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Equal Education

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Mr. Ephraim Tau

District Director
No. 78 Howard Avenue, Munpen Building
Benoni Ekurhuleni North 1501

25 October 2013

CC: Gauteng MEC for Education Barbara Creecy

Dear Mr. Tau,

We are writing to thank you for taking the time to meet with us and to request that the Gauteng Department of Education take action to address the sanitation crisis in schools in Tembisa.

Equal Education is a movement of students, parents, teachers, and community members campaigning for quality and equality in the South African education system. We were founded in 2008 by a group of young activists committed to addressing the inequalities in our education system. We currently have volunteers in almost every province of the country, with offices in Gauteng (Tembisa) and headquarters in the Western Cape (Khayelitsha). Here in Gauteng, **we have members in nearly every public secondary school in Tembisa.**

During discussions with our members in July and August of 2013, the state of sanitation in Tembisa schools emerged as a major area of concern. In order to better understand the sanitation situation, our members conducted a survey of the state of sanitation in 11 high schools between 26 August and 6 September 2013. The surveys represent an exhaustive effort by our members to capture the state of sanitation and they reflect the reality of schools in Tembisa.

The results of our survey reveal that the sanitation system in Tembisa high schools is in crisis. Key findings from the survey include:

- **Approximately 90% of schools surveyed** have insufficient infrastructure or a dysfunctional sanitation system; **In some schools, there are days where there are no functioning toilets for students to use**
- **No students reported receiving regular access to toilet paper or soap in their schools**
- **Many schools have broken or non-functioning taps; sometimes there is no water supply to the toilet blocks**
- **Many schools do not have sanitary bins; In those that do, the sanitary bins are often full, resulting in students throwing their sanitary pads on the floor**

The crisis hurts students' ability to learn, puts them at increased health risk, degrades their dignity, and erodes their safety and security. Students say that long lines at bathrooms keep them from class and bad smells from nearby toilets distract them in class. The lack of soap and water means that many students cannot wash their hands, a particularly concerning situation given the absence of toilet paper. Both girls and boys feel violated and unsafe due to the lack of doors or locks on doors. As one learner from Ingqyazivele stated, "My dignity is not there anymore because of the dirty toilet I have to go to everyday."

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The current state of the sanitation system in Tembisa violates both national and international standards. For example, South Africa's Department of Water Affairs and Forestry's (DWAFF) 2008 Minimum Requirements for Ensuring Basic Water Supply and Sanitation in Schools and Clinics states that there should be one toilet per 25 girls and one toilet plus one urinal per 40 boys.¹ As noted above, 90% of schools we surveyed violate these standards either because their existing infrastructure is insufficient or because the dysfunction of their sanitation systems means that there are too few toilets working. The DWAFF standards reflect the general consensus regarding sanitation requirements. For example, these standards are aligned with both the sanitation standards put forth by the World Health Organization (one toilet per 25 girls and one toilet plus one urinal per 50 boys)² and Western Cape Education Department (one toilet per 35 students).³

The GDE is not the sole cause of the sanitation crisis nor is the crisis its responsibility alone. Our members are committed to working with their peers to ensure students respect sanitation resources. Where necessary, our members stand ready to work with schools that may need to make adjustments, such as allocating greater budget for sanitation issues or ensuring that the sanitation budget is allocated as intended.

However, in order to solve this sanitation crisis, the GDE must take action. Our survey suggests that (1) the ratio of the students to toilets and (2) the ratio of students to maintenance staff are key determinants of the state of the sanitation system. The first ratio can be improved by building more toilets; the second ratio can be improved by providing more resources for sanitation-related issues. The Government has direct influence over both of these ratios. Beyond these two areas, the GDE is uniquely positioned to enable and influence schools to fix all aspects of the sanitation crisis identified by our members.

We commend the GDE for its past efforts to address the sanitation system at schools in Tembisa. Recent examples of this include upgrades at Ikusasa and Phomolong Secondary Schools. However, we are aware that past efforts have not led to long-lasting solutions. Instead, the crisis persists. **In order to learn from past mistakes, we would like to work with the GDE to review documentation relating to the processes through which these upgrades were performed.**

While Equal Education's members are not the first students to go to school in the shadow of a sanitation crisis, we are determined that they will be the last. We need a comprehensive and permanent solution. We are therefore requesting that by 8 November 2013, the GDE respond to this letter with a timeline by which it will have developed a plan to address the sanitation disaster in Tembisa. This plan should:

1. **Define a standard** regarding the supply of toilets, water supply and sanitation materials (e.g. sanitary bins, soap and toilet paper); maintenance; and the ongoing monitoring of the sanitation system to which both schools and the GDE can be held accountable
2. **Provide a timeline for ensuring all schools reach this standard**, prioritising those schools that are of greatest need and reflecting the urgency of the situation
3. **Include accountability measures** to ensure an open and transparent process, such as community consultation committees and publicly available regular progress reports

We are willing to engage in any dialogue and work with any partner that is committed to improving schools' sanitation system within a reasonable timeframe. We would welcome the opportunity to build a fruitful relationship with the GDE to address this and any future challenges in the education system in Gauteng.

Yours faithfully,

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¹ <http://www.equaleducation.org.za/sites/default/files/files/Annexure%20AN13.pdf>

² http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/publications/wash_standards_school.pdf

³ http://wced.pgwc.gov.za/circulars/minutes09/IDCminutes/edse10_09.html#a

