

Quality education is a key tool to realise opportunity while ending poverty and unemployment

By Baxolile 'Bax' Nodada MP – DA Shadow Minister of Basic Education

Sihlalo,

As we debate the Basic Education budget vote, we must know that quality education is a key tool to realise opportunity. One which our children can use to end poverty and unemployment despite their circumstances of birth.

Chairperson, terrible damage has been caused to our children's education through the disruptions to their schooling over the last two years – rural and township schools have lost up to 75% of their learning and teaching time.

Rotational schooling mostly affected the poorest and most vulnerable schools. It took the DA going to court to end rotational schooling despite the Ministerial Advisory Committee in July 2021 recommending that it be abandoned.

Minister, I hope it won't take us going to court again to lift mask-wearing for school children while science and health experts have advised government to abandon it.

What is more concerning though are the systemic tests done by the Western Cape Education Department which show that overall, learners have fallen up to 70% behind previous cohorts in Language, and up to 106% are a year behind in Maths.

The greatest learning losses can be seen in the Foundation Phase on reading, writing, language, and numeracy. Allowing these gaps to persist will widen the inequality gap between the haves and the have nots, condemning the latter to a lifetime of poverty and unemployment.

That is why in this budget vote we have recommended that DBE consider further/extra interventions within its plans and targets for catch-up programmes; specifically, in the rural/disadvantaged schools.

I do want to however commend the diversification of learning pathways through the three-stream curriculum model – a step in the right direction in developing knowledge and skills enabling learners to access industry, jobs, and entrepreneurial opportunities.

However, I would like to suggest that DBE considers more subjects and skills beyond coding, robotics, and marine pilot studies. Developing skills and expertise to refine gold, diamond, and platinum is an opportunity DBE should explore in the curriculum.

Secondly, engage with the private sector and NGOs to establish collaboration schools as part of the Department's targets.

“Collaboration schools” seek to partner with under-performing schools serving marginalised communities with a school operating partner to strengthen school governance and improve quality teaching and learning in that school, so all learners can reach their full potential.

I offer an invite to the Department and the Minister to come see what collaboration schools have done in providing quality education for children in Bonnievale. Quality education is pertinently made possible by quality teaching and development.

Currently we have over 1 500 unqualified teachers and 24 000 teacher vacancies.

The Department must allocate resources to train and reskill teachers to ensure that they are qualified to align their knowledge with the three-stream curriculum model.

It is essential to further fill crucial vacancies by developing adequate quality teachers in the Maths and Science and Technology through the Fundsa Lushaka-bursary while prohibiting bursars from changing their study subjects once admitted to universities.

The low uptake in the MST subjects especially in our top performing provinces is completely unacceptable and must be addressed.

Furthermore, it has become imperative that DBE establishes an independent schools monitoring evaluation authority to strengthening education quality.

The recent floods in KZN and the Eastern Cape have exacerbated the infrastructure challenges in the schooling system with 630 schools damaged costing the Department R442 million to fix. This is on top of the R203 million in damage caused by the July unrests.

Yet, R1.6 billion has been cut from the infrastructure budget by Cabinet over the medium term which has already affected the existing infrastructural backlog of dealing with mud, dilapidated asbestos, and pit toilets in schools.

Despite the SAFE and ASIDI programmes which have recorded very low spending, we still sit with over 900 inappropriate structures and 1 526 schools with pit toilets which were supposed to be eradicated by March 2021 – sadly goal posts keep on being shifted.

The President's social infrastructure delivery mechanism announced at SONA is mentioned nowhere in the APP and budget which is concerning.

It is crucial to site the model that will be used with this social infrastructure delivery mechanism to urgently address infrastructure backlogs in schools and the poor delivery by implementing agents.

Learner dropouts remain a huge challenge.

Before the pandemic, at least four out of ten learners in South Africa who started school did not finish.

Each young person that drops out of school adds to the deepening of intergenerational poverty, unemployment, and inequality – currently affecting 3.3 million youth not in education employment and skills training.

SA-SAMS' digital recording to track dropouts is badly designed and schools without ICT access battle to capture learner information. It's unclear whether learners who dropout have permanently done so, or

have moved to new schools or to TVET colleges. These unknowns are precisely the factors obscuring the disappearance of learners.

LURITS was instituted to address these data collection issues. Unfortunately, LURITS remains wrought with gaps and inaccuracies in terms of how information is collected at schools. It's time the Department review SA-SAMS and LURITS to ensure that we track, trace, and adequately develop strategies to retain learners in school.

It would be amiss of me not to mention that the DA will in the coming days submit our comments on the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill that was opened by Parliament on Sunday.

The BELA Bill fails to consider the practical implications of making grade R compulsory; takes the decision of final admission away from school governing bodies; removes power over a school's language policy; fails to consider the various concerns of home-schooling; and the Bill is missing an opportunity to effectively regulate online and blended learning to alleviate the pressure on physical schooling.

Chairperson, the largest obstacle to redressing the legacies of the past and creating a society of opportunity is the repairing our failing education system.

The DA believes that education is the foundation of opportunity.

Where we govern, more children stay in school, infrastructure in schools is built and maintained despite budget cuts, quality teaching is monitored through the school's evaluation authority, and more collaboration schools are built to harness skills needed for the economy – that's why parents move their children to find better schooling.

Minister, instead of taking offence when we offer you best practice, embrace it for the sake of the future of this country. It's called political maturity.

I would also like to take the opportunity to thank the now former Western Cape MEC for education, Debbie Schafer, for her work in providing learners with good quality education and a fair chance at accessing opportunity regardless of whether a child was born in Khayelitsha, Mitchells Plain, Bonnievale or Wynberg.

A country that does not adequately invest in its youth through quality education confines generations to a lifetime of poverty and unemployment.

Therefore Minister, as the custodian of Education, we implore you to please wear your political maturity hat in this budget vote and consider our recommendations.

Our children deserve better.

I thank you.