

ADDRESSING DISPARITIES TO ACCESSING QUALITY EDUCATION IN SOUTH AFRICA

South Africa has some of the highest rates of universal access to primary education, with Gross enrolment rates in primary schools having increased from 88,1% in 2002 to 94,2% in 2015 (StatsSA, 2016). Learners from disadvantaged backgrounds perform poor because, they are enrolled in schools with fewer resources, such as education materials and staff. The access to quality of education remains very poor mostly in the historically deprived areas; some of the schools do not even meet the basic learning infrastructure requirements such as access to laboratories, libraries and Internet connections. This condition results in learners experiencing learning deprivation, higher-grade repetition and dropout rates.

The lack of adequate appropriate infrastructure in schools does not lead to the equitable access to education and resources. For example, the 2017 Adjusted Estimates reported that there is poor performance of the implementing agents in the delivery of water and sanitation facilities. As a result, out of a target of 344 schools, 1 has been provided with water and, 4 schools provided with sanitation out of a targeted 257. In the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education, the 2016/17 financial year was noted to having had under expenditure similar to the 2015/16 financial year due to delays in project delivery and subsequent underachieving of planned targets. The Department will need to address the problems regarding the poor implementation of projects, by monitoring and evaluating progress on tenders awarded. There also needs to be clear reporting on the progress made to meet targets that have been made in a financial year. A report released in August 2017 by the Centre for Enterprise and Development notes that South Africa's schooling system is still characterised by poor infrastructure, lack of educational materials and low learning outcomes. As such, improved access to basic services at the schools would certainly address the problem of disparities in accessing quality education.

In addition to this, the Provinces make use of the Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG) to construct, maintain and refurbish education infrastructure and schools. However, the budget allocation for this Grant in the Province of the Eastern Cape for the 2016/17 financial year was decreased by 12% from the 2015/16 financial year, mainly due to previous under spending on this grant. In order to address this challenge, it is important that the Eastern Cape Education Department be held accountable. The overall EIG under expenditure over the 2015/16 financial year totaled R1.7 million, meaning that only 82.5% of the fund was utilised. This cannot go on as it further perpetuates the disparities in education.

A Fiscal Monitor report released in October 2017 by the International Monetary Fund, *Tackling Inequality*, notes that addressing education disparities will lead to improvement in economic efficiency of the countries. As such, narrowing the disparities in quality education and learning outcomes is necessary in order to improve enrollment and quality of education for all. The Fiscal Monitor further notes that the targeting of better spending to public education for disadvantaged learners and schools "could potentially reduce education inequality and raise overall education outcomes, while keeping the total public education budget unchanged" (International Monetary Fund, October 2017). Efforts should be directed on expanding access to quality education and resource governance/allocation. Provinces should ensure better use of the

budget allocated in order to improve access to quality education. While the Minister of Finance, Malusi Gigaba, explained in his Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) speech on 25th October 2017 that R44 billion would be spent on building new schools and refurbishing others, R415 million in-unspent funds was declared within the School Infrastructure Backlogs Grant (SIBG) according to the Adjustment Estimates that accompanied the MTBPS. The underspending is explained as being due to delays in appointing contractors. This is unacceptable given the economic climate and needs of learners and teachers. There is a need for more financial management support in order to avoid under/over-expenditure and improve expenditure within the EIG. It is high time that the Department of Basic Education (assisted by Treasury) address challenges in school infrastructure provisioning.

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