

The education minister promised all schools would have a library by 29 November - but there's no chance that deadline will be met

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21 Sep 2023

Three-quarters of public schools still don't have libraries, in spite of a 2013 promise.



Nearly three quarters of public schools still don't have libraries, in spite of a 2013 promise by the Minister of Education. Archive photo: Lucas Nowicki

- In 2013 Education Minister Angie Motshekga promised that all public schools would have libraries by 29 November.
- But there is no chance that this deadline will be met.
- According to the department's latest figures, which date from 2021, nearly three-quarters of schools do not yet have libraries.

About three quarters of South African public schools don't have libraries and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is set to miss its 29 November deadline for fixing this.

Libraries are among the minimum requirements for public schools set in 2013 by then Minister of Basic Education Angie Motshekga after pressure from Equal Education. According to the 2013 [Minimum Norms and Standards](#):

- All schools must have a school library or media centre and a minimum, adequate and suitable school library collection.
- The core suitable library collection must be regularly replenished according to the requirements of a particular school.

The document set three, seven and ten-year deadlines for issues regarding public school infrastructure. The deadline for the library requirement was 29 November 2023.

But there is no chance the deadline will be met.

An [Education Facility Management System report](#) from last month shows that in August 2021, 74% of 22,697 public schools were without libraries. Of the schools with libraries, 43% were not fully stocked, meaning only 14% of the country's public schools had fully stocked libraries. More recent figures are not available.

Putting a library into each school would require an investment of over R8bn in the next seven years, according to an [April 2023 DBE infrastructure report](#). But the DBE report does not mention any plans to invest any money at all in libraries.

According to a [recent international literacy survey](#), 81% of grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning.

Tatiana Kazim, an Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) legal researcher, said the South African Human Rights Commission views library books as a necessary material to learn how to read and write.

"When access to the internet in South Africa is so patchy and so unequal, there's still a pressing need for physical resources, like books and libraries," she said.

"Why not public schools?"

Lunga Nqadolo is managing director of The Bookery, a civic organisation that builds libraries in South African schools.

She said libraries are important not only for the books they provide, but also as spaces for children to do homework and enroll in extra lessons, reading groups and other activities. This early exposure gives children a better chance at succeeding in academic work later, she said.

Private schools usually have well-stocked libraries, Nqadolo said. "And one has to ask, 'why not public schools? Why is that a question?'"

In July 2023, The Bookery built and stocked a library with 4,000 books at Zibodla Primary School in the Eastern Cape town of Mqanduli. Zibodla was the 93rd library The Bookery has constructed, and two more are being prepared. They receive over 850 applications from schools every year to help build libraries.

The percentage of schools without libraries is highest in the Eastern Cape at 93%, followed by Limpopo at 91% and the Northern Cape at 80%, according to the DBE data.

Buyiswa Nogcinisa, the principal at Zibodla, said the library has helped her 160 students tremendously. She had been trying to get a library for years because the school only had a few books.

“We are always struggling with learners who cannot write, who cannot read and who cannot speak,” she said.

Nogcinisa said the school hosts phonics and writing programmes in the library. She still needs more equipment, like overhead projectors.

Nqadolo said if the government was doing its job properly, then organisations like The Bookery would not need to exist.

According to the [National Treasury’s 2023 Estimates of National Expenditure](#), R48.7bn has been allocated to the education infrastructure grant and school infrastructure backlogs grant over the budget period through 2026. But this money will be prioritised for building new schools, providing sanitation, supplying water and repairing infrastructure.

The department plans to distribute 60 million workbooks for grades R to 9 in languages, mathematics and life skills to public schools that request them, according to the expenditure estimates. There is no mention of libraries.

The DBE did not respond to requests for comment from *GroundUp*.

GroundUp sent emails to the DBE’s media desk and departmental spokesperson, Elijah Mhlanga, on Thursday and Monday. There was no response. Mhlanga also did not answer or return several phone calls on Monday.

Published originally on [GroundUp](#).

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