

Pupils suffer as staff protest over unpaid overtime

Delays leave EC special needs school in shambles

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Close to 300 pupils housed at St Thomas school for the Deaf are spending weekends without professional care in the midst of a staff go-slow.

They are being looked after by eight extended public works programme (EPWP) workers.

School governing body chair Simphiwe Mfengwana said the work-to-rule labour action by the support staff at the school situated between King William's Town and Stutterheim has been caused by non-payment of overtime monies by

the department of education since 2013.

He said that in September, the 27 support staff including housekeepers, cooks, cleaners, caregivers and security staff stopped working on weekends and demanded their overtime monies. Pupils, some as young as four, live at the school's hostel and attend the Grade R to Grade 12 classes.

Dispatch was present when the first day of the 2018 final matric exams at the school were delayed by two hours after the support staff locked the school gates, barring entrance.

On the weekend the pupils were left in the care of eight EPWP workers.

Six cooks were sent to the hostel by the department on

Friday evening.

Parent Siphokazi Simon said during a meeting at the school on Monday several pupils had epileptic seizures.

"Because there was no one to give them their prescribed medication, three learners had seizures on the day," said Simon.

On Tuesday, Mfengwana said the pupils at the school had missed two weeks of teaching this year. There had been no trained staff caring for the children on weekends since September.

Mfengwana said the school only re-opened on January 22, 13 days later than the official opening day of January 9.

"The children returned late to school because the support staff



CAUGHT IN CROSSFIRE: Pupils left out in the cold as support staff at St Thomas School for the Deaf down tools. Picture: RANDELL ROSKRUGE

made it clear they were continuing with their protest. We were concerned about the well-being and safety on weekends, especially without a plan in

place, so we decided to keep them at home," said Mfengwana.

He said the pupils only returned to school after the de-

partment of education stated during a meeting on January 15, that it would pay the staff the outstanding overtime money in two weeks' time.

The department failed to deliver on its promise, said Mfengwana.

"After failing to deliver on their promise, the staff continued where they left off with their protest."

Mfengwana said a group of parents decided to take turns on weekends to look after the children.

"That worked for a while, but there were some disagreements and the arrangements ended," he said.

After the meeting at the school on Monday parents went to the education offices in

King William's Town to demand answers.

On the arrival, they held an official hostage and demanded immediate responses from top managers.

Mfengwana said around 6pm two senior officials were sent to address them and a fresh promise was made.

In a written record of discussions between the officials, the department stated that if the staff's claims had been captured, they would be paid on Wednesday or next Monday.

The letter signed by the Buffalo City Metro education district director N Fikeni stated that one of the "contingency measures" would be keeping the EPWP workers on site this coming weekend and to send

extra security guards.

"These EPWP workers will remain at St Thomas till Monday morning. The staff of the security company guarding, Bundy Park [education offices in KWT] would be redirected to work at St Thomas over the weekend," stated the letter.

Last year more than 500 pupils attending Parklands Special Needs School in Beacon Bay, Khayaletu Special Needs Schools in North End and Vukuhambe were severely impacted when the support staff at the schools refused to work overtime for no pay.

Education spokesperson, Loyiso Pulumani said the Fikeni report stated the workers would be paid on Wednesday or Monday.