

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.

Spotlight on the state of school infrastructure in the Eastern Cape



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

- Spotlight on the state of school infrastructure in the Eastern Cape
- Writing feature: The deterioration of school infrastructure in the Eastern Cape
- Law and policy

The deterioration of school infrastructure in the Eastern Cape

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On 13 May, Equal Education hosted a provincial roundtable in the Eastern Cape bringing together learners, parents, community members, and representatives from the departments of education, public works and infrastructure, treasury, the Auditor-General, and the South African Human Rights Commission. At a time when many schools across the province continue to endure collapsing infrastructure, overcrowding, unsafe sanitation, and inadequate scholar transport, the gathering was intended to create a space where government departments could account directly to affected communities, coordinate action across fragmented bureaucracies, and work toward solutions grounded in the lived realities of learners.

Instead, many Equal Education members left feeling gaslighted and despondent about the prospects for the right to basic education ever being meaningfully realised in the province. This should not be the case. The right to basic education in South Africa is immediately realisable and by its nature, demands that decision makers fully commit themselves and prioritise the fulfilment of the enjoyment of this right.

Learners from Lukhozi High School described the indignity of trying to learn in crumbling classrooms without reliable access to safe drinking water. Parents and learners spoke about the humiliation of being treated as disposable by the state. We have been organising at Lukhozi for over ten years, and have since been calling for its infrastructure to be prioritised by the Eastern Cape Department of Education. We have had countless meetings with department officials who have been playing delay tactics as a form of avoiding accountability. Lukhozi High School was built through community members efforts over 20 years ago and little has been done to safeguard and manage the infrastructure. From broken windows, dilapidated roofs and walls in classrooms. Learners often need to rotate when attending school because of the shortage of classrooms. Quality learning time is often lost as a result of this instability. Not only has Lukhozi High become a health hazard due to its lack of infrastructure, but it has become a school where potential of academic success is lost due to the negligence and unwillingness from the department to change the quality of the school.

When these concerns were raised, a representative from the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) suggested that communities held unreasonable expectations, were ignorant of planning processes, and that their attitudes were not conducive to ensuring that their school might be prioritised in future plans.

The response was eerily emblematic of the findings from Equal Education's latest research report, Whither The Weaver? Fragmentation and Abandonment in School Infrastructure Programmes in South Africa, which argues that the manner in which the state organises school infrastructure provisioning lends itself to fragmentation, perverse incentives, and ultimately the abandonment of learners and the right to basic education.

In the case of Lukhozi High, the ECDoE simultaneously argued that the school community needed to make a stronger case to be prioritised in the district's plans, but also that plans are necessarily diverted to address more urgent obligations.

Lukhozi High had in fact already been included in three separate projects in the department's 2025/26 infrastructure budget. However, funds were later reprioritised – ostensibly for disaster relief efforts and potentially due to irregular reprioritisation toward ICT infrastructure projects.

What emerged at the roundtable was a stark example of what Ruth Wilson Gilmore calls “organised abandonment”: the systematic withdrawal of social investment from particular communities while resources and protection flow towards elite private interests.

The ECDoE outsources infrastructure delivery to a market of at least eight different Implementing Agents. To manage and oversee these implementing agents, the ECDoE further outsources to private companies, as “Project Support Units” (PSUs) who effectively take over the ECDoE's core infrastructure functions in contracts worth hundreds of millions of rand. The bid specifications of a 2024/25 PSU tender require 114 employees – nearly double the staffing complement of the ECDoE's own infrastructure directorate.

Far from strengthening state capacity, this model fragments accountability and distances decision-making from democratic oversight and affected communities. When projects fail, communities are bounced between consultants, implementing agents, district offices, and departments, each disclaiming responsibility while schools continue to deteriorate.

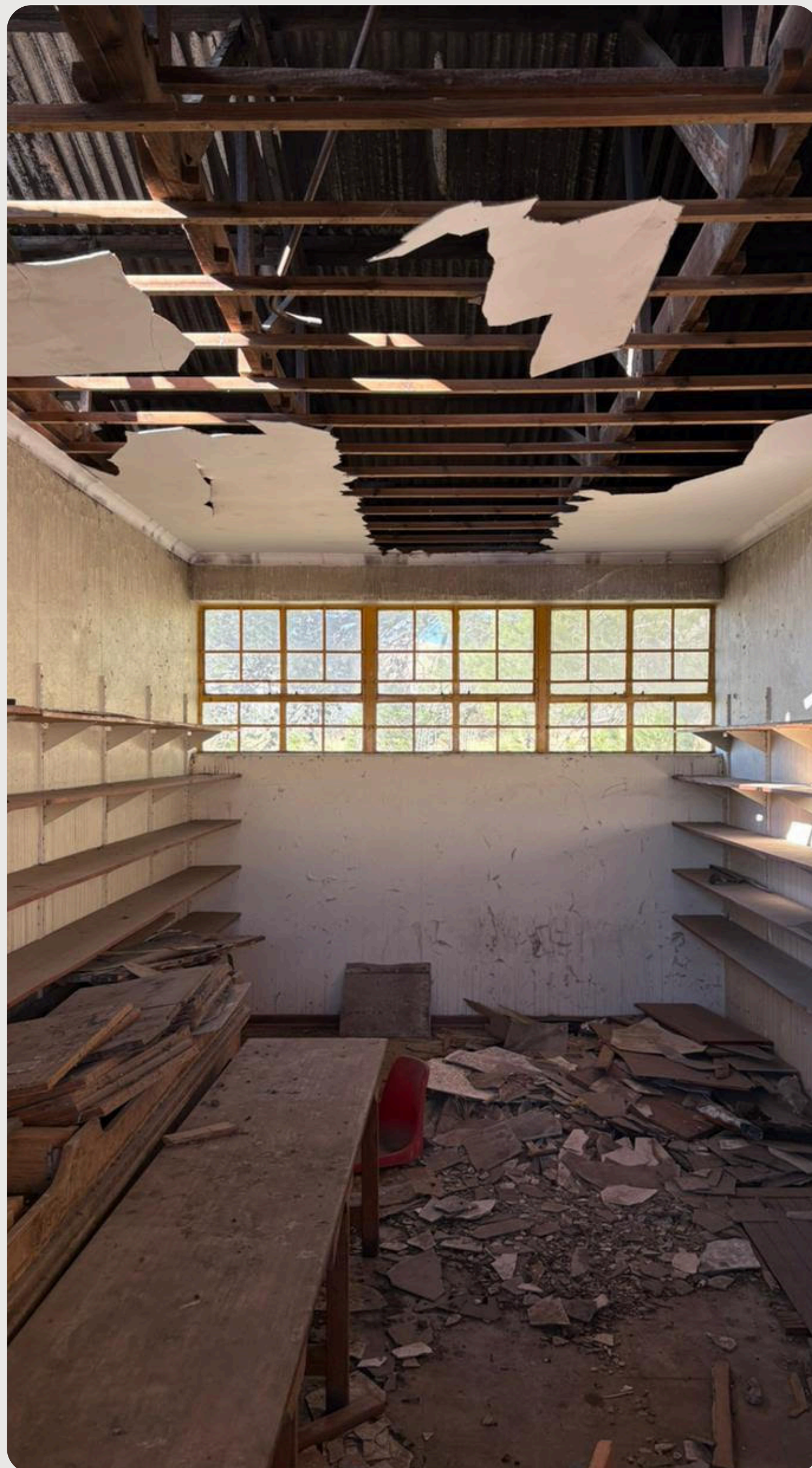
The roundtable aimed to promote transparency and accountability to protect learners' rights. In reality, communities are largely excluded from the decisions being made about which schools matter, which communities can wait, and which learners are considered expendable.

The needs of learners at Qonce High School – fighting simply to keep their school open and provided with the barest necessities such as electricity, doors for toilets, and desks – were in no uncertain terms deemed secondary to the interests of a privately owned tavern operating in close proximity to the school.

Learners at countless other schools across the province face similar abandonment within a broader process of violent rural dispossession, disinvestment, extraction, and resultant urbanisation. Since 2015, more than 600 public schools in the Eastern Cape have closed. The schools that remain are also under threat of closure, or else expected to absorb increasing numbers of learners without corresponding investment in classrooms, sanitation, furniture, textbooks, nutrition, or psychosocial support.

Austerity budgeting is central to this crisis. It has hollowed out the state's capacity to directly plan, maintain, and deliver school infrastructure. Instead of building capable public institutions, government departments increasingly rely on outsourcing arrangements, consultants, and implementing agents to compensate for shrinking internal capacity. Yet these arrangements often come at enormous cost while weakening democratic accountability and creating fertile ground for corruption, delays, and wasteful expenditure.

The crisis in the Eastern Cape is a political crisis rooted in how the state chooses to govern, spend, and distribute care. Until government confronts the deeper political economy underpinning infrastructure delivery – including austerity, outsourcing, and rural disinvestment – the constitutional promise of equal and quality education to learners in poor and rural schools will remain abandoned.



Forbes Grant Senior Secondary School, Eastern Cape

Access a copy of our report [here](#)

Law and policy monitoring

Parliament

Portfolio on Basic Education

For May, the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education convened to discuss the following key areas: early childhood development, verification of personnel in the education sector, textbook procurement for the foundation phase and the basic education budget vote report. The meetings reports can be accessed [here](#).

On 02 June 2026, the Equal Education and Equal Education Law Centre appeared before the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education to present on learner admissions and racial profiling of learners in the Western Cape schools. Our presentation noted the importance of redress in access to education for learners who are overaged or from disadvantaged communities. The presentation can be accessed [here](#).

Call for comments

The Minister of Human Settlements has published a draft amendment to the Prevention of Illegal Eviction from an Unlawful Occupation of Land Act, with calls for comments due on 15 June 2026. Citing its regressive nature, organisations such as Ndifuna Ukwazi have been advocating for the Bill's withdrawal. Also, there have been calls for the Minister to engage in meaningful dialogue with civil society organisations and movements that are working to address the housing crisis that low-income communities are currently experiencing. This is to ensure that any amendments to the PIE Act are designed to protect vulnerable communities rather than to facilitate their exclusion. The draft amendment Bill can be accessed [here](#).

2026 Annual Review of the Constitution. The Joint Constitutional Review Committee has been mandated by both Houses of Parliament to seek written public submissions on the annual review of the Constitution of the country in accordance with section 45(1)(c) of the Constitution. The submissions are due on 06 July 2026. For more information, read [here](#).

Court

Legal Resources Centre “Invisible without birth certificate case

On 20 May 2026, the Legal Resources Centre appeared in the Western Cape High Court to challenge laws preventing some children from having their births registered, risking exclusion from access to basic rights and services, such as the right to basic education. For more information, read [here](#).

