

Building of schools at risk as departments squabble

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The department of education has given the schools construction implementing agent, the department of public works, an ultimatum – comply, or else they will take their projects and walk.

The stand-off between the two departments comes after construction of 37 Eastern Cape schools stalled due to non-payment of contractors.

On Tuesday, the Daily Dispatch reported that between May and November, various builders contracted to build schools in areas such as Joe Gqabi, Chris Hani and O R Tambo had walked off the sites of 37 school projects due to non-payment.

The builders were collectively owed more than R104m.

Public works blamed educa-

tion for the non-payment. However, education now says public works is to blame.

The Dispatch understands that there was a service level agreement between the two departments, where it was agreed that public works would pay

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contractors on behalf of education and education would reimburse public works.

Public works said they stopped paying the 37 contractors after education failed to pay them more than R84m owed for previous invoices.

Education says public works failed to comply with the education facilities management system (EFMS), an online system that seeks to ensure effective, efficient and transparent management of the department's finances, leading to the R84m being withheld.

On Tuesday, the Dispatch sat down with the education department's chief director for infrastructure, Zama Mnqanqeni, head of infrastructure Tsepo Pefole, education spokesman Loyiso Pulumani and other heads of departments.

Pefole said public works had presented "half truths".

"They misrepresented facts. For instance, they did not even submit the invoices for the R104m, but went on to tell the contractors that they were unable to pay them because we did not make the funds available," said Pefole.

According to Pefole, the lack

of compliance was brought to the attention of public works on numerous occasions. However, it was never addressed until they decided to withhold the R84m.

Pefole said public works only started sending compliant invoices in October.

"After they submitted compliant invoices we paid them," he said.

Mnqanqeni said they would consider terminating their agreement with public works should this continue.

Responding to the latest remarks from education, public works spokesperson Vuyokazi Mbanjwa said they would no longer comment on this matter. She did, however, say their initial comment still stood.

Mbanjwa said the department would call a meeting with the office of the premier, provincial treasury and education to put this matter to rest.