

# Press Release

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SOUTH AFRICAN  
INSTITUTE OF  
RACE RELATIONS

South Africa's Leading Research and Policy Organisation

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## Most pupils choose English instead of their mother tongue

Over 60% of pupils in South African schools choose English for learning and teaching, despite the fact that only 7% of pupils speak English as their home language, according to the latest *South Africa Survey*, recently published by the South African Institute of Race Relations in Johannesburg.

Out of the country's 12.2 million pupils only 851 536 speak English at home, yet 7.6 million pupils choose English as their preferred language of learning and teaching.

Zulu is the most widely spoken home language, spoken by over 3.1 million pupils. However, less than a third of them choose to be taught in Zulu. The same trend is true of Xhosa, Tswana, Pedi, Swati, and Venda speaking pupils, only a third of such pupils choosing to be taught in their home language.

Less than a quarter of pupils who speak Ndebele, Sotho, or Tsonga as their home language actually choose to learn in their respective languages.

Apart from English, Afrikaans is the only language that has more pupils choosing it as their preferred language of instruction than it had pupils who speak it at home.

The data was sourced from the Department of Basic Education.

In April 2011, the minister of higher education and training, Dr Blade Nzimande, said that he would establish an advisory panel to look at how to strengthen the university teaching and expansion of African languages, which he said was in a serious decline. He suggested that in future every South African university student could be required to learn at least one African language as a condition for graduation.

'The majority of pupils are taught in African languages at the foundation phase but switch to either English or Afrikaans as their language of learning and teaching from as early as Grade 4,' said Mr Jonathan Snyman, a researcher at the Institute. 'The decline in African languages is evidently not something that emanates at tertiary institutions, but is rather the result of choices that parents and pupils make early on in schooling careers.'

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