

Build co-operation into school sector

Streamlined delivery chains are needed, as is the ability to construct safe infrastructure

COMMENT
Eddie Rakabe

Recent news about the drowning of a child in an Eastern Cape school pit toilet has again brought into question the capability and resolve of government to eradicate school infrastructure backlogs and to ensure that conditions are conducive to effective teaching and learning for all children.

The Eastern Cape incident elicited countrywide condemnation of the education authorities for allowing schoolchildren to continue using unsafe and unhygienic ablution facilities, amid countless undertakings to replace such structures. Government's commitment to providing appropriate facilities has been tested in several court battles seeking to secure infrastructure funding for unsafe schools, and to solicit obligations to deliver infrastructure in accordance with legally binding minimum norms and standards.

Despite government introducing a funding programme to address school infrastructure backlogs and promulgate the norms and standards for school infrastructure, many pupils are at risk from unsafe school infrastructure conditions. This is perplexing in a country that regards education as an apex developmental priority and is running a basic education budget of more than R250-billion a year.

Seemingly, eradicating school infrastructure backlogs is not as simple as making funding available or just promulgating delivery norms and standards. Education authorities are quick to point out the mismatch between the resources available to deliver, at scale and to required standards, and the actual needs on the ground.

In 2011, more than 900 schools reported lacking ablution facilities and 11400 schools were still using pit toilets. The Eastern Cape and Limpopo, where children have drowned in school toilets, are pur-



Weak links: The slow provision of safe infrastructure to schools is hindered by, among other factors, poor planning and irresponsible handling of contracts with incapable service providers. Photo: Madelene Cronjé

portedly overwhelmed by historical infrastructure backlogs that have not been adequately redressed despite successive years of greater budget allocations.

Considering this factor, it may be unreasonable to blame a lacklustre infrastructure delivery programme (and perhaps the latest toilet tragedy) on the education authorities when resources are ostensibly lagging for both current and historic needs. Recent estimates by the minister of education suggest that more than R10-billion will be required to eliminate pit toilets at schools.

The question remains: Will the education department deliver on its promises if such funding is made available?

The answer to this question lies in the newly revised pit toilet eradication plan, known only to the council of education, and how such plan is eventually executed. The presidency's request for a sanitation audit at schools has prompted national and provincial education authorities into action and given hope that pit toilet tragedies will soon be a thing of the past.

Notwithstanding this optimism and the evident rediscovered sense of urgency, the department's track record for delivering infrastructure leaves much to be desired. The process of addressing school infrastruc-

ture problems began in early 2000s through the creation of conditional grants that were earmarked to deal specifically with backlogs.

The funding regime underwent various changes over the years, culminating in two dedicated school infrastructure funding programmes in 2011: the Education Infrastructure Grant and the School Infrastructure Backlog Grant, known as the Accelerated School Infrastructure Delivery Initiative. No less than R70-billion was dispensed to provinces by these grants between 2011 and 2017.

A common concern about these grants has been a combination of abysmal spending performance and poor planning by the targeted provinces, causing the reallocation of the funds to other competing priorities and ceaseless infrastructure budget reforms. Insufficient funds are often cited as hampering accelerated infrastructure delivery, yet billions in infrastructure funding has been returned to the central coffers because of underspending.

Education infrastructure delivery problems, however, transcend adequate resourcing. The fault lines are deep-rooted in the system of multi-government education delivery. Provincial education departments

entrusted with the responsibility of delivering infrastructure have been battling for years to build internal delivery capabilities, leading to perpetual cycles of underspending and elongated delivery timelines.

Infrastructure delivery is generally outsourced to third-party agents by the department of public works, whose sole function appears to be that of managing contractors on behalf of client departments. The entire school infrastructure delivery chain is fraught with agency (service provider) management deficiencies and accountability failures. This arrangement leaves provincial education departments with little room for recourse on project completion delays and shoddy work undertaken by third-party agents. Similarly, the department of basic education has to navigate cumbersome institutional hurdles to intervene where provincial departments are lacking.

A combination of these institutional hurdles and frustrations about delivery inertia has triggered increased national interest in directly executing infrastructure projects on behalf of provinces. With the introduction of the School Infrastructure Backlogs Grant, the department of basic education took full delivery responsibility, with the intention of abolishing backlogs within a three-year period.

The grant was introduced with a budget allocation of R8-billion but only R2-billion had been spent by the end of the three-year cycle. The grant then had significant budget cuts, protracting the timelines for ending sanitation backlogs.

This national intervention strategy has encountered teething problems. Underspending is the foremost but is only a symptom of the deeper underlying challenges. The programme was introduced with overly ambitious delivery targets and little implementation experience. Provincial education departments are reluctant to take over newly built infrastructure stock that is not accompanied by increased operational budgets. Most worrisome is that school infrastructure has not been delivered cost-effectively and where the needs are greatest.

The relationship between the national and provincial education departments in dealing with infrastructure is characterised by mistrust and evading responsibility. A case in point is the adoption of the minimum norms and standards for school infrastructure, which apportioned great delivery burden, accountability and expectations on to provinces without securing the resources necessary to meet the required comprehensive standards of school infrastructure conditions.

The regulations make it law for every school to have adequate water, sanitation, electricity and other important facilities. Provinces have been given a seven-year timeframe, starting in 2014, to comply with norms and standards for these services.

Responding to this mammoth task will require all parts of the education sector to work together. The infrastructure delivery chain has to be streamlined, delivery capacity has to be strengthened where it's lacking, levers of accountability have to be applied timeously and consistently instead of encroaching upon each other's responsibilities and, more importantly, innovative delivery methods have to be used.

Eddie Rakabe manages the fiscal policy unit of the Financial and Fiscal Commission. These are his own views