

Budget Vote Debate 14
Basic Education
By
Hon. N Singh, MP

6 May 2015

Honourable Speaker,

Despite the fact that the Department continues to enjoy the biggest slice of our national budget, it remains of great concern that many issues that plague it have not as yet been resolved.

One of the biggest concerns is the department's failure to implement policies that speak to the needs of the country and also the reality of how learners and teachers function in the classroom. The failure of Outcomes Based Education is an example of a policy which had good intentions but was mostly overburdened by the administrative requirements that followed it.

Teachers did not have the time to truly engage with the subject matters they taught because most of their time was taken through the continuous administrative responsibilities they were required to perform.

An entire generation of learners suffered due to the OBE system and many teachers left the profession as a result of the cumbersome nature of the system; the consequences of this system are still being felt to this day because political imperatives were placed above the needs of our learners.

One of the many issues that plague the department is that of infrastructure. For a long time the Minister avoided taking any form of action on the call for the establishment of binding norms and standards for school infrastructure. She had to be taken to court to accelerate the publication of these norms and standards and it still took years for this to happen.

Despite the progress achieved to date in building new schools, there still remain schools which are still using pit toilets, have no water access, chronic lack of classrooms and proper access to modern education; it is hard to say that the lives of all pupils are in a drastically better position.

In 2012, the mismanagement of textbook distribution in Limpopo was highlighted. We then received assurances from the department that this has been resolved, even across the country and that only a few cases remain.

However, it seems that very little has truly changed with regards to this issue.

The Minister must clarify as to whether those tasked with delivering textbooks are at fault or her department is the culprit in this matter - both cannot be absolved of responsibility.

The quality of education our learners receive has also come into question, as it seems the main focus is getting enrolment numbers up. The dismal performances in maths and science in our schools is alarming, especially because we rank so low amongst countries around the world, some of whom have unstable economies to deal with. Quality education is also seemingly a luxury item for poorer communities and the lack of proper qualifications of some teachers does not help matters.

Teachers are no longer trained well, as some receive their degrees through correspondence, without ever having stepped into a classroom. This translates to no real time practical teaching experience.

The removal of teacher training colleges set us back tremendously and even the Minister has acknowledged this. Some teachers can even be found teaching subjects that they do not even have qualifications for. There is no incentive for teachers to remain in their professions or attract newly qualified ones.

This has resulted in many learners lacking the ability to transition between matric and tertiary learning requirements, as many first year students struggle to adjust to the increased workload and responsibility of learning on their own; some of them end up failing and dropping out because of this.

These and other outstanding problems need to be addressed urgently. And even though this continues to be the rhetoric every year, there is no excuse that the department can stand on with regards to having the largest budget while failing to make a lasting and meaningful impact. More stringent measures must be taken to ensure that not only is the budget being spent appropriately, but that those abusing the financial system are rooted out.

Some teacher unions must also bear a large element of responsibility for undermining our educational potential and for endangering the education of our learners by protecting inept teachers and trying to continually influence the appointment of teachers; those who qualify should be chosen, not those who carry membership cards. This needs to be addressed urgently because if it is not, it shows that the department is the lapdog of unions and has no independent capability to act.