

+ SECTION27

catalysts for social justice

2 February 2016

Honourable Nomalungelo Gina MP
Chairperson
Portfolio Committee on Basic Education
By email: ngina@parliament.gov.za

Dear Honourable Ms Nomalungelo Gina

Report on the poor quality of education provided to learners with visual impairments

1. We refer to the report "Left in the dark: Failure to Provide Access to Quality Education to Blind and Partially Sighted Learners in South Africa" ("the Report"), which followed research by SECTION27 in collaboration with the South African Braille Authority, the South African National Council for the Blind, Blind SA and the SA National Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Persons.
2. In our initial discussions with your office regarding the Report, we sought an audience with the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Basic Education ("Committee") before the end of 2015.
3. The session was urgently scheduled in recognition of the need to address parts of the Report before the beginning of the 2016 school year, but was unable to proceed due to protest action at Parliament. We have since received notice of a formal audience with the Committee on 1 March 2016.
4. The new allocated date with the Committee will fall shortly before the end of the first school term of 2016. We have therefore written to the Department of Basic Education ("Department") requesting an update on their progress in addressing the urgent measures required to provide a basic education to blind and partially sighted learners. We attach this letter for your reference as annexure "A".

5. We hope to receive feedback from the Department on our request for information in time for it to inform our meeting with the Committee. We continue to communicate with schools and the blind sector regarding the conditions in schools for learners with visual impairments.
6. We appreciate the opportunity to present to the Committee and look forward to a fruitful session and working relationship going forward.

Yours sincerely



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cc:

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Mr M Mveli
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"A"

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Dear sirs

Report on the poor quality of education provided to learners with visual impairments

1. We refer to the report "Left in the dark: Failure to Provide Access to Quality Education to Blind and Partially Sighted Learners in South Africa" ("Report"), which followed research by SECTION27 in collaboration with the South African Braille Authority, the South African National Council for the Blind, Blind SA and the South African National Association of Blind and Partially Sighted Persons.
2. The Report presents findings on the conditions in schools for the blind as at July 2015 and, based on extensive research, provides recommendations for how these conditions can be improved.
3. SECTION27 was initially invited to present the Report to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on Basic Education ("Committee") in November 2015. The session was urgently accommodated by the Committee because of a recognition that the Report's recommendations should be considered in time for the beginning of the 2016 school year.

4. Unfortunately, due to protest action in parliament, the session was postponed. We have since been allocated a new date of 1 March 2016. This is at least 5 months since the Department of Basic Education ("Department") first received a copy of the Report.
5. In light of the delay, and the urgency of the challenges detailed in the Report, we trust that the Department will have begun to implement measures to address the difficulties faced by learners with visual impairments raised in the Report. In particular, we refer to the following urgent recommendations to be addressed before the beginning of the 2016 school year:
 - 5.1 That the conditions in schools for visually impaired learners be thoroughly audited by the national and/or provincial departments of education;
 - 5.2 That measures to facilitate access to schools for poor learners, including hostel accommodation and transport fees are provided where necessary, and that these learners are not prevented from accessing school because of these or any other costs associated with schooling;
 - 5.3 That existing vacancies within the Inclusive Education sections of provincial and district departments of education be urgently filled;
 - 5.4 That measures be taken for the national government to allocate a conditional grant for non-personnel funding, as was required by White Paper 6, 2001;
 - 5.5 That the Department urgently appoint a task team on the production of braille and large print learning materials including textbooks, workbooks and teachers' guides. In this regard we note the judgment in *Minister of Basic Education & others v Basic Education for All & others* in which the Supreme Court of Appeal confirmed the right of each learner to a textbook for each subject and placed the obligation to fulfil this right on the state;
 - 5.6 That the provincial departments of education ensure all schools have adequate braille production facilities as an urgent interim measure pending the provision of braille textbooks, workbooks and teachers' guides;
 - 5.7 Every learner should have access to their own Perkins Machine;
 - 5.8 Schools should be provided with computers that are compatible with JAWS or similar software and teachers must be trained to teach learners to use the computers and software;
 - 5.9 All new educators should receive intense introductory braille training and urgent measures should be taken to teach existing educators braille;

- 5.10 Setotlwane Secondary School and Rivoni School for the Blind in Limpopo should be urgently moved to new premises that are safe and appropriate for learners with visual impairments; and
- 5.11 Perimeter fences of all schools for learners with visual impairments should be secured and security guards employed and paid by provincial departments of education. The schools' subsidies should specifically provide for the costs of paying security guards.
6. We would appreciate an update from you as to what steps the Department has taken to implement these recommendations, in order to ensure that learners with visual impairments are provided with an adequate basic education. Given that we will be presenting the Report to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee on 1 March 2016, we would appreciate a response by 22 February 2016.
7. We will be sending a copy of this letter to the Chairperson of the Portfolio Committee under separate cover.
8. We continue to communicate with the schools and the sector on the conditions in schools for learners with visual impairments and are committed to working together with the Department in addressing these urgent problems.

Yours faithfully



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