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Joint MTBPS media statement: No new money for schools, but SAA's rescue plan equals almost a year's worth of school infrastructure funding

Finance Minister Tito Mboweni's Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), delivered yesterday, is devastating for many social services including basic education. The [MTBPS](#) says that government will reduce basic education funding every year for the next three years, leading to less money being spent per learner. Despite the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on lives and livelihoods, government will spend money on paying debt, including at mismanaged State-owned enterprises like South African Airways (SAA) and Eskom.

While learners sit in overcrowded classrooms and use unsafe toilets, and school taps run dry, Minister Mboweni has chosen to sacrifice education funding:

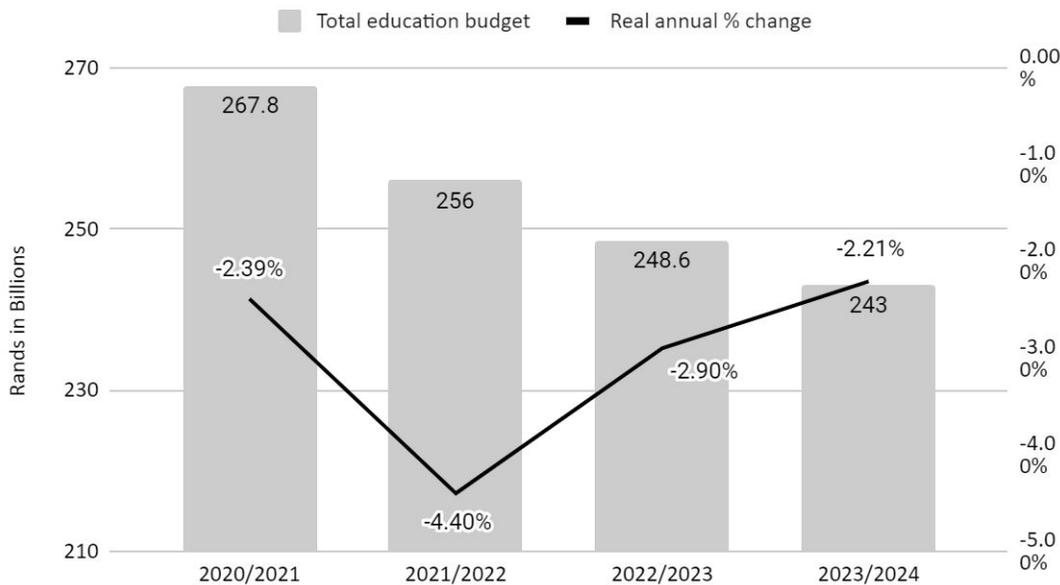
- The total **basic education sector budget will not increase at all** between this year and next year. **When inflation¹ is taken into account, the education budget will shrink every year for the next three years.**
- The Minister **did not reverse the R2.2 billion cuts** he made to the provincial education infrastructure grant (EIG) in June's special Covid-19 budget. These cuts have resulted in [1 938 essential school construction projects](#) - paid for through the EIG - being stopped or delayed!
- While R475 million has been rolled over from last year to the national school infrastructure backlogs grant (SIBG) to pay for toilets in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal, money was cut elsewhere in the same budget, including in funding for the Eastern Cape, resulting in the **national grant increasing by only R139 million.**
- Budget cuts to programmes aimed at improving maths, science and technology in schools and preventing HIV and AIDS, amounting to R128 million, were not reversed.
- **R10.5 billion was allocated from across the budget to rescuing SAA.** This amount is almost equal to South Africa's entire school infrastructure budget for this year. **R276 million was taken from the Department of Basic Education's budget** to help pay off SAA's debt!
- **No new money was given to the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP).** This is worrying because a few months ago the DBE [said](#) in court papers that it might struggle to pay for food parcels in November and December.

¹ Every year the prices of goods and services go up. This is inflation. When analysing government budgets it is important to see if rising prices have been taken into account. When you have the same amount of money as the year before, you will usually be able to buy less with that money.

Pattern of shrinking education spending

For many years, the education budget has been growing very slowly, hardly keeping up with inflation. But when the national budget was delivered in February this year, it showed, for the first time in recent years, a decrease in the total basic education budget – when inflation is taken into account. This budget reflects the entire pot of money that is given to national and provincial education departments. Worryingly, yesterday’s MTBPS revealed that this pot of money will continue to shrink over the next three years.²

Total education budget and % change (real)



Source: Medium Term Budget Policy Statement 2020, page 37. Figures converted to 2020 rands.

When inflation is not taken into account, the basic education sector will receive exactly the same amount of money next year as it received this year – a 0% increase! However, as the graph above shows, when we take inflation into account, the basic education sector’s budget will decrease by four percentage points between now and the next financial year.

School infrastructure

Safe and sufficient school infrastructure is crucial to creating environments that enable quality teaching and learning. Yet thousands of South African schools still do not meet the minimum standards for infrastructure that the law demands. The Covid-19 pandemic has painfully highlighted how not having proper toilets or water threatens learners’ health and how not having enough classroom space can interrupt learning time. Moreover, had sufficient investment been made to addressing the apartheid backlog in school infrastructure since 1994 to ensure the safety and dignity of learners and teachers, less money would have had to be spent on temporary structures such as mobile toilets and classrooms and water tanks during the pandemic.

² When inflation is taken into account (in real terms)

Despite this, cuts were announced to infrastructure budgets in June's special Covid-19 budget. Schools are being forced to use their already [overstretched](#) budgets to provide Covid-19 [essentials](#) such as sanitiser and masks. Government has put in place expensive and temporary solutions, such as mobile classrooms, to try and solve old problems like overcrowding. However, these temporary fixes will affect government's ability to make sure schools have permanent solutions to infrastructure challenges.

The MTBPS promises that over the next three years, there will be a focus on *“ensuring that planned infrastructure projects in basic education... are delivered on time and within the available budget.”*³ But the DBE and provincial education departments have a terrible track record when it comes to meeting their own, legally binding deadlines for resolving school infrastructure problems.

“The [budget] cuts affect me negatively, because at our school, we don't attend classes every week and only come to school on some days and this affects our education. We don't learn well at all. Our toilets also don't work... we don't have proper sanitation.” - **Bali Nkosi, Gauteng Equaliser (EE member), Grade 11**

Unless there are meaningful increases to the basic education budget over the next three years, government will probably break its promises to fix our schools.

National School Nutrition Programme

When schools closed on 18 March 2020, the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which millions of learners rely on for a daily meal, was suddenly stopped. This was devastating because it came at a time when many families were facing job losses and struggling to put food on the table. On 17 July 2020, the North Gauteng High Court [ordered](#) government to reopen the NSNP to learners who qualify, whether or not they were back at school. While the conditional grant that pays for the NSNP was not cut in the special Covid-19 budget or the MTBPS, R50 million that was not used because of school closures, was reprioritised to pay for Covid-19 essentials.⁴

Government did not add any money to the NSNP budget, despite the DBE saying that providing food for learners at home can be more expensive than providing meals at school. If learners continue to only go to school on some days, or if schools are closed again, government may not be able to afford providing all learners with meals. For the many learners who rely on the NSNP for their only meal of the day, this would be a crisis.

“The budget cuts haven't sat well with us, and they affect us, especially around food. Food is important. Food is essential for children. If you haven't eaten you can't concentrate in class. But if the budget goes

³ National Treasury, 2020. *Medium Term Budget Policy Statement*, p. 40

⁴ National Treasury, 2020. Supplementary Budget Review, p. 42. Available at: <http://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/national%20budget/2020S/review/FullSBR.pdf>

up then maybe we'd get enough food so that we can concentrate in class and pass..." - Mahlaba Matlou, Limpopo Equaliser (EE member), Grade 10

National Treasury's failure to consider a basic income grant or to continue to top up the Child Support Grant (CSG), which reaches [12 million children](#) in South Africa, contributes to increases in hunger, poverty and inequality right now, which has knock-on effects on schooling. Over the years, research has shown that there is a strong relationship between learner achievement and socio-economic status.⁵

Failing to protect social spending

The pattern of the cuts to basic education funding mirrors other trends in the MTBPS. This mini-budget cements government's commitment to austerity budgeting, which means cutting government spending to reduce debt. Funding to health services, housing and social development has also been cut, instead of finding ways to raise more income from those who can afford to pay. The weight of budget cuts is largely going to be carried by teachers, healthcare workers and police. By 2024, salaries for teachers and other employees in 'learning and culture' departments are expected to decline by R114 billion - the largest decrease in wages across government.⁶

Conclusion

South Africa's courts have said that the right to basic education includes certain core elements such as safe and sufficient infrastructure, scholar transport, textbooks, teachers, desks and chairs. The country's Constitution also contains a right to basic education which is immediately realisable — this means that the government must do everything possible, including planning and budgeting, to make sure every learner has access to quality education.

Government's ability to fulfill this responsibility is now being limited by anti-poor budget decisions as well as economic pressures caused by corruption - made worse by Covid-19. Minister Mboweni must urgently reconsider his priorities in the MTBPS and put children at the centre of next year's budget, by reversing cuts to education budgets.

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⁵ University of Pretoria, 2017. *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study. South African Children's Reading Literacy Achievement*. Available here:

https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/164/ZP_Files/grade_5_girls_2016_final_country_report.zp147996.pdf

⁶ National Treasury, 2020. *Medium Term Budget Policy Statement*, p. 39