

# Agriculture takes the spotlight in matric class of 2023

By Lindi Botha | 23 January 2024 | 1:01 pm

*While the matric class of 2023 has much to celebrate in the increased pass rate, the agriculture sector has more reason for optimism with the increase in interest in agricultural subjects.*



Karel Schwab, principal of Winterberg Agricultural High, says there has been an increased interest in agricultural subjects.

*Photo: Supplied*

Agriculture schools around the country have reported an uptick in interest in agriculture subjects, with students faring particularly well in their final year marks for agricultural sciences, management and technology.

Nadia Last, deputy principal at Merensky High School in Tzaneen, Limpopo, noted that the school had more than 1 000 learners, out of around 1 500 in total, studying agricultural subjects. The school achieved a 99,5% pass rate, higher than the national pass rate of 82,9%.

While agriculture had long been termed too 'unsexy' to attract youth, Last said there has been a definite upward trend of interest in agricultural studies over the last few years.

"When land claims were rife a few years ago we saw interest in agriculture dwindling among our students, but this has now changed. We are situated in an agricultural area and there are so many success stories that it is inspiring our youth.

"Students are also realising that agriculture is life science – it's knowledge you will always use no matter where you are. It's not a subject you learn at school and never use again."

Karel Schwab, principal at Winterberg Agricultural High School in the Eastern Cape, told *Farmer's Weekly* that the school had to expand their agricultural subjects last year since interest in this area of study is increasing.

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"Conversations around own food production is spurring interest in agricultural subjects. But students are also realising that one does not need to own a farm to study agriculture – there are far more possibilities for interesting careers across this sector.

"The number of students taking agricultural management as a subject has double in the last few years."

Winterberg Agricultural High achieved a 93% pass rate, with an increase in those that are eligible for tertiary study.

Nearly 98% of the Merensky High School learners obtained a pass rate that allows for tertiary study. Last said that most of these students were either headed to Elsenburg Agricultural Training Institute and the University of the Free State to study agriculture, or to the University of Pretoria to study veterinary sciences.

The technological changes in agriculture is also piquing interest.

Last noted that the 100% pass rate achieved for the matric class in maths, and the fact that nine out of 15 that scooped distinctions in information technology, boded

well for this cohort to pursue agricultural directions that would aid the sector's technological revolution.

In spite of the optimism over the increase in interest in agriculture, Last bemoaned that fact that the Umalusi Council had marked down the marks for agricultural management and agricultural technology. The council sets the standard for education training in South Africa and ensures that exams are marked correctly.

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It is common practice for the council to mark certain subjects up or down when they are deemed out of line. Last, however, said that this discouraged learners from taking the subject since their hard work would not necessarily pay off, and could affect their university options.

"We try our best to get more students interested in agriculture, and then government derails our efforts."

Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, meanwhile praised the national class of 2023 for defying what she called "astronomical challenges", including the COVID-19 pandemic during their high school years – to reach the high pass rate. "There is no doubt that the basic education system has begun to reach the desired stability, which is healthy for a large and important system as ours.

"The unquestionable resilience our school community has shown against such a devastating pandemic and other challenges, such as sporadic service delivery protests, the floods in some provinces, violence, and the general moral decadence, such as alcohol and substance abuse, cannot go by unnoticed," she said.