



Members of the parliamentary portfolio committee for education and opposition parties visited the Nombewu Full Service School in Umzimkulu, which was badly damaged in a storm last year. **PHOTOS: DA**

Education's debt delays repairs to rural schools in KZN

ESTELLE SINKINS

KwaZulu-Natal's education bosses have been told to replace mud schools, but they may not have the money to do so.

At a meeting of the provincial public works committee yesterday, members of the provincial legislature (MPLs) were told that numerous school projects would have to be put on hold because the Department of Education owes the Department of Public Works millions of rands.

The news comes just days after Premier Sihle Zikalala said that all vandalised or storm-damaged schools would be repaired. Dr Imran Keeka, the DA's spokesperson for education in KZN, who attended the meeting, said they were told all projects planned for the new financial year, starting in April, would be halted. He added that the Department of Public Works was unable to confirm whether or not it would provide boreholes at more than 600 schools in the province.

Among the schools that would be affected by a lack of infrastructure funding, is the Nombewu Full Service School in Umzimkulu. This mud school, which has 322 pupils and 11 teachers, was badly damaged in a storm last year. One of seven mud schools KwaZulu-Natal, its walls are crumbling and large parts of the roof are missing. The school was one of two in the Harry Gwala district visited by the parliamentary portfolio committee for education on Tuesday and Wednesday.

At Mhlabazi Combined School, also in Umzimkulu, they found that there was no running water and meals were provided to pupils from a makeshift kitchen in a shack. Bongile Mbinco-Gigaba, chairperson of the portfolio committee, who also visited schools in Ixopo, said the eradication of mud schools must be expedited.



LEFT: This shack serves as the kitchen at the Mhlabazi Combined School in Umzimkulu. RIGHT: The remains of the roof at the Nombewu Full Service School, in Umzimkulu, which was badly damaged in a storm last year.



She added the department had to find ways to reduce government red tape that prevents schools from repairing their facilities quickly.

Keeka — who wants the province to review a decision to cut R497 million from the infrastructure budget — said it was unacceptable that over 3 000 rural schools were still having to rely on mobile classrooms and toilets with no running water.

"In addition, a total of 465 schools remain storm damaged or vandalised due to the lack of, and, sometimes, the involvement of the community to catch the perpetrators."

The portfolio committee on basic education is also concerned about vandalism, which it says impacts on funding set aside for new buildings and the maintenance of existing ones.

"Schools

are community assets that are essential for the development of those communities and must be taken care of," Mbinco-Gigaba said.

"The committee has encouraged schools to strengthen their relations with stakeholders such as police, community policing forums, councillors and the community at large to find practical and workable solutions to the challenge of vandalism."

Education department spokesperson Muzi Mahlambi said funding for the department's infrastructure plans had been impacted by cuts made by the provincial treasury, as a result of

the Covid-19 pandemic.

"We are fully aware of the problems this has caused and we are working together with national to attend to this matter

"The storm-damaged schools are being attended to with some needing serious attention."

He did not respond to questions about the claim that the Department of Public Works intends halting work on Education Department projects.

The Witness also approached Public Works for a comment, but a spokesperson said he would not be able to comment until today.

