

21 February 2024

Equal Education and Equal Education Law Centre joint statement: Government's austerity agenda puts children's right to schooling in jeopardy

Today, Finance Minister Enoch Godongwana delivered his budget speech, setting out government's spending priorities for the 2024/25 financial year. Basic education was allocated R324.5 billion for the 2024/25 financial year, with additional money to cover teacher salaries. However, with the Cabinet-approved reductions of R2.8 billion over the medium term from various programmes, including the school infrastructure budget, the sector will once again have to tighten its purse strings.

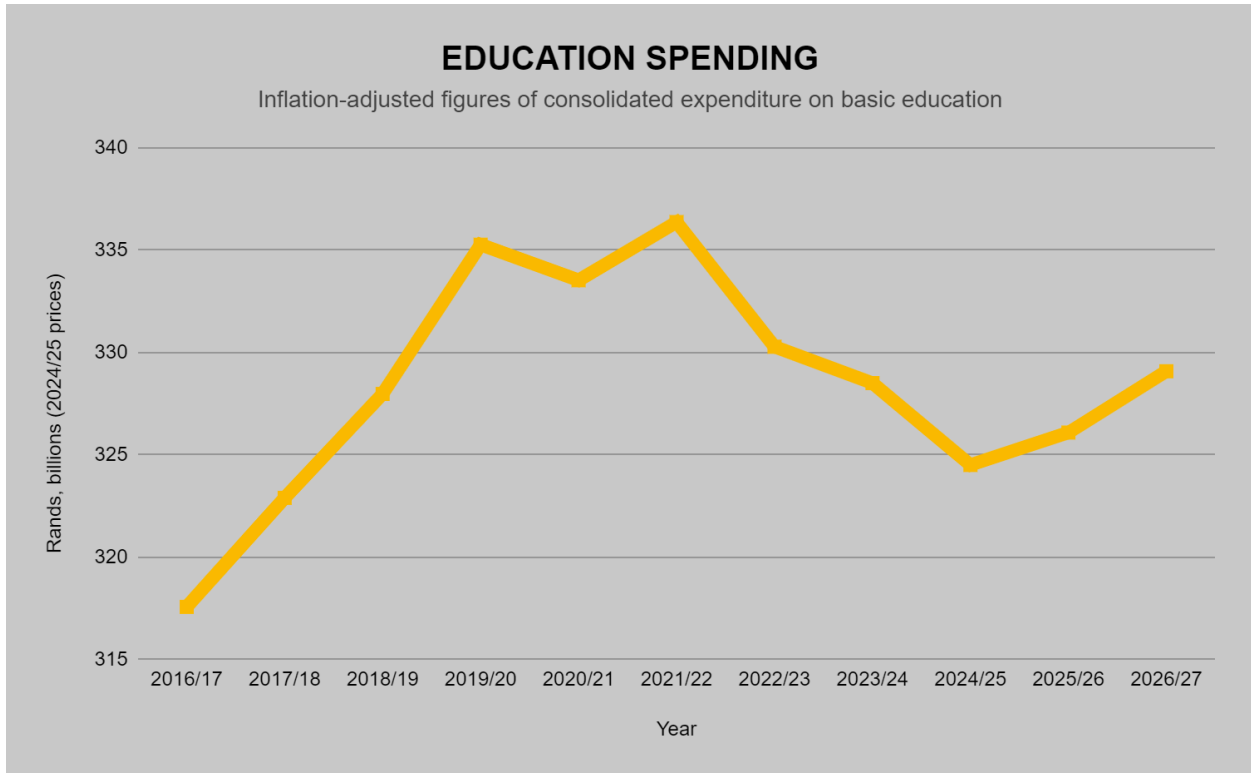
Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) are concerned that National Treasury's continued austerity budgeting—aggressive cuts to social spending—is a significant blow to the millions of poor and low-income households who are reliant on government services to realise their socio-economic rights, including the right to basic education. This education budget does not comply with government's human rights obligations.

National Treasury's efforts to navigate South Africa's "debt problem" continue to use a similar strategy to previous years, resorting to budget cuts and reprioritisation (austerity) to repay government debt. Treasury's push in this direction will severely disrupt the provision of vital public services like basic education, and is a warning sign that human rights are increasingly just not a priority. EE and the EELC strongly oppose this renewed austerity agenda and call for Parliament to review its decision allowing for cuts to education funding, and for an immediate reversal of all cuts.

Funding the future

Although quality basic education is an immediately realisable constitutional right, Treasury's austerity agenda seeks to undermine this right. 30 years into democracy, many public schools are still experiencing low learning outcomes, shortages of quality teachers, and crumbling infrastructure. Most children [cannot read](#) for meaning in any language. Even the significant stride we have made in expanding access in the sector is being undermined by [spatial challenges](#). All of these issues require a lot of money and resources to address.

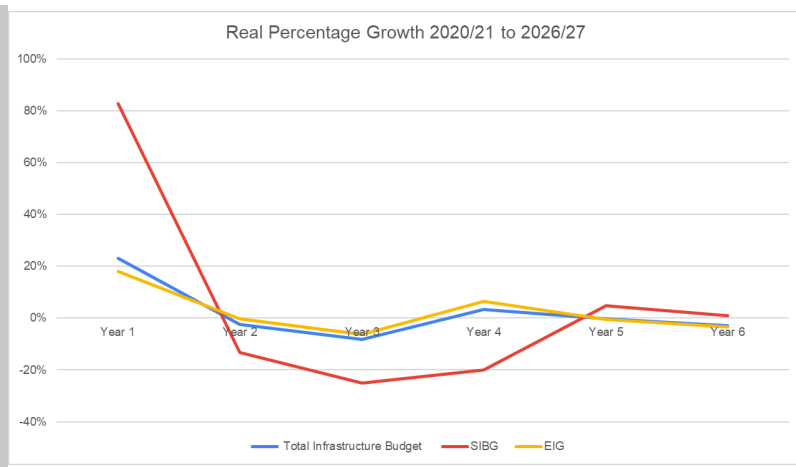
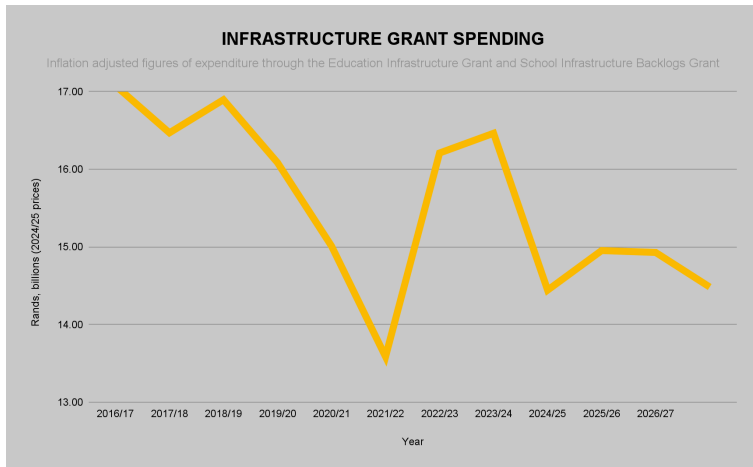
Even though education continues to be one of the biggest national spending items, basic education has gradually been falling off government's priorities for a while. Although the basic education budget for 2024 is R324.5 billion and is projected to grow over the next three years, when inflation (the price of goods and services) is considered, today's tabled (2024/25) budget does little to relieve the crisis in the schooling sector. This amount is insufficient to provide quality education delivery, let alone address the many crises in the sector because of high inflation and high learner enrolment.



The Education Infrastructure Grant (EIG)—the main grant that provides co-funding for school infrastructure programmes in provinces, including the maintenance of existing infrastructure and the building of new schools—allocation of R13.68 billion is a slight increase of R1.4 billion, a return of cuts made in November 2023. This means in reality, money to the EIG in 2024 did not increase and is even slightly less than the R13.8 billion allocated in February 2023.

The 2024 Budget also tabled significant reductions to school infrastructure spending over the next three years, with the School Infrastructure Backlogs Grant (SIBG) set to reduce by R1.2 billion and the EIG by R611 million. The total 2024 infrastructure budget (both the EIG and SIBG) of R14.95 billion is not enough to even provide the 70 043 additional classrooms needed in 8 133 schools to address overcrowding alone.

Previous austerity measures—such as those introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic and more recently in the 2023 MTBPS—have already affected education departments’ [plans](#) and ability to provide schools with basic infrastructure and services that are long overdue. In a [report](#) to parliament last year, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) estimated that it would need to spend at least R20 billion each year to eliminate all existing critical infrastructure backlogs by 2030. This means that at the current level of funding, the estimated 2030 deadline will also not be met and infrastructure backlogs will likely only be eradicated in 2038.



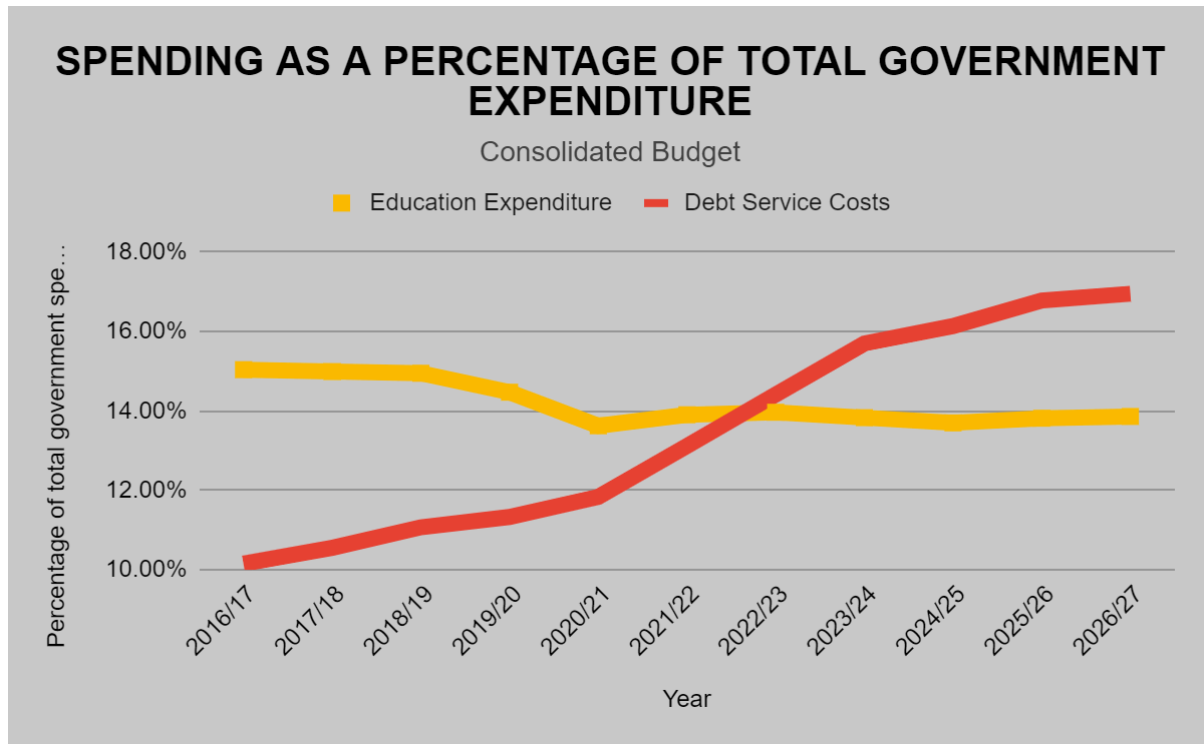
The foundation of the schooling system is shaky, affecting the rest of a learner’s schooling career. This could be easily addressed with targeted resource investment. While last year’s budget projected that the 2024 Early Childhood Development (ECD) grant would increase to nearly R1.9 billion, this year government plans to only spend R1.59 billion. While we welcome the modest increases to the ECD grant, we also note serious funding challenges in ECD generally. Currently, only 15% of children eligible for the Child Support Grant benefit from the ECD subsidy. More funds are needed to expand access to all eligible children, at a rate much higher than the current R17 per eligible child per day—an amount which has been frozen since 2019.

For the nearly [60% of ECD programmes](#) that are not registered with the DBE and cannot access the ECD subsidy, funding for pre-registration support and improvements to infrastructure is vital - yet less than 10% of the ECD grant will be devoted to this over the next three years. Also, when one in every four [young children](#) is nutritionally stunted, there is a clear case for funding for the national roll-out of an ECD feeding scheme similar to the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). While it is encouraging that an additional R197 million is earmarked in 2024/25 for piloting a nutrition support programme, much more will be needed for a national roll-out. Yet future funding is unclear. Adequate investment in ECD now can [help prevent greater](#) costs incurred in later years.

The politics of education funding

In the build-up to the 2024 Budget Speech, many analysts have commented on the tightrope that Minister Godongwana would have to walk in an attempt to stabilise the economy and assure an electorate who are desperate for hope in a dire situation. The Minister of Finance highlighted how low economic growth and rising interest rates on government debt have increased pressure on debt service costs, which is one of the largest expenditure items in the tabled consolidated budget, at R382.2 billion. Unfortunately, this has crowded out other public spending. The amount of money spent on servicing debt in one year is nearly triple the amount needed to ensure schools have much-needed safe

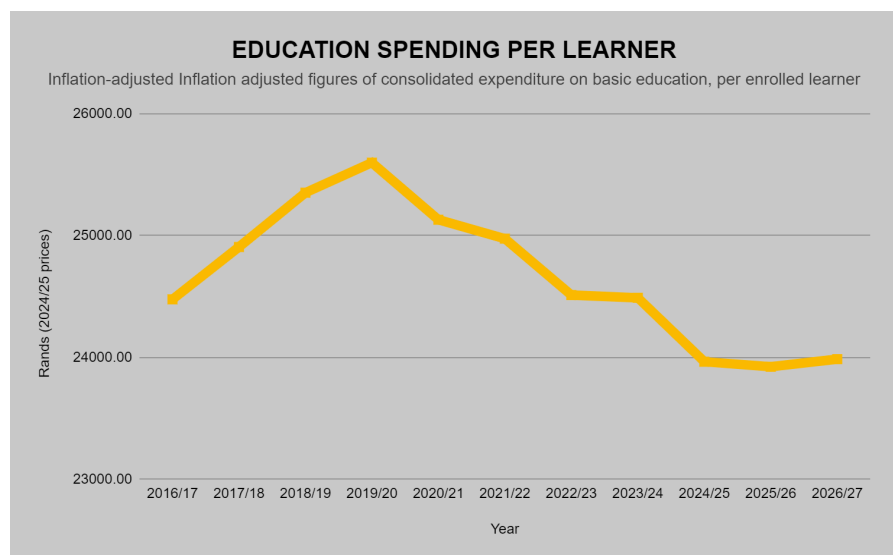
sanitation, sustainable water sources, libraries, computer centres, science labs, and secure perimeter fencing.



Although we welcome some of the measures introduced to increase government revenue through the reform of the Gold and Foreign Exchange Contingency Reserve Account and some moderate tax increases, we stress the importance of exploring further options to maximise the use of all available resources to ensure the fulfilment of socio-economic rights, including basic education. Treasury’s commitment to “fiscal responsibility” cannot come at the expense of learners’ rights. Underinvesting in schooling is bound to have consequences, not only on the quality of education outcomes now but also on the long-term availability of skilled labour.

An insufficient education budget is unlawful

In cutting or reprioritising any parts of the education budget, Treasury is making a political choice to limit departments’ ability to provide quality schooling for all. The amount that government spends per learner has only decreased since 2018.



Reduced spending per learner means one of two things: either the quality of education (which is worryingly low already) will suffer or the number of learners provided with schooling will need to go down. **Neither of these options should be allowed.**

The courts have [said](#) that it is extremely difficult for government to justifiably use budgetary restrictions as an excuse for not fulfilling *children's* rights, like the right to schooling. Despite clear legal obligations, government often uses the “scarcity of resources” as an excuse for its service delivery failures. For example, education departments have repeatedly broken laws by missing legally binding deadlines in the [school infrastructure law](#) that say when all schools should have the *very minimum* infrastructure and services, often blaming a lack of money as the main reason for this.

Conclusion

With its renewed policy of austerity, government has made its political decision on how it prioritises social rights clear. As a transformation tool of government, the 2024 education budget does not adequately cater for the millions of learners in the public education system whose rights are being eroded by austerity.

We, therefore, call on National and Provincial Treasuries, and Parliament to:

- Reverse all cuts made to the education budget and end austerity budgeting now!
- Ensure that education budgets grow in line with inflation and learner enrollment at the very least;
- Increase the value of the ECD subsidy to at least R46 by 2029, provide adequate funding for pre-registration support and improvements to infrastructure, and phase in nutrition support for children at all ECD programmes, whether registered or unregistered;
- Implement proper monitoring, oversight, and consequence management to ensure efficiency and effectiveness in education departments' use of available resources to achieve quality service delivery to school communities; and
- Revise its approach to debt management and fiscal consolidation so that socio-economic rights are explicitly prioritised and protected.

[END]

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