



## Does context matter?

**Why context matters.  
When context matters.**

During the course of the year so far, a small number of schools rated '1' (inadequate) or '2' (requires improvement) have complained that the SEA does not take context into account. They could not be more wrong.

Conversations around context are always a 'hot' topic of debate when my Team meet during quarterly reflection sessions. We are unanimous on one thing: **YES, context absolutely matters, but it must inform findings, not excuse weak education provisioning by the school.**

It is impossible not to see – or feel – context when evaluating a school in the Western Cape. Context helps evaluators to:

- **Understand starting points:** what are the socio-economic conditions, language of learning and teaching (LoLT) vs home language, and resource levels that are factors which may determine what the school can realistically achieve in the short term.
- **Interpret data fairly:** the same results can mean very different things depending on intake and circumstances e.g., progress vs raw scores.
- **Evaluate leadership more accurately:** good leadership is often seen in how well a school responds to its context, not in the absence of challenges.
- **Assess impact, not effort alone:** schools in challenging context may show significant improvement even if results remain modest. Improvement over time is often as important as final outcomes.



- **Support Improvement, not just accountability:** When data is interpreted in context, evaluations:
  - Identify **root causes** of challenges
  - Provide **targeted recommendations**
  - Encourage **developmental support** rather than punitive responses
  
- **Prevent bias and misinterpretation:** without context:
  - Data can reinforce stereotypes
  - High-performing schools can be overpraised without examining advantages
  - Under-resourced schools can be unfairly penalised

Context encourages evaluators to ask:

“Why is this happening?” instead of just “What is happening?”

- **Avoid one-dimensional judgements:** Context ensures evaluators do not rely on a single indicator such as:
  - Test scores
  - Pass rates

Instead, they triangulate with:

- Classroom observations
- Teacher practices
- Learner engagement
- Leadership and management quality
- Good governance
- Safeguarding and behaviour

However, **context cannot lower expectations:**

- All learners, whether at mainstream academic schools, subsidised independent schools, schools of skills, special schools (ASD, profoundly-intellectually disabled), are entitled to quality teaching in a safe, orderly learning environment.
- Weak teaching, poor management or a lack of accountability cannot be justified by context.



## Key Principle at the SEA

**Fair evaluation** = Data + Context + Professional Judgement

### Simple Illustration

Data Point	Without Context	With Context
Low grade 3 maths systemics scores	Poor teaching	Large class size, language barriers, limited resources.
High dropout rate	Weak school management	Community migration patterns, economic pressure on learners.

The focus during all evaluations must be: Given the schools context, how well is it performing and improving?

Context will always **provide the lens**, but **standards remain constant**.

In conclusion, context matters because it ensures school evaluation data is interpreted fairly, accurately, and in a way that reflects real conditions rather than misleading surface results.

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