

What is the issue?

Scholar transport is an important part of the right to basic education. When learners have access to free and reliable scholar transport, they can get to school safely, on time, and use their energy to concentrate in class.

Learners all over South Africa walk for hours every day to get to school and back home. Of all the provinces, KwaZulu-Natal (KZN) has the greatest need for scholar transport. Around 483 633 learners in KZN walk more than half an hour in one direction to school each day, according to the 2016 General Household Survey done by Statistics South Africa (Stats SA). The Eastern Cape is the province with the second largest number: 183 202 Eastern Cape learners walk for more than half an hour to school in one direction, which is far less than the number in KZN. In November 2017 the Department of Basic Education (DBE) reported that KZN plans to transport only 53% of learners in need of scholar transport in the 2017/18 financial year, the lowest in the country by far. The remaining provinces will transport, on average, 91% of learners in need in the same financial year.

In 2014, Equalisers from schools in a village called Nquthu, located in the Umzinyathi District in Northern KZN, informed EE about the great difficulties they faced in walking to school and back every day - that include walking very far distances in extreme heat and in thunderstorms, and crossing rivers and mountains, at great risk of violent crime including sexual assault. Many learners are tired and hungry after the long walk, and cannot concentrate properly in class or perform well at school. These are just a few of the challenges affecting these learners' right to access basic education, which caused EE to take up the fight for scholar transport.

Both national and provincial governments have a responsibility to ensure the provision of scholar transport. Currently in KZN, both the Department of Transport and the Department of Education share this responsibility and should be working together to solve the problem.

There is also a National Learner Transport Policy (published in October 2015) that guides the provision of scholar transport nationally. Unfortunately, while KZN has published a provincial scholar transport policy, the status of the provincial policy is unclear, creating many uncertainties for schools and learners that are in need.

Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) visited schools in Nquthu in 2014 and in 2015, to investigate the complaints raised about the lack of scholar transport. We spoke to teachers and principals who complained of having to teach learners who were hungry and exhausted after their long walk to school, and who struggled to concentrate and to stay awake in class. They told us that learners were arriving late at school, were absent, and often dropped out of school because of the lack of scholar transport. As few as 5% to 10% of learners would come to school on days of heavy rains or lightning storms. Some learners could also not attend extra lessons after school because they still had to make the long journey home. We also spoke to learners themselves, who gave first-hand accounts of all these challenges.

School visits

What has EE done?

Engagement with the KwaZulu-Natal government

Having heard the testimonies of learners and their teachers in Nquthu, we began engaging with the KZN Department of Transport and KZN Department of Education on how they went about providing scholar transport in the province. We wrote to the KZN DoE and the KZN DoT in February 2015, and again in March 2015 highlighting the hardships learners were facing, and requesting important information about how they were providing scholar transport in the province. Unfortunately, the replies from both Departments were unsatisfactory. For instance, in one of its responses the DoE found that only one of the 12 schools we discussed qualified for scholar transport.

March to the KZN Department of Education

In April 2015, due to the poor response of the KZN government, EE members marched alongside other high school learners and community members to protest the lack of scholar transport. Five hundred people marched to the KZN DoE in Pietermaritzburg to demand concrete solutions to the lack of scholar transport.

A memorandum was handed over asking for:

- Scholar transport for schools in Nquthu identified by EE as in need;
- The proper implementation of the KZN Scholar Transport Policy;
- A bigger budget for scholar transport in KZN;
- The adoption of a national scholar transport policy; and
- Money specifically for scholar transport (a conditional grant).

VICTORY

3 schools receive transport

In May 2015, the KZN DoE responded to EE's memorandum, stating that three of the Nquthu schools qualified for scholar transport: Esikhumbuzweni High School, Mangeni High School, and Nhlalakahle Secondary School. After many delays, these three

schools finally received buses in November 2015, six months after EE was told that these schools qualified for scholar transport.

VICTORY

The National Scholar Transport Policy published

When EE started its campaign for scholar transport in 2014, there was no national policy that could guide how scholar transport was provided in the country. After many letters to the Minister of Basic Education and the Minister of Transport, demanding a national policy, the *National Learner Transport Policy* was finally published in October 2015. This policy contains important guidelines and principles that provinces must adhere to.

In January 2016, EE and the EELC submitted an analysis of the policy to the national Departments of Transport and of Basic Education. We highlighted areas of concern such as the lack of clarity around planning, around how different government departments would work together, and around budgeting. We were also worried about the absence of deadlines and inadequate monitoring of implementation.

Equal Education

Equal Education is a movement of learners, parents, teachers and community members working for quality and equality in South African education, through analysis and activism.

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Equal Education Law Centre

The Equal Education Law Centre is a public interest law centre specialising in education law. Its goal is to ensure the realisation of every learner's right to an equitable, safe and adequate basic education by employing the law and the Constitution.

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The Long Walk to School

The battle for free and safe scholar transport in South Africa

#LongWalkToSchool

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EE takes on a symbolic walk

Even though three schools in Nquthu had received scholar transport, there was still a desperate need for buses in the other Nquthu schools that EE was helping. In March 2016, 300 EE members and facilitators walked from New Hanover to Pietermaritzburg, to hand over a memorandum to the KZN MEC for Education. The memorandum demanded emergency relief for specific schools in Nquthu, the implementation of the National Learner Transport Policy, and more funds specifically for scholar transport (a conditional grant). Learners, parents and teachers participated in the walk, which lasted two days.

Protest at the State of the Province Address

In March 2017, EE held a silent protest inside the KZN Legislature during the State of the Province

Address. We called attention to the fact that the amount of money allocated to scholar transport in KZN was set to decrease for the 2016/2017 financial year. We demanded, once again, a conditional grant to fund the urgent implementation of a proper scholar transport policy. We also demanded clear, consistent and accurate information on how many learners qualified for scholar transport, how many learners had access to scholar transport, and the cost of providing scholar transport.

Picket outside the Department of Basic Education

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The #LongWalkToSchool film

In July 2017, outside the head offices of the KZN DoE in Pietermaritzburg, EE members gathered for the first screening of our short film, entitled the Long Walk To School. The film traces our scholar transport campaign since 2014, and the lives of the EE members who challenged the refusal of the provincial and national government to provide their schools with scholar transport. The peaceful and lawful gathering embarrassed the KZN MEC of Education, who called on police to illegally disperse EE members.

