

Cops letting arsonists off the hook

Burning down a school building – or any property, for that matter – as a form of protest, can never be justifiable. What is even more absurd is to reduce classrooms to ashes – disrupting the education of hundreds of pupils – just because you are not happy with the outcome of an election.

Yet this is exactly what a group of small-minded political ruffians did in Siyabuswa, Mpumalanga.

They burned down classrooms and a storeroom at Thabana Senior Secondary as well as classrooms and a library at Siyathokoza Secondary simply because they would not accept the outcome of a by-election. Schools have clearly become a soft target for anarchist groups who believe they can get attention from authorities by resorting to violence.

What seems never to concern them is that such actions do not only cost the state loads of money – the Public Works Department says it costs R14.5-million to build a school and about R1.08-million per classroom – but they also jeopardise the future of the pupils.

Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga has every right to be angry and frustrated by this trend. Her call for harsh sentences for people who burn down and destroy infrastructure should be supported by all South Africans who seek to put an end to this kind of criminality. However, we believe that the minister's plan for the introduction of new legislation to ensure that perpetrators get stiff sentences does not get to the heart of the matter.

These arsonists do not burn down schools because they think that when they are caught they will receive minor sentences. They do so with impunity because they know that the chances of them being caught at all are quite slim.

How many people have been arrested, prosecuted and convicted for destroying school buildings and other public infrastructure over the years? So the problem is not really the existing legislation or the lenience of the judiciary in handing down sentences.

The real problem is the incapacity of the state, through the police, to investigate and arrest those involved in such crimes.

Unless we start seeing arrests and convictions, those who burn down school buildings will continue to do so with impunity. Before we talk new laws, police must do their work.
