



PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON BASIC EDUCATION

February 2018

Summary of key issues raised during the 2016 engagement on school connectivity (ICT)

1. Introduction

Information and Communication Technology (ICT) is central to government's efforts to improve the quality and efficiency of the education system from a number of respects including administration, e-learning and teacher training. Key targets set for the sector in the 2014 – 2019 Medium Term Strategic Framework include that¹:

- 80 percent of learners should have access to information via broadband by 2018/19
- All schools should have access to broadband at a required speed by 2020.

The MSTF further requires that all teacher resource centres in all provinces should have ICT programmes for the professional development of teachers, exposing them to the use of technology in the classroom².

The Portfolio Committee on Basic Education last held its engagement on school connectivity (ICT) in a joint meeting with the PC on Telecommunications and Postal Services on 1 March 2016. It was a follow up of the joint meeting held in 2014.

The Universal Service Access Agency of South Africa (USAASA) and the Independent Communications Authority of South Africa (ICASA) were also invited to participate during the discussions.

2. Key issues raised during the 2016 engagement on school connectivity included the following:

- It was noted that Policy had improved in respect of schools' connectivity since 2014. There was a coordinated approach amongst the relevant provincial and national departments for a closer working relationship. This improved relationship has ensured the rollout of broadband with clear guidance from policies such as SA Connect and the National Development Plan (NDP).

- It was important to address the key challenge of crime, as it has a detrimental effect on schools which often have to deal with the vandalising of equipment and infrastructure. The DBE acknowledged that there were major challenges in respect of the security of ICT equipment at schools. The risk of emerging syndicates was a concern and therefore close collaboration with the police was vital. Members noted that there was a need to teach communities to create a strong responsibility to take ownership of each school so as to ensure that schools are safeguarded.

¹ Outcome 1 Education, MTSF

² DBE's 2015-16 APP

- ICASA and USAASA highlighted the challenges in respect of issues surrounding the payment model. ICASA noted that in terms of its funding model, a much longer term intervention was required. There was an indication that the obligation imposed on operators would be broadened to keep schools connected for the duration of their licence
- Regarding the sources of funding for school connectivity, the DBE noted that discussions were underway with the National Treasury to ensure that adequate funding would be received
- Members requested that all gadgets be upgraded to meet the requirements of teachers and learners. The DBE responded that the upgrade of gadgets used at schools and the call for increased speed of the connectivity would be addressed. The Department of Telecommunications and Postal Services (DTPS) noted that the issue of connectivity and devices had been addressed by provincial steering committees and service providers, who had become part of the steering committees to facilitate the quality of service.
- The DBE was in the process of the finalisation of guidelines in the sector in respect of how ICT would be used as a source of communication amongst the various role players.
- The DBE noted that all the targets were already agreed upon but there could be a reconsideration to align them with meeting the targets of Operation Phakisa. The timeline for connectivity and capacity building remained 2019.
- Regarding the impact of ICT on the performance of teachers and learners, the DBE noted that there had been notable improvements in learning outcomes and enhanced teacher competency.
- Schools with special needs would form part of all schools covered to broaden ICT provision.
- On the Portfolio Committee's request that schools be supported by IT specialists, the DBE responded that they would look at options of shared services for schools. There was an intention to build IT support clusters around schools and to have a call centre to support schools.
- Members acknowledged the new focus and commitment by the DTPS and the DBE but expressed concern that in this process there should be accountability by all stakeholders which would include national and provincial departments, ICASA and USAASA amongst others. There was a need to enforce and sustain the connectivity projects
- The role of union involvement in the ICT rollout and possible resistance was discussed. The DTPS noted that they are working closely with the unions and that no resistance had been experienced.
- The use of tablets as a medium for teaching learners was not exclusive as a teaching method, the view was that during the primary school phase a strong focus would be on teachers with the aid of ICT training.

- Other issues highlighted included increased utilisation of ICT centres by teachers, the targeting of rural areas for connectivity of schools, the lack of ICT and infrastructure resources at schools, incentivisation for teachers to be deployed in rural areas, the role of universities in the training of teachers, the use of interactive white boards, the increase of capacity to 4G networks, the responsibility for breakage and repairs of equipment, the need for greater access times for learners, the training of parents in ICT and vetting and the refurbishment of schools.

3. Issues requiring progress report

Specific issues that required follow up included the following:

- The DTPS should provide an updated list of schools that are connected without disruption in connectivity.
- The DBE needed to provide a written response in respect of the budget requested from the National Treasury as well the progress report on the outcome of the request.

Other issues requiring follow up:

Issues raised by the Departments	Progress report
A development plan had been identified to facilitate the training of all teachers in line with meeting the targets of Operation Phakisa 2019	Pending
The DTPS noted that the intention was that electronic white board and tablets would be used in the classroom to facilitate teaching methods. Generators would be installed as a back-up in case schools were without electricity.	Pending
USAASA noted that discussion was underway in respect of solutions for schools with no electricity and options such as solar installations were considered. However, the funding concerns would hamper this process	It is not clear whether there has been any progress on this matter

4. Matters for consideration

- Although strides are being made towards school connectivity and using ICT to support learning and teaching, the available data on ICT connectivity should be treated with caution. The Department reports in its presentation (on slide 27) that as of December 2017, 64.9 percent of schools have connectivity, up from 51 percent reported in 2016. It is further reported (on slides 25 and 26) that more schools are connected in Gauteng, Northern Cape and Western Cape than the actual number of schools in these provinces. Inconsistencies in the connectivity data are attributed to a number of factors, including that some schools received connectivity twice and have thus been counted twice. This raises a number of questions regarding the reliability of the data of the Department:

- Is it accurate to suggest that 64.9% of schools have connectivity when some schools have been counted twice in the three provinces mentioned above?
 - How many schools in other provinces have received connectivity twice and thus been counted twice?
 - Are Provincial School Connectivity Steering Committees effective in preventing duplication of connectivity with other projects in the provinces?
 - What is the actual number of schools (out of the total of 24 775 schools) that have been connected?
- In respect of physical security in schools, despite the Department's assurance in 2016 that a mobile solution requiring minimum security (strong room) was adopted, it would seem this measure is ineffective. Incidences of burglaries and theft of computers in schools continue to be rife, including through the ceiling of the strong rooms (as in the case of Wolvenkop Special School in the Nkangala District, Mpumalanga).
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- Regarding support and maintenance pertaining to school connectivity, the Department reported in 2016 that although USAASA was required in terms of Government Gazette No. 37718 of June 4 2014, to take this responsibility post 3 months' period of service by network operators, USAASA had not started this function. Provincial steering committees had thus decided that the Network Operators transfer knowledge to District IT Technicians. Is this happening? Are District IT Technicians well capacitated? During the site visit to Verena Primary School, it emerged that two routers that were provided by the CSIR and Telkom had not been working post three months' period after installation. Has USAASA assumed this responsibility as required by the Government Gazette?
 - In 2016, the Department reported that they had developed a School Connectivity Management Information System that captures all school connectivity initiatives. Is this system/information accessible in the Department's website?
 - It is cause for concern that a large percentage of schools currently connected (56.9 percent of the 64.9 percent) have low speed connectivity, with only 8 percentage having broadband connectivity.
 - Is the sector on course to achieve the MTSF target of universal access to broadband at the required speed by 2020?
 - The DBE should give the Portfolio Committee feedback on the outcome of DTPS' engagement with National treasury and third party CSI funders regarding provision of adequate funding to roll out Operation Phakisa deliverables The target delivery date of the engagement is 30 June 2018, as per the presentation.
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