

There's a funding crisis in basic education

By [Paul Esterhuizen](#)

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Investment in South Africa's public education sector is on the backburner as multiple other crises, most notably the energy crisis and a looming water crisis, consume government's attention.



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One of the problems with National Treasury's 2023/2024 national budget announced last month is that the allocation for education is not keeping abreast of inflation.

The Department for Basic Education's budget allocation for the next financial year has increased by 5.6%, yet its total expenditure is due to increase by 7.2%. Minister of Finance, Enoch Godongwana announced that an additional R22bn would be allocated to address the shortfall in education compensation while R48.7bn would be allocated to an education infrastructure grant of which R2.1bn would be allocated to address infrastructure backlogs at schools that don't meet the basic norms and standards.

Over the medium term, government said the focus of Department of Basic Education's spending will be on improving school infrastructure, providing support to improve matric completion rates, providing support materials for learners and teachers, and increasing the supply of teachers.

Government has allocated R48.7bn to an education infrastructure grant to address school infrastructure backlogs and to repair school infrastructure damaged by flooding in 2022 in KwaZulu-Natal and the Eastern Cape.

A host of challenges

Public schools in South Africa face a host of challenges including poor maintenance, inadequate infrastructure and insufficient teaching and learning materials. Education advocacy group Equal Education says overcrowded schools, insufficient teachers and learning resources, and deteriorating infrastructure is a direct threat to the future of learners. It says that 17,832 of the country's 23,276 public schools are still without libraries. More than 14% lack reliable electricity,

25% lack reliable water supply and a shocking 9% still rely on pit toilets as their only form of sanitation.

Equal Education says the physical state of our public schools is a clear indication that the system is not functioning as it should and that, given these appalling conditions, it's no surprise that many learners struggle with foundational skills such as reading.



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The group estimates that basic education funding is shrinking each year once inflation is taken into account.

In the basic education sector, teacher's salaries make up the bulk of expenditure. When the budget allocation is not increased sufficiently, schools are not able to employ more teachers which has significant implications for class sizes. The shrinking budget also has implications for resources and support for learners.

Basic education funding isn't the only challenge

As Equal Education has previously pointed out, it's not only basic education funding that is a problem but also how provincial education departments spend the money that is allocated to them. According to the Auditor-General, the Department of Basic Education is the third highest wasteful spender of all government departments. Between 2011 and 2021, 29% of the budget allocated to school infrastructure grants was not spent. And between 2018 and 2021, a shocking R5.7bn was irregularly spent.

What these figures clearly illustrate is that budget allocations that are not keeping pace with inflation are only part of the problem and that there is also an urgent need for better oversight and control over the department's spending.

The demand for places at public schools is on the rise as interest rate hikes and high inflation place parents of school going children under financial pressure, particularly given that in most instances, salary increases have not kept pace with inflation. According to credit bureau TPN's School Survey, a number of private schools are struggling to fill their classrooms with 40% of private schools reporting less students in 2023 compared to 2022. Nearly 50% of government schools, on the other hand, have accepted more learners compared to 2022.

Although government spends around 20% of GDP on education, the bulk of the budget goes towards salaries rather than constructing new schools. Until a concerted effort is made to construct new schools and employ more teachers where the demand is highest, the problem with over-crowded classrooms will persist. Similarly, government needs to take its oversight role more seriously and ensure that funds allocated to provincial education departments are not mismanaged and wasted.

Every child in South Africa has a constitutional right to a basic education. They deserve more than empty promises.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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