

EDUCATION SERIES

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ABOUT OUR ORGANISATION

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 research, to empower young activists and ensure equality in South African education.

EQUAL EDUCATION SAYS NSFAS IS THE LIFELINE FOR POOR AND 'MISSING MIDDLE' STUDENTS TO ACCESS FREE, QUALITY, DECOLONISED HIGHER EDUCATION, BUT ITS CORRUPTION, MISMANAGEMENT, AND BUDGET CUTS ARE LOCKING STUDENTS OUT INSTEAD OF BRINGING THEM IN.



In this month's education series, we reflect about:

- Youth-Led Reflections on the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS)
- Celebrating Equal Education Woman
- Urgent call for accountability and immediate intervention in Eastern Cape Schools
- Law and Policy

National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) system failures continue to leave vulnerable students out in the cold.

On the 11th of August 2026, Equal Education, together with Youth Capital, scheduled a hybrid roundtable discussion with the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) to address ongoing issues that adversely affect students who rely on this fund day-to-day. The engagement was planned well in advance. Students mobilised and gathered in different locations to consult and table their grievances directly with NSFAS.

Students had travelled and gathered in Khayelitsha (Cape Town), while others from different Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) across the country waited and made themselves available online in anticipation of the engagement. Some students even travelled from outside the province specifically to participate. At the eleventh hour, however, NSFAS indicated that its senior leadership would no longer attend the engagement.

Equal Education, Youth Capital and students refused to accept that students who had organised, travelled and waited for NSFAS should once again be left without answers. Representatives from Equal Education and Youth Capital headed to the national NSFAS offices based in Cape Town CBD. They staged a peaceful sit-in, insisting that NSFAS leadership account directly to the students. Students who had gathered in Khayelitsha subsequently made their way to the NSFAS offices. For approximately 4 hours, students, Youth Capital and Equal Education remained at the NSFAS offices demanding an audience with senior leadership. NSFAS CFO, Wassim Carrim, eventually arrived and met with representatives of Equal Education and Youth Capital at the NSFAS offices. However, the demand was clear: an engagement behind closed doors with civil society organisations could not substitute for accountability to the students themselves. The students had been invited to engage NSFAS directly; they showed up and therefore deserved to be addressed directly.

After further engagements, NSFAS officials eventually addressed students. By then, frustration among students had understandably intensified. Students had spent hours waiting for an institution that had initially committed to meeting them, only to withdraw at the last minute and then refuse to meet them when they arrived at its offices. As tensions rose, law enforcement officials were called to the NSFAS offices.

The presence of law enforcement in response to young people demanding answers about their education was deeply concerning. Students should not have to escalate their voices, occupy institutional spaces, or face the intimidation of law enforcement simply to secure an audience with a public institution whose mandate is to serve them - a phenomenon (the ongoing militarization of campuses) that Equal Education and Youth Capital notes with deep concern has become more prevalent at Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) over recent years.

The events of the day also demonstrated the power of organised young people refusing to be dismissed. Students showed up and demanded answers. And ultimately, NSFAS had to engage. This inability or unwillingness of NSFAS senior management to meet with students where they are located and respond to their issues reflects a much deeper, ongoing problem: students have repeatedly struggled to be heard by an institution whose decisions directly shape whether they can access and remain in higher education.

Each academic year, without fail, students are forced to protest for equal access to quality higher education because of a system that does not work for them, according to their needs and priorities, in their contexts. When students finally get access, they are still plagued by the ongoing operational inefficiencies of the entity, including delays with payments of student allowances and accredited accommodation and other service providers.

NSFAS is the closest thing this country has to a guarantee that apartheid's economics won't decide a young person's future. Existing student allowance caps do not cover the needs of students' growing cost of living. The cost of food and the cost of accommodation are rising, and students are expected to fill that gap. These are not minor administrative issues; they directly affect whether a young person can learn, eat, have somewhere to sleep, and have the stability required for learning.

The NSFAS system is currently not conducive to good learning and education in this country. When we asked our tertiary society members (TSOC) and post-school youth members (PSY) how they would describe NSFAS, they used words such as: 'unreliable', 'disappointing', 'stressful', 'devastating', 'frustrating', 'unfair' and 'a total system failure.' These are the words from young people funded via the Scheme. These are the same students that the NSFAS office has decided not to hold themselves accountable to and that they continuously struggle to contact and have their issues resolved. These are the students who continue to suffer under the mediocre services that are rendered by NSFAS.

The abject failure of NSFAS cannot be understated. The inability to meet students where they're at will forever be documented in history. Fifty years after young people protested on the streets of South Africa, young people today still find themselves having to protest against a democratically elected government for the opportunity to access education again. NSFAS, in its current form, is failing to create the conditions students need to study and succeed. NSFAS' failure to attend this engagement therefore mirrors the government's overall failure to support student access to higher education. We have had Student Representative Council (SRC) members go to the Portfolio Committee of Higher Education and Training to speak on the issues of accommodation costs, the high cost of food and transport, only to be met with nothing but contempt and confusion.

When the scheme fails, the consequences are dire and are much greater than an unpaid allowance or an unanswered query - it places students' education and futures at risk. How are young people meant to succeed and change the prospects of the future of this country if they are not adequately funded and resourced? Public money must be spent for the good of the public. That principle should be non-negotiable. At a time when young people are already facing high levels of unemployment, which wreck the prospects of young people entering the economy and changing their futures for the good of this country.

Equal Education's organising alongside students and young people yesterday demonstrated why both forms of advocacy matter: young people must have the power to organise and demand accountability, while their experiences must also shape the decisions taken by policymakers and institutions. Two forms of advocacy met. Students mobilised on the ground. Civil society stood alongside them. NSFAS was compelled to respond.

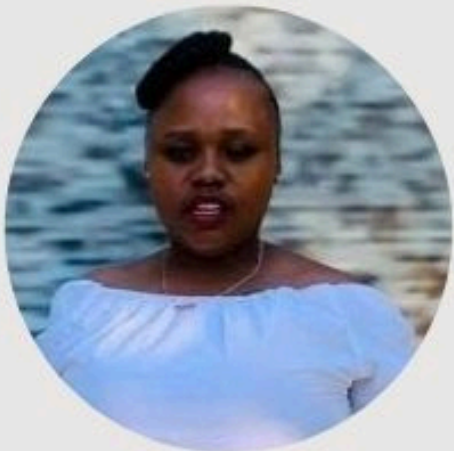
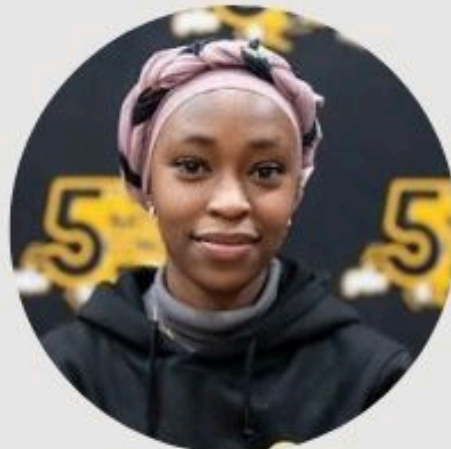
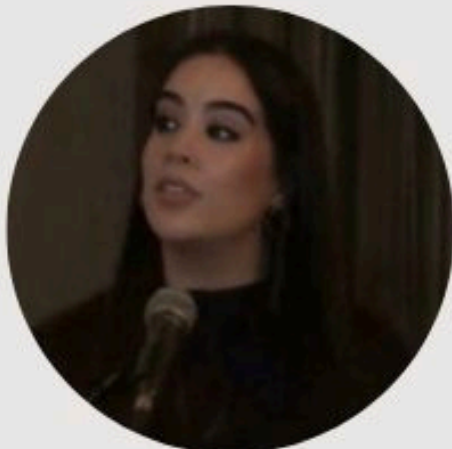
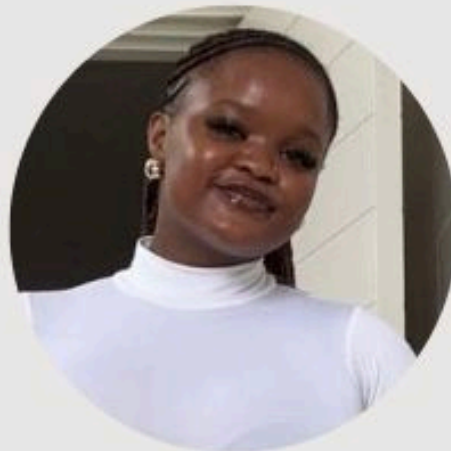
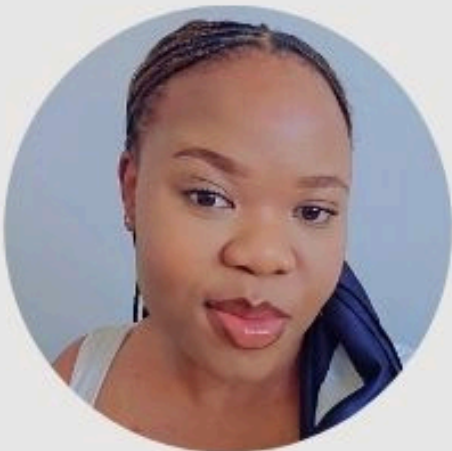
The work, however, is not finished. Following the engagement, NSFAS committed to a further engagement with students and civil society for 25 August 2026. We expected that commitment to be honoured.

On the 25th of August 2026, Equal Education, Youth Capital and Tertiary Society members across the country, some connected online, had an engagement with senior NSFAS officials. Students addressed the officials directly, and they responded to the grievances that students raised. These grievances related to policy decisions and system inefficiencies that continue to adversely impact students who qualify for funding.

Even though we were not fully happy at the end, they were able to answer the questions, but we hope that NSFAS officials will continue to work to strengthen internal systems so that they work better for students. Equal Education continues to monitor developments pertaining to the public entity and higher education sector generally, calling for increased and sustained funding for higher education, strengthened institutional capacity and greater accountability and transparency!

***NoStudentLeftBehind**

We closed the women’s month by celebrating the strength, courage and commitment of women staff of Equal Education



URGENT CALL FOR ACCOUNTABILITY AND IMMEDIATE INTERVENTION IN EASTERN CAPE SCHOOLS



Photos taken by Equal Education EC organising team at the school



On 24 August 2026, Equal Education issued a statement expressing deep disappointment and concern that, after five weeks, teaching and learning have still not resumed at some schools in the Eastern Cape, including Luzuko Primary School.

The disruption followed legitimate concerns raised by parents and communities regarding unsafe school infrastructure. Luzuko Primary School is built entirely from prefabricated materials and has stood since 1999. These concerns cannot be dismissed or treated as an inconvenience. Educators have reportedly sustained injuries on multiple occasions as a result of the unsafe conditions at the school. Parents have therefore been rightfully demanding that the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) address the underlying infrastructure concerns and ensure that learners and educators can return to a safe learning environment.

We are now approaching the end of the third term, yet learners at affected schools have lost approximately four weeks of teaching and learning. Despite the significant amount of learning time already lost, there remains no clear and publicly communicated catch-up plan from the ECDoE, and no sufficient evidence of urgent interventions to ensure that lost learning time is recovered. This situation cannot be allowed to continue as business as usual. The Eastern Cape remains one of the country's most disadvantaged provinces, and learners already face significant barriers to accessing quality education. The continued disruption further deepens existing inequalities and places the educational futures of thousands of learners at risk.

The ECDoE must be held accountable for ensuring that learners' constitutional right to basic education is protected. Accountability cannot be avoided by shifting responsibility or allowing urgent matters to remain unresolved. Where schools are unsafe, the ECDoE has a responsibility to respond urgently, transparently and effectively. To date, the ECDoE has repeatedly provided proposed timelines that were not constructive, including dates for the delayed implementation of infrastructure projects. These timelines have been rejected by parents because they do not adequately respond to the urgency of the situation. Learners have already lost valuable teaching and learning time, while educators and learners continue to face the consequences of unsafe infrastructure. We note that the Disability Economic

Empowerment Trust (DEET) has been appointed to deliver temporary classroom structures at Luzuko Primary School. While this is an important intervention, parents are not making unreasonable demands. They are simply calling for the process to be fast-tracked so that learners can return to a safe and functional learning environment as soon as possible. This urgency must also extend to other schools across the province facing similar infrastructure challenges.

On Monday, 17 August 2026, parents, with the assistance of Equal Education, had to mobilise themselves to receive feedback directly from officials of the ECDoE at Bundy Park. It is unacceptable that parents and communities must repeatedly organise and mobilise themselves with their own resources simply to obtain basic information about the education and safety of their children.

We therefore call on the Eastern Cape Department of Education to provide clear, immediate and transparent information on:

- The concrete steps being taken to address infrastructure concerns at Luzuko Primary School and other affected schools;
- The specific timeline for the safe resumption of teaching and learning;
- The measures being implemented to protect learners and educators from unsafe infrastructure;
- A clear and time-bound catch-up plan to recover the teaching and learning time already lost; and
- The mechanisms that will be used to monitor and ensure that these commitments are implemented.

Parents and communities have demonstrated extraordinary patience throughout this process. They have repeatedly raised their concerns and have waited for meaningful intervention from the Department. They now deserve clear answers, concrete timelines and urgent action.

The ECDoE cannot expect learners and parents to continue bearing the consequences of administrative delays and inadequate interventions. Five weeks without teaching and learning is five weeks of learners' futures being compromised. As Equal Education, we call on the ECDoE to treat this matter with the urgency it deserves and to account publicly to the learners, educators, parents and communities affected. The right to education cannot be postponed. Learners cannot afford another day of inaction.

***SofundaSonke *FixOurSchools *NoLearnerMustBeLeftBehind**

Law and policy monitoring

Parliament

Portfolio Committee on Basic Education

The Portfolio Committee on Basic Education held several engagements in August. These included a briefing by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on the BELA regulations, as well as discussions on statutory rape of young girls and the Minister's response to the Joint Interim Report. The Committee also engaged with the DBE and the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) on learner admissions, racial profiling, and the outcomes of court proceedings concerning these matters. Over the past two years, the WCED has continued to deny the racial dimensions of learner admissions and discrimination in Western Cape schools. This is despite a court finding that the WCED's learner admission policy is discriminatory, as well as concerns raised by the DBE regarding discriminatory practices in the province. Access the full meeting reports [here](#).

Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training

The Portfolio Committee on Higher Education and Training held several engagements in August. On the 12th of August, the committee received a briefing from the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) on progress in stabilising the entity since the administration period, after the Minister of Higher Education and Training placed the entity under administration on 04 May 2026 and appointed Professor Hlengani Mathebula as the administrator. The intervention followed findings that governance instability, operational failures, financial weaknesses, unresolved appeals, ICT deficiencies, accommodation challenges, and accountability concerns were seriously undermining NSFAS's effectiveness. Access the full presentation from NSFAS [here](#).

Portfolio Committee on Police

On 19 August 2026, the Portfolio Committee on Police held a Parliamentary Summit on Gang-Related Violence, calling for a long-term and coordinated state response. As part of the summit, Equal Education made a written submission to the committee calling for interventions for learner safety. Access our full submission [here](#).

Court

NSFAS

On 14 August 2026, the Pretoria High Court ruled that Higher Education Minister Buti Manamela's appointment of Professor Hlengani Mathebula as NSFAS administrator was irrational and ordered the immediate reinstatement of the disbanded board. Read about the judgment [here](#).

Makhanda Full Circle, Ntsika Secondary School, Hoërskool PJ Olivier, and Tyanty Primary School

On 19 August 2026, the Makhanda High Court declared the Eastern Cape Department of Education's withdrawal of public school funds unlawful and unconstitutional. Read about the judgment [here](#).