

## **Sonja Boshoff: The safety of our learners has been put on the back burner**

Minister,

Despite a departmental budget of almost R22 billion and a range of policies, it is clear that the safety of our learners is not being given the priority it should be.

I recently highlighted the fact that almost 380 000 teachers employed in public schools had not been vetted against the Child Protection Register.

This is of great concern considering that between April 2014 and February 2015, 525 complaints of physical, verbal and sexual abuse by educators were reported.

We have no doubt that the majority of our teachers will pass the vetting process but it is an unfortunate reality that, in some cases, those who are entrusted daily with our children are also the very same people who are guilty of abusing them.

That is why it is imperative that teachers are checked against the register to ensure that they are suitable to be trusted with our children.

The South Africa Council for Educators (SACE), who is responsible for vetting the teachers against the list, have stated that the reason none of the 38 000 public school teachers have been vetted is that they are in the process of compiling the list from the relevant departments.

They have been in the process of compiling this list for several years while putting our children at risk.

Minister, despite having SACE implement strategies on ethics, norms and standards, we have seen a drastic rise in teenage pregnancies.

A reply to a DA parliamentary question recently revealed that there are 20 000 students in our education system that are pregnant, 717 of which are primary school children.

This indicates high levels of statutory rape by the legal definition. It is possible that some of these instances are at the hands of teachers and principals and it is critically important that the real nature of how these pregnancies came to be, is exposed.

The role of SACE is critical, but as it currently stands, none of their responsibilities are being effectively managed or executed.

It would appear that they are more interested in buying a fancy building, as has been the main topic of discussion during the tabling of their reports, than they are in ensuring that sexual offences by educators is dealt with, swiftly and decisively.

Minister, why have we not seen any serious offences committed by educators being reported to SACE? If there are no incidences to report, why are there so many pregnancies? Why have we not heard SACE mention a single case of statutory rape, which by law must be reported to SAPS?

Minister, we should do everything possible to ensure that our children are, at the very least, safe from sexual and physical abuse at school. To this end, the budget must prioritise the need for vetting all teachers and for the implementation of policies to curb the high incidence of teenage pregnancy.

To build a society which is free and which empowers the people of our Nation to reach their potential, we must first protect and nurture our young people so that they are given the opportunity to achieve great things.

The starting point is making sure our children are safe at school and I call on you to bring about the necessary change to ensure that our children are taught in an environment free from abuse.

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### **Desiree van der Walt: Promises on vital infrastructure upgrades not fulfilled**

Honourable Minister and Colleagues

Debating the budget today is much more than just the figures in it.

It is all about delivering quality education to our children and to prepare them for their life after school.

Promises on the delivery of desks, textbooks, proper classrooms and decent ablution facilities have characterised past SONA's – but the fulfillment of these promises has been as elusive.

Last year in his SONA address President Zuma promised that all schools in the Eastern Cape will have desks by August 2014, **were these ever delivered?** No, these learners are still waiting.

This year in his SONA address the President boasted about the “successes” of the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Development Initiative (ASIDI) that is set to get a budget of R7 billion over the medium term, yet very little to nothing has been done.

Yes, some “*state of the art*” schools were built, but this programme was supposed to eradicate 510 inappropriate schools by end of the 2013/14 financial year. A year after its deadline the ANC government has missed its own targets on eradicating mud schools by a massive 80% as 404 mud schools remain.

At this pace it would take another 16 years to eradicate all the targeted mud schools.

It means that an entire generation of children, predominantly in the Eastern Cape, will have to complete their schooling in an environment that is unsafe and an infringement on their dignity.

This celebrated programme has also missed its own targets on water access by 70%, its sanitation target by 62%, and its electricity target by 69% – not something to “brag” about, I would say.

Sedibeng School in Lephalale is an ASIDI example, completed but can’t open because there is no furniture.

Honoko School in Tubatse, which is truly state of the art, is built on top of the mountain where it takes 40 minutes to travel the 7km with a 4x4 vehicle to get to the school as there is no other access route.

In Limpopo many newly built school projects have been abandoned leaving learners in places such as Musina and Blouberg to be taught under trees.

The children of Lebaka B in Vohlabaneng Village pass a new but empty school every day on their way to a crowded neighbouring school.

The asbestos panels of the classrooms at Noordgesig Primary in Soweto are held in place with huge stones, yet this school was prioritized to be replaced.

The toilet facilities at many of these schools are even worse.

At a Protea South school in Soweto a basin was blocked since opening in January. The girl’s bathroom was locked as the key was lost and a garden fork was used to attempt opening it on our oversight visit.

In the Eastern Cape the pupils from Mnxe High School are forced to use buckets in the open as toilets.

Minister, it cannot be that our children should be subjected to such poor conditions as the government continues to fall short of their promises to replace and upgrade school infrastructure.

We cannot pass the buck to the provinces, you are the custodian of basic education and we expect you to get the provincial departments to ensure the dignity of children in South Africa is upheld.

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**Annette Lovemore: Put targets on quality education first**

Minister,

You know that, of the three National Education and Evaluation Unit (NEEDU) reports that have been compiled, you released only the first one. You have now, I note, uploaded the second one.

That first report focussed on literacy in the Foundation Phase, and it was damning. Helen Zille labelled it the most important report of the decade.

The report found that South African children's reading skills are falling behind those of their international counterparts by the end of Grade 1.

The second damning report focuses on Grade 5 literacy across the country.

I quote: "*The reading fluency of learners...is generally very disappointing... The average score for reading fluency was just over 46 words correct per minute. Grade 5 learners should be reading at 110 words correct per minute...more than 10% of Grade 5 learners could not read a single word.*"

A total of 75% of Grade 5 learners tested scored less than 5% on a simple comprehension test based on their reading.

Your own Annual National Assessments show that by the end of Grade 3, only half of Grade 3 learners are effectively literate.

The last report of the Progress in International Literacy Study showed that South African children spend half the time on reading than average learners worldwide do. And that half of our children could not even achieve the international benchmark for LOW literacy.

Is it any wonder that only half of the children who start school with bright eyes and eager minds ever make it through to matric? That a full half of them drop out somewhere along the line?

Minister, the DA has referred your Annual Performance Plan and your 5-year strategic plan to the Minister of Finance, and asked him to review and reject them.

Your announcements today lack credibility. You have not shown any sense of urgency about the most basic skill – reading. Children have to learn to read before they can read to learn.

You refer to the International PIRLS report. That report is dated 2011. And then you announce with pride that you hosted a reading round table. That round table took place in March 2015. Four years' delay equates to approximately 2 million Grade 1 learners – half of the total – who were allowed to fall behind their counterparts while you dallied.

You do not include any of what you have announced today in your official plans. Why not? We want numbers Minister. We want clear, precise targets that show commitment and courage.

Your plans simply do not address every child's constitutional right to a basic education. You have one single target in your plans that directly reflects learner outcomes. And that is the matric pass rate.

We have some suggestions.

Every child must be able to read, independently, and with understanding, by the age of 8, or the end of Grade 3. Make that your number one priority.

Make THAT mandatory. Make reading out loud, at the right rate of words correct per minute, with understanding, part of the promotion requirements. Not only for 1000 schools as you suggest. For every one of the 14000 odd primary schools across the country.

Every foundation phase teacher must be fully capable of teaching children to read.

Make THAT a target. The latest research tells us that teachers are leaving university unable to teach children to read. Intervene urgently. And test teachers before they are employed. Then hold them accountable based on how well their children read.

Provide young learners with reading books. NEEDU has told you that Foundation Phase learners should be reading at least one title per week, thus 30 a year. Provide them. Make THAT a target.

A child who cannot read will fail. And you, Minister, need to act FAST to avoid that being the prognosis for half of our learner population.