

Budget Debate on Vote 16: Basic Education

Speech by Baxolile 'Bax' Nodada MP

DA Shadow Minister of Basic Education

ANC education is the new form of oppression, a pathway to unemployment and poverty

Chairperson,

As we debate the Basic Education budget vote, we must remember that quality education is the most powerful tool to realise opportunity.

A tool children can use to end poverty and unemployment despite their circumstances of birth, geography, race, or gender.

The Department of Basic Education therefore has a mandate to monitor the standards of the provision, delivery and performance of education.

But listening to Minister Motshekga this week has left me feeling like Alice in Wonderland.

While South African learners cannot read for meaning; while they attend schools in unsafe environments without food; while they sit in overcrowded classrooms with overworked and underqualified teachers forced to teach an outdated curriculum; the Department has no plans in place to turn the situation around to save this generation.

They make many promises but there's little actual impact on the ground.

This is nothing new.

During Minister Motshekga's first term I was impressed by some of her reforms – a new curriculum, new workbooks and new assessments. But you have run out of steam and ideas, Minister.

Reading and catch-up crisis and ECD

The PIRLS results released on Tuesday are just but an example.

1 in 5 grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language.

More than half of grade 6 children can't read for meaning when tested on grade 4 levels – these tests show that we have lost a decade of progress.

You see Minister, the thing with surveys of achievement is that they don't care what you say you've done, they just measure what children actually know. And what they revealed was devastating.

Minister, if children can't read they are doomed before they even begin.

The Covid-19 pandemic is not wholly to blame either.

These devastating outcomes are of your making. Your Department closed schools for far too long and didn't have plans while they were shut.

75% of learners who attend no-fee schools lost 50% to 75% of their learning time in 2020 and more than 25% in 2021 because of your Departments, Minister.

The Ministerial Advisory Committee advised DBE in July 2021 to send all learners back to school immediately. But this was ignored and rotational timetables continued for another 6 months.

Even when we took your Department to court to end rotational schooling, you resorted to name calling and thought we were grandstanding. But we knew the devastating effects of your inaction.

Most sensible countries have announced huge catch up programs. Chile has a detailed 4-year plan to catch up learning losses from Covid. Not South Africa. Currently there is no budgeted national catch up plan, just talk.

The DBE's dribs and drabs are a disgrace – talking about free websites and parachuting untrained unemployed youth in classrooms.

An investigation by *GroundUp* and *Viewfinder* refuted DBE's claims to Parliament about a National Reading Programme and found that the programme is nothing but a "collection of random, uncoordinated activities by provincial education departments with no proper monitoring."

In fact the DA-run Western Cape is the only province with a budgeted, implemented and monitored reading plan, as well as their R1.2-billion "Back on Track" program to catch-up learning losses.

R111 million has been set aside for reading, specifically for Afrikaans and IsiXhosa schools. That is why the Western Cape has double the number of learners that can read compared to the rest of the country.

How are learners meant to eventually participate in the labour market if they can't understand what they read – a basic skill. Last year, the Department of Higher Education's Labour Market Intelligence Programme identified a lack of "reading comprehension" as the number one skill deficit in the country's labour market.

4.9 million young South Africans are unemployed.

3.7 million youth aged 15-24 are not in employment, education, or training. Umalusi needs more budget to finalise and implement the GEC for grade 9s so that learners who choose to leave school after grade 9 do not join growing unemployment lines.

Chairperson, the Minister and DG must therefore present their budgeted catch-up and reading plans to Parliament with specific milestones in this APP so they can be held accountable to stop this blood bath where a generation of children will be confined to a lifetime of poverty and unemployment.

Pit Toilets and Infrastructure

Chairperson, the ANC government's biggest victims are poor children.

The ANC government is so dysfunctional and incompetent that it cannot do even the most simple things: building toilets, feeding children, or keeping the lights on, let alone teaching children to read.

29 years into our democracy there are more than 5 000 schools with functional pit toilets, and no credible plan in this financial year to eradicate them.

DBE has failed to meet every single ASIDI and SAFE target to eradicate pit toilets and other dangerous school infrastructure. And the goal posts have been shifted for the fourth time to 2025 now.

When 4-year-old Langalam Viki's tragic death in her school's pit toilet is raised, the Minister simply refers to the police investigation. Yet the DA's request on a progress report of the investigation remains unanswered.

The fact that the police are investigating the circumstances of her death does not minimise the dehumanising facilities Langalam was forced to use daily while alive.

I personally did an oversight to her school. The toilets are horrendous.

The Minister would certainly not use them, nor would she allow her grandchildren to use them. But the learners at Langalam's school are still subjected to those conditions to this day.

Sadly, in the last decade, we have lost 6 children to pit toilets under your watch, Minister.

Schools are not meant to be the graveyards that this ANC government has turned them into.

That is why as the DA we have launched a pit toilet campaign and will be approaching the courts to ensure that each pit toilet is eradicated in schools.

More than 5 800 schools still have unreliable water supply. There are 400 mud schools and 900 schools still have asbestos roofing despite a 2016 deadline to replace them.

Yet, the Eastern Cape and Mpumalanga Departments returned R414 million meant to deal with unsafe infrastructure.

This money was then was given to provinces who can use it like the Western Cape who built a new school in 65 days, yes you heard me correctly 65 days; while your Departments infrastructure projects are delayed by an average 27 months.

Minister, it is high time your Department looked at efficient models to build schools of quality quicker to eradicate dangerous infrastructure in schools.

Learners and teachers deserve a safe and dignified environment that is conducive to learning and teaching.

Nationals School Nutrition Programme

To add insult to injury, learners at more than 10 000 schools in KZN and the Eastern Cape were forced to go hungry when those provincial departments failed to ensure provision of their daily meals.

The KZN tender is now the subject of investigation. However, there is no indication from DBE on whether those responsible for this travesty will be held accountable despite allegations that a family member of an official benefited from this tender.

But with this ANC government, cadres must eat while children starve.

Minister, an urgent audit of all the provincial NSNP programmes must be done to identify looming problems and ensure that no other learners suffer the same fate.

If the ANC government fails to do this, there is no hope to address learner dropout rates because a meal is an incentive that helps keep the 9.6 million learners dependent on the programme in school. The Department must ensure the full roll-out of breakfasts in schools as is done in the Western Cape and Gauteng.

Dropouts and Quality outcomes

It is also time the Department faced the truth about the matric results – a real pass rate of 54.6% is not good enough. What does a Bachelor's pass mean if learners aren't able to grasp their first year course work at university?

Minister, your government's sole focus on quantity means nothing if quality and depth of education is left out of the equation.

Greater focus must be put on fostering creativity and entrepreneurial skills. Studies must be done on the benefits of continuous assessments. Millions of learners' futures are in peril.

Conclusion

Minister, the DA believes that education is the foundation of opportunity.

Where we govern, more children stay in school, school infrastructure is built and maintained despite budget cuts, children eat twice a day, budget is provided for a catch-up plan and reading, quality of teaching is monitored through an evaluation authority, more collaboration schools are built to harness skills needed for the economy on all levels. No child is at risk of dying in a pit toilet because we don't have them. Life is better where the DA governs; that's why parents move here looking for better schooling.

Where the DA governs, we focus on outcomes and action, not endless talk and meaningless documents.

So instead of taking offence when we offer you best practice, embrace it for the sake of the future of this country who are confined to a lifetime of poverty and unemployment. It's called political maturity, mama.

Minister, you are responsible for millions of learners. Your Department's failures are your failures, as much their limited successes are.

It is time to vote out these ANC-oppressors in 2024 and usher in a new moon-shot pact government that will provide quality education as a pathway out of poverty and unemployment. Noko badiniwe ngoku, masibaphumze.

I thank you.