

Parents in tears over terrible conditions at school for disabled children

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Eastern Cape education department sends task team to investigate.



Ikhwezi Lokusa Special School is being investigated by the Eastern Cape education department following protests by learners. Learners and parents complain of poor conditions at the school and abuse by hostel staff. Photo: Nombulelo Damba-Hendrik

- **The Eastern Cape education department is investigating allegations of abuse and the terrible state of a school in Mthatha for children with special needs.**
- **Ikhwezi Lokusa Special School accommodates learners with physical and intellectual disabilities aged between six and 12.**
- **Learners returned to class this week after several days of protest action that started on 27 October.**
- **Allegations include that learners sleep on brick beds, the school does not have running water, the toilets are broken, and children are left “completely unattended” during the long interval when caretakers change shifts.**
- **Section27 and several disability rights organisations have asked Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga to intervene.**

Tears streamed down Nokhaya Bhudu's face as she told a room full of people how she had found her disabled son very ill, alone and lying on a bed made of bricks at Ikhwezi Lokusa Special School in Mthatha, Eastern Cape.

Her son had been very sick for three days, and only after she arrived at the school was he taken to hospital where he remained for five weeks to be treated for a serious illness.

Bhudu was among more than a dozen parents who attended a meeting last week to discuss allegations of abuse by staff and the dilapidated state of the school. This followed several days of protests by learners that started on 27 October.

The learners returned to classes this week after negotiations with school governing body members who pleaded with leaders of the protests to return to school to prepare for exams next Monday.

The poor conditions at the school and allegations of abuse by hostel staff were brought to the fore in an exposé by Carte Blanche.

Nothing has changed since learners returned to class. Learners in the hostel, many of whom need a wheelchair to get around, are still sleeping on beds made of bricks and bathing in cold water.

Ikhwezi Lokusa was built by missionaries in 1965. The government took over the management of the school in 2001, and rents the school buildings from the church. The hostel accommodates learners with physical and intellectual disabilities aged between six and 12.

At the meeting last week, Bhudu said that in October 2022 her daughter in Cape Town had phoned to routinely check on her younger brother, only to discover that he had been sick for days.

"The school did not inform me. Luckily I live in Mthatha, so I rushed here. I found other learners playing outside. The learners told me that my son was sleeping. I found him lying on those brick-slab beds all alone. He had not eaten and no one bothered to check on him," she said.

"They gave him two panados but he told me he could not drink the tablets because he had not eaten anything yet. I went to the shop to get him something to eat and medication. He started vomiting and I had to clean the mess myself. I asked to take my son to hospital and he was admitted immediately," she said.

Bhudu said her son was hospitalised for five weeks and could not write his final exams last year. She said she didn't have a choice but to send her son back to school because there are no other schools nearby for children with special needs.

Another mother made allegations that learners at the school were sexually assaulted.

Several other parents also stood up and complained that the learners, even those who have to be helped to the toilet, are often left to fend for themselves at the hostel, particularly at night.

Section27 and several disability rights organisations wrote to Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga on 25 October about the treatment of learners. They believe that the conditions at the school are a risk to the children's safety and well-being.

Eastern Cape Department of Education spokesperson Malibongwe Mtima said a male care worker at the hostel had been arrested in June for allegedly raping a 16-year-old learner who has severe cerebral palsy.

Mtima said the accused had been denied bail and would remain in jail until his trial which is set for 4 December at the Mthatha Magistrate's Court.

School governing body (SGB) chairperson Fundile Mazantsana, told *GroundUp* that the accused drove the learner to his

flat in May and raped him, returning the learner to the hostel the following evening.

Mazantsana said the learner informed the deputy principal and the deputy informed the principal. The parents were called, and they decided to report the matter to police and open a case against the “house father”.

Learners say they have been complaining since March but nothing has changed.

Mazantsana said protesting learners chased staff off the school premises on Friday 27 October, despite his attempt to intervene. He said one of the protests happened at midnight and while he was on his way, he phoned the police to escort him to the school because “it was chaos”.

OR Tambo Disabled People’s Organisation chairperson, Zilindile Highbane was a learner at Ikhwezi Lokusa in the 1980s. He said learners had also slept on brick beds in those days, but the school was in a far better condition then.

“We never felt like we were sleeping on brick beds, but what I see now is a disgrace. There’s no cover between the thin mattress and the brick bed. This is why children are getting sick,” he said.

The department’s Mtima told *GroundUp* that a district office submits regular reports to the department. From these reports the department picked up what was going on at the school and intervened by setting up a task team.

He said the team had visited the school on Friday and spoken to learners and the school principal. He said the principal assured officials that most of the learners’ complaints had been resolved and promised that the rest would be “ironed out” soon.

Mtima said that because the department rents the school’s buildings from the church, it could not make any significant changes to the buildings without permission “due to legal complexities”. He said the department’s lease with the church had expired years ago, but the school had continued paying rent. He said the department is currently in negotiations with the church to have the lease renewed so they can renovate.

In the letter to Minister Motshekga, Section27 and the other activists demanded she immediately investigate, put measures in place to ensure the safety and adequate care of learners and set up a monitoring mechanism to make sure there were no further violations of their rights.

Spokesperson for provincial MEC Fundile Gade, Vuyiseka Mboxela referred *GroundUp*’s questions to the department, confirming that a task team was handling the matter.

National Basic Education department spokesperson Elijah Mhlanga said the director general is handling the matter and has received a report from the task team after their recent visit to the school. “The report and their findings will be released once it is ready,” he said.

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