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MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION'S BUDGET VOTE SPEECH 2021

The Minister of Basic Education, together with the Deputy Minister, on 20 May 2021 delivered her Budget Vote Speech in a virtual address to the National Assembly.

As expected, the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the programmes of the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the provincial education departments were highlighted as a result of the human resource and teaching and learning time losses suffered.

Although the Minister announced that the overall 2021/22 budget allocation for the education sector increased by 15,5%, it is important to note that the increase is from the revised baseline allocation for 2020/21 where substantial cuts had been made to the sector's overall budget allocation. So, while the increase might seem significant, it is not the case, as confirmed by the fact that the Minister thanked National Treasury for assisting the sector in cushioning **some** of its key priority areas, meaning that all priority areas will not be able to be sustained during 2021/22. This calls for wise and effective spending of available resources.

One thing that the Minister's Budget Vote Speech confirmed is that the gears of government grind slowly. The process of the transfer of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) function from the Department of Social Development to the DBE has been in the offing since the President announced it during his 2019 State of the Nation Address. According to the Minister it is anticipated that the process will only be completed on 1 April 2022.

The Incremental Introduction of African Languages (IIAL) strategy introduced in 2013 is still not fully implemented. Two thousand, five hundred and eighty-four schools that are not offering African languages will be targeted for implementation this financial year.

The introduction of the General Education Certificate (GEC), announced in 2019 is targeted for roll-out only in 2023. It is expected to be Gazetted shortly for public comment.

Fortunately, other priority areas have been implemented / are ready for implementation. NAPTOSA welcomes the first cycle of the Systemic Assessment in October this year to assess key learner competencies in Mathematics and Languages at the end of Grades 3, 6 and 9. This is the result of another tedious process through which NAPTOSA, and the other education unions, fought to shift

the Department from its fixated position on the Annual National Assessments. We also welcome the indication that the number and types of formal assessment have been reduced with, *inter alia*, the June exams being removed as a compulsory component in Grades 4-12. We nevertheless need to remain vigilant that new types of assessment are not smuggled in via the back door.

The Integrated Reading Sector Plan, that aims to ensure that by 2030 every 10-year-old can read for meaning, is another priority area that we fully support. While the Deputy Minister announced that, through partnerships with a number of organisations, more than 30 000 teachers have been trained how to more effectively teach reading for understanding, it points to a fundamental lacuna in teacher training programmes. The DBE should urgently address this matter with the Department of Higher Education, because it cannot be that teachers who enter the profession have not mastered this fundamental skill.

Another positive announcement is that an initial group of 40 master trainers are to be trained on the Common Elements Treatment Approach (psychosocial training) in order to capacitate the education sector in providing psychosocial support to learners and educators. This is an area that NAPTOSA has been harping on for a very long time because of the inadequacy of these services in our schools, especially felt during the course of the pandemic.

Infrastructure development remains a formidable challenge and although it was announced that 34 schools have been built the past year despite the pandemic challenges, we seem not to be making a dent in alleviating the problem of overcrowded classrooms. That the issue of water supply and sanitation projects are still being punted as major achievements, is incomprehensible. These services should have been in place in all schools a long time ago with annual focus only on maintenance projects.

NAPTOSA is pleased with the Minister's announcement in her speech that the full attendance of primary school learners is now only targeted for the beginning of the second term. It means that NAPTOSA's inputs on the draft Directions, which provided for full attendance from 31 May 2021, were taken on board. We had pointed out to the Department that the latter date was ill advised because it would not give schools and the system sufficient time to prepare for the return of all (primary school) learners.

We appreciate the acknowledgement by the Deputy Minister that teachers (we believe she also meant to include Education Support Personnel) are the sector's most important assets. It would, however, be wonderful if this could be backed up in practical terms - salaries, health and safety of employees and safe working environments.

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