



Democratic Alliance
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Debate on Vote 16: Basic Education

Honourable Chairperson, Honourable Members,

South Africa cannot afford another decade of promises without delivery in Basic Education. For too long, the ANC-majority governments have spoken the language of change but walked the path of neglect. The result? Pit latrines decades after apartheid ended. Ghost employees consuming resources meant for learners. Infrastructure budgets returned to Treasury. Literacy levels among the worst globally.

This is not just a crisis of policy, it is a crisis of leadership, accountability, and political will.

Today, however, we stand at the dawn of a new chapter with a Minister at the helm who brings not only integrity but urgency. Minister Siviwe Gwarube entered this office not with ego, but with open ears and a clear vision. Her *Listening and Learning Tour* across all nine provinces laid bare the failures – and began correcting them.

Under her leadership, 97% of the pit latrines identified in the 2018 SAFE audit have been eradicated. That is real progress, not photo ops. The National School Nutrition Programme was rescued from a R9.8 billion centralised tender disaster – halted before the rot could spread. Interim guidelines for the BELA Act have been published, and draft regulations on admissions and capacity will soon follow.

Let us be clear: this budget is the first in over a decade that reflects a people-first, not a politically expedient, approach to education.

Chairperson,

Despite this renewed vision, we are under no illusion that the road ahead is easy. In fact, the real storm lies in the wake of 30 years of ANC fiscal recklessness.

Provincial education departments are on the brink of collapse. In the Eastern Cape, R530 million in education funds was returned to Treasury in 2016. Mpumalanga returned R312 million. And in 2024, some provinces still failed to pay school allocations on time.

Now, these same provinces cannot fill educator posts, cannot maintain infrastructure, and cannot keep learner transport running. These are not just technical failures. They are violations of children's constitutional right to education.

But under the new administration, a line has been drawn in the sand. The Minister has ordered financial recovery plans from every province – demanding action on ghost employees, unfilled posts, and underspending. Ring-fenced budgets for infrastructure and learner support are no longer optional. Accountability will no longer be negotiable.

Chairperson,

We are also encouraged by the firm policy direction laid out in this budget:

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Early Childhood Development (ECD) is finally being treated as the foundation of the education system. With a target to register 10 000 new ECD centres in this financial year, we're setting up our youngest citizens for success.

Literacy and numeracy are being restored to their rightful place: the centre. South Africa cannot compete in the Fourth Industrial Revolution when 8 out of 10 children can't read for meaning by Grade 4. Curriculum-aligned materials for Grades 1 to 3 are being prioritised.

Inclusive Education is receiving overdue attention. Special schools like Nokuthula in Johannesburg – state-of-the-art in concept but decaying in reality – are finally under scrutiny.

School Safety is being tackled at national level through the SAPS-DBE protocol. This includes visible policing, GBV interventions, and disaster management guidelines.

And for the first time in years, district offices are being asked to account for how they support schools, not just audit them.

This is not reform for headlines – it is reform for outcomes.

Honourable Members,

Tuesday's ambush in the Portfolio Committee exposed the desperation of those who cannot fault progress, so they manufacture distraction. We watched as ANC and EFF members turned on the DA-run Western Cape and its Minister of Basic Education – not because of failures, but because they fear success.

Let us compare:

Western Cape has the highest learner retention rate and a functional school infrastructure database.

While provinces like the Northern Cape are plagued by persistent infrastructure backlogs, unspent conditional grants, and financial mismanagement.

Where the Western Cape uses data to plan, others use it to excuse inaction.

It is not a coincidence that when disaster strikes – from floods to administrative collapse – DA-led departments can respond while ANC-led once appeal to Treasury with empty hands and empty excuses.

Chairperson,

In the past year, we've also seen the following DA-led innovations under Minister Gwarube:

The Safe Schools App allows citizens to report pit toilets and safety concerns directly.

A Human Resource Development Strategy for ECD practitioners is being drafted.

The Post Provisioning Norms are under review to distribute teachers more equitably.

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A review of White Paper 6 on Inclusive Education is underway — a long-neglected policy now finally back on the table.

These actions reflect a department no longer content with paper-based progress.

Let us not pretend that the GNU is perfect. But it has given South Africa one invaluable gift: the opportunity to break from the failures of the past and move toward evidence-based governance.

This Budget reflects that.

The Democratic Alliance supports this Budget Vote — not out of loyalty to a person or party — but because we see a clear shift from excuses to execution, from slogans to service, from silence to accountability.

In closing, Chairperson,

We owe our children more than memorials and apologies for pit toilets, broken textbooks, and ghost teachers. We owe them action, protection, dignity, and opportunity.

To the Minister: We thank you. And to those still determined to weaponise dysfunction for politics, we say: your time is up.

The village is rising. The storm is passing. The children are watching. And this time, we will not fail them.

I thank you.

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