

Business day online 31 October 2018

# Implementing agencies for Eastern Cape school infrastructure projects woefully slow

The appointed agencies, which get a percentage of the cost of each project, lack oversight and are each undertaking far too many projects

31 OCTOBER 2018 - 11:36 TAMAR KAHN

The Eastern Cape education department is doing such a poor job supervising the implementing agencies appointed to build schools, that only seven were constructed in the year to end-March, according to a report released on Wednesday by the advocacy group Equal Education.

Despite a promise made by former president Thabo Mbeki in 2004 to put an end to children learning under trees or in dangerous buildings, progress towards this goal has been painfully slow. Nowhere is this more so than in the Eastern Cape, which remains home to more schools built with illegal materials, such as mud or asbestos, than rest of the provinces put together — 471 out of a total of 600.

Many children and teachers also have to contend with schools that lack electricity or decent sanitation.

The department has contracted a series of implementing agencies to deliver school infrastructure in an effort to overcome its own lack of capacity, as well as the limitations of the provincial department of public works. However, they have become a stumbling block to improving school infrastructure, partly because there is inadequate oversight of their performance.

The implementing agencies typically receive management fees of between 4.5% and 10% of the cost of a school infrastructure project, regardless of their performance, finds the report. There are 10 different implementing agencies working on school infrastructure projects in the Eastern Cape.

“It is incredibly frustrating that there is a law that outlines government obligations to build schools, and there is ring-fenced money to achieve it, yet the numbers are shocking. We are trying to find the different factors that play into the delay, and implementing agencies are certainly one of them,” said Equal Education’s co-head of research Roné McFarlane.

“They are a critical link in the chain, and they need to be held accountable,” she said.

Equal Education has encountered cases where school infrastructure has been provided, but is of such poor quality it places pupils in danger. Yet no under-performing contractors have been added to the National Treasury’s blacklist by the department of basic education, the provincial education department, or by any of the implementing agencies, according to the report.

McFarlane said the poor oversight of implementing agencies was partly due to short-staffing in the Eastern Cape education department, and the unmanageable workloads allocated to project managers at implementing agencies. The report found project managers at the Independent Development Trust carried up to 30 projects each, while those at the Coega Development Project were overseeing between 40 and 45 projects. They should ideally oversee 10.

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