

Budget Debate on Vote 16: Basic Education

Speech by Marina van Zyl MP

DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Basic Education

Minister, members, fellow South Africans.

Budget time is the perfect time for government to correct shortcomings in any department and propose a way forward that will support positive programs to benefit all South African children.

Unfortunately, this is not the case today. This budget is a missed opportunity and the children of our country will continue to suffer under the uncaring ANC government.

The Department of Basic Education should focus its budget on improving the quality of education through investing in resources like textbooks, early childhood development programs, teacher shortages, nutrition support and infrastructure.

These, if not attended to, will negatively impact on the quality of education students receive. Unfortunately, not enough is being done in any of these areas. Let me give you a quick lesson on the mistakes you are making:

On the matter of textbooks – centralising procurement, as proposed in the BELA Bill, will not assist students. Textbooks must be with learners on the first day of school.

This is currently not the case and centralising the system only creates opportunity for corruption by cadres.

On the matter of early childhood development – there is much to say about the failings of this uncaring ANC government – the inclusion of Grade R to be compulsory causes grave concern: that of infrastructure, or rather the lack thereof.

This time it's an old ANC favourite – over-promising and under delivering.

The Department themselves has admitted that there is no budget to address this infrastructure need, and will not be able to build Grade R classrooms.

Where will the money come from Minister? Your Department is pushing so hard to get the BELA Bill passed, which will make Grade R compulsory, yet there is no plan assure compliance. You will create a backlog even before it can be implemented!

On the matter of teacher shortages – the Funza Lushaka bursary program has been put in place by this government, in order to address specific skill and teacher shortages. However, according to the most recent annual report, almost a quarter of students weren't placed. With the University of Stellenbosch's warning earlier this year that 49% of teachers will retire in the next decade, and that not enough new teachers are being hired, the lack of Funza Lushaka placements is very concerning.

On the matter of the National School Nutrition Program – More than a million children were forced to go hungry after the KwaZulu-Natal and Eastern Cape provinces failed to provide them with meals as part of the NSNP. The KZN Basic Education MEC's foolish decision to the programme in that province, is now being investigated by the SIU.

The Eastern Cape MEC for Basic Education failed to ensure that nearly 5 000 schools received payment in time to provide their learners with meals – for many of them often their only meal a day.

Minister, can you imagine the desperation of poor parents who have come to rely on the schools to ensure nutritious meals for their children, only to be confronted by their hungry cries? When will you fix this mess, Minister?

On the matter of infrastructure – Infrastructure is one of the most worrying issues in Basic Education. Schools are not being built quick enough, which creates overcrowded classrooms.

Now, the Minister will come here and say that it is language and admission policies that creates overcrowded classrooms. No Minister, it is the lack of your Department to address the lack of proper infrastructure that creates this problem.

Pit toilets are not being eradicated despite a court judgement stating it should have been addressed by the end of March 2023. Children are dying in pit toilets. Put budget to eradicate this, Minister. We cannot have parents identifying the lifeless bodies of their children in pit toilets 29 years after democracy.

Then, on the issue of learner transport - the learner transport system in South Africa faces various challenges, particularly in relation to the inclusion of vulnerable scholars.

33% of learners with special needs and 19% of learners that qualify for learner transport do not receive the necessary transport assistance.

I think it is time that government decides where this function should be: the Department of Basic Education or Transport?

Learners that qualify for transport, should receive support from the government.

Minister, like the payment of Norms and Standards for School Funding, this only remains a paper budget, nothing more.

Minister, the learners and parents of South Africa deserve an apology from you. You are failing them. Your Department is failing them. You hide behind moving goal posts and skewed statistics while generations of children suffer and die under your Ineptitude.