

The EC Government Returns Funds When Services are Needed

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In recent days yet another story of the unnecessary struggle in the Eastern Cape became news. A group of 80 learners from Gwebityala Senior Secondary School in Elliotdale, Eastern Cape reportedly dropped out of school mid-year. This sad development followed the cancellation of the scholar transport that had been taking the learners from Mpame and Mdikana which is almost 24 kilometres from the school. The provincial government was reportedly hiring the scholar transport.

It is a big decision to resort to leaving school, with the concern of the parents. According to some sources, this decision was taken when some of the children were still taking the mid-year exams. But it is also a very big demand to expect adolescents to walk to a school 24km away and back home. There is not much that such learners could absorb in a classroom after such a gruelling walk. According to witnesses interviewed on SABC News, the pupils are turned back at the gate if they arrive late, as per school rules.

In the same interview, the parents of the children also said that it is unsafe for the children to walk such a long distance and preferred for them to drop out as they can only accompany them a portion of the distance to the school.

The Parliamentary Monitoring Group(PMG) meeting that sat on 18 April 2023, found that “Learners were forced to drop out if no schools were nearby. A shortage of schools in communities remained problematic. Half of the learners dropped out of school, contributing to unemployment rather than the economy.” The drop-out rate of learners in the province is alarming, with the lack of transport a big contributing factor.

The numbers of children provided with transport have seemingly been reducing because of austerity measures. In 2020 there were 124,247 learners transported by the provincial Department of Education (ECDOE), in 2021 only 87,000 students were provided transport while a staggering 140,884 learners needed transport services.

The budget cuts often mean that scholar transport providers struggle to get payment for their services. Earlier this year, this province led by Premier Oscar Mabuyane took responsibility for only 90,000 learners with a further 50,000 not catered for. These details are revealed in an affidavit by Petros Majola, the director of Khula Community Development.

The PMG meeting confirmed that “Rural areas in the Eastern Cape needed more secondary schools”, despite this fact, the Eastern Cape Department of Education is moving to close over 1000 schools due to low numbers of learners in each school. The more progressive thing to do would be to provide scholar transport and for long-term, they must fix road infrastructure and other features such as bridges. This is to mitigate problems learners face when travelling to faraway schools, if the ECDOE will not build more schools within reasonable distances.

According to reports about the 80 fresh drop-outs, the learners must walk across forests and cross rivers on their way to the faraway Gwebityala Senior Secondary School. The thing about crossing rivers and covering dangerous roads to school is that children especially young girls often get raped and killed.

Instead, the trend is for the provincial government to spend below the budget it is allocated by the national Treasury in the face of service. For the 2023/2024 budget, the Eastern Cape government took R2.2 billion back to the fiscal. While this money was unused, the province still has a lot of needs where infrastructure is concerned and education needs to improve, as it's evident from the annual matric results in which the Eastern Cape is always nearer to last place than the lead.

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