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PROCEEDINGS OF NATIONAL COUNCIL OF PROVINCES

The Council met at 14:02.

The Chairperson took the Chair and requested members to observe a moment of silence for prayers or meditation.

The Chairperson announced that the hybrid sitting constituted a sitting of the National Council of Provinces.

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Hon delegates, may I take this opportunity and welcome you to the sitting of today. Also, our special delegates who have joined in, both physically and on the virtual platform. Our special greetings to the Minister of Basic Education. Hon Gwarube, you are always welcome in the NCOP; this is your second House. Each time we invite you, we remain grateful to the fact that you are available to take your responsibility in terms of responding to the questions as posed by the hon members.

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Having said that, hon members, may I equally remind you of the Rules, in particular subrules 21, 22 and 23 of Rule 103 that applies in this sitting. In accordance with the Council Rule 229 subrule 1, there will be no notices of motions or motions without notice.

I would also like to further remind delegates that in terms of Rule 229 of the Council Rules, the time for reply by the Ministers to a question is five minutes. Only four supplementary questions are allowed per question. A member who has asked the initial question would be the first one to ask a supplementary question to the Minister. The time for a supplementary question allocated is only two minutes. Accordingly, the Minister will be afforded four minutes to respond to the follow up questions.

I now take this opportunity and invite the Minister of Basic Education to respond to Question 7 asked by hon Feni. Over to you, hon Minister.

QUESTIONS – CLUSTER 2A: SOCIAL SERVICES

Question 7:

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The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon Chairperson, it is always so good to be in the NCOP and to answer questions to the hon members.

The issue of scholar transport is critical in ensuring that learners, especially in rural, remote and high-risk areas, are able to access schooling safely and consistently. It is, however, a shared intergovernmental function. Implementation takes place at a provincial level, working across education and transport authorities, while the National Department of Basic Education, DBE, and the Department of Transport work on policy, co-ordination, monitoring and support.

However, we can't ignore some of the carnage we've seen involving some of our learners on the roads. It has become very important for us to prioritise making scholar transport safe for learners, particularly those who come from far-flung areas.

In relation to addressing the gap of provision, the Department of Basic Education is working with the Department of Transport on the review of the National Learner Transport Policy. That review is aimed at strengthening key areas such as planning, safety, security, beneficiary criteria, service design,

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procurement, and contract management. We think that the working between these two departments is going to help us in terms of being able to strengthen how scholar transport is delivered in the country, so that we can keep our learners safe, but at school on time.

In parallel, the DBE is continuing to support provinces through our intergovernmental structures by focusing on matters such as learner identification, route planning, prioritisation of rural and farm school routes, and the monitoring of provincial plans and expenditure. It's important because learner transport is funded through the provincial equitable share and must be planned and implemented effectively at a provincial level. This is where I would implore members of this House to really help us with holding our provinces to account when it comes to some of these matters, because scholar transport is squarely funded through the equitable share that provinces receive, and so we must hold the executive at all levels to account to make sure that money is spent where it needs to go. Where it needs to go to areas like scholar transport, those things need to be happening. Of course, from a national department level, we are responsible for monitoring and supporting our provinces.

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In relation to the safe and reliable access, the department is working with the transport and law enforcement agencies, including Road Traffic Management Corporation, to strengthen compliance with transport and road traffic laws. This includes attention to roadworthiness of cars, legal operating requirements, pre-contract inspections and compliance checks.

The focus is therefore very clear, to improve the co-ordination, the strengthening, the planning, and tighten the safety oversight and support to provinces that learner transport is safer, is more dependable, and more responsive to the needs of learners who have to travel long distances, particularly those learners who find themselves in rural and far-flung areas.

For me, what is most important, as we are strengthening our policy around scholar transport, is making sure that we keep our learners safe and that scholar transport is dependable, and that they are able to get to school on time for protecting learning and teaching. Thank you very much, Chair.

Mr M FENI: Hon Chair, to the hon Minister, thank you for the response. We acknowledge and appreciate the involvement on the Department of Transport and its agencies. However, I would like

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to know whether the Department of Education in the provinces, like the Eastern Cape province, have the necessary capacity to do the vetting and accreditation of vehicles that carry the learners. Thank you very much.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: As I indicated before, because it's an intergovernmental service, in many provinces, for instance, where hon Feni comes from - the Eastern Cape, the function is actually run solely by the Department of Transport. The Department of Education in the Eastern Cape is but a beneficiary of that. So, in some provinces, these things are more difficult than others to manage, and that's why I was saying it's a multigovernmental layered approach where we've got provinces doing this at the bottom, but we also have Minister Creasy and I looking at a uniform policy that we can have.

I think it's also important, because we've got this intergovernmental nexus at which we work, that we place where we place the responsibility where it needs to go. The Department of Transport has the capacity to vet and accredit, and using some of the entities would really be useful to us.

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That's why we are saying it's not only the provinces that must work together; Minister Creasy and I should work together to see how she can use some of the entities under the Department of Transport in making sure that we, as a client department, are also designing a policy that covers both departments, but that also guides provinces on what needs to happen.

What worries me is that the implementation on the ground ... sometimes policymaking can be here, but the implementation on the ground can be something very different. In fact, late last week I was in a community, and I saw for myself somebody who literally had children overcrowded in that car. When I stopped him, he said, well, I can take them all off.

So, the point I'm trying to make is that we have to strengthen the law enforcement part a lot more than is currently happening. I think with the working together of the Department of Transport, we will be able to make sure that law enforcement and the vetting and the accreditation happens so that we can also make sure that on our side we do our part.

I also want to say that I'm also imploring parents to really pay close attention to private providers in particular who ferry

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their children to school because some of the things that we are seeing are really disheartening and can be avoided if, for instance, there's better driving on the road and also we avoid issues like overcrowding. Thank you very much.

Dr I SCHEURKOGEL: Thank you, Chair, and welcome to the House, Minister. Minister, where does the national department's responsibility end and provincial department's responsibilities start? Thank you, Chair.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: It's a shared responsibility. The Department of Basic Education essentially sets policy, legislation and regulations. From a provincial point of view, they are responsible for the planning, spending, and making sure that they identify learners who are worthy of scholar transport.

Remember that we have criteria set that says which learners are eligible for scholar transport. For instance, learners with special needs, and learners who are living in rural and farm areas. So, provinces are responsible for identifying those learners, and also responsible for allocating the adequate amount of money required in order for the scholar transport function to happen.

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You'll recall a couple of years ago, and I used the Eastern Cape as an example, that the Eastern Cape Department of Education and Transport were both taken to court on the delivery of scholar transport. So those things are quite critical to understand that Minister Creasy and I can set the framework, but the implementation in a department like mine does sit with the provinces. However, we are not only just saying that's a provincial function, because of course, this is our entire government, and we need to view it as such. These are 13,7 million learners and they don't care if the responsibility sits with who and who. We just need to make sure that they are in fact ferried to school safe and on time.

That is why we are saying that we are taking our responsibility as a Department of Education at a national level to do stronger monitoring and support the provinces so that they can do this work, and that this work is not something that slips through the cracks. When we don't get scholar transport right, lives can be lost, as we've recently seen in Gauteng.

So, that's where the differentiator is, but as I said, going far beyond that, we have to support provinces, and that's why we've taken the decision to do so. Thank you.

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The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Thank you very much, hon Minister. The next follow up question is from hon Ceza, who has joined in on the virtual platform. Over to you, hon Ceza.

We allow you to switch off your camera, hon Ceza. You may proceed.

Mr K CEZA: Thank you very much, Chair, for that rescue. To the hon Minister, the crisis of scholar transport remains a national shame as learners across all nine provinces are still subjected to unsafe, unreliable, and undignified conditions in their pursuit of education. In rural provinces such as Mpumalanga and the Eastern Cape, the situation is particularly dire.

In Mpumalanga, for an example, children in Geluk farm in Emakhazeni Local Municipality continue to walk long and dangerous distances to school, crossing rivers and busy roads without any formal transport support. With many routes impassable during heavy rains, yet this department, along with the provincial departments, continues to extend outdated contracts for scholar transport that is unsuitable for these terrains.

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In light of this, what concrete steps have you taken in monitoring, along with the provincial departments, to conduct audits of rural roads conditions so as to ensure that scholar transport tenders use dignified and suitable vehicles for the terrain? Thank you very much.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Absolutely. As I indicated before, regardless of the fact that there's delineated functions and there's delineated responsibilities, ultimately, we all share the responsibility of keeping our learners safe. So, you asked the question around roadworthiness, in particular. Any vehicle that is used for learner transport must fully comply with the legal safety requirements. In that regard, enforcement authorities, including the Road Traffic Management and Corporation and other traffic law enforcement bodies, are important partners in tackling this issue of un-roadworthiness, unsafe operations, overloading, and non-compliance. So, the DBE is working very closely with these partners to make sure that precontract inspections are done, regular compliance checks are done, enforcement operations and actions against unsafe vehicles are undertaken.

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Where we find problems is where there are private arrangements that are used outside of this properly managed provincial system, the risk is higher. What happens is that parents enter into a contract arrangement with somebody in the community and where we aren't able then to do those pre-contract checks. However, from a point of view of government entering into a contract with people who are providing scholar transport, that work is very clear and law enforcement agencies know what it is that they need to look out for.

Additionally, as I said, we are updating the policy on scholar transport alongside with the Department of Transport. We want to strengthen that policy so that it can guide provinces on what happens in an environment where there's an independent provider. What kind of requirements must that person have? Do we make sure that they've got the correct PDP, for instance? We make sure that their vehicles are roadworthy, even though they may be private providers. So that's why we are looking at the service model to say, the issue is not necessarily the 800 000 learners that we are transporting every day, the issue lies in sometimes the private service providers where we are not having a closer look at. That's why Minister Creasy and I want to increase this work with the review of the policy so that we can have a closer

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eye on even the private providers, because that's when the risk of safety for learners becomes a lot higher. Thank you, Chair.

Ms T BREEDT: Thank you, Chairperson, I do appreciate. I think it was somebody else before me. I think ... Oh, no, sorry.

Hon Chairperson, to the hon Minister, thank you so much for your answer. I think we all share the passion for scholar transport and the problem with it. I appreciate and welcome the fact that we are reviewing the policy and ensuring that it gets supplemented down to our provinces.

My problem, however, is with the monitoring of not only these contracts, but also of these physical vehicles. We see a lot of them, term having wonderful vehicles in the first term, and then by the second or third term, they have a vehicle that is not the one that they contracted for initially. To me, that gets back to law enforcement and having boots on the ground.

Hon Minister, I want to know from you, what is your department and hon Creasy's department doing in ensuring that the South African Police Service, SAPS, and all of the provincial community safety departments are equipping and having enough

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staff on the ground to be able to fulfil this monitoring function? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, I agree with you that sometimes a discrepancy comes in where somebody, even with pre-contractual checks that provinces do, abandon the car that they were contracting on and use something else. I think that's where continuous monitoring on the side of provinces needs to happen, because it cannot be that you contracted on a particular vehicle that is roadworthy and certified. That is why, in my view, anybody who is ferrying learners should be easily identifiable by members of the community, even if it's something that is written "ferrying learners. If my driving is reckless, please call this number." Those are some of the things I think we need to build into that policy discussion, because ultimately, even members of the public should be able to say, no, I can report this person. I can see that this car is overloaded, or I can see that this driver is being reckless.

So, I think continuous assessment of the roadworthiness of the cars is important, but also, I think just vigilance from the schools as well is incredibly important. Again, I want to make this point that the law enforcement agencies that work with

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Minister Creasy's department, have been more than co-operative with us to say, look, we will do the checks that you need us to do. We will try and have more boots on the ground. We will try and identify when the peak hours are. It's usually early in the mornings and in the afternoons when children are being picked up. So, we are receiving that kind of support. However, in my view, unless we all coordinate from DBE, Department of Transport, provincial education departments, provincial transport department, and unless we're all co-ordinating to this review of this policy, there's still going to be gaps. That, for me, is where we need to fill in those gaps and make sure that we come up with something concrete that South Africans can see that we take this matter seriously, because it's about the safety of their children. Thank you.

Question 14:

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Chair, the findings of the Funda Uphumelele National Survey, FUNS, which we collected in 2025 and released in November 2025, confirm what other assessments have shown to us. Too many children are falling behind in reading and in the early grades. This is precisely why foundational learning, especially literacy and numeracy in

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Grades R to 3 have been placed at the centre of our work. This is literally one of our key priorities.

And we've said we want to reorientate the education system to put value on the foundations of learning. Because, members, if you have a shaky foundation, the learning losses later in life are almost impossible to overcome. If children don't have a strong grasp of foundational numeracy and literacy, we see this later in the years in their inability to take on gateway subjects, in their inability to be able to take on, you know, maths, science, technology, accounting, and we lament those things. But because we neglected the foundations, that's where we need to make sure that we are strengthening our efforts.

And so, first, what are we doing about this? So, since the release of the survey the department has focused on ensuring that these findings, these are not just reports that gather dust, that these findings are translated into practical and at a district and at a circuit and at a school level, so that we can see the learnings, but we can see how it shifts the focus.

Secondly, the survey benchmarks have been built into core tools that shape classroom practice. This includes ongoing revision of

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the annual teaching plans and the foundation phase benchmark aligned to assessments for teachers and subject advisors, including a strengthened early grade reading assessment toolkit.

Thirdly, the department is improving the support for remediation. Updated classroom tools are being updated together with remedial manual so that learning gaps can be identified early. As I indicated, if we identify learning gaps much later, the remedial actions are either too costly or will simply not be effective.

Fourthly, the survey findings and benchmarks have been incorporated into our lesson plans, into our training manuals, and these materials will be initially rolled out to 5 000 teachers and the lessons and the processes that will be used to strengthen further implementation.

But I think for me, most excitingly, hon members, for the annual performance plan, APP, of 2026 and 2027, it now includes an actual indicator that looks at reviewing and strengthening the implementation plan for national reading strategy in the foundation phase. And I think that's important because we have to move away from simply advocacy around early child learning,

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we have to hold ourselves to account, we have to have you holding us to account.

And so, what I've said to the department that it's important that we insert these things into the annual performance plans so that when we go and report before Parliament, Parliament will ask us: How far are you with your literacy strategy? How far are you with your integrated support to improve literacy in Grade R to 3? And in parallel to that, the Mathematics, Science and Technology, MST, Conditional Grant is also being sharpened to drive stronger improvements in foundational numeracy.

Again, we can lament about how children are not performing well in maths and science, but if we miss it right at the foundations, we are unlikely to get it right at the end. And so, that's why I'm saying we're not only just simply saying this as rhetoric, we've now put it in our own performance plans so that you can hold us accountable. Because for me, my interest is to see the needle shift, more and more learners being able to read for meaning, more and more learners being able to count meaningfully and confidently, because it's only then that we can change our education system. Thank you, Chair.

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Ms J M ADRIAANSE: Hon Minister, you basically covered my question and my follow-up. But I need to know, new teachers that are being trained: Have their courses and are they going to be adapted to include this very essential part and investigation and survey that has been done, so that we have them trained correctly right from the start?

I welcome the fact that 5 000 teachers that are already trained are included in this, but those that are starting out now: Has their syllabus been incorporated with this and what's the future of that? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon Chair, it's a very important question and one that I'm pleased to say, we've been in very close working relationship with the Department of Higher Education and our universities, because historically, members, teachers who weren't very good at their job were sent to go and teach foundation phase, as though foundation phase is where talent goes to die.

But we've actually realised that foundation phase teaching is a specialised skill. We've got to incentivise people to go to university, to go to institutions of higher learning to learn

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the skill of teaching in the foundation phase, because if we don't match the strategies to improve outcomes for children with the strategy to empower the teacher, we're not going to see the desired results.

So, one of the things that we've done to incentivise learners or students who want to pursue a teaching profession, we've said that the Funza Lushaka Bursary, a larger part of it needs to be allocated to people who want to go to teach in the foundation phase. It's our way of incentivising a lot more younger people into the profession.

We've engaged with universities to say ... and now we've got an exciting working relationship with University of SA, UNISA, they have taken thousands of our Grade R practitioners who were otherwise underqualified, because now that Grade R is part and parcel of ... is essentially part of compulsory schooling, you have to make sure that the Grade R teacher that is there is actually a qualified educator. But there have been many Grade R practitioners who were working in that space, because we were not viewing it as a critical space, so, we've allowed them ... we've given ... we've sourced funding to give them the bursaries to go and get their degrees through UNISA.

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So, we are really trying to match our efforts right around supporting the young ones but also matching our efforts with supporting the teachers because you cannot have this education system that leaves the teacher behind.

And so, I think with the reorientation that we've undertaken now, there's an understanding that the foundations of learning are important. From literally two years old, that's where we are targeting children to get into structured Early Childhood Development, ECD, centres. They need to be thriving by five. By the time they get to Grade R they need to be cognitively developed enough to start schooling. But that has to be matched with qualified teachers, qualified practitioners and that's the kind of work we are doing, ongoing, and I'm excited about the partners who've come on board along with us.

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Are you done, Minister?

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Yes ma'am.

Mr M P SIBANDE: Minister, data further shows that people in Quintile 1 schools, which is the poorest schools, are four times

more likely to be unable to read a single word than the learners in Quintile 5 schools, which are wealthy schools.

Now, my question: Whether the department has any target interventions to assist the learners from the poorest schools in South Africa?

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, it's an incredibly important question, and one that I'd like to illustrate with a very small example of what I call the two 10-year-olds in South Africa, the tale of the two 10-year-olds.

The one 10-year-old who has had a structured ECD centre that they've had access to since they were two years old, they are being read to, they've got good nutrition, they go to school, they're able to read and read for meaning. By the time they turn 10, they are already very much fluent in language and in numeracy.

And then there's the other 10-year-old, the one that you mentioned, in the Quintile 1 school, who's in a village, who has never been to an ECD centre, who faces the high chance of

malnutrition, who probably interacts with a book for the very first time when they're six or seven years old.

And those two 10-year-olds, those are the faces of South Africa's education system. And my ... I think our moral obligation is to change the story of that, that more and more children need to get to a place where there's equal access to these things.

And so, what are we doing about it? Well, we're making sure that the mass registration drive, the Bana Pele ECD mass registration drive is targeting communities that are underserved, communities that are either in townships and rural areas, so that we can get our learners, our young children already in an ECD centre.

What also are we doing? We're making sure that even schools in rural areas have Grade R classrooms that are catered to them and making sure that ... [Interjections.]

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Can you hold on, hon Minister!

Hon Nonkonyana, can you please mute yourself!

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Front Table, can you please assist us ... [Interjections.]

Sorry about that, hon Minister ... [Interjections.]

Hon Nonkonyana, you are disrupting the session!

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hey, my time!

The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Sorry about that, hon Minister. You may proceed!

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: And so, hon member, the question you ask is so poignant about the equity and the equality of our education system. And yes, there's definitely a focus, a lot more on Quintiles 1 to 3 schools, making sure that those very children are able to read for meaning.

But the other thing is, what we've found with surveys such as Funda Uphumelele and our approach to mother tongue-based bilingual education, which we've adopted as a strategy and as a priority, is that African languages are not a hindrance to literacy. In fact, they're a gateway to literacy. So, when you teach children in their mother tongue in their earlier years,

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they are able to pick up an additional language, a third language earlier on in life.

So, in fact, we shouldn't treat home languages as though they're a disadvantage. Home language education is important and that's actually how you bridge the gap between those kids who are able to read for meaning and those who can't.

And so, this is why surveys like this are important, because they're instructive to us about how do we utilise South African ... all South African languages to make sure that children are able to access and make sense of the world around them in complex concepts.

So, that's some of the exciting work that we're doing. But also having children in Quintiles 1 to 3 schools in ECD and in schools, helps us deal with the malnutrition problem. And a lot of children in poor communities are stunted and stunting is irreversible. And South Africa is not a poor country. No child should be going hungry or dying of malnutrition in our country. And so, having these structured programmes is going to help us be able to bridge that gap, elevate that inequality and that unequal footing in life. Thank you.

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The CHAIRPERSON OF THE NCOP: Hon Minister, once again, we apologise for the disruption that you had to endure whilst you were busy responding to the questions.

And once again, hon members on the virtual platform, can we remind you of the rules of this House, that they need to be observed at all times, regardless of where you are, in terms of your connectivity.

What has happened, hon Nonkonyana, it's unheard of, particularly yourself. We are looking at you with high respect and accordingly, please try and refrain from doing such.

And that goes to all of us, hon members, at all times.

Hon Montwedi, can you ask your follow up question!

Mr M K MONTWEDI: Hon Minister, I think you did respond to the steps that you're going to put in place in addressing the Funda Uphumelele National Survey.

But I just want to find out from you to say, one, what consequences will follow if provincial education departments

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fail to implement the required reading interventions that you just spoke of?

And another thing is that in your response also, you spoke about preparing learners from as old as Grade 2. And you'll agree with me that these children are still in the ECD centres, and specifically, not the structured ECD centres.

Now, I want to ask you Minister to say: What support are you giving to these ECD centres that are not structured, so that they should indeed be part of preparing a learner from as early as Grade 2?

Setswana:

Ka a makalo, ke lebogile, Modulasetilo.

English:

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Chair ...

IsiXhosa:

... kubulela mna.

English:

I think, firstly, I think ...

IsiXhosa:

... mandiqale kulo mbuzo wokugqibela ...

English:

... around ECD centres. The hon member is absolutely correct. That's why we're talking about a coherent and a continuous education system.

We are looking at an education system that looks at a two-year-old until 18 years old and further education and training. If you're only looking at an education system that starts children at six years old, you have completely already failed. Eighty percent of a child's development ... the brain of a child's development, 80% of it happens before they turn five. That is why we have to capture two-year-olds literally into structured ECD centres, where they have a nutrition, where they have a structured curriculum in place appropriate for their age, where they are taught these things and they have these cognitive games that they play, because we don't want to miss that window.

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It is such an injustice for me where we talk about poor performance of children in South Africa, when I'm thinking, well, we've let them down by not capturing them earlier enough.

So, what are we doing to make sure that we are covering ECD centres? We have been fortunate enough to receive R10 billion over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework, MTEF, to spend on making sure that ECD centres are registered so that each child at an ECD centre has access to R24 a day per child and that is the subsidy that Treasury has given us.

But over and above that, we are working with private partners, philanthropic partners, who are saying, we want to help you do more, we want you to scale. In fact, one of our first of its kind is a blended ... a form of a blended financing model of the Education Outcomes Fund, EOF, that we recently got into, which is about R500 million, which we've managed to raise with philanthropic partners who are going to go to our most rural provinces.

So, Eastern Cape, Northern Cape are going to be the beneficiaries of this fund, where these philanthropic partners are saying, let us help you scale, because we can see the size

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of the problem and we want to make sure that we are walking the journey with you.

So, we're not just only looking at government funding, we're also looking at how best we can be creative about attracting funding from other sources.

We're also fortunate enough to also have thinking partners, and the World Bank is one of them and a whole lot of others who are with us in this journey of saying, how do we design a curriculum for a three-year-old? How do we design a curriculum for a five-year-old? How does that differ?

And also, some of our partners, more importantly, our corporate partners have lifted their hands and they've said, look, if you want to have the practitioner in the ECD having an NQF Level 4, we are happy to sponsor and take some of these practitioners to an institution to go gain that.

So, for me this is more than just about children, it's now transforming communities. Because a woman who was running an ECD centre in the back room of her home all of a sudden has an opportunity to get some training, has an opportunity to be able

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to run a formal, fully subsidised ECD centre. So, those things really are quite exciting.

In terms of consequences around provinces. Look, as I said, we've included these things in our APPs. Our APPs with provinces usually align. So, it means that there's been an overwhelming buying into this new strategy that we've embarked on. So, I'm not expecting any kind of resistance from provinces. This is the strategy of the Seventh Administration, and I think we're all pulling in the same direction. Thank you, Chair.

Mr M M PETER: Hon Minister, as you have said, matric results are the culmination of all schooling years built on strong foundational learning.

The recent Funda Uphumelele Survey shows that only three in ten Grade 1 to Grade 3 pupils can read at grade level.

I do, however, commend the interventions your department has implemented to address these challenges. They show a step in the right direction.

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In that light, hon Minister, could you indicate the estimated timeline for when we could see significant improvements in reading proficiency in the Eastern Cape and whether current early grade reading benchmarks are being met in the provinces' under-performing schools? Thank you, Minister.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon Peter, you're absolutely right, and that's why I think I started off a little bit earlier by saying that for me it was important to not only just talk about and advocate for foundations of learning, but to include it in our annual performance plan so that all of you can hold us accountable to say, you said you were going to do this, have you met that? Because for me I think annual performance plans and the indicators in them should live through impact. We shouldn't just be doing a tick box exercise and saying, yes, we monitored ten schools, yes, we did that. The real impact, as you indicate here, is whether or not more South African children are going to be able to read for meaning and count confidently, and that, for me, is when we will know that all of these interventions are working. And so, we are aggressive in trying to make sure that, one, we're utilising mother tongue a lot more in our teaching.

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Obviously, the ECD strategy, which I was talking about, becomes very important. And of course, strengthening Grade R, making sure that all children who are six are able to access Grade R.

But also I think for me, excitedly, and I would hope that you would share this dream with me, in as much as people celebrate matric results and really we should be very happy about how our children are performing in matric, my view is that we should be as obsessed about matric results as we are about results of children who are able to read and read for meaning or children who are ready for school.

I dream of a big time where the Early Learning National Assessment, ELNA, assessment that we do for children who are five turning six starting Grade R, that we can start to celebrate those milestones because for me that's a far more meaningful indicator. It shows you where the children are falling behind, it shows you where you must focus on, it's literally telling you how you must run your education system. The matric pass rate is an exit indicator. Those learners have now left our system.

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So, for me, I really want the country and I really hope I can have advocates in all of you to say, the foundations are where it's most matters. Because you see the children we speak about, those who can't read for grade level, the reality is that they don't ever catch up. If a child can't read at Grade 1 level in Grade 1, they'll eventually progress to Grade 3, but they're never going to be able to catch that learning loss. And you know where we find it the most? When they get to high school, then they completely battle to write even a simple maths paper.

Then that's why people ask me, why aren't children taking up more maths and science? Because ultimately, if you can't read for comprehension, you can't solve a maths problem.

So, this is why I'm obsessed about the work that we're doing at a foundation level. And I'm hoping some of the ... we've got the ... you asked when, how, when the timelines? Well, firstly, all of these things are on the go immediately. But we have our systemic evaluation, our own systemic evaluation, which we have running in the country, which tests Grade 3 learners.

I'm also very excited, I really want to put a lot of emphasis on that Grade R test that kids take next year so that we can really

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see whether or not does it make a difference? But if a child is in a structured ECD centre, are they more ready for Grade R than a child who isn't? Because then that's a proof case to parents to say, don't keep your children at school, send them to an ECD centre so that they can be ready for formal schooling. Thank you, sir.

Question 8:

The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr D R Ryder): Delegates, we will move to the next question, which concerns "The eradication of unsafe school structures." This question was originally asked by the hon MF Mokwele. We have been informed that he is unable to pose the follow-up today and will be represented by the hon Feni. Minister, if you can respond to Question 8, please.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, House Chair. I wish to agree with the member who raised the question about the measures in place. However, I would like to go further and state that unsafe infrastructure undermines not only learner safety but also their dignity and the conditions for learning and teaching. This affects both learners and teachers.

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It remains a priority for me, the department, and the provincial departments of education. The first point is that the delivery of school infrastructure is primarily the responsibility of the provincial departments of education. I therefore ask members, when provincial representatives appear before you, to examine the infrastructure expenditure grants. They receive a conditional grant, known as the Education Infrastructure Grant, EIG grant, which is an infrastructure grant. If they are not spending accordingly, we need to call that out. We must ensure that no province underspends on infrastructure, especially when there is a R140 billion backlog in school infrastructure. We must hold ourselves to a much higher standard. The first point I am making is that the national department's role is to monitor the regulatory framework, oversee implementation, and ensure it provides oversight and support.

So, we do not just simply hold our hands and say it is not our responsibility. We must support provinces. We must go into oversight and verify that these reports that we are getting about the eradication of unsafe structures are actually accurate.

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To accelerate the eradication of unsafe structures, provinces must continue to invest in infrastructure for new schools, replacement schools, upgrades, additions, rehabilitation, refurbishments, and, most importantly, maintenance. It is important to emphasise that many of the infrastructure issues holding us back arise because, even when new schools are built, principals and school governing bodies, SGBs, do not maintain them. This results in a recurring cycle.

In addition, the National Department of Education launched the Accelerated School Infrastructure Delivery Initiative, ASIDI, which was intended to address serious backlogs across the country. We are now almost finished with that. Remember, we also have the Sanitation Appropriate for Education, SAFE, programme, which was a fund manager at the Department of Basic Education, DBE, level. From the 2026/27 financial year, infrastructure grants will be allocated to the provinces.

All new and replacement schools are therefore expected to include the services required for functional learning, including water, electricity, and usable ablution facilities. This is important because we have norms and standards that guide public school infrastructure.

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The Limpopo Department of Education began a condition assessment of the entire school infrastructure portfolio. This process will update the condition ratings of 3,600 assets and will help the province prioritise maintenance upgrades and eliminate infrastructure that does not meet the required standards.

On timeframes, these depend on two issues: The scale of the backlog, as I have indicated, R140 billion rand in infrastructure backlog. That is what the sector faces. So, on timeframes, it is the scale of the backlog, the readiness of projects for implementation, and the funding available in a fiscally constrained environment. And that is why I am saying to you that there can be no province that can come here and confidently say that they underspend on infrastructure, when we have R140-billion backlog. Each province should be spending 100% of the infrastructure grant. And if they are not, one of the things that we are doing is if a province is underspending, we move money to a province that is spending. So, that province stands to lose if we do not utilise our money as we should.

Thank you very much, sir.

Mr M FENI: Minister. Thank you, hon Chair. Hon Minister, it was earlier reported in the media that Mpfariseni Secondary in

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Thohoyandou, one of 1,800 Limpopo schools flagged by the Provincial Education Department, still has a collapsing ceiling during lessons. More than one hundred people squeeze into a single classroom. And learning is taking place on the veranda or under a tree. Then the question is whether there are any immediate remedial steps to assist in such a situation.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, Chair. Hon member, it was previously reported in the media that Mpfariseni Secondary, located in Limpopo, Thohoyandou, one of 1,800 Limpopo schools identified by the Provincial Education Department, still has a collapsing ceiling during lessons. More than one hundred people are squeezed into a single classroom, and learning takes place on the veranda or under a tree. The question then arises as to whether there are any immediate remedial steps to assist in such a situation.

Rural provinces like Limpopo face deeper historical backlogs. You may recall that, years ago, there was an initiative to replace mud schools and remove asbestos from schools. However, in provinces such as Limpopo, Eastern Cape, and KwaZulu-Natal, which are rural, some of these backlogs persist in a significant way.

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It is therefore important that several actions are taken. Here are some practical steps. First, provinces must improve their condition assessment data. The quality of data is crucial, as I often emphasise not only to the team but also to the MECs, because it guides spending priorities. Second, projects must be better prepared before implementation, as weak planning at the outset often causes delays. Provinces must be clear about the project scope and planning before beginning implementation.

Third, there must be stronger procurement planning and stronger management of contractor performance. And this is where things go wrong because a school may be identified as a priority school for refurbishment, but for some reason, a contractor will walk off-site or whatever the case may be, and we need to hold contractors far more accountable.

In my view, I think contractors who do business with the state and who do not perform or who walk off projects should be banned from doing work with the state again. Why is it that a contractor in Limpopo that did not finish work can pop up in the Eastern Cape and still be awarded a government contract? We should be able to say, if you cannot be trusted to do the work

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that you said you were going to do, then you must never do business with the state again.

Fourth, provinces need tighter monitoring and reporting so that stalled projects are identified early, and corrective action is taken quickly.

Finally, where existing budgets are not enough to address the scale of the backlog, the sector must pursue additional funding mechanisms. And this is important to look at blended financing models that National Treasury is looking into, and we must be creative in saying we cannot simply sit back and say we do not have R140 billion, so what do we do?

Education is immediately realisable as per the Constitution. So, we must make sure that we work together with provinces, but with greater planning and greater consequence management of contractors. Do not implement until you are ready and you have done your planning. And let us aggressively start making sure that we prioritise those schools. And the member did furnish me with the name of the school. I want to undertake that I will follow up with the MEC. My office has taken note of that name of that school, and we will follow up on it and be able to at least

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give this Council a written response on what the plan is with the infrastructure there. Thank you.

Mr F J BADENHORST: Hon Minister, welcome to the Council. Once again, it is great to have a competent Minister in the House. Unfortunately, not all the members in the House are as competent as you in preparing their questions, which recalls the question that has just been asked by hon Mokwele through hon Feni, who does not seem to realise that school infrastructure is a provincial competency. Which brings me to my question.

What measures do you plan to put in place to deal with MECs who have oversight over this crumbling school infrastructure that jeopardises the safety of our school children? As so eloquently pointed out in the question by hon Mokwele and hon Feni.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: I do not want to laugh into the Hansard recording, Chair. I was just taking a moment to compose myself. Thank you very much, hon member. It is an important question that the member asks, because everywhere you go, people say, "If this is a provincial competency, how do you hold MECs to account"? The truth is that this is an extraordinarily complex governance model because provinces hold the power,

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provinces hold the budgets, and appointments of MECs are made by premiers. The equitable share for education is allocated by premiers to the MECs.

At the DBE level, what we hold are conditional grants. That is where we can really hold people to account, because the National Treasury makes it noticeably clear that if you receive a school nutrition conditional grant and do not spend it on school nutrition, that grant can be taken away from provinces. So that is where we can hold provinces to account.

Of course, this is more of a collaborative governing model, because we meet as the Council of Education Ministers and show them, for instance, issues around underspending, such as infrastructure underspending, to say, you are in the red, province A, you need to ensure that if invoices have not been paid, this is addressed. I am not going to defend provinces that are underspending on critical matters such as infrastructure. We all took an oath to serve, and to serve to the best of our ability.

And if there are problems, things like floods, construction mafia, and the like, then those are the problems. But it cannot

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be the norm that we have perpetual under spenders on such a critical issue in education. And so, it really does bother me that the way that the governance model is set up, Honourable Member, is such that I can cooperate, I can push the provinces, I can write to them. A problem here, there is a problem brewing here, you are going to underspend. For instance, in KwaZulu-Natal, that department was placed under section 18 of the Public Finance Management Act, PFMA, because of governance issues. So, there are ways and tools and means to say, if you do not spend, province B is spending, we will move that money over.

Many provinces, in fact, Limpopo was one of the provinces that lost some money, I think, in the last financial year, because they were not spending at the level at which they needed to spend. And we could shift monies to other provinces because we cannot allow that money to go back to the National Treasury. Allowing that money to go back to the National Treasury, it means that it is lost to the sector.

So, if provinces are not spending, there are conditions that National Treasury gives us so that we can hold them accountable. If they misuse the grants and conditional grants, we can take it

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away. But of course, we do not want to get there because it is about the learner at the end of the day.

And so, it would really be helpful if we could all hold ourselves to a higher standard of performance so that we can say that all 13,7 million learners in our country are served and they are served well. But to force provinces to do better, we must be harsher on ourselves and say, You do not spend, so different provinces will spend, but we are not losing this money to the sector. Thank you, sir.

Mr V GERICKE: Thank you, Chairperson, good afternoon, Minister. I am sincerely grateful that you gave hon Badernhorst a lecture on the issue of conditional grants, as he often does not understand the difference between the mandate and conditional grants. He is frequently confused, and he is from the DA.

Minister, there are still too many unsafe schools with dilapidated infrastructure. Every year, there are promises to address this problem, but nothing happens. The EFF demands that you provide timelines and proper information regarding the repair of these schools, particularly those in previously disadvantaged areas. For example, in my hometown of Peckersdorp,

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in George, the Peckersdorp Senior Secondary School has been dilapidated for the past 20 years. Our people sit in classrooms with broken doors and windows, among other issues. Year after year, the MEC for Education in the Western Cape visits and makes promises, but nothing changes.

Therefore, we demand today that you give us clear and direct answers. I do understand what you explained earlier regarding the various factors involved. But I mean, we must at least can say what in the medium-term framework or what the long-term, what are the long-term plans and so on, and how will you exert pressure on the MECs to realise these objectives?

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, I think, for me, what is also quite important is - and I am always very careful not to paint an overly positive picture of our education system, because I believe all of us have had some interaction with it in one way or another. People know what they experience on the ground. It goes far beyond just PowerPoint presentations shown to you.

So, I take your point, and I have noted it. The team is here, and I have noted the school you mentioned in George. I am quite

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sure it is high on the MEC's list, as the MEC in the Western Cape has started what they call the Rapid School Build Programme. This programme aims to halve the time it would normally take a department to build a school.

In fact, the Rapid School Build Programme has delivered schools within 70 days, with teams working around the clock to keep up with the demand. This is not unique to the Western Cape or any other province.

Gauteng, for example, faces a similar problem. As parents move to areas of economic prosperity, the province must accommodate many more new learners and late applications. You will see that they add mobile classrooms and try to make additions to schools. Provinces such as the Western Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, and especially Gauteng will always face issues with infrastructure backlogs because of the sheer volume of people moving into those areas. I believe, as I mentioned, that it is on his radar.

In the Council of Education Ministers, CEM, we have provinces sharing best practices. For example, recently, the MEC for Limpopo shared with us what they are doing to achieve such good maths and science results. Another learning point was the

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Western Cape sharing with colleagues about the rapid school build programme. What is important with that programme is the time it takes.

There is nothing worse than allocating funds for building a school and it takes seven years. The overruns cost the state money, people are left waiting, and the building is vandalised in the process. That is why I said to hon Feni a little earlier that, in my view, a contractor who does shoddy work on a government project should never be allowed to work on government projects again.

Because it is the very communities that you are talking about, hon member, that end up suffering, because either contractors are walking off site, or they simply just do not start. So, the team is here. I have taken note of Pakal's talk in George, and I will raise this with the province. Thank you very much.

Mr M FENI: Hon Chair, I am covered. Thank you very much.

Question 1:

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The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Chairperson, do you see why I like to be in the National Council of Provinces more than in the National Assembly? Hon Feni said he's covered.

He doesn't need to add anything more. But thank you very much to the hon member for the question. The school governing bodies are very central to democratic school governance.

In terms of the SA Schools Act, the governance of every public school is vested in the school governing body, SGB, while the professional management of the school is undertaken by the principal and the authority of the relevant and obviously the provincial authority being the Provincial Education Department. The Act also requires that the head of each Provincial Education Department must provide introductory and continuing training to governing bodies to ensure that principals and departmental officials render the support necessary for governing bodies to perform their functions effectively.

So, the Department of Basic Education, DBE, supports provinces to evaluate SGB effectiveness through structured national tools, provincial monitoring processes that assess whether or not school governing bodies are carrying out their statutory

functions. These include the SGB functionality tool, a standardised instrument used to assess whether the SGBs are performing their core governance functions properly.

What are their core governance functions? Their core governance functions are the adoption and the implementation of key policies, the financial oversight and accountability, support for discipline and school safety and stakeholder participation. And so, those are the things that we support SGBs with.

In addition, provinces with support from the national department use national SGB functionality and sampling and a survey approach to identify whether or not SGBs meet the minimum governance requirements and they flag schools where this is not happening. The department also engages with SGB associations, parent structures to strengthen democratic participation. I have found that where school is most successful, is when it's got a functional SGB and a very good school leadership. I think once those two things work in tandem, schools tend to perform well. So, the functions of SGBs could not be overstated.

However, how do we then make sure that those that are underperforming, as the question asked. Well, we make sure that

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there's orientation, induction and continuous training of SGB members, that there school level plans developed with the district, that we are monitoring through district support visits and structured reporting, escalating where governance issues persist, we measure and strengthen parental engagement through grade meetings, learning support engagement and improved communication between parents and the school. So, I would end it there. Thank you, hon House Chairperson.

Ms M KENNEDY: Hon Minister, during our oversight visit to Naledi Ya Meso, it was very clear to us that the SGB there was not doing their duty.

Now, Minister, what specific consequence management have you initiated against this SGB for failing to monitor the frequent absence of the principal and the unauthorised changing of subject groups during mid-year, which directly contributed to the zero percent pass at this Naledi Ya Meso? And, how does the department, your department, plan to monitor the fidelity of implementation to ensure that the training of the SGBs is translated into practical school level act? Thank you.

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The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, hon member. Yes, I first want to deal with the issue that the hon member is raising of the Naledi Ya Meso Secondary School, which recorded a zero percent pass rate in 2025, a matric pass rate. In response to this, the Limpopo Department of Basic Education moved very urgently at the start of 2026. We had an engagement with them to ask exactly the question that you are asking, about what were some of the factors that led to this outcome?

So, at the start of the academic year, they immediately entered the school. They're providing the school with a full package of support to stabilise the school and improve results. The provincial leadership also intervened immediately. The school has now effectively been adopted for ongoing support. The head of department is receiving weekly progress reports and will visit the school monthly. Teaching and governance support has been strengthened through the deployment of two additional educators at the school, the appointment of an acting principal and the election of a new SGB.

Governance and the financial management training is scheduled to take place on 12 March, which happens to be in two days' time. Learners have already received tablets with laptops and

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projectors, which are due on 23 March. The academic recovery support is also reinforced through partners such as Facet; Capitec; First National Bank, FNB, nongovernmental organisations, NGOs; and a training arrangement with another secondary school providing tutoring over the weekend.

The aim is to have sustained support for this school so that we can never see what happened in 2025 happen again. So, that is the full package of support that the school is receiving. As I said, it wasn't just you that was shocked. I, myself, when I saw that they'd received 0% pass rate, was very concerned about what had happened. And so, that's what we've done through the Department of Education in Limpopo. So, I have faith that we'll be able to turnaround not only the governance issues but also the academic performance. Thank you.

Ms S MASUMPA: Thank you, Minister. It is a known fact that for any school to excel, it depends on collaboration between school management, teachers, parents and learners. It is totally unacceptable for a school to record a zero percent pass rate in matric, given that they have a low-learner enrolment. My question is: What steps the Ministry takes to ensure that a

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specific school will receive required support, especially employing teachers that the school needs? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, hon member. As I was explaining to hon Kennedy that the province has done a number of things. Number one, replacing the SGB, that the old SGB was disbanded, dissolved. So, there's a new SGB, there's an active principal, two additional educators have been deployed there, tablets and laptops have been deployed to the school, the head of department, HOD, is having monthly reports with the school. So, we are turning around not only just the governance issues there, but also the academic performance.

I agree with you, there shouldn't be a school that records 0% pass rate, and so, therefore, getting to the core of what were some of the governance issues that affected that has been important, but as I was answering hon Kennedy, those are the steps that we are taking for that specific school in particular.

Ms J M ADRIAANSE: I nearly got up too early. So, hon Minister, in this case we had the shock of our lives with the 0% pass rate. We even thought maybe nobody pitched for the exam, but you alluded to that the whole SGB has been dissolved and in

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experience and from experience we have noticed that some SGBs become overpoliticised, and that affects the whole relationship with the school, with the school principal and with everything.

I want to ask you: Will you commit to the department to conduct an assessment linking the functionality of SGBs to learner performance outcomes to demonstrate if evidence exists that stronger SGB governance and involvement leads directly to improved academic results? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, it is deeply unfortunate where SGBs are overly politicised because the SGB is one of the most organised democratic institutions of our schooling system. The reason why that is, is because, one; you want to include parents in the decision-making of the school, and SGBs have a tremendous amount of power. So, that's why even with ourselves, as the Department of Basic Education, DBE, we work hard to make sure that they're empowered, they understand financial management, that they meet regularly, that the department supports them in being able to be fully functional.

However, it is important that parents at the school understand that that school belongs to them, and so, they need greater

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involvement in the SGB. That's why there is this relationship because the SGB is a representative of teachers, a representative of the parents of the school, and so, it's very important that there's a greater participation for parents than teachers. Ultimately, the role of the SGB is for parents to have a greater say in how a school is run, how the code of conduct is determined, how the admission policy is determined, all of those things are absolutely important.

I think that schools will lose out on the crucial relationship and the crucial functionality of an SGB if they allow themselves to be overly politicised instead of being more obsessed about the quality of the teaching happening at the school and the future of their children. Thank you.

Ms T BREEDT: Hon Minister, thank you for your answer. I think the assistance and support that the secondary school is having is exceptional and is good. However, what has ... and you've mentioned that the independence of the SGBs are important, because it is, after all, the parents who have to take responsibility for the schools. Nevertheless, what is worrying, however, to me, hon Minister, is in your initial response to the

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original question, you said that you sampled different SGBs to monitor them.

So, I would like to find out, and that is worrying, because effectively that means only when we get to 0% pass rate will we actually realise there is a problem if we do not monitor regularly all the SGBs. How is your department, with the provincial departments, looking at having broader monitoring and evaluation of SGBs to ensure that those SGBs that are suffering and that are lacking are actually assisted before we see a 0% pass rate? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, yes, of course, the sampling that I'm referring to is the work that we would do as a Department of Basic Education at a national level, because we would receive reports from provinces that says, all our SGBs are fully functional. Of course, we've got a responsibility to go monitor and do oversight on those statistics.

As I indicated to you, it's not simply enough to just receive reports. You, yourselves as a department need to make sure that that is happening on the ground and so, that's the sampling that I'm referring to, to say that we would then go and sample to see

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whether or not ... and the sample is healthy enough for you to be able to see whether or not what we are receiving as a report from provinces is in fact accurate. But, as I indicated also initially in my answer, is that provinces should be doing not only a once-off orientation for SGBs, but they should be doing continuous empowerment for SGBs.

The SGBs have enormous powers and it's important that even now that we've had legislation in the sector that they're empowered, they understand what that means, they understand how they must change their ways of doing things, and even as we're dealing with issues around bullying in schools, incidents that we've seen really increase over time.

The SGBs have tremendous amount of powers to be able to say, as a school how we will deal with this issue. So, provinces are doing continuous empowerment of SGBs, but ultimately, we would sample then as the national department to see whether, in fact, this is indeed happening. Thank you very much, Chair.

Question 21:

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, Chair.

Transport for learners with special education needs is not just

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a luxury, it is often the difference between being in school or being left out of school altogether. The information provided by provinces indicates that 12 575 learners with special educational needs who qualify for learner transport are currently not receiving it across 106 schools.

The provincial figures provided by the departments are as follows: In KwaZulu-Natal, we are sitting with over 9 000 learners across 65 schools. In the Eastern Cape, over 1 000 learners across 22 schools, and in Limpopo, 329 learners across eight schools. These figures are serious, especially in the case of KwaZulu-Natal.

It is important to clarify that learner transport is implemented at a provincial level jointly by the provincial basic education departments and provincial departments of transport, funded through provincial budgets. The role of the Department of Basic Education is to provide policy guidance, exercise oversight, and raise delivery failures through our intergovernmental structures.

As the executive authority in the sector, these numbers for me are not good. In fact, they are an indictment because, as I

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said, scholar transport for learners with special learning needs sometimes means exclusion versus inclusion. Where qualifying learners are not transported, the consequences are immediate: poor attendance, interrupted learning, strain on families, and in some cases, complete exclusion from school altogether.

This is why the department will continue to press provinces to strengthen the following: Planning, budgeting, contract management, route provision, payment systems, and where required, the availability of suitable and adapted vehicles. In some instances, a normal car would not necessarily be what is needed for somebody with special education needs.

Learners with special education needs must be prioritised. Inclusion is not a luxury. It is a constitutional obligation. These three provinces that I have highlighted here, there is a lot of work that needs to be done to make sure that all of those kids who are deserving of scholar transport to go to school receive that scholar transport as per our constitutional obligation. Access to school must not depend on whether or not a family can somehow overcome transport barriers or a family can pay. We must make sure that we prioritise the most vulnerable

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amongst us, and I can guarantee that we will be monitoring this issue very closely. Thank you, Chair.

The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr B A Radebe): Thank you, hon Minister. The first follow-up question will come from the hon Mhlongo from KwaZulu-Natal.

Ms L P MHLONGO: Thank you so much, Chair, and greetings to you, hon Minister. Thank you so much for your response. Special needs children are very close to my heart. Minister, with regard to your response on the ground, I am going to make reference to Khalipha Special School. It's in KwaMashu. Three hundred out of 475 learners with special needs, educational needs, are currently struggling to attend school due to breakdown of scholar transport caused by lack of fuel, drivers, and vehicle maintenance. Given that these learners qualify under the National Learner Transport Policy, what urgent interventions has your department put in place to restore transport services immediately, and how will you ensure that the children with disabilities are not excluded from education because of provincial administrative failures? Thank you.

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The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, and I agree with you, hon member, that children should not be the victims of mismanagement of government money and mismanagement and poor budgeting priorities.

KwaZulu-Natal accounts for the largest number with over 9 000 learners across 65 schools that are currently not being transported. This does require urgent intervention. I have taken note of the school that you are talking about in KwaMashu. The team is here. We will continue to engage with the Department of Basic Education in KwaZulu-Natal. Perhaps let me take this moment to just say to members that KwaZulu-Natal finds itself in an unenviable position, one where there have been questionable policy-making decisions, budgeting priorities over a decade. The province finds itself in a scenario where it owes its debtors billions of rands to the point where they are unable to use what is allocated for them for specific functions.

One of the issues that you raised relates to scholar transport. I am fully aware - particularly in the case of schools with children with special education needs - that this has been an acute issue that has been brought to my attention, and we have been escalating the matter to the relevant authorities. My

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concern with the department is that the problems are systematic. Yes, we can resolve the issue of transport breakdown in the KwaMashu school, but the province needs to turn its finances around. That is why we have the intervention of Treasury with Section 18 of the Public Finance Management Act, PFMA.

What we want to do on our side is to support the MEC and his team to make sure that they get out of the financial black hole they find themselves in. Because at the genesis of all of the problems that arise from KwaZulu-Natal, KwaZulu-Natal produced the most amount of bachelor passes. It came number one, and on top in matric results. The problem is not the teachers, the district directors, or the officials. Clearly, those people are dedicated. The problem is systematic, and it is government related. I agree with you, no child should suffer because administrators and politicians failed to run government departments effectively. So, we will support them.

Last year we held a meeting with the premier and the MEC for finance. We said that we are their partners and we want to support them to turn this situation around. They serve one of the largest learner populations. In fact, KwaZulu-Natal has the highest number of learners. We cannot afford to allow KwaZulu-

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Natal to underperform, given that it has the largest number of learners. I think of the 13,7 million learners in the system, more than two million are in KwaZulu-Natal. The KwaZulu-Natal crisis is one of the things that keeps me up at night.

Ultimately, the solutions come from within the province, and it is at that level that the situation must be turned around. I have taken note of the specific school in KwaMashu and I will be back to an opportunity to follow up on that. Thank you.

The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr B A Radebe): Thank you, hon Minister. The next follow-up question will come from the hon Sibande from Mpumalanga.

Mr M P SIBANDE: Thank you, Minister. We understand that the demand for specialised school transport for children with special needs in South Africa exceeds the supply. Besides the vehicles themselves, do the provincial department ensure that where the transport is available, they have attendants to assist the learners with special needs in those vehicles? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much, hon member. As I said, access for children with special educational needs should not be a luxury. It should be something that is

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guaranteed. You are absolutely right. As I indicated earlier, it is not just about providing transport. It is also about providing transport of adaptive vehicles. Because, for instance, if a child is in a wheelchair, they would need to be transported in a particular way where that car is able to take those wheelchairs in and transport it to schools. Right now, I think our biggest priority is to make sure that we identify where the big problem areas are, as we have in preparation for this sitting. As I indicated, it's KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape, and Limpopo that have the most problematic numbers.

This will require us to engage with them and ask how they are managing to make sure that those numbers decrease? As I was explaining in response to the previous question, the challenge in KwaZulu-Natal is that the immediate response is often that there are no funds. We have to find creative ways to say that the exclusion of children with special education needs can't be tolerated. We have to find a way - whether through the premier's intervention or other mechanisms within the province - to turn the situation around.

The reason why this becomes complicated when a province does not have money to fulfil basic things that they need to do is

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because there's no legal instrument through which Treasury can bail out a government department. What they have in the pot is what they have. What then needs to happen is how they spend what they have in the pot. That's what becomes difficult. That's why I am saying, we are wanting to say, we are saying to KwaZulu-Natal that in particular, we stand ready to support you to turn the situation around. Thank you very much.

The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr B A Radebe): Thank you, hon Minister. The next follow-up is from hon Du Plessis of Gauteng.

Ms N S DU PLESSIS: Thank you very much. Hon Minister, in light of the recent concerns regarding scholar transport that we all are taking quite seriously, how is the department working with provincial transport authorities to ensure that vehicles transporting learners, particularly those with special needs, comply fully with the National Land Transport Act and related safety regulations? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much. You are absolutely right. I think it becomes such an important thing. As I said, adaptive vehicles are important. It is not just making sure that children are able to get to school, but it is how they

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are transported that becomes incredibly important. The steps that we are taking, obviously, involve working closely with the provinces as well as with the Department of Transport at the local level. Even when there are contracts that are being awarded to scholar transport providers, those scholar transport providers who are working with schools or with schools catering to learners with special educational needs, they need to make sure that they are vetted and they are accredited to be able to make sure that they are ferrying learners around.

As a member here raised the issue around somebody bringing one vehicle when they are coming to accredit, and then six months down the line, they are using another vehicle. That's why continuous assessment of these things is important. I think that co-ordination between the PEDs - the Provincial Education Departments, and Department of Transport, and the law enforcement agencies, and more boots on the ground work that they plan to deploy, particularly during peak times - will be crucial. This collaboration will ensure that adaptive vehicles are available when there is no overcrowding.

It is a challenge, hon members, and I must be honest, especially when provinces are saying they can barely cover the costs of

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scholar transport. Ultimately, however, it is not a matter of choosing one over the other. What I want to make clear is that it's not a matter of choosing between normal public transport and this. All children, in accordance with the Constitution, have a right to access education. For those with special education needs, we must ensure that we meet them where they are. It is not a matter of prioritising one over the other. So, this is an area where we need to push ourselves further, to make sure that we are not a hindrance to access to education - particularly for those learners, because as I indicated, the results are dire. Children can drop out of school entirely.

I have visited schools of children with special educational needs, and I can tell you that those children cannot be stopped. They produce quality things, things that you would buy from a shop. I have seen schools that are doing tremendous number of things. We must never, ever as a country, essentially neglect people, because for some reason, it's costly for us to cater to them. We must just up our socks and hold ourselves to a higher standard. Thank you very much.

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The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr B A Radebe): Thank you, hon Minister. The next follow-up question will come from the hon Mampuru, replacing the hon Siwisa.

Mr M M MAMPURU: Thank you, Minister. Minister, as you have rightly said that all learners must have access to education, which is a different story when it comes to Re Tlameleng School for the Blind in Kimberley, where parents have to source their own transport to get their children to school, with some of them even having to choose to withdraw their children from the schooling system completely. In light of this, Minister, what steps have you taken to ensure that the scholar transport reaches all learners, in particular from poor communities with special needs, who currently do not have access to schooling? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Thank you very much. Absolutely, hon member, this is a very serious issue, because as I said to the hon Du Plessis, that it's not an "either/or" situation. It's not a matter of whether or not a province can provide scholar transport for one set of children and not the other. We simply have to do it. We have to make sure that, particularly, as you said, when I was talking about scholar

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transport a little bit earlier in the session, I explained that the criteria that is used for those who deserve scholar transport more than anyone is children with special education needs. They feature predominantly if you have a challenge in getting around of mobility, whether you are blind, whether you are in a wheelchair, whatever the case may be, number one criteria is there. The second criterion is what you raised - the issue around rural and farm areas and farflung areas. That's the second criteria. The question you ask: What are you going to do about it? Ultimately, provinces must understand that when they divvy up their budget....

IsiXhosa:

... xa besabelana imali besithi ...

English:

... this is for education, this is for health, when then the departments of education themselves are allocating funding to functions, they must understand the scale of the problem. How many children do we have that we need to ferry around to schools? They need to allocate properly, and they need to plan accordingly, because that's where the problem lies - where you are trying to rob Peter to pay Paul, so then you shortchange on

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this one function, and you simply don't cover children where they need to be. That's the real challenge that provinces are facing. Because of austerity measures of the last 10 years, the budget has not kept up with the scale and with the pressure and the growth of the system.

I have great sympathy for provinces, because a lot of this, they are absorbing a lot of unfunded mandates, they have been doing so for the past 10 years. There has been a lot of financial pressure on them. No additional money is being allocated. It's difficult. But ultimately - I think my view is, we have to make some tough decisions. That's what a home in distress does. When you are bankrupt, you make some tough decisions to say, we will prioritise this, but we are not going to prioritise that. I think for me, one of the things that needs to happen is that there are some bitter pills to swallow to say. Some of these things are nice to have, but we need to get out of this fiscal financial hole.

I will continue pestering the Minister of Finance. He probably hates to see me calling him. I will continue pestering him for more money for the sector, because our problems are many. And

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yet, we house the future of the country right here in the sector. Thank you very much.

Question 9:

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Chairperson, improving foundational learning in the early years is one of our central priorities, because a learner who cannot master reading and basic numeracy in the early grades is far more likely to struggle later in the curriculum. The department has therefore taken steps to strengthen support in Grade R to Grade 3.

In terms of literacy, the department has published the SA National Literacy Strategy and Plan 2024 to 2030. The strategy provides a clear national framework to improve reading for meaning with particular focus on strengthening literacy in African languages and bilingual contexts, improving access to quality reading material in all official languages, supporting teachers with better professional development, practical classroom guidance, and mobilising parents and caregivers to support reading at home and in schools.

It is really through the generosity of some of our partners that we have also managed to find partners who are willing to fund

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libraries in schools, particularly at schools in township areas or in schools that are in rural areas, where, if there isn't a physical structure of a library, there will be trolley libraries that can be brought into the school so that there can be a reading culture where children can take books home, and they can read to their caregivers and their caregivers can read to them.

As I indicated, I've also ensured that the 2026 to 2027 annual performance plan, APP, includes a review and strengthening of the implementation plan for the National Reading and Literacy Strategy so that it contains a minimum integrated package of support to improve literacy in Grade R to Grade 3.

This is important because we need greater consistency in what reaches classrooms. That includes planning, teaching support, quality materials, practical tools for teachers and support of districts.

So, this work is extremely important to me because I truly believe that we are not going to be able to change the education system around in South Africa if we don't get the foundations right.

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In terms of numeracy, as the member has asked, the department is sharpening its focus, as I indicated earlier. We have what we call the mathematics, science and technology conditional grant, which is the one that goes to provinces, and we have a sharper focus on how we use that grant to also strengthen foundational numeracy, not only focusing just on learners between Grade 10 and Grade 12.

In monitoring these interventions, the department works through the provinces, the districts, to make sure that we do routine monitoring and supporting visits so that we can really see the change.

For me, more than anything, the practical implementation of this strategy is going to either show us in a year or two or in 10 years' time that we made the right investments by planting early, planting strong and making sure that the foundations are solid before we start expecting the education system to do things that we were not able to get right.

So I'm confident that with this reading strategy we'll be able to see commendable shifts. I want to change the statistic in our

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country around children who are unable to read and read for meaning. It's incredibly important. Thank you very much, Chair.

Ms D W FIENIES: Chairperson, it is understandable and it is acknowledged that the strategy is in its initial stage. However, we believe that any programme should have a monitoring and evaluation element. Can the Minister please indicate to us whether she has appraised herself of the progress being achieved by this said strategy and plans?

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, you're absolutely right. That's why I've been lamenting and saying I'm excited that we've put this strategy and key indicators in the APP, because that says I'm willing to put my head on the block in terms of its effectiveness and efficacy, and the implementation thereof. I'm also willing to commit my entire department to making sure that we do this.

However, it's important that we don't just leave things as APP targets, because it's easy to say we've gone to 5 000 schools, and you tick that as a box. I think this is the culture I'm trying to inculcate amongst all of us in the department; that we

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must be obsessed with changing the reality, not just meeting the targets.

We must be obsessed with outputs. I'd want to see a South Africa where a child can get to Grade 1 being able to write his or her name and to read with some level of meaning in some language. However, that requires us to really, really, really commit, not only to the strategy, but to the vision itself.

I don't enjoy reading and seeing South Africa being ranked low when it comes to literacy and numeracy rates. So I'm saying to the department, beyond just APP targets, let's be obsessed with making the change. Let's be obsessed with saying that no statistic will ever come back saying eight out of 10 children in the country cannot read in any language.

We must be obsessed with changing that story. That goes beyond just meeting a target, going to a meeting and saying, oh, I've met this target. Be obsessed with the outputs. Is the strategy working? When we go and monitor in the provinces, are we seeing a marked difference? How is this strategy linking with our early childhood development, ECD, strategy of saying we want children

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to come from ECD straight into Grade R, and therefore be able to read and count confidently in that way?

So, all of these things start together. One of the things that I think is important to your question about the success of it, is not to view the education system in silos or broken down, but literally from zero ... from the cradle to 18 and beyond. Once we view and think of it like that, then we understand that we have as much of a responsibility to the matric learner as we do to the two-year-old that needs to go into an ECD ... that is structured, because the foundations that we will lay with that two-year-old will determine how they perform when they're 18 and they leave school.

So, as I said, for me it's more than just a strategy. It's a reorientation, a complete relook at our education system and trying to create some coherence with it so that we can change the picture that we have been seeing for a while. Thank you, Chair.

Mr J H P BRITZ: Hon Minister, how is your department ensuring that teacher training, learning materials and classroom support

in the foundation phase are aligned with the goal of ensuring that every learner can read for meaning by the end of Grade 3?

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, you're absolutely right. I mean, with any strategy – and to the hon member's point earlier about how will I measure the efficacy of the strategy – you have in education, you have to take your role-players along, and teachers are critical to that.

If you remember what I said a little earlier, historically teachers who weren't very good at their job would be sent to teach Grade 1, Grade 2, as though that work is not specialised work.

I'm glad that we've come to the realisation in South Africa that foundation phase teaching is actually a specialised skill. Similar to how you would want to find a maths teacher, a science teacher, you need foundation phase teachers to be just as skilful as those people.

The first thing is to make sure that your pipeline of teachers that are coming in are teachers who are aligned to your

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strategy, with your strategy being to start them early. We start them with their home language.

Another skill that is really important – many teachers don't know how to do this – is bilingual teaching, which is also a skill that is needed. If we are saying that home languages are important in being able to bridge the gap between not being able to read and literacy, then you need a teacher who's going to be able to cultivate the use of the home language in order for that child to pick up an additional language at another time.

So the point you make is a real one. We've done a couple of things. Number one is the pipeline. I've said with regard to the Funza Lushaka bursary scheme, the majority ... 60% of learners who are on that scheme are people who want to pursue foundation phase teaching. We are putting in some investment into mother tongue-based bilingual education because that's an important tool for us to improve literacy. The *Funda Uphumelele* survey feeds into that mother tongue-based bilingual education strategy.

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Number three is ensuring that we take our teachers along with us, so that we can say, right, this is important, this is how we are teaching the foundation phase.

The exciting thing, which I mentioned earlier, was the partnership that we got into with the University of SA, Unisa, that is taking on Grade R practitioners who are not qualified teachers ... to be able to go to Unisa and study ... what they call distance study.

To me that's incredible, because for the first time a Grade R practitioner who used to earn a stipend will now become a fully fledged educator in the classroom. Firstly, that's powerful for them as a massive way of really empowering themselves and obviously ... remuneration.

However, what does it mean for that six-year-old? All of a sudden, it's not the riffraff of people that are sent to go and teach and look after children. They're not being told to sleep and play and then go home. All of a sudden, a six-year-old in South Africa has a qualified teacher standing in front of them saying, here's the lesson plan, here's the phonics, this is what we're going to do.

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That excites me, because I think even if we don't see massive results in the next year, I certainly think we will see a massive difference if we follow the strategy. Thank you very much.

Mr M M MAMPURU: Minister, you know, in the early 2000s when I was in secondary school, we were 84 in a class that was supposed to take only 34 students. We struggled because our teacher could not have access ... to give support to some of the learners who struggled with either numeracy or literacy.

That was the problem of overcrowding. The same thing still persists now. So my question is as follows. What are you as the Minister going to do in terms of interventions in all the overcrowded schools to assist learners who are struggling to comprehend learning in terms of literacy and numeracy? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Chair, I hope the hon member is going to be able to plug me on his headgear. I really like it. I would love to procure one for myself as well. [Laughter.] No, no, no, no, thank you very much.

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Hon member, it's an important point and what you raise is a crucial point ... where you say in the early 2000s, which was 26 years ago, the issue of overcrowding happened.

Really, the truth of the matter is that the fiscal envelope of our country is not able to keep up with the demand that we place on it. So, two things can be true at the same time.

I'm harsh on provinces with regard to financial management. When there has been poor financial management, well, then the consequences must follow.

However, at the same time, I am also sympathetic, because about a decade ago our government made a decisive shift to fund Basic Education less and Higher Education more. That has had serious consequences for the sector. But now we're also adding six-year-olds ... to be compulsory, without additional budgeting.

Provinces now have to take that on and they have to absorb that. When we looked at how much would be needed to plug the gaps here and there, we found that they would need about R17 billion.

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So provinces had to shoulder that and say, well, because this is legislation, it's now compulsory. We have to make sure that every child has access to Grade R.

I take your point. As I indicated earlier with the infrastructure question, we have R140 billion in infrastructure backlogs.

However, we can't simply just fold our hands. Number one, it starts with proper financial management at the provincial level. It also says spend your budget and spend it well. Plan effectively as a province. Don't underspend your infrastructure budget or you will lose it. Make sure that you prioritise, particularly schools that are dilapidated, schools that a danger to children and schools with asbestos that needs to be removed.

Yes, the need is greater than our revenue or our cash flow in the sector. However, we must be able to demonstrate to Treasury that we are in fact spending the little that they are giving us. We are spending it, we are changing lives, so that we can be able to make the case of why we need additional funds.

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We've also looked at working with Infrastructure SA. We had an exciting meeting several weeks ago. We were looking at Budget Facility for Infrastructure, BFI, funding, which is a form of blended financing, and where we can tap into Infrastructure SA, not only just looking at the equitable share. So, there are a number of things that we're trying to do to reduce those numbers.

The other issue that I just wanted to touch on is reviewing what we call the post-provisioning norms. The post-provisioning norms is the ratio that we use in saying 1:35. So, one teacher to 35 children.

That policy hasn't been reviewed in 20 years. So we need to review that, looking at the size, the shape and the size of our education system currently. I think if we do those things, one, spending wisely and ... effectively reviewing the post-provisioning norms and being creative in how to find further financing for infrastructure projects, we may be able to get there.

However, we can't simply fold our hands and say, oh, they didn't give us R140 billion. It's not going to come. We've got to make

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sure that as a sector we are responsive to the crisis. Thank you very much.

Ms L P MHLONGO: Hon Minister, we already know that there's a huge gap between urban, rural, deep rural schools and locations. So, can you please clarify what practical classroom-based training, mentoring and ongoing professional support has been provided for foundation phase teachers? And, how is your department ensuring that educators in underresourced schools receive the tools necessary for literacy and numeracy intervention, in order to produce measurable improvement in learner outcomes? Thank you.

The MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION: Hon member, professional support remains incredibly important. As I said, you can't improve an education system without ensuring that you couple that up with ...

Chair, the hon member there is disturbing me. I don't know. He's making gestures. He's intimidating me. [Laughter.]

[Interjections.]

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So, professional support is an integral part of any strategy, because if you leave the educator behind, essentially you've just done things at a surface level. What is exciting is that we are coming up ... For the first time in 14 years ... we haven't been able to update the foundation phase catalogue of learning textbook material and workbooks.

So, what is exciting is that from 2027, provinces are going to be able to procure newly revised foundation phase textbooks and workbooks. That's exciting because, of course things have changed in a decade and a half, and being able to put those lesson plans in front of a teacher and say, this is how you structure a lesson plan, by the end of this week this must be what the learners have covered, by the end of day two this is what the learners should have covered. Then they actually have workbooks which they will write in, and of course, the textbooks, and also more importantly, their readers.

That's why I said to you that what has also been really important has been these partnerships with people like Avbob that are rolling out trolley libraries across provinces and saying, show us where your most vulnerable schools are.

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So, I mean, without trying to, I don't want to be overwhelmed, but if members have a particular school, for instance something that doesn't require a tender, that needs a library, there's no reason for you not to write to me and say there's a school in so and so that desperately needs a library ... some books.

As I say, I'm obviously constrained because I'm using the generosity of corporate partners, but what I'm trying to say is that if it's something that can help teachers or that can help learners, and where we can reach, we are more than happy to do so. So that is how we're going to be supporting the foundation phase.

I'm really looking forward to what the next three years will do when we take the systemic exam again for Grade 3, because that cohort would have started Grade R or Grade 1 now. I'm looking forward to seeing what this support that we are ... and how this focus that we have on the foundation phase will translate to the outcomes of that systemic exam. I'm really looking forward to it.

I hope I can come here three years from now and say to you, this is what has happened and this is how we've improved the system.

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The HOUSE CHAIRPERSON (Mr B A Radebe): Thank you, hon Minister.

I think that each and every member in this House agrees with you that the foundational phase plan is credible. Everyone just needs to put their hands on deck so that we ensure that it is implemented.

Hon members, without further ado, we have come to the end of questions to the Minister of Basic Education. I would like to thank the hon Minister for availing herself to answer the questions. This concludes the business of the day and the House is adjourned.

The Council adjourned at 16:03.