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R700m sunk into unfinished school building

Contractor woes mean spent cash can't be recouped

By **Tshwarelo eseng Mogakane**

The Mpumalanga government has spent more than R700-million on a school that was meant to rescue impoverished children on farms in the Mkhondo municipality but the pupils are still crammed in deplorable conditions.

The long-delayed Mkhondo Boarding School, in Piet Retief, was meant to uplift rural education. Instead, it has become a financial sinkhole that threatens to swallow over R748-million, with zero return on investment.

A confidential report presented to the provincial executive committee on April 3, 2025, and seen by *Sunday World*, shows that by March this year, R703,805,453.19 had already been spent, yet the school remains incomplete.

Construction began in 2018 with an initial spend of just over R51-million.

Each year since, more mon-



Mkhondo Boarding School, remains unfinished. / Facebook

ey has poured in: R213-million in 2019/20, R134-million in 2020/21, R79-million in 2022/23, and another R169-million in 2023/24.

The 2024/25 budget ring-fenced an additional R78.8-million, of which only 75.6% has been spent.

Clear Choice Builders (CCB) – currently in business rescue – was given the contract but the job proved to be too big.

CCB was previous unable to complete the infamous R500-million Mpumalanga

Parliamentary Village, and has been flagged for non-payment of subcontractors, work stoppages and poor performance.

According to the construction breakdown, the school was meant to include four Grade R classrooms, 32 classrooms, dormitories for boys and girls, a science lab, computer centre, library, eight ablution blocks, a guardhouse, 18 covered parking bays, a sewage treatment plant, kitchen, dining hall and sports facilities.

However, in January the

school wasn't ready.

The education department had to scramble for a stopgap. It reopened eight farm schools it had previously shut down.

DA education spokesperson Annerie Weber called the debacle a taxpayer betrayal.

"This delayed construction has become a burden to taxpayers and probably another cash cow for ANC comrades," she said.

"Construction was supposed to be an 18-month project. But by April 2025, the project is not even complete, yet nearly R800-million has already been spent."

Weber said the provincial government misled the public by claiming the project would be ready by January.

"They said the school was going to be handed over by April 30, but it did not happen."

The school remains incomplete while contractors continue to down tools over payment disputes.

On March 24, residents blocked an official inspection because they were angry that the department forced job seekers to travel 120km to Ermelo to

submit their applications.

"This unreasonable requirement imposes a financial burden on unemployed residents and effectively excludes local applicants from consideration," said Thoko Mashiane, ActionSA provincial chair.

Mashiane warned that unless government engaged honestly with the community and created a fair, transparent hiring process, the school would remain closed indefinitely.

Bongani Dhlamini, spokesperson for the Department of Public Works, Roads and Transport, confirmed receipt of a detailed media enquiry and promised to respond.

So far, the provincial government had already missed multiple deadlines.

While the official report optimistically projected that the project would be completed by April 5, it also listed major delays due to contractor under-performance, non-payment of subcontractors and recruitment-linked disruptions.

Yet, with almost three-quarters of a billion rand already gone, accountability remains as incomplete as the school itself.