

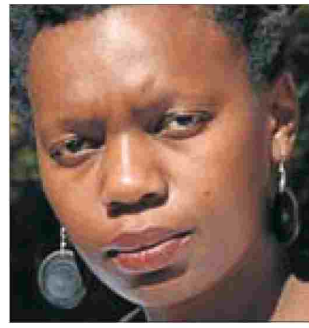
Fixing our broken schools takes more than money

The national budget for basic, free education is almost R17.6bn. Even so, free basic education in SA is in crisis. Most schools have no library, face staff shortages and suffer mismanagement. Business Day brings together three experts to discuss what can be done to change this state of affairs.



Nikki Stein

Stein is an attorney with Section27



Nomalanga Mkhize

Mkhize is a Rhodes University academic and volunteers for Save Our Schools and Community in the Eastern Cape



Naledi Pandor

Pandor is a government minister and chair of the ANC's education committee

Dear Naledi and Nomalanga

THERE is a widely held assumption that the poor quality of education arises from a lack of resources, and therefore that the solution to the education crisis in SA is to make more resources available. A consideration of the funds allocated to basic education — R17.592bn on a national level (excluding allocations to provinces) — suggests otherwise.

The provision of basic education does not involve a linear relationship between resources and quality — a multitude of factors contribute to education. The delivery of basic education depends to a large extent on a budget that aligns needs and available resources. But money on its own will not address the education crisis without the following:

- Proper oversight of expenditure of resources allocated to education, including effective contract management. Where resources are not spent according to approved budgets and the laws governing public finance management, steps must be taken to address this. This includes steps to avoid underspending of funds, which may result from poor performance by service providers or failure on the part of education departments to take the steps necessary for the delivery of quality basic education.

- A system of accountability in terms of which those responsible for the delivery of quality basic education are held to their obligations and called to account where they fail to discharge these obligations. This includes teacher accountability and appropriate action where teachers are absent from class or from school.

- Addressing allegations of corruption in education, by investigating these allegations and taking action, including criminal action where appropriate.

- Legally binding, national, uniform minimum norms and standards in education, including norms and standards for school infrastructure.

The education crisis can only be addressed through participation by all stakeholders, including the government, unions and civil society, to ensure that systems are improved and resources properly spent towards ensuring a quality basic education for each and every learner in SA.

Regards, Nikki

Dear Nikki and Naledi

I mostly agree with Nikki, this is not about resources but about the way they are managed, especially at the provincial level. Provincial departments have become feeding troughs for a myriad of corrupt interests, from fraud-committing department employees to politically connected tenderpreneurial networks creaming off the supply chain.

This corruption alone hinders the department's capacity to overhaul the major structural legacies of inequality bequeathed to us by white-minority rule.

All the problems relating to maladministration and dysfunction boil down to the fact that we cannot hold provincial education departments truly accountable and many operate as mini-fiefdoms where power and politics take precedence over policy implementation.

The education sector is also a critical site of elite political networking between aspirant tripartite alliance members who want to gain access to state resources and jobs by using their political power in the South African Democratic Teachers Union (Sadtu), the Congress of South African Trade Unions (Cosatu) and African National Congress (ANC) branch politics. This is how many teachers become municipal councillors.

I remember at the height of the Eastern Cape education meltdown in 2011, a Grahamstown education forum of stakeholders was convened. After one meeting, an education official went up to the school governing body head who was chairing and said, very



FACILITY FAILURE: Phumlani Kubheka, a maths, technology and natural science teacher at Slangrivier Primary School in a rural area outside Newcastle, stands outside the school's makeshift communal kitchen. He is one of the many teachers who stay in mud huts and caravans on the school property during the week because there is no transport to get them back to their homes. Picture: JACKIE CLAUSEN

loudly after throwing me a look of contempt, "We must now put on our ANC hats and watch out for these 'social movements'." This gridlock of backroom political interests within education is paralysing prospects of change.

With all this in mind, I don't see how Nikki's norms and standards being "legally binding" will facilitate reform. Is Nikki planning to litigate for walls and toilets till kingdom come? We have had so many cases in our courts already. The department's inability to deliver infrastructure is a problem of administrative capacity and politics, not a legal problem.

Regards, Nomalanga

Dear Nikki and Nomalanga

I agree that resources are not the response to the many and very serious challenges that confront us in education. Nevertheless I do believe the ANC is right in its decision to designate education its top priority and to provide significant resources to education.

A number of policy decisions by current and former ministers have led to positive improvements in education. Free access for the poor and the provision of improved infrastructure in many communities, as well as greater attention to textbook provision, annual testing and initiatives to ensure efficient expenditure of funds for infrastructure are all welcome progress that has been led by the current minister.

Nikki is right that norms must be developed and implemented and she knows the minister is working on this. But that must happen in a planned manner and not be a fancy empty promise that we cannot realise.

Nomalanga stresses the need to fight corruption and inefficiency — that is right too. The example she cites illustrates how hard it is to persuade all in education to do the right thing because it is the right thing to do.

I believe we have to bring community pride and parent action back into education. It should be a shame for communities that children go to school and fail to learn, that teachers are employed and fail to teach.

We must all be interested in excellence and success. Parents

should take an interest, be engaged with their children as parents were even under difficult apartheid Bantu education. Parents, learners and teachers must have a passion for education, an unquenchable desire to achieve and succeed. Communities must support teachers and administrators who do the right thing, and ensure that those who do not meet the tough standards of a society that recognises the life-changing benefits of education feel the scorn of a nation that will not tolerate failure.

If we do not retrieve this lost belief in community power, we will not achieve the ambitions we have set for ourselves.

So, I agree: funding is not the only answer — it helps, but without us as active agents of change it cannot do much.

Regards, Naledi

Dear Naledi and Nomalanga

We are in agreement that while resources are necessary for the delivery of basic education, funding alone cannot solve the education crisis. We differ, though, on precisely what should accompany resources.

A sound legal framework is key to realising the right to basic education, not to enable more litigation but for the opposite reason. Clear norms and standards provide clarity as to the content of the right, and the duties of the state in delivering on each component of basic education.

Only with such certainty can the right be realised.

But sound laws and policies are still not enough. It is commendable that there has been increased access to free basic education, but the quality of this education must urgently be addressed. This includes curriculum, infrastructure, teaching, and learning and teaching support material, to name a few examples.

Prioritising education will only carry weight if the underlying obstacles — corruption, financial mismanagement, underspending, lack of responsiveness and accountability of state officials and lack of transparency — are addressed as well. Only then can good decisions be implemented.

I agree with Nomalanga that

basic education must be removed from party politics. Learners lie at the centre of the constitutional right to basic education. All stakeholders, including the state, unions, teachers and community members, must work together to prioritise the best interests of the learners at all times.

Regards, Nikki

Dear Nikki and Naledi

Naledi has raised an issue that has vexed me for five years. Why on earth have communities become so complacent on education?

The reasons are many but two stand out. The first is that our education system is bifurcated along income lines — those who pay more get better quality, those who pay less get less. Instead of fighting for better public education, parents prefer to get their children into middle-income, semi-privatised ("Model C") schools with a higher social status. Value in education has come to



correlate too closely with cost.

Naledi, in much the same way Minister Aaron Motsoaledi does with health, the ANC must lead with a vibrant and compelling vision of what public education ought to mean to society as a whole and to black people specifically, given the depth of our intellectual traditions. Technicist responses don't inspire. Yes we try through community projects to promote a love of learning, but it requires imaginative political leadership backed by the fiscus.

The second reason education has been devalued is that it doesn't prepare most children for the harsh capitalism of the 21st century, where jobs are shrinking. Can our current education system, even if we had a 100% matric pass rate, produce globally competitive citizens over the next 50 years? We need to rethink the heart of the system.

Regards, Nomalanga

Dear Nikki and Nomalanga

Concerns about the quality of education hugely influence government planning and funding. I think we have all the necessary policy instruments. We do not need more. All of us have to support the education sector to implement these policies. We also need to do more to investigate why a province is failing to implement.

The weak link that I think Nikki does not address is how to inspire everyone to do more and to do it well.

to turn around education by acting as a united force for change.

Regards, Naledi

Dear Nomalanga and Naledi

Community participation in and ownership of solutions to the education crisis is crucial. However, I don't think we can place all parents in the same category. Many parents are products of an inherently unequal education system, and need to be empowered. Parents want better education but they need support in fighting for it. An important way to do this is through developing the capacity of school governing bodies. These bodies have both a right and a responsibility to promote the best interests of learners at their schools and the broader community. But the provincial education departments also have an obligation to develop the capacity of school governing bodies — including training in financial management — to ensure they can discharge their obligations.

At the same time, teachers must be both motivated to do well, and disciplined when they do not act in the best interests of the learners. Unions have an enormous role to play here. I think that there is space for the unions to do this more constructively.

Quality basic education should not only be available to those who can afford it due to historical advantages. It is a basic constitutional right. Section 29 of the constitution guarantees that all learners, and not only those who can afford quality education, should be fully prepared to realise their full potential.

Regards, Nikki

Dear Nikki and Naledi

Nikki is right; currently not all can participate meaningfully in education reform. I get frustrated when the ANC says education is "everybody's problem". Yes it is, but we do not all have equal capacity to address it.

What I find surprising is how the ANC tends to retreat from the power it wields over the education system. It is not useful to say that

black communities ought to be able to stand up for education in the same way they did under white rule. These are two different eras with different social and political dynamics. We are not collectively fighting a rogue white regime here. A liberation movement is at the helm of state; people expect it to lead and set the tone.

I often plead with civil society colleagues to ask how proposed remedies will balance out local power relations, the level at which we live our everyday lives.

You try to empower school governing bodies and parents but they are reluctant to speak out against powerful officials and teachers backed by party structures. It's easier to confront a councillor you voted for than a union-backed teacher you didn't hire.

Naledi, I get sceptical when we use a moralising paradigm that people can pay lip service to. Let's rather query institutional deficiency — why is it hard to fire unprofessional teachers?

Regards, Nomalanga

Dear Nikki and Nomalanga

I think Nomalanga's vexed issues require a mix of Steve Biko and Nelson Mandela: the one part encouraging belief in self and ability to influence the course of society, and the other believing this expression of self must be for the good of all. I regret that I promote a "moralising paradigm", but I do hold the view that we have begun to disempower ourselves by believing in this monolithic Leviathan, able to do all we want.

I believe in people acting and agree with Nikki somewhat on the empowerment of school governing bodies — but even that is being done already, so why do we continue to have these failings?

Education in SA is a complex and multifaceted challenge that does not have easy answers. Our brief encounter has pointed to how difficult it is to turn around the most odious of the social engineering that was apartheid. A people once proudly aspirant has become victim to the residue of Bantu education. I speak morally because one of our failings is the lack of inspiration and belief that we have the answers.

The ANC is right that education is a societal issue — it is so in all societies with a quality system. I believe those with voices should join the ANC in pointing out problems and in inspiring hope.

Both of you may recall where we were on infrastructure in 1996 and on teacher numbers in schools: much progress has been made since then and the infrastructure budget has grown.

I do think there is a further conundrum: even though the education budget is huge, it is inadequate for the gaps we still need to address. The fact of 80% or more going to salaries leaves very little for our concerns. Once more I believe our national imagination must look beyond the ANC in government to address this. Happily the minister is already building new national partnerships that may give us a unity of purpose that could be uniquely South African.

Regards, Naledi

Dear Naledi and Nomalanga

I do not believe that responsibility for the education crisis can be shifted, even in part, to disempowered communities. The people are entitled to expect their government to provide quality education for their children. Our government must capacitate its structures to be transparent, responsive and accountable in responding to needs at all levels.

As civil society, we must capacitate communities to hold our government to account to improve the realisation of basic rights. The whistle must be blown on corruption, mismanagement and any other breaches of legal obligations. We cannot stand for people being silenced through intimidation tactics.

We need oversight of the funds spent on salaries in the same way

that there must be oversight of all other expenditure. Teachers must meet standards of excellence and enable our children to reach their full potential. Education department officials must live by the values of transparency, accountability, responsiveness and a high standard of ethics.

The first step to addressing the education crisis is to admit that there is one, to identify the problems and to stand together in tackling them.

We need to do this honestly, leaving corruption, mismanagement, intimidation, harassment and personal interests at the door, bringing in only the interests of our children. We cannot afford another generation of unequal education in our country.

Regards, Nikki

Dear Nikki and Naledi

The purpose of the liberation movement taking state power is precisely to undo the legacy of an oppressive past. It cannot be a surprise to us that Bantu education has had these devastating consequences. All post-apartheid policy must grapple with the tragedy of fragmented and broken communities. School governing body units in district offices are meant to provide extensive support to underresourced parents yet you barely see or hear of them. Nobody in higher office bothers to hold them accountable.

State failure to deliver decent education means communities must depend on private schooling, unreliable sponsorships or donor-funded NGOs for education support programmes. These are forced to duplicate the state's functions with very limited impact. I agree with Naledi's Bikoist sentiments — cultural and intellectual imagination resides outside the state, it is cultivated and renewed by a people.

The Leviathan cannot and should not define a society's intellectual soul. After all the walls, desks, and textbooks have been delivered, there is no amount of policy that can instil a spirit of learning in people. This is why I've come to value reading and painting with children in my area over marching to the district office for the umpteenth time. They must be shown that much as education is a public issue, it is an enterprise of personal enrichment.

Regards, Nomalanga

Dear Nikki and Nomalanga

I agree that the state must use its power and it is doing so. As I indicated, there is much that has been achieved. More infrastructure has been provided, there is greater access for all children who should be in school. Greater attention is being paid to the quality of education. We have more and better qualified teachers in schools.

Corruption and willful mismanagement must definitely be addressed. I do want to stress however, that corruption is most often that of public officials, not teachers as we have implied. Officials are being investigated and charged as we saw in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Even on the worrying under-expenditure in infrastructure funding remedial steps are being taken, the basic education department is leading an accelerated infrastructure delivery initiative.

The department has recognised the need to strengthen maths and science development support and is vigorously addressing enhanced teacher development. Furthermore, the minister has recognised the vital importance of textbooks before every child. The development of workbooks, and the announcement of a textbooks-for-each-subject policy are all welcome developments.

I must conclude by repeating educational change and transformation is a long-term process full of pitfalls and hurdles. The ANC is striving hard to build an education system that will ensure all learners enjoy access to quality and real opportunity.

Regards, Naledi