A New School Year, Familiar Challenges

Media Reporting on Back-to-School 2026



MOXII AFRICA

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ABOUT MOXII AFRICA

Moxii Africa (formerly Media Monitoring Africa) founded in 1993 is a public interest organisation whose vision is to strive for open and trusted information and to build an accessible, accountable, and transparent information ecosystem we can trust. We aim to ensure accountability, open information, promote safety, empower the public, and instil information integrity in South Africa and the rest of the continent. We achieve these aims through holding those with power accountable through lobbying and advocacy, strategic litigation, research and analysis, civic technology development, and training and facilitation.

INTRODUCTION

Every year, the reopening of schools in South Africa prompts renewed media scrutiny of the education system and the extent to which children's rights are protected. This brief report analyses media coverage published during the 2026 back-to-school period, monitored between early and mid-January 2026, across major national and local media houses, including *IOL*, *The Citizen*, *Daily Maverick*, *News24*, *BusinessTech*, *GroundUp*, *EWN*, *and SANews*. Reporting during this period reflected heightened public concern around learner safety, access to education, school readiness, and quality, while also revealing growing expectations for journalists to report responsibly on children's issues. Collectively, the coverage illustrates how children are often positioned within broader systemic debates, underscoring the need for media narratives that consistently centre learners as rights holders rather than passive recipients of policy and adult decision-making.

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Safety and Wellbeing

Media coverage strongly emphasised learner safety and wellbeing. An *IOL* article, ***"Education minister calls for safe, bully-free schools during back-to-school campaign"*** (19/01/2026), highlighted calls from the Minister of Basic Education for collaborative efforts between schools, parents, and communities to ensure safe and respectful learning environments. Local outlets like The Citizen also reported on the emotional challenges learners face, with headlines such as ***"Back-to-school anxiety: How parents and learners can cope this year"*** (15/01/2026) and ***"It's a new year and back to school – some helpful tips"*** (03/01/2026, Randfontein Herald), which offered practical guidance for coping with stress and promoting emotional readiness.

While these articles provided valuable advice, few interrogated whether schools have sufficient counselling services or anti-bullying structures in place. The gap reflects the need for media to go beyond awareness campaigns and critically assess institutional preparedness for learner wellbeing.

While these articles played an essential role in raising awareness, media coverage largely stopped short of interrogating whether schools are structurally equipped to support learner wellbeing. Few reports examined the availability of school counsellors, psychosocial support services, or functional anti-bullying mechanisms.

Media reporting could be strengthened by moving beyond general advice to critically assess institutional capacity, while also incorporating children's voices about their lived experiences of bullying, anxiety, and safety at school.

Government Accountability and School Readiness

Several news outlets scrutinised government preparedness for the new school year. *GroundUp* reported, ***"Special schools closed in KwaZulu-Natal after Education Department fails to pay subsidies"*** (January 2026), exposing administrative failures that disproportionately affected children with disabilities. In contrast, SANews highlighted the visibility of government oversight: ***"Nzimande leads back-to-school oversight visit as KZN schools reopen"*** (January 2026), while IOL's Weekend Argus reported, ***"Western Cape schools open doors for 1.2 million learners in 2026"*** (14/01/2026), emphasising the official narrative of readiness.

The tension between official optimism and on-the-ground challenges was a recurring theme. While ministers and MECs projected competence and commitment, investigative reporting highlighted persistent funding, staffing, and infrastructure challenges. This contrast revealed a recurring tension in media coverage between official optimism and the realities experienced by learners and schools. While leadership visibility is essential, reporting could be improved by consistently juxtaposing official statements with independent verification and the perspectives of affected children and caregivers. Holding authorities accountable requires sustained follow-up reporting, particularly on whether promises made during oversight visits translate into tangible improvements.

Community Support and Charitable Initiatives

Community-based interventions were also widely reported. The Citizen covered initiatives in Soweto under the headline, ***"Local organisations pamper learners ahead of back-to-school"*** (16/01/2026), showcasing charities providing uniforms, stationery, and food to learners. While these efforts alleviated immediate burdens and highlighted community solidarity, the reliance on charitable support implicitly underscored systemic gaps in state provision.

While such coverage humanises the back-to-school experience, it also risks normalising charity as a substitute for state responsibility. Media reporting could be strengthened by contextualising these interventions within broader systemic failures and questioning why essential educational needs continue to rely on charitable goodwill. Including children's reflections on what support means to them could further deepen the impact of these stories.

Quality of Education

Debates over the quality and equity of public education continued in the media. BusinessTech's article, ***"Big battle over public schools in South Africa"*** (05/01/2026), examined tensions between parents, civil society, and government over governance, access, and education standards. These discussions reinforced the ongoing inequities in South African schooling, with access and outcomes still heavily influenced by geography and socio-economic status.

While these discussions are critical, media reporting often remains abstract and policy-focused. Coverage could be improved by grounding debates about quality in learners' everyday classroom experiences, particularly in under-resourced schools. Giving children space to describe how overcrowding, teacher shortages, or inadequate resources affect their learning would strengthen child-centred journalism and move beyond elite-driven discourse.

Weather-Related Disruptions

Extreme weather was another theme. IOL reported ***"Back-to-school under storm clouds as heavy rain, heat forecast across SA"*** (14/01/2026), while The Citizen documented flooding in Limpopo under the headline, ***"Limpopo floods school Monday"*** (8/01/ 2026). These conditions disrupted attendance and posed safety risks, highlighting the vulnerability of school infrastructure to climate events. Coverage, however, rarely explores long-term adaptation strategies.

Despite this, coverage tended to frame weather events as isolated disruptions rather than symptoms of broader climate vulnerability. Media reporting could be strengthened by examining long-term infrastructure planning, disaster preparedness, and climate adaptation strategies for schools. Including children's experiences of navigating unsafe routes or damaged classrooms would also humanise the impact of climate-related disruptions.

Overcrowding and Learner Placement

Overcrowding and unplaced learners remained prominent in media reporting. IOL reported ***"North West school faces Grade R overcrowding as pupils return for 2026 academic year"*** (14/01/2026), highlighting classrooms overflowing and learners being turned away. Citizen articles, such as *"Scared but excited: Back-to-school 2026 sees Grade 8 pupils, parents feeling mixed emotions"* (January 2026) and ***"Gauteng Education blames school placement backlog on parental errors"*** (14/01/2026), illustrated both the emotional strain on families and the persistent structural capacity issues. The Daily Maverick, in ***"Emotional day as unplaced learners, flooding and overcrowding mar first day of school"*** (14/01/2026), captured a vivid picture of systemic failure affecting thousands of learners, echoing SAHRC warnings of potential constitutional rights violations.

Media reporting could be improved by avoiding blame-driven narratives and instead focusing on structural constraints on capacity. Including children's voices — particularly those who are unplaced or learning in overcrowded classrooms — would strengthen rights-based reporting and ensure that learners are not rendered invisible.

Learner Transport Crisis

Transport issues dominated media discourse around child protection. The Mail & Guardian reported ***"Twelve pupils killed in Vaal scholar transport vehicle crash"*** (19/01/2026), while IOL published *"No compromise on safety: Mpumalanga MEC issues warning to scholar transport operators"* (07/01/2026).

News24 noted *"At least 168,000 pupils set to walk long distance to school in scholar transport crisis"* (2025), and EWN reported on structural failures under the headline, ***"SAHRC exposes deep-rooted failures in North West scholar transport"*** (19/01/2026). Citizen coverage urged parents to verify transport safety, reflecting the heightened anxiety surrounding learner movement. These reports emphasised the direct link between unsafe transport and violations of children's rights to both life and education.

While most outlets reported responsibly by protecting children's identities, coverage often focused on tragic incidents rather than sustained accountability. Media reporting could be strengthened by tracking investigations, monitoring the enforcement of safety regulations, and amplifying children's experiences of unsafe or inaccessible transport. This would reinforce transport as both a child safety issue and a fundamental component of the right to education.

Overall Media Trends

Overall, media narratives during the 2026 back-to-school period were largely crisis-driven, with a strong focus on overcrowding, transport failures, school closures, and emergency responses. Favourable coverage of community support and government initiatives was present but limited. Across themes, children's voices were rarely directly accessed, with reporting relying heavily on adults such as officials, parents, and educators. Ethical standards were generally upheld, particularly regarding the protection of children's identities.



Conclusion

Back-to-school coverage in 2026 reflects the persistence of systemic challenges in South African education, including overcrowding, transport failures, climate vulnerability, and unequal access to quality learning environments. While media coverage has drawn attention to urgent issues and stimulated public discourse, there remains significant scope for improvement in child-centred reporting.

Strengthening media practice requires consistent inclusion of children's voices, sustained accountability reporting, and deeper interrogation of systemic gaps beyond moments of crisis. Media houses such as IOL, *The Citizen*, BusinessTech, News24, Daily Maverick, and EWN play a crucial role in shaping public understanding. By adopting a rights-based, child-focused approach, the media can move beyond exposure toward meaningful advocacy that upholds the dignity, agency, and rights of children in South Africa's education system.

CONTACT US

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