JOINT SUBMISSION TO THE SELECT AND STANDING COMMITTEES ON APPROPRIATIONS

2024/25 APPROPRIATIONS BILL (B5-2024)

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SUBMITTED BY:

Equal Education and Equal Education Law Centre
Isivivana Centre, 8 Mzala Street
Khayelitsha, 7784
South Africa

Email: mahfouz@equaleducation.org.za **or** katherine@eelawcentre.org.za

I. INTRODUCTION

Equal Education (EE) is a youth-led mass democratic movement of learners, post-school youth, parents, teachers and community members who use mobilisation and public action, supported by careful research, to empower young activists and ensure equality in South African education. Our campaigns are informed by the experiences of EE members across five provinces and by policy analysis. At EE we build an understanding of the education system while drawing attention to problems facing school communities and learners.

The Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) is a public interest law centre specialising in education law - specifically community lawyering, movement lawyering and legal research and advocacy. EELC works closely with EE in pursuit of their mutual goals of an equal education system and quality education for all.

Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) welcome the opportunity to make submissions on the 2024/25 Appropriations Bill (B5-2024) to the Standing and Select Committees on Appropriations ("the Committees"). Our submission seeks to highlight the social impact of the state budget, primarily focusing on the schooling sector. In particular, we comment on funding allocations through various line items and specific conditional grants relevant to basic education, demonstrating the impact some of these funding decisions have on learners, school communities and education service delivery generally.

II. FISCAL CONSOLIDATION JEOPARDISES COMPLIANCE WITH HUMAN RIGHTS OBLIGATIONS

The schooling sector is plagued by multiple issues, including poor infrastructure, quality and learning deficits, and historic inequality, all of which require funding to address. Reduced spending on education only stands to deepen existing inequalities. Treasury itself has acknowledged that due to budget cuts, provinces will struggle to hire more teachers and that this will impact school overcrowding, "*possibly resulting in weaker education outcomes*".

The burden of cuts to social spending falls disproportionately on marginalised communities who depend on free healthcare, education and social protection services. United Nations bodies have repeatedly said that South Africa's indefinite austerity measures in the name of 'fiscal consolidation' pose a significant threat to human rights and likely result in unlawful non-compliance with international and domestic human rights obligations. Despite South Africa promising to remedy this by ringfencing the children's budget during its 2024 review by the United Nations Committee on the Rights of the Child, we see continued cuts to important social spending that impact children.

South African courts have repeatedly found that failing to take reasonable measures and dedicate available resources toward the realisation of socio-economic rights is unlawful. The courts have also noted that it is even harder to justify failures to dedicate resources toward children's rights and to an unqualified and immediately realisable right like basic education. Like all other areas of law and policy, the budget must comply with constitutional obligations. We urge the Committees, and Parliament at large, when considering the contents of this submission, to determine whether the 2024/25 budget withstands Constitutional scrutiny. We contend that it does not.

III. OPEN LETTER FROM EQUALISERS IN LIMPOPO

Dear Mr President, incoming Minister of Education and MEC of Education in Limpopo

As we approach the hour of the inauguration of new government, we Equalisers (Equal Education learner members) from Ga-Mashashane in Limpopo want to reflect on the current unacceptable state of our schools and to repeat the calls we have made to government to make sure that we have safe, encouraging and accessible school environments. Because we are under the age of 18, we could not contribute to democracy by registering our views on the ballot. We have therefore chosen to speak about our struggles to holistically access our right to education in schools that have broken and unsafe infrastructure, unreliable water, unsafe school environments, textbook and reading book shortages and overcrowded classrooms.

Water and Sanitation

The Limpopo province has some of the worst examples of inequality and a broken education system. The infrastructure backlogs in the more rural parts of the province are vast. The Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (school infrastructure law) and the Komape court case – where Equal Education (EE) was a friend of the court – made the Limpopo Department of Education (LDoE) remove plain pit toilets and supply rainwater harvesting tanks or boreholes to many of our schools. But we are still very concerned that some of our younger siblings in schools like Tutwana Primary and Mashashane Primary are still using dangerous plain pit toilets. We are also worried about the new infrastructure in our schools, new toilets are breaking because they are not being maintained. Our toilets and water facilities are being vandalised because our schools do not have enough security and fencing. More and more, we are seeing water only available on some days and not on others, which makes it difficult to manage hygiene and to concentrate on hot days. It also badly affects our school feeding schemes because without clean water we cannot get a nutritious meal. We demand that you please fulfil all the past promises to remove plain pit toilets in all our schools and make sure that the new water and sanitation facilities that we are given are good quality, well maintained and protected from things like vandalism.

Infrastructure

The roofs in many of our classrooms leak when it rains. This disrupts teaching and learning, especially during the rainy season, and damages school furniture that is already not enough. The leaking roofs sometimes result in classes being suspended.

Our schools also do not have stocked science laboratories, computer centres or libraries. Even though having a good understanding and excelling in subjects like Natural Science, Technology, Chemistry and Languages is dependent on these facilities. One of the best methods to learn and to develop critical thinking skills is by doing things practically, we are not given the opportunity to do so as a result of not having these facilities or having rooms that are named libraries or labs but that do not have books or equipment. We demand that our classrooms get better roofs that do not result in teaching and learning being dependent on the weather. We also demand that you provide our schools with stocked libraries, computer centres and labs in accordance with the school infrastructure law.

Overcrowding and Teacher Shortages

Our schools are getting more and more learners because of schools closing or merging and more learners moving to Ga-Mashashane. Some of our classes have up to 70 learners. We know that the school infrastructure law says that the maximum teacher-to-learner ratio should be one teacher for fourty learners. As the number of learners in our schools grows, we realise that we do not have enough teachers, tables and chairs, toilets and classrooms to keep an encouraging learning environment.

Between the years 2012 and 2021, there has been a 4% increase in learner enrolment at public schools in Limpopo, while the number of teachers decreased by 2%. On 30 March 2023, Limpopo's previous MEC for education said in her budget speech "the department is continuing to fill the vacancies at Operational, Middle, and Senior Management levels". Meanwhile, schools such as Mmatshipi Senior Secondary in Ga-Mashashane have subjects that do not have teachers allocated to them which forces some of us to choose subject streams that we are not passionate about. This sometimes results in poor performance or in worse cases failing and repeating a grade. This limits our educational opportunities and does not allow us to have the right to choose. We are black learners who live in a rural part of South Africa, we are constantly reminded that we do not have the right to choose or have access to a proper school environment, we cannot accept this from the incoming government of our country and our province. We demand that it ensures that we have enough qualified teachers for different subject streams who can teach us in our home languages, classrooms, classroom furniture and toilets that can accommodate the growing number of learners and qualified teachers to provide quality education to learners.

School Safety

A number of us are scared to go to school because we are experiencing more cases of learners bringing weapons like knives to school, leading to fights in school and between different schools. There are particular groups of learners in our schools that are responsible for this and our teachers are tasked with putting themselves in danger to stop these fights and violent incidents. It is especially difficult for them as we do not have enough teachers and the ones that we do have are not well trained or do not have the capacity to adequately deal with these incidents. Many of our fellow learners are targeted by these groups, are afraid to come to school and are frequently absent. We also do not have sporting facilities and even when there is a sports ground, we do not even have a single ball to play the sports with. We believe that playing team sports might help our fellow learners to avoid fights and be protected from this form of peer pressure.

We demand that our schools are provided with enough sports facilities and equipment; that you support our schools in forming functional safety committees with well-trained teachers; assist our schools in creating school-based support teams that include teachers who are trained to provide initial psychosocial support, and can help facilitate access to professional psychosocial support services for the learners that are causing these violent incidents and for the members of the school community that are affected by it; and improve the knowledge and internal capacity of schools on national and provincial school safety interventions such as the National School Safety Framework (NSSF).

Textbook crisis

In a country like ours where many learners are unable to read and write, it is very concerning to see there is a textbook crisis that makes this problem worse. We are still forced to share textbooks in secondary schools in Ga-Mashashane such as Botsikana, Mmatshipi, and Seipone because there is a shortage of up-to-date textbooks delivered to the school.

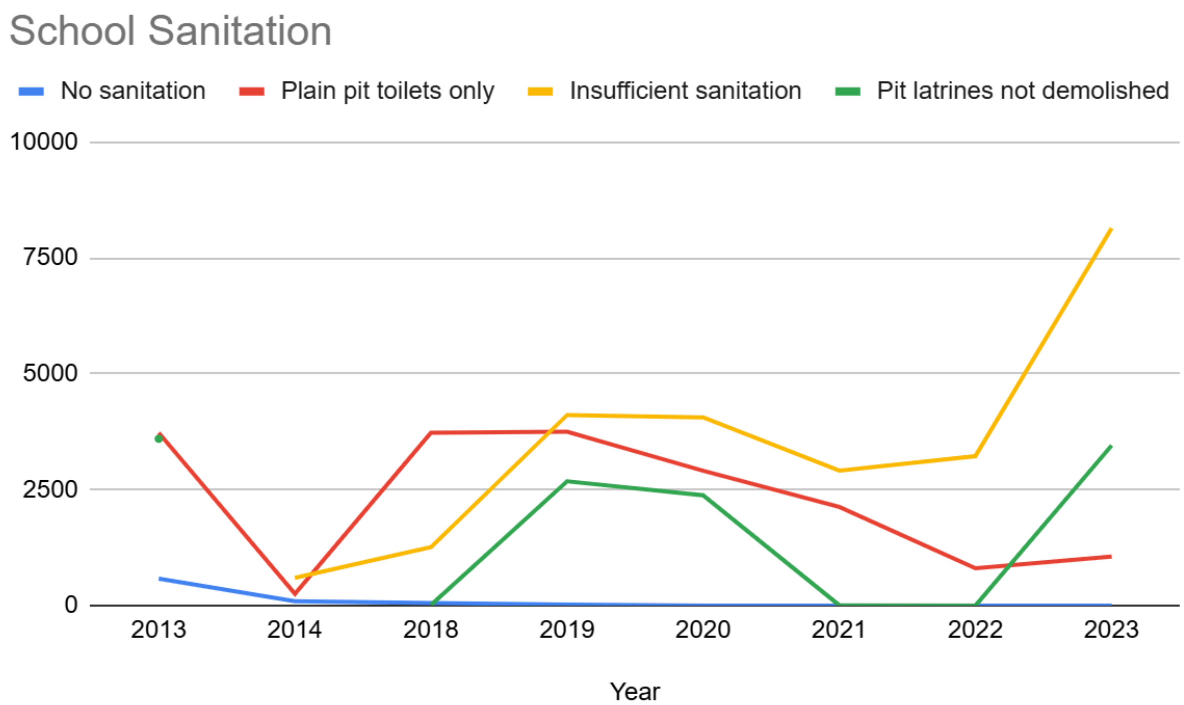
The textbook issue has been going on in the province since 2012. How can our government expect this country to get more learners reading if it is failing to ensure that each learner has the most basic learning material, a textbook? If the LDoE can provide adequate reading and study material in schools there can be an improvement in learning outcomes in the province. We demand that you take into consideration the growing number of learners in the province every year and deliver enough textbooks to our schools.

Conclusion

There is a tendency from the department to not prioritise fixing the school environments of learners in the rural parts of the country. Over the years, we have marched, picketed, shared our demands on social media, and written postcards about the state of our schools, particularly the state of water and sanitation in Limpopo schools. We have also heard many promises being told about our schools being provided with relief. On 10 May, Equalisers from the Western Cape took to the streets to speak about most of the demands that we are writing to you about today, the previous government has still not responded to these demands. On 25 May, we joined other Equalisers across the five provinces that EE organises in to go through political party manifestos and look at some of the promises that had been made about basic education. Some of our demands were mentioned in some manifestos but we know that many times what is promised is not what is actually done.

We, Equalisers from Ga-Mashashane in Limpopo are therefore repeating the call for this new government to be honest, accountable and transparent in meeting our demands. We ask that you, the new government, will at least prioritise the needs of learners from the rural parts of this country, listen to us as we are at the forefront of experiencing these challenges and respond by acting not by talking. #YouthPowerBeyondTheBallot

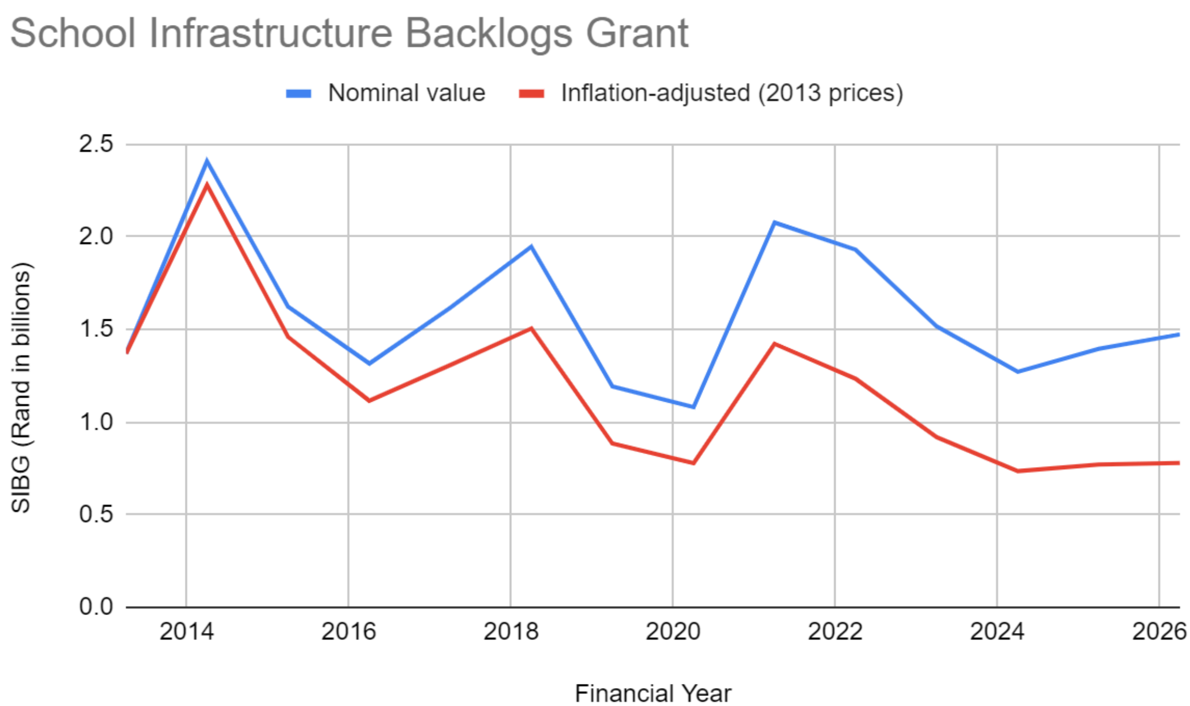
IV. WATER AND SANITATION



The provision of water and sanitation in public schools is essential for creating a safe and healthy learning environment. Access to clean water and proper sanitation facilities is crucial for maintaining basic hygiene, preventing the spread of diseases, and ensuring the overall well-being of students and staff. Not only can inadequate facilities lead to health problems that result in increased absenteeism and decreased academic performance, but they also threaten the basic dignity of school learners.

The tragedy of dangerous and undignified plain pit latrines in schools has been widely reported on. While the government has made progress in reducing the number of pit latrines in schools, it has missed several self-imposed deadlines for eradicating them entirely. Sometimes pit latrines are not removed from schools even in cases where they are replaced, for fear of the inadequacy of replacement facilities, which may rely on unsustainable water supplies or depend upon an unreliable government to provide chemicals necessary to maintain VIP toilets.

Funds are therefore needed to fast-track the provision of sanitation infrastructure and facilities and also to keep them maintained. The above graph aggregates data from Provincial Education Departments' (PED) Norms Progress and other infrastructure reports. While it is encouraging that all schools have access to sanitation, it is clear that the number of schools reporting inadequate sanitation is increasing dramatically. More money is required to avoid further retrogression into undignified learning conditions.



Despite the urgent ongoing need for school sanitation, the 2024/25 budget cut planned expenditure on the School Infrastructure Backlogs Grant (SIBG) by R1.2 billion over the MTEF. This is an in-kind conditional grant that funds the Accelerated School Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI), which is a critical intervention that is meant to rapidly eradicate some of the most pressing school infrastructure backlogs like water, electricity, and sanitation. If prices were held constant, the value of the SIBG has reduced from R1.37 billion in 2013 to R735 million today.

Investing in the maintenance and provision of these facilities not only protects the health of the school community but also promotes equity, as all students, regardless of their background, have the right to learn in a clean and safe environment. Therefore, prioritising funding for water and sanitation in public schools is a fundamental step towards fostering an environment where students can thrive both academically and personally.

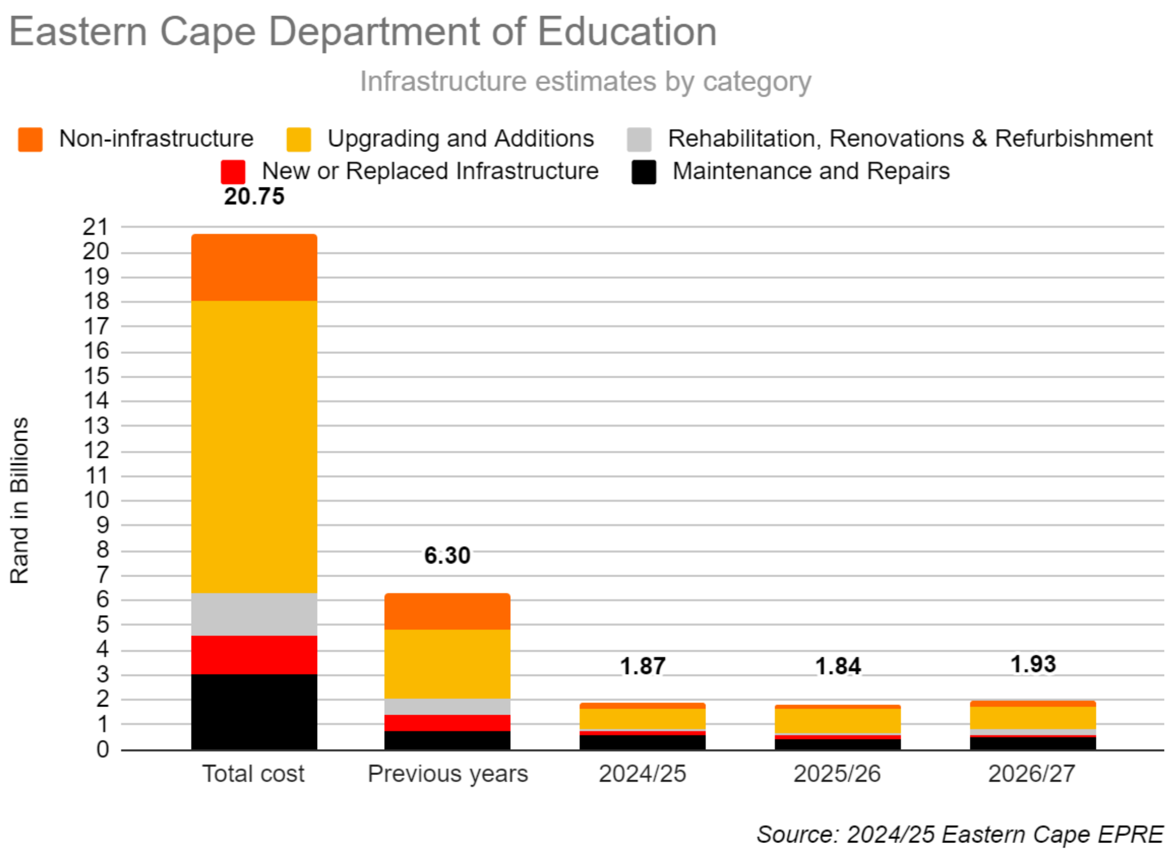
V. SCHOOL INFRASTRUCTURE

For years, Equal Education has been campaigning for the eradication of school infrastructure backlogs to ensure that all public schools meet the Uniform Minimum Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure (the Norms and Standards). The law recognises the importance of adequate infrastructure to facilitate a secure and conducive learning environment. This is backed up by EE's recent research confirming that insufficient or poor infrastructure shapes teaching and learning experiences in South Africa.

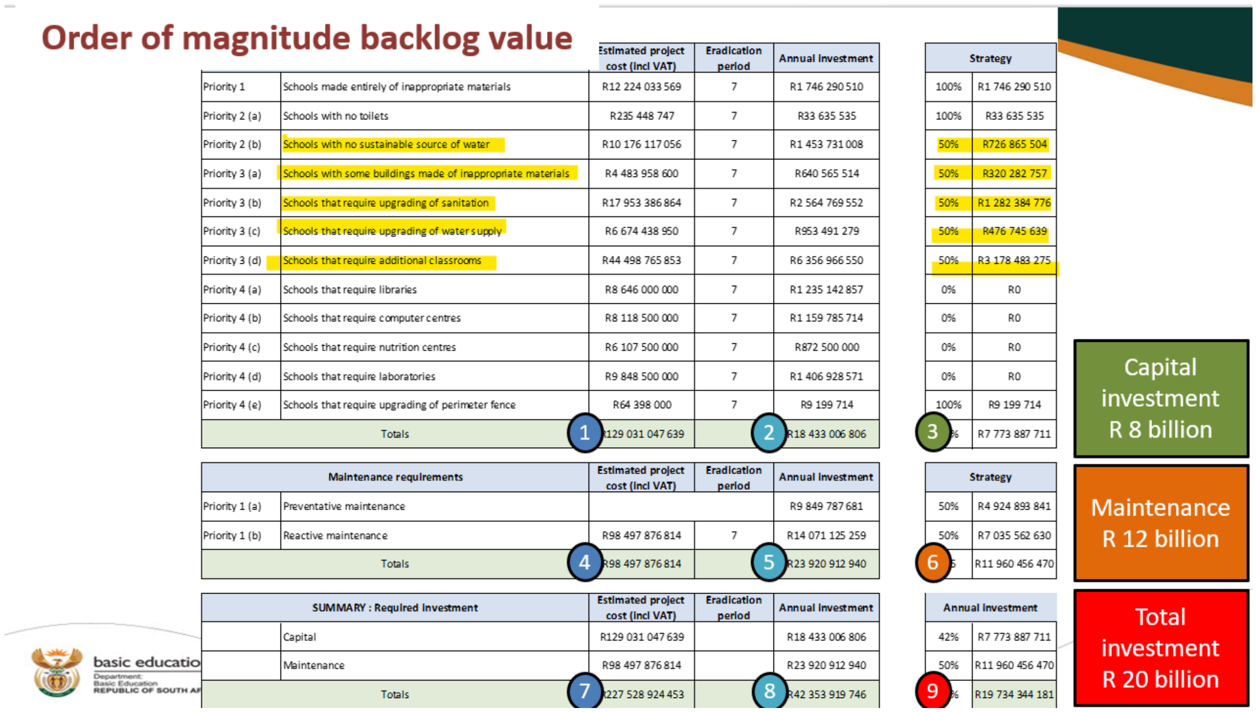
The Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG) is critical for provinces to construct, maintain, upgrade and rehabilitate infrastructure in schools and enable them to achieve the targets set out in the Norms and Standards. In a constrained budgetary environment like the current one, provinces are almost entirely dependent on this grant for all school infrastructure spending.

In 2022/23, the EIG accounted for 85% of all provincial infrastructure spending at public ordinary schools. If you exclude spending by the Western Cape, the EIG accounts for 94% of all infrastructure spending (own calculations). We are concerned that the EIG grant is set at a level that is insufficient to capacitate provincial education departments to fulfil legal and moral obligations to learners and school communities. Despite this, Treasury has announced a net R573 million (R38m-R611m) reduction to the EIG baseline over the MTEF.

The EIG will grow from 13.7 billion in 2024/25 to 14.4 billion in 2026/27 at a nominal average growth rate of 2.5% over the next three years. Even before accounting for inflationary pressures, it remains at too low a level to address the infrastructure requirements of schools, given existing historic backlogs.



The graph above, by way of example, shows the list of current school infrastructure projects that are being undertaken by the Eastern Cape Department of Education. It clearly shows that the level of funding required to complete these projects (R20.75 billion) far exceeds the sum of planned and incurred expenditure on school infrastructure (R11.94 billion). This is not unique to the Eastern Cape. It is reflected nationally.



Order of magnitude backlog value

		Estimated project cost (Incl VAT)	Eradication period	Annual investment	Strategy	
Priority 1	Schools made entirely of inappropriate materials	R12 224 033 569	7	R1 746 290 510	100%	R1 746 290 510
Priority 2 (a)	Schools with no toilets	R235 448 747	7	R33 635 535	100%	R33 635 535
Priority 2 (b)	Schools with no sustainable source of water	R10 176 117 056	7	R1 453 731 008	50%	R726 865 504
Priority 3 (a)	Schools with some buildings made of inappropriate materials	R4 483 958 600	7	R640 565 514	50%	R320 282 757
Priority 3 (b)	Schools that require upgrading of sanitation	R17 953 386 864	7	R2 564 769 552	50%	R1 282 384 776
Priority 3 (c)	Schools that require upgrading of water supply	R6 674 438 950	7	R953 491 279	50%	R476 745 639
Priority 3 (d)	Schools that require additional classrooms	R44 498 765 853	7	R6 356 966 550	50%	R3 178 483 275
Priority 4 (a)	Schools that require libraries	R8 646 000 000	7	R1 235 142 857	0%	R0
Priority 4 (b)	Schools that require computer centres	R8 118 500 000	7	R1 159 785 714	0%	R0
Priority 4 (c)	Schools that require nutrition centres	R6 107 500 000	7	R872 500 000	0%	R0
Priority 4 (d)	Schools that require laboratories	R9 848 500 000	7	R1 406 928 571	0%	R0
Priority 4 (e)	Schools that require upgrading of perimeter fence	R64 398 000	7	R9 199 714	100%	R9 199 714
Totals		1 R129 031 047 639		2 R18 433 006 806	3 %	R7 773 887 711

Maintenance requirements		Estimated project cost (Incl VAT)	Eradication period	Annual investment	Strategy	
Priority 1 (a)	Preventative maintenance			R9 849 787 681	50%	R4 924 893 841
Priority 1 (b)	Reactive maintenance	R98 497 876 814	7	R14 071 125 259	50%	R7 035 562 630
Totals		4 R98 497 876 814		5 R23 920 912 940	6 5	R11 960 456 470

SUMMARY : Required investment		Estimated project cost (Incl VAT)	Eradication period	Annual investment	Annual investment	
	Capital	R129 031 047 639		R18 433 006 806	42%	R7 773 887 711
	Maintenance	R98 497 876 814		R23 920 912 940	50%	R11 960 456 470
Totals		7 R227 528 924 453		8 R42 353 919 746	9 %	R19 734 344 181

In a presentation to parliament last year, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) acknowledged that cost-containment measures (austerity) have impeded their ability to provide school infrastructure per the requirements set out by the Norms and Standards. By their calculations, which do not appear to account for inflation, the DBE will need to invest R42.4 billion per year to eradicate school infrastructure backlogs by 2030.

Given the austerity constraints, the DBE presented a reduced infrastructure spending strategy which will not provide any allocation to the building of libraries, nutrition centres, computer centres, or laboratories. It will only allocate 50% of the required funds to ensure that all schools have sustainable water sources, receive necessary sanitation upgrades, and are made of appropriate building materials. The strategy also only funds 50% of preventative and reactive school maintenance requirements. This would reduce the annual cost of school infrastructure investment down to R19.7 billion.

Under previous iterations of the National Minimum Uniform Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure, all public schools were supposed to be equipped with water, electricity, safe sanitation, connectivity, libraries, science laboratories, and computer rooms by 2023. These are legally prescribed minimum norms which learners are entitled to, that Treasury should have funded and departments should have already delivered. It is thus unconscionable that the EIG has been cut. These cuts should be repealed and additional funding should be allocated to improve school infrastructure.

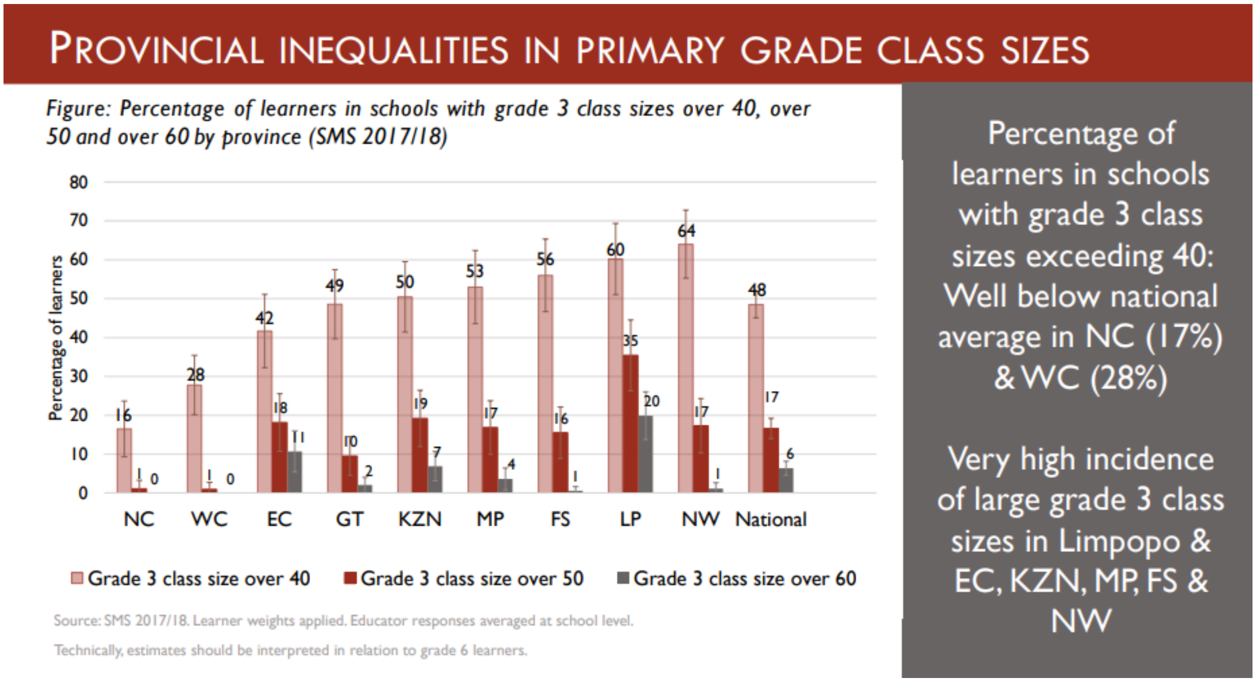
VI. OVERCROWDING

Public outcry erupted in April this year when it was revealed that there were 31 462 unfilled educator vacancies across the country, a 28% increase on 2021's figures. But even with these posts filled, overcrowding would still be a significant cause of concern in South African schools.

The additional funding allocated to the DBE to accommodate the cost of living wage adjustments for public sector workers has been grossly insufficient. The 2024/25 national allocation towards compensation of employees increased nominally by just 2.4% from R236.1 billion to R241.9 billion – far below the inflation rate. If one were to drill down into provincial education departments' expenditure on educators and related professionals specifically, the results would be even more bleak. Under this line item, which is not reported by all provinces, the Free State's budget decreases by 6% and Northern Cape's by 4.5%. Gauteng's budget for educators and related professionals increased by 4.5%, Western Cape by 4%, and KwaZulu Natal by just 1.5%.

What this translates to is a severe shortage of educators in public schools across the country. Compounding this problem is the nationally determined post-provisioning norms, which do not sufficiently allocate teachers on an equitable basis. Amongst public schools located in lower-income communities (quintile 1-3 schools), the average learner-educator ratio is 29.9. The average learner-educator ratio in quintile 5 schools, by comparison, is 25.1. At private independent schools, it is 17.4.

It is important to also note that learner-educator ratios do not fully reflect class sizes, which also depend on the subjects offered, teacher qualifications, classroom infrastructure and furniture, and a range of other factors. In 2017, 48% of grade 3 learners went to school in classes with more than 40 learners. According to Education Management Information System (EMIS) data, the national average learner-educator ratio has increased from 24.4 in 2017 to 28.4 in 2023, meaning that classroom sizes have likely increased. This is a cause of grave concern.



Willis, G. (2023) 'South African Teacher Shortages as Revealed Through Class Sizes and Learner-Educator Ratios'. RESEP, Stellenbosch University

There are a series of interventions that Treasury should engage in to ameliorate this crisis, including advising on adjustments to the post-provisioning norms, funding the Special Intervention Programme on Overcrowding in Schools (SIPOS), prioritising the review of the Equitable Share formula, providing sufficient funds for hiring enough educators, protecting and expanding the Funza Lushaka bursary scheme, and expanding the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative.

Post provisioning norms

Overcrowding is most acutely experienced in no-fee and low-fee schools, which do not have the resources to hire additional teachers. We recommend that Treasury consult with the DBE to adjust the post-provisioning norms and increase the pool of available posts that are allocated for poverty redress. Currently, a maximum of 5% of all posts can be distributed to schools based on the relative poverty of the learners of a school. This should be revised upwards to increase the progressivity of the education budget without placing additional strain on the fiscus.

Special Intervention Programme on Overcrowding in Schools

In 2022, the DBE announced that it would introduce SIPOS. It engaged with Treasury to supply additional classrooms to overcrowded schools at a reduced cost and time. We recommend that Treasury commit to funding the Special Intervention Programme on Overcrowding in Schools, which was intended to support the provision of 70,043 additional classes in 8,133 overcrowded schools across the country. This programme was put on hold due to cost-containment measures, at the immense expense of learners and the future of this country.

Hiring of more educators

We recommend that additional funding be allocated to increase provincial education departments' personnel budgets. We note that hiring freezes for educators and non-educators have been in place across a number of provinces. Thus, no meaningful increase in the number of teachers available is expected. In addition, in the context of a school overcrowding crisis, provinces and schools may also not hire replacement/substitute teachers when permanent staff are not available. This occurs in the face of overwhelming evidence that South Africa faces a teacher shortage that is only set to become worse, with just under half of all publicly paid teachers set to retire by 2030. Treasury itself has acknowledged the negative impact this decision is likely to have, "possibly resulting in weaker education outcomes".

We are concerned that allocations to the provincial equitable share (PES) will be reduced in real terms for the fourth year in a row, and that the projected average annual increase of 3.9% over the Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF) is also below inflation estimates. This increases the risk associated with another negotiated wage increase in the medium term. The MTEF baseline reduction of R61.5 billion to the PES is gravely concerning as it will directly influence the capacity of provinces to deliver quality education services. We recommend that these baseline reductions be reconsidered to allow provinces to hire more educators for overcrowded schools.

Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme

Research commissioned by the Department of Higher Education and Training in 2022 shows that South Africa will face a massive teacher shortage, with 48% of publicly paid teachers expected to retire and exit the teaching profession by 2030. The Stellenbosch Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP) institute states, "*This scale of teacher shortages and the need to train thousands more teachers are unprecedented in our history, and require urgent policy attention from government and universities*."

Despite an already existing teacher shortage and the impacts of increased teacher retirement already being felt by the sector, R397.9 million will be cut from the Funza Lushaka bursary allocation over the MTEF period. It is stated in the DORA that "*Despite Cabinet approved reductions to the programme's funding [. . .] the Department plans to increase the number of bursaries awarded from 9 700 in 2024/25 to 10 300 in 2026/27. This will be done by funding more students completing the one-year postgraduate certificate in education and increasing the number of bursaries awarded to institutions with lower fee structures.*"

The decision to prioritise Post Graduate Certificates in Education (PGCEs) is confusing because, due to cost containment measures implemented by Treasury in 2023/24, the Department of Basic Education was forced to withdraw already awarded bursaries from all PGCE students who were two months into the academic year. In addition, to be admitted into a PGCE programme, one is required to already have an undergraduate degree, which substantially reduces accessibility to the teaching profession.

Presidential Youth Employment Initiative

The education sector presidential employment initiative, which assisted provinces in employing assistants in schools and thereby provided livelihood opportunities for over 1.1 million young people is a tremendously valuable programme. Beyond its direct employment effects, it has also helped previously unemployed individuals gain work-related skills, had an economic stimulus benefit, and improved education service delivery by reducing the administrative burden of teachers, assisting with classroom management, and supporting learners during activities.

While we understand that this programme will continue, the mechanism through which it is implemented is unclear. In the explanatory memorandum to the Division of Revenue Bill (Table W1.17), there does not appear to be any funding allocated to the education sector presidential employment initiative beyond the R6.46 billion that was provided in the 2023/24 financial year.

However, the Budget Review notes that “about R4 billion will be made available for hiring more teacher assistants through the basic education schools employment initiative in the provinces.” We are concerned at the more than R2 billion decrease in allocation to a programme which not only supports education services but also provides direct employment and economic stimulus.

VII. LEARNER AND TEACHER SUPPORT MATERIAL (LTSM)

Learner and teacher support material (LTSM) comprises textbooks, workbooks, stationery, and other educational materials such as dictionaries, lab equipment, and technological tools. Textbooks are particularly useful to learner development as they help with lesson planning and are positively associated with improved educational outcomes. The DBE is required to ensure that every learner has their own textbook for each learning area. LTSM is procured and distributed at national, provincial, and school levels. Expenditure on each of these items has been reduced significantly in the 2024 budget, at a time when learners report having precarious and inadequate access to textbooks.

DBE's Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring programme

The 2024 Budget announced cabinet-approved reductions of R97 million to the DBE's Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring programme over the MTEF period. This will directly affect the Department's ability to print and distribute workbooks to schools in need. To fulfil its requirements and print the 60 million workbooks needed, the Department will implement further cost-saving measures, particularly on printing.

The DBE's 2024/25 Annual Performance Plan that was presented to parliament on 11 July 2024 reflects that just 33.78% of Volume 2 Grade R–9 LTSM workbooks were delivered by January this year.

These cost-saving measures appear frugal in the short term but will lead to increased costs in the future. Poor-quality workbooks cannot be expected to service learners throughout the year. Lower quality workbooks are more likely to break during use, and printing faults and other expected errors will diminish learners' ability to use workbooks effectively, and hamper their educational process, possibly resulting in learners staying in school for a longer period.

Transfers and subsidies to non-profit institutions

Perhaps one of the most concerning budgetary decisions is the drastic reduction of transfers to non-profit institutions, the majority of which are public schools. Many schools rely on funding from the government for non-capital and non-personnel expenditures, including LTSM. The national appropriation for this line item reflects a 10% drop from R130 million last year to R118 million in this financial year, and further cuts in the future. In provinces, the total transfers to non-profit institutions have reduced by 12% from R29.7 billion to R26.5 billion. KwaZulu Natal explicitly stated in its budget that it cannot afford to fund schools at the level stipulated by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding to fund no-fee schools.

The implication of this is that schools are forced to shift the costs of education services onto poor learners, depriving desperate households of much-needed funds to keep up with the rising costs of living. Schools in quintiles 1-3, which are designated no-fee schools, are often compelled to charge hidden fees by asking for parents to donate cash or materials in lieu of a compulsory fee. Learners who cannot afford to supplement a school's income through these means are sometimes denied access to learning material necessary for their education.

This scenario highlights an important fact about austerity. Underspending by the state places additional burdens on schools and households. It incentivises schools to resort to extraordinary, and in some cases unlawful, measures to supplement their revenue. This can compromise learners of their right to education. According to the results of the 2023 General Household Survey, 19.5% of individuals aged 7-18 years cited no money for fees as the reason for not attending any educational institution

We are all too familiar with the near-perennial crises of textbook shortages, which are often associated with procurement issues or poor administration. Defunding the Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring programme and reducing transfers to schools will only add fuel to the fire. Adequate and flexible funding is necessary to ensure that learners at all schools receive their required textbooks and workbooks timeously.

VIII. EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT

We are deeply concerned regarding the changes to Early Childhood Development (ECD) funding allocations proposed by the 2024/25 Budget. Last year's budget projected that the 2024 ECD grant would increase to nearly R1.9 billion, but baseline reductions mean that this year government plans to only spend R1.59 billion. The DORA notes that R1.1 billion has been reprioritised from the ECD grant over the MTEF to pilot a nutrition support programme, but only R197 million has been earmarked for the programme in 2024/25. It is unclear whether, when, and how the rest of the money will be used to deliver a comprehensive ECD nutrition programme.

The daily subsidy per child aimed at supporting access to ECD services for children from low-income families has not increased in nominal terms since 2019. It remains frozen at R17 per child per day for ECD centres and R6 for non-centre-based programmes. This means that, in real terms, this already inadequate subsidy has decreased by a quarter.

Real prices have increased by almost 34% since then and food price increases have been even more severe. Aside from covering the costs of staff, rent and equipment, this subsidy also covers food for learners—of the R17 subsidy, only R6.80 may be used for nutritional support. Many learners in Early Learning Programmes attend centres from 7 am to 6 pm. This means that R6.80 is supposed to cover the cost of food for an entire day. For learners lucky enough to benefit from State ECD subsidies—only 35% of eligible children—meals provided by ECD institutions can sometimes be their main and most stable source of nutrition. This lack of adequate nutritional support is extremely concerning because 27% of children under 5 are stunted.

In addition, there are also over 1 million children attending close to 50 000 unregistered township and rural ECD programmes who require the subsidy but simply do not qualify due to ECD centre registration requirements. While government has committed to supporting unregistered centres to meet registration requirements, and specifically minimum infrastructure standards, the 2023/24 adjusted budget cut R58 million from the infrastructure component of the ECD conditional grant. While the 2024/25 budget has reversed this cut and increased the allocation to R157 million, it is still not nearly enough to support the registration needs of ECD centres and unlock access to the subsidy for the children who need it.

Not only are there human rights implications for the underfunding of the ECD sector, but there are substantial cost implications too. The first five years of a child's life are critical to their development, and set a foundation to enable future learning and development. Without access to care, nutrition, stimulation and opportunities to play and learn, learning and developmental deficits arise and are likely to result in significant disadvantages throughout a child's life.

Investment in ECD has proven to be one of the most cost-effective and efficient fiscal multipliers - evidence shows that the earlier the educational intervention, the higher the cost-effectiveness and impact on a person's lifetime productivity. Insufficient ECD investment requires government to substantially increase basic and tertiary education funding, and investment in other sectors like health too, to make up for deficits and address resultant crises. A quality early learning foundation can "*reduce* *a child's likelihood to leave school prematurely, improve their performance in school, build the skills they will need to succeed in the workforce and, ultimately, reduce poverty and boost equality*." In other words, **the cost of inaction is much greater than the cost of adequately funding ECD now.**

IX. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Equal access to quality basic education is an “immediately realisable” constitutional right that must be treated as a matter of urgency. Adequate investment in the schooling sector is key to the full realisation of this important constitutional obligation. EE and the EELC, therefore, urge the Committees to seriously consider this submission and the following recommendations with it.

Compliance with Human Rights Obligations

We recommend that:

1. The Committees ensure the 2024/25 budget withstands Constitutional scrutiny by reversing cuts and ring-fencing the children’s budget.

Water and Sanitation

We recommend that:

1. Cuts to the School Infrastructure Backlogs grant are repealed so that urgent infrastructure backlogs under the ASIDI programme can be addressed.
2. Investment into school infrastructure, particularly to assist with the sustainable provision and maintenance of water and sanitation should be increased in light of the growing number of schools with insufficient sanitation.

School Infrastructure

We recommend that:

1. The value of the Education Infrastructure Grant is increased to at least R19.7 billion to enable provinces to address some of the most pressing infrastructure backlogs.
2. Cuts to the Education Infrastructure Grant are repealed and Treasury commits to working with the Department of Education to fund all current infrastructure projects that are dedicated to meeting the minimum uniform standards for school infrastructure.0
3. There is stringent oversight over the spending and implementation of both infrastructure grants.

Overcrowding

We recommend that:

1. Treasury works with the Department of Education to revise post-provisioning norms so that the budget is more progressive and prioritises spending on schools serving poorer communities.
2. The budget is amended to fund the Special Intervention Programme on Overcrowding in Schools.
3. Cuts to the Provincial Equitable Share are repealed and additional funding is allocated to increase provincial education departments’ personnel budgets
4. Teacher training is prioritised through sufficient funding to the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme so that the scheme is more accessible and trains more teachers.
5. Cuts to the education sector presidential employment initiative are repealed to support job creation, classroom size management, and the provision of educational services.

Learner Teacher Support Material

We recommend that:

1. Treasury reverses cost-containment measures introduced to the DBE's Curriculum Policy, Support and Monitoring programme so that learners have access to high-quality printed educational material.
2. Additional funds are allocated to support provinces that do not fund schools at the minimum levels required by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding.

Early Childhood Development

We recommend that:

1. Increase the value of the ECD subsidy to at least R46 by 2029.
2. Provide adequate funding for pre-registration support and improvements to infrastructure.
3. Phase in nutrition support for children at all ECD programmes, whether registered or unregistered.