

SPEECH BY MINISTER DEBBIE SCHÄFER

WESTERN CAPE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

Date: 30 March 2021

EMBARGOED UNTIL DELIVERY

2021 Western Cape Education Budget Speech

Speaker,

In every budget speech, I mention that I wish there were better news to share about our dire financial situation. And unfortunately, in every budget speech, I have to be upfront about the fact that there isn't, and to present an honest and accurate account of what we can and cannot do as a government and as a provincial education department.

The challenge we are facing is as simple and complex as this: with sustained increases in our learner numbers, our needs are not being met with the required increase in budget. This is something we have warned about for years now, yet people still jump up and down and act surprised when we have learners who are unplaced.

Learner growth vs. budget

This year, once again, we have 19 000 more learners in our schools than we did in 2020. This is the annual average increase for the last five years, meaning we have another nearly 100 000 learners in our system than we did five years ago.

Our ongoing emphasis on retention of learners in the system adds to the problem. Retention is not just 'desirable', as Member Dugmore recently put it, casually implying that it is a nice-to-have that is not essential. Education is a vital determinant of our learners' future well-being, and completing basic schooling significantly improves their future prospects.

But there is a flip side: when more learners remain in school up to their matric year, we have fewer places opening up for new and relocating learners to join our schools. Our greatest success poses one of our greatest challenges - where do we put the tens of thousands of learners moving to the Western Cape each year?

Every year I have to explain to political opportunists that we are not failing to plan, that we can predict as much as we like, but if we do not have the money to implement those plans, we simply cannot implement them.

Whilst there has been some progress in amending the equitable share formula to take into account the increase in numbers, the fiscal realities of our country render them meaningless. And the cumulative effect of the years when we didn't receive the money for the learners in our system, combined with the current crisis, is why we are sitting with the difficulties we are facing. So we keep having to provide more with less. Last year, we lost a third of our infrastructure budget to Covid-19 and national grant cuts. A prudent national government would have had reserves to deal with such emergencies. Because they didn't, the money to keep our teachers and learners safe had to come from our funds that are already inadequate as it is. But there is always money for the litany of failing SOE's. Before that, we had the drought, for which we had to re-allocate R300 million, also from infrastructure, as there was nowhere else for it to come from. And of course, the above-inflation salary increases for staff decided by national government and driven by their alliance partners, has created a budget shortfall of over R2.2 billion over the past 5 years in the Western Cape. So national government negotiates what we cannot afford, we have to pay, and they do not refund us. And then we are accused of "blaming" national government when we cannot deliver as we need to and as we had planned. Yes, we do blame national government, because they ARE in very large part, to blame and we should not have to keep on explaining why we do not have sufficient resources when just about everything national government touches is a disaster.

It is also noteworthy that, in 2008, the very person who now says that we "blame and complain", said the following: "our province alone needs over R5 billion to make up its infrastructure backlog. If current funding patterns continue it will take us 30 years to eradicate this backlog." This was said by member Dugmore when he was provincial minister of education.

So, it seems that the ANC has been acutely aware of the persistent underfunding of our province's education department by the national treasury for over a decade, and yet has done absolutely nothing about it. Will they now?

The emotional and physical toll that the pressure of placing learners where there is simply no space is immense, and I applaud the work our districts are doing in this regard. Learners who are enrolled late will also be supported through catch-up programmes.

I must comment here on the criticism made against me by members of this House last week, regarding my department's returning funds to the Provincial Treasury. As the opposition members know, I am not the accounting officer, so it was not my decision. But it is a fair question to ask, when we are repeatedly claiming underfunding.

As part of the adjustment budget process, we had the choice either to return funds to Provincial Treasury if they would not be spent by the financial year end, or report an under-expenditure and lose the money. With a monthly salary budget of over a billion rand, it is always a tight balancing act to avoid over and under expenditure, and whilst R350million is a lot of money, it constitutes about 1.5% of our budget. Delays in filling posts can easily amount to this kind of under-expenditure. If we were to overspend by that amount, which is just as easy, we would be vilified for that too.

These funds were allocated to the compensation of employees but were not spent during the year in large part because of Covid-19 limitations and lags in the appointment of staff. These funds could not be spent on other necessities in our department because of a decision of this government several years ago not to allow Cost of Employment funds to be spent on other priorities in a budget vote.

We have explained this matter to the members before, so it is unfortunate that our engagements with the Standing Committee seem to so readily slip from certain members' minds, whilst others who are not even part of the committee have much to say on the topic when politically expedient.

Budget highlights and school construction

It is within the context of these perpetual challenges that I present our budget for this financial year. Our baseline allocation is R24.5 billion – this is a big number, but with 1.1 million learners in our schools, we have big needs! Unfortunately, this budget represents a reduction of 7.5% in our baseline allocation for 2021/22, 8.4% for 2022/23, and 8.0% in 2023/24. Please note – more decreases in budget with more increases in learners WILL result in more difficulties placing learners and more overcrowded classrooms.

Despite the very difficult environment we are working in, all credit must go to our staff, led by SG Brian Schreuder, who continue to seek innovative ways to deal with the issues we face, and stretch every rand we get as far as possible.

We are taking bold steps to address the shortage of space in our schools.

Now that we have data from the annual SNAP Survey to indicate the exact areas of growth and demand, our Head of Department has recently approved 342 additional teaching posts in areas where the demand for places is growing quickly. This is in addition to the 429 posts added in 2020.

In addition to the extra staffing provisions, we have seven new and replacement schools due to be completed by the end of the year: Turfhall PS, Kwa-Faku PS, PC Petersen PS, Sunray PS, Willows PS, Panorama PS no 2, and Perivale PS (which is currently under threat of running late because of community interference). Six extra classrooms at Saldanha LS and 8 extra classrooms at Tulbagh HS are also scheduled to be completed this year.

I am especially pleased to announce the actions we are taking to resolve the placement situation in Klapmuts. The rapid residential expansion of the town has created a significant demand for places for learners to be taught in Xhosa. Learners are presently being transported to Paarl, Kraaifontein, and Kayamandi, but this is not a sustainable situation. For the past year, we have been engaging with the community to find appropriate land for school construction as well as temporary solutions for placement while construction takes place.

We have now secured the necessary land, and will begin planning for two schools – one primary and one high – in the town. The first, a mobile primary school, is expected to be up and running by next year. Planning has also commenced to provide a permanent high school that is expected to come into operation in 2025. The high school will incorporate clean energy, green technologies and alternative construction material.

It is important not to draw a parallel between the situation in Klapmuts, and that of the illegal “school” operating in Forest Village. The latter is a case of a group of people trying to strongarm the WCED into hiring select individuals by using children as pawns.

The WCED had originally offered various options for the placement of these children at schools in the area at the end of last year. Every offer was denied, because this group demanded that we use their “existing teachers” and create a “new school” on the premises of another as a “condition” of acceptance. We cannot simply appoint teachers or create new schools in such a manner. We have to consider a variety of factors – including the fact that other areas have more serious challenges with regards to admissions and should be prioritised.

I urge the members of this House that have sought to further exploit these children by claiming that they could not find any place in any of our schools to instead show

leadership by encouraging the parents of these children to work with the Department to accept suitable placement.

We are further safeguarding our infrastructure spending over the MTEF by earmarking our entire infrastructure budget.

New high schools are planned for Sir Lowry's Pass, Hout Bay and Mfuleni in the Cape Town metro, along with Mooresburg in the West Coast district and Hermanus in the Overberg district.

In line with our province's economic needs and our strategic priority of expanding access to STEAMAC subjects, we plan to complete an aeronautical sciences school in the Cape Winelands in the coming financial year, and are currently planning an agriculture school in the same district. We further plan to open a School of Skills in Manenberg to ensure that learners in that area are able to access more inclusive learning opportunities, scheduled for completion in the 2023/24 financial year.

We also need to make sure that our existing schools are maintained through a programme of maintenance and replacement where necessary. This is contributing greatly to our shortage of funds for new schools – we inherited a portfolio of old and deteriorating infrastructure, which unfortunately the ANC administration had done almost nothing to address. While they replaced just three schools in five years, we have 13 planned for completion over this MTEF alone. In fact, since the DA was elected, we have constructed twice the number of schools on average each year than the previous ANC administration did. And we have done so in extremely difficult financial conditions.

Support for schools

Just as the Department is struggling financially, so too are our schools. While both no-fee and fee-charging schools are affected by cuts to departmental budgets, fee-charging schools have faced the additional burden of parents being unable to pay school fees owing to the pandemic. Fee-charging schools need this income to pay SGB-appointed staff and cover daily expenses.

I welcome the emergency funding provided by the national government to schools to assist them with paying their SGB-appointed staff. But this was a short-term stop-gap measure. Our schools are finding it harder and harder to make ends meet.

We have made sure not to apply any budget cuts to critical support to schools, including norms and standards, LTSM, and learner transport allocations. We have also been

innovative in finding ways to help schools cut their expenses, particularly in terms of utility bills, which are a huge burden on our schools.

I have reported previously on the Smart Water Meter project with Bridgiot and the University of Stellenbosch, which has yielded very good results and saved both money and water. During the last year, we have made subsidies available to schools to fund the installation and monthly costs of comprehensive water usage monitoring systems. This subsidy is, to my knowledge, the only one of its kind in South African schools, and adds to our previous work done in response to the threat of Day Zero, which included the installation of rainwater storage tanks at our schools.

In accordance with our commitment to environmental sustainability, and once again with the support of Stellenbosch University and other partners, fluorescent lights at 25 low-income schools are being replaced with LED lights, offering better-quality illumination at a lower cost. These schools have seen their annual electricity costs decrease by up to R37 000. We have also approved 14 solar panel projects at our schools, in line with our government's commitment to lessen dependence on Eskom in this province. Again, another bright light in the Western Cape that assists our schools in using less electricity, paying lower prices and freeing them from Eskom's unreliable electricity supply. A win-win all round. Except for Eskom, of course, but we can't wait another thirteen years for them!

Once again, we have endured losses as a result of burglary and vandalism of our schools. Over the December/January school holidays, 59 incidents were reported, including four major incidents with significant costs that our schools and department must now cover. This wanton destruction of property needs to stop. Apart from the fact that it makes no sense, it places us under even more financial pressure.

We are continuing with our commitment to building 30 high-security fences in schools each year, including in our hotspots. As part of the Western Cape Recovery Plan, 20 fences scheduled for delivery by the end of the 2021/22 financial year have been fast tracked, for delivery by July this year instead. An amount of R30 million has been allocated for fencing in this financial year.

It is crucial that we continue to implement the Covid-19 safety protocols, which do require some of our schools to continue with rotational timetabling. We have thus made a provision of R71 million for schools for the printing of take-home lessons and activities for learners in 2021 – an increase from the R50 million spent last year.

eLearning and ICT

Our many years of previous work in eLearning and ICT in schools has put us in an excellent position to make sure we use every possible resource to the fullest.

I call our ePortal a national treasure with good reason. The way in which the eLearning and Curriculum directorates got stuck in to innovate during last year's school closures is phenomenal. I have previously spoken about the increase in the number of resources, and the usage of resources on the portal. When I shared the work at an eLearning seminar last year, one of the first questions asked was whether anyone from outside the province could access our resources. And we do indeed share it with learners and teachers from all provinces – over 20% of the users are currently from Gauteng, with a further 7% from KwaZulu-Natal and 2% from the Eastern Cape. We are pleased that the unique value of this resource is recognised by people from across the country. And again, very well done to our team.

85% of our schools are already connected with broadband. This provides us with a bigger range of options in delivering education. And the rest need to be connected as soon as possible. This year an amount of R145.5 million has been allocated to expand local area networks at our schools.

We are leading in classroom-to-classroom streaming, which began as a project with 12 schools and has now expanded to 58 schools, streaming from classroom-to-classroom and alternate venues across all eight districts. In addition, a pilot with 16 Master teachers (two per district) streaming lessons to two schools each will begin this year, following two years of planning.

This year, the Eden and Central Karoo Education District will create a broadcasting studio at the district office from which lessons by master teachers can be broadcast, virtual curriculum support can be provided to teachers, lessons can be professionally recorded to serve as review resources for learners, and staff can connect seamlessly with teachers, parents and learners through live conferencing. This is a very exciting initiative, and I am looking forward to visiting them as soon as it is up and running.

Our technology, while it also has its limitations, has proved particularly useful as we deal with the implications of Covid-related physical distancing requirements. Our mediation of Revised Annual Teaching Plans for Grades 1 to 9 for Term 1 2021, for example, took place online, with 29 000 teachers connected remotely to the sessions over three days. This just shows the naysayers who thought that we should not be spending money on ICT, how wrong they were.

In accordance with our commitment to providing our learners with the best education possible, which includes 21st century skills, and also in an effort to try and address the

increasing numbers of learners who cannot be accommodated in our schools, we have some exciting projects that have started or are about to start, in the province.

Over the last year, working in conjunction with the iBodhi Trust, we have piloted a 'virtual classroom' set up at Beacon Hill High School in Mitchells Plain, where all learning and tasks take place online. A classroom has been converted into a digital lab with the help of the Valentre Institute, where learners have access to the necessary equipment and internet access to participate.

27 Grade 9 learners participated in an intensive, three-month intervention to address gaps in their learning using online learning, and saw a significant improvement in their assessment results. For example, learners were assessed before and after the intervention, resulting in a 17% improvement for English and 42% improvement for Mathematics.

Our schools are also taking their own steps in developing online learning and responding to the challenges we are facing. Wynberg Boys' High School has developed their own online offering, with Wynberg Online High School launching for Grade 8s this year as a private, co-educational education solution for those unable to find placement at the schools in that area. Daily live lessons following the CAPS curriculum are offered, along with dedicated technical support and engagement with teachers. They are also making provision for social interaction through organised extra-mural and sporting activities in partnership with local clubs, and online learners can also participate in certain activities offered at WBHS should they wish to.

I am also pleased to announce that Rhenish High School is going to start piloting an online offering called Rhenish Connect, from next year for Grades 10 and 11. The intention is to provide more opportunities for learners who need more flexibility, and who do not flourish in traditional school environments, whilst retaining a strong link with the school. It is still very much in the initial phases and we will work together with them to maximise learnings from this pilot project. I look forward to seeing the results of this, and wish them all success.

Maths and Science

I turn now to Maths and Physical Science, two key subjects needed in our economy, and part of our STEAMAC strategy. I am very pleased that both our Mathematics and Mathematical Literacy pass rates increased in last year's NSC, and remain the highest in the country.

Last year, we received excellent results in the Trends in International Maths and Science Study, scoring significantly higher than the rest of the country as a benchmark participant.

Notwithstanding this, I remain concerned that our participation rate in both these subjects is too low, and we are determined to translate these gains into more learners writing and passing these subjects in Grade 12.

One of the things we will do is pay closer attention to our focus schools, some of which have been taking in learners who do not qualify according to their ability, and this needs to change.

I am also very hopeful that, if we can get streaming of classes right, we can expand our offerings to areas where there are insufficient learners for a particular subject to justify a teacher post in that subject, or insufficient subject experts.

I do remain concerned about the effect of league tables on the achievement of our learners in the subjects that are critical to the economy, such as maths, science and technical and vocational skills. I am concerned that the ongoing focus on being “the top” encourages the dropping of these subjects in order to improve averages, which is not necessarily in the best interests of our learners or our economy.”

The DBE itself has recognised this, and has developed an Inclusive Basket of Results measure of the quality of a province’s matric results that goes further than the overall pass rate. Indicators include Maths and Science pass rates, Maths participation rate, throughput, and the percentage of bachelor’s passes and distinctions. I look forward to seeing what this measure reveals about the league table – it is a pity that this is not released at the same time as the results are.

We are, however, working hard to improve even more in Mathematics and Physical Science. In addition to the work we are doing in the Foundation, Intermediate, and Senior Phases to provide a solid grounding and interest in these subjects, we are implementing specific interventions for Grade 10 to 12 learners. We are using ICT to support revision and consolidation with the Siyavula programme, and providing opportunities for self-directed learning using video lessons distributed via WhatsApp. We support learners who are struggling with revision and consolidation in the form of weekly revision questions. Our Grade 11 and 12 learners also have access to revision materials with supportive Telematics recordings to mediate this material. And we provide scientific calculators to learners at 30 schools to improve accessibility of these subjects.

The Metro Central Education District broadcast Mathematics and Physical Sciences tutoring lessons to over 200 learners in a single session last year!

We have also seen some very promising results from a programme called Reflective Learning. This has been tried out at Apex High School, made possible thanks to the support of their operating partner as a Collaboration School. The programme identifies backlogs for each individual learner using a baseline assessment to determine their grade-level understanding of specific concepts. The programme then provides a personalised catch-up course to bridge those gaps. This approach has proved extremely beneficial for Apex High learners. For example, the 2020 Grade 11s were able to catch up three grade levels on average before entering matric this year.

This is not a one-hit wonder – similar improvements were seen in the iBodhi Trust intervention I mentioned earlier, with learners catching up an average of over three grades in various specific Mathematics learning areas (in just three months).

The potential for this programme to assist learners coping with gaps in knowledge aggravated by the Covid-related disruptions is something worth exploring on wider scale – if we can find the budget.

On the issue of curriculum in general, I really want to say a huge “Thank you” to Dr Peter Beets and his team. Dr Beets is also retiring this week, and I believe that the work he has done will only really come to fruition after he has left.

Conclusion

So although we face huge challenges in the Department, this has not dampened the enthusiasm of our staff and our schools to try new things and remain positive. We have had an unbelievably tough year, and the road ahead looks just as bumpy. Coping with the impact of the pandemic and the increasingly difficult funding situation will take great courage and leadership.

On this note, I must commend the lifelong work of our outgoing Head of Department, Mr Brian Schreuder, who retires tomorrow after nearly five decades of outstanding service to education. I wish you a restful and relaxing retirement, but your character clearly does not lend itself to too much leisure! I have no doubt that you will continue to make a contribution to our cause of delivering quality education to every learner in our province, or wherever else you have the opportunity.

I welcome our new HoD, Mr Brent Walters, and wish him all the best as he tackles the challenges I have outlined in this speech.

As always, I salute the courage and dedication of our officials, school staff members and teachers, and the parents who support them. And to our learners, who despite the devastation and disruption of the past year, still continue to seek better opportunities through education. We will continue to do our very best for them, so that they in turn can do *their* very best.

I ask that this House support the budget.

Media Enquiries:

Kerry Mauchline – Spokesperson to Minister Debbie Schäfer

Email: Kerry.Mauchline@westerncape.gov.za