

1 November 2023

Equal Education and Equal Education Law Centre joint statement: National Treasury's budget cuts will further deepen the #EducationBlackout threatening the future of the country's learners

"We can't afford budget cuts because we are not getting the school services. So if there will be a budget cut on education, I think it will be worse." - Equal Education learner member

Today, 1 November 2023, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana tabled his Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), setting out changes to the 2023/24 main budget and government's spending priorities for the next three years. The #MTBPS2023 follows National Treasury's decision to implement cost-containment measures—aggressive budget cuts to social spending—to reduce spending across national and provincial government departments to repay government debt. These budget cuts are deeply concerning for the delivery of crucial social services, including basic education. The budget is a transformation tool, and the current spending choices show that government is not prioritising human rights, and particularly the rights of learners.

The social implications of Treasury's planned austerity measures will be dire, particularly for a sector currently battling a growing #EducationBlackout that requires substantial spending to address, not less. National Treasury's decision will likely plunge the sector into further darkness. What this means for education service delivery (infrastructure and quality teaching) is that the growing inequalities in the system, particularly between under-resourced and wealthy schools, will worsen. Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) strongly oppose these austerity measures disguised as fiscal responsibility and call for National Treasury to reverse cuts to the basic education budget, particularly on school infrastructure.

Darker days ahead

The schooling sector has been facing a resource, infrastructure, and learning crisis, with learners experiencing an #EducationBlackout that will be hard to undo. The appalling physical conditions of our schools that many learners from working-class and rural communities navigate daily are one such sign that the system is not functioning as it should. It is no secret that many of the country's public schools still need basic infrastructure and services for conducive learning and teaching environments. Despite the clear need for relief, plans for service delivery are likely to fail yet again.

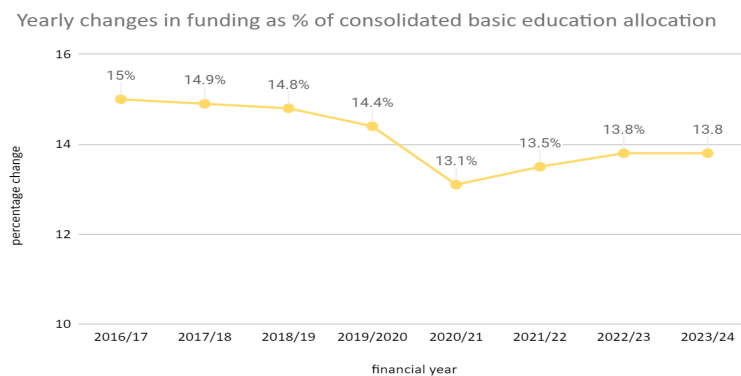
According to a Department of Basic Education (DBE) presentation to stakeholders, including EE and the EELC in September 2023, over 5 000 school infrastructure projects had been planned for the 2023/24 financial year across provinces, the bulk of which are only in the planning stages of development. These projects will not come cheap. Another important consideration for the sector is investment in Early Childhood Development (ECD) to address foundational challenges in learning outcomes. So far, state funding of ECD remains inadequate at R17 per eligible child per day since 2019.

National and provincial departments of basic education have, for many years now, reported limited resources as a reason for not meeting their targets, especially on school infrastructure. Budget cuts, however slight, will exacerbate and provide 'justification' for non-performance as the renewed austerity measures will lead to half of the planned projects for 2023/24 not even making it to the starting line.

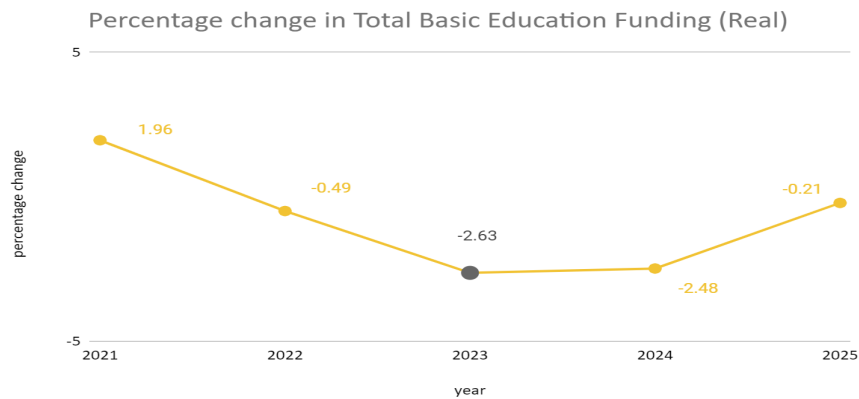
Cuts to any part of the education budget hamper the ability of education departments to meet their annual goals and broader constitutional mandates, worsening pre-existing challenges in quality service delivery to school communities. Learners attending public schools across the country who rely entirely on government funding are the most affected and punished by austerity measures.

Money politics

Even though education remains one of government's [largest total spending](#), budget cuts and austerity are not new to the schooling sector. Since 2016, basic education's share of national [overall spending](#) has slowly been dwindling, with COVID-19 budget cuts in 2020 creating a huge dent. Even as the sector has been slowly recovering since 2021, basic education funding has struggled to keep pace with the increasing cost of goods and services (inflation) and growing learner enrolments.



The total basic education budget in the February budget was slightly higher than expected for 2023, with Treasury adding more money to both the total budget and the Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG). Despite these significant additions, the overall total funding still decreased by 2.6% if inflation is considered. Even if the entire budget was spent with no irregular, wasteful, and fruitless expenditure, the amount of money given to the sector would still be substantially less than what is needed to address the many challenges.



The #MTBPS2023 promised “*targeted spending revisions that contain overall expenditure while directing resources to core functions*”, yet we have gotten a mixed message as far as the basic education budget is concerned. The small wins, very few worth celebrating, came in the form of additional money to pay salaries in the sector, and the projection that the basic education budget will increase annually over the next three years.

However, the projected growth will still be below inflation. Moreover, even though the Early Childhood Development Grant is grossly insufficient to cater for the 4.7 million eligible children, Treasury has announced that the maintenance portion of the grant will be reduced by R58 million. The reduction of the school infrastructure budget (combined EIG and SIBG amounts) by R1.7 billion is particularly alarming.

Treasury’s reason for hacking the school infrastructure budget was because of “significant and unforeseeable economic and financial events”. Although Treasury argues that it tried to protect critical services from budget cuts, the decision to cut the school infrastructure budget amidst severe backlogs may have devastating impacts on learners in under-resourced schools. R1.7 billion could have provided: 2 991 additional classrooms, 12 516 toilets, 3 686 school libraries, and 1 180 sustainable water sources—facilities that the sector desperately needs.

Conclusion

Equal access to quality basic education is an “immediately realisable” constitutional right and must be treated as a budget priority. The sector needs adequate resources to **stop the #EducationBlackout**. EE and EELC, therefore, call on National and Provincial Treasuries and Parliament to:

- stop austerity budgeting immediately and reverse the cuts to ensure pro-poor spending;
- adopt a progressive approach to basic education funding that ensures that education budgets grow in line with inflation and learner enrollment at the very least; and
- implement proper monitoring and oversight to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in education departments’ use of available resources to achieve quality service delivery to school communities.

[END]

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