

PROVINCIAL FOCUS

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The race to fix schooling in the Eastern Cape

When Mandla Makupula was appointed Eastern Cape MEC of Education in 2010, the department was limping towards the end of a school year characterised by many setbacks.

"I could characterise my appointment as a baptism of fire, because I got appointed over a weekend. When I took the oath on 29 November 2010, I found a department that was busy with the exam period and faced by a number of challenges that subsequently led to the Section 100 intervention by national Government."

A Bachelor of Science graduate from the Walter Sisulu University, formerly the University of Transkei, Makupula fell in love with the teaching profession when he studied for a Diploma in Higher Education with the same institution, making it his second tertiary qualification. The man tasked with steering the Eastern Cape education ship in the right direction had been a member of the Eastern Cape legislature since 1999.

The challenges facing education in the Eastern Cape are compounded by socio-economic problems associated with the province's high levels of poverty. These problems have their roots in the extreme impoverishment of the province, dating back to its colonisation and later balkanisation into homelands. Census 2011 results rate the Eastern Cape as a region with an average annual household income of R64 539, making it the second poorest province in the country after Limpopo.

A high migration rate and high levels of illiteracy are some of indicators showing that the province faces intractable problems. It also has the highest proportion of households that have no access to piped water, which stands at 22,2%, and the lowest proportion of households that use electricity as a source of energy.

According to the *Annual Survey for Ordinary Schools 2009/2010*, published by the Department of Basic Education, the Eastern Cape has 22% of schools in the country, the second most after KwaZulu-Natal.

But many people leave the province in search of greener pastures.

Census 2011 results puts migration out of the Eastern Cape at 436 466, the highest in the country. This number includes many learners who go to the Western Cape in search of better schooling.

Early in 2012, Western Cape Premier Helen Zille was criticised for tweeting that pupils relocating from the Eastern Cape were, in her view, "education refugees".

Schooling infrastructure is also lagging. The annual survey says the Eastern Cape has the lowest number of schools with faxes (23%) and the lowest number of schools with telephone lines (31%).

Back in 2010, Makupula inherited a schooling system faced with these historical and other more contemporary challenges: a lack of proper school infrastructure; a legal scuffle with Equal Education, a non-governmental organisation; an exhausted budget; a collapsed school feeding scheme; cancelled scholar transport; a low matric pass rate; strikes by teachers and the non-renewal of temporary teachers' contracts.

This was a sinking ship.

To make things worse, the provincial Government instructed the department to come up with a turnaround plan aimed at addressing the challenges. "So, my first day in the office was physically calm but administratively turbulent. I had to take quick and painful decisions with the aim of steering the ship in the right direction."

Two years down the line, the ship is navigating calmer waters and Makupula is more optimistic about the future. He is attempting to isolate and tackle schooling issues, leaving social problems to agencies with more specialised capacity.

Implementation of Section 100

In an effort to intervene in the crisis-riddled department, Cabinet took a decision in early 2012 that the Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshekgwa, should take over the administration of the department.

She appointed an intervention task team led by Ray Tywakadi, Phillip Benadé and Dr Anis Karodia, who was also heading the task team in Limpopo. The team was to oversee the implementation of the turnaround plan, while Makupula managed the department day-to-day.

"The minister came down and spoke to everybody, from the premier to the leadership of the department and myself; we were briefed on Section 100. I had only been with the department for three months and I was still struggling to grapple with the issues and settling down."

Makupula says the department had long cried out for help, given the number of challenges they were

facing. His predecessor, former MEC of Education Mahlubandile Qwase, had already sent a delegation to the then Minister of Education, Ms Naledi Pandor.

For Makupula, Section 100 was a welcome intervention. "Minister Pandor had already started sending people down before I arrived. We saw Section 100 as an escalation of assistance that we needed because of the huge challenges we were facing."

Since this was the first time Section 100 1(b) had been implemented, it came with a few challenges. "The first two to three months were a bit turbulent. There was no clarity on who the accounting officer was, what the role was of the MEC or how you account to the legislature. Those were some of the pertinent issues that we were grappling with.

"After a while, we eventually found each other and established a good working relationship with the task team. We all wanted an improved department so we had no choice but to put whatever misunderstanding we had aside and focus on the bigger picture, which was to make the department properly functional."

National School Nutrition Programme

In 2002, Government introduced the School Feeding Scheme as a small part of the Integrated Food Security Strategy for South Africa. In a province with the second highest number of learners who are orphans, numbering 92 973, and the highest proportion of learners receiving social grants, approximately 37% according to a 2010 annual survey, the feeding scheme is critical in retaining learners at school and keeping them well nourished.

The feeding scheme was aimed at fostering better and quality education by among others, enhancing children's active learning capacity, alleviating short-term hunger and addressing certain micronutrient deficiencies.

According to the policy on school feeding schemes, the school nutrition programme should only be implemented in schools classified as quintiles one to three, as those are schools with children coming from poor backgrounds. Makupula explained that, due to its high levels of poverty, the situation in the Eastern Cape was tricky and put him and the department's leadership in a difficult position.

"The leadership said that children do not stop getting hungry when they get to quintiles four and five. There are children in quintiles four and five who might be

coming from poor backgrounds and deserve to be assisted. So, we started feeding even children in quintiles four and five."

Though he believed that the leadership had taken a wise and well-intentioned decision, the downside was that it demanded a major chunk of the budget to keep the programme afloat. "The challenge was that school nutrition is a conditional grant that we get nationally, and now the Eastern Cape had to supplement with its own resources on the feeding of quintiles four and five. This put a lot of pressure on our budget."

He adds: "That decision was sinking us financially because we were feeding quintiles that were not part of the official programme. In a sense, we were draining ourselves financially and getting deeper into a crisis for a good reason. That was one of the first painful decisions I had to take.

"The question was, do you continue sinking the department deeper into financial crisis for a good course of feeding poor children, or do you stop feeding them to save the department so that it continues to feed the official categories?"

Relationship with school governing bodies

Makupula has now decided to let school governing bodies (SGBs) take over feeding schemes, leaving teachers to concentrate on their core business. This is part of efforts to rally community members behind the schooling of their children. >>



The MEC for Education in the Eastern Cape, Mr Mandla Makupula.



"I took a decision that said, let us reorganise ourselves. We agreed that SGBs would be responsible for feeding their own children. We then took scholar transport to the Department of Transport. This reorganisation was done so that we could place our core business at the centre stage. Our core business is the classroom, in school functionality, quality learning and teaching; that is our core business."

Before 1994, most parents and communities were excluded from school governance. Like in many schools across the country, SGBs were organised along racial lines. It was only with the enactment of the South African Schools Act, 1996 that all public schools were required to have SGBs that were democratically elected by members of the school community.

Makupula says that, for a long time, communities had made the mistake of leaving education only in the hands of the Government, unions and academics. "We left out a very critical component: parents and communities. Those are the owners of the schools, the owners of the learners. Since I came into office, I have said that we should empower SGBs. Wherever I go for meetings, I never fail to meet SGBs."

He added that there was a sudden interest in education from the community and that this made the job of the department easier. "We are getting a lot of cooperation from various sectors, traditional leaders, religious leaders, local councillors and municipalities; they are really coming on board. I can give you pockets of excellence where, because of the contribution of chiefs, we are making a big difference, places like Encobo and Mount Frere, where chiefs play a prominent role."

He added that when the chiefs hold their normal traditional gatherings, they also have an item about education on their agenda where SGBs account to the community on issues such as punctuality and attendance.

Poor matric performance

In the past three school years, the Eastern Cape has had the worst matric results of all provinces. The province achieved 51,1% in 2009, improving slightly to 58,3% in 2010 before sliding marginally to 58,1% in 2011.

Part of the problem was that the department had lost focus of its core mandate of teaching. "Since I started talking to you, I have been talking about school nutrition and scholar transport. That is not the core business of the department; important as that is, it is not the function of the department."

Makupula concluded by saying that the department has been submerged by other challenges that took most of their time and they neglected their core business. With the new approach of disseminating those services to the relevant bodies, he believes the department has paved a way to focus on its key outcomes.

Change is in the air for Eastern Cape Education. The launch of the Cofimvaba Technology for Rural Schools project in December 2012 by the Minister of Science and Technology, Mr Derek Hanekom, is a positive sign of how Government is leveraging technologies and innovations to support learning and teaching in a rural district.

The project is the initiative of the Council for Scientific and Industrial Research, working with a number of Government agencies to improve education, create food security and build the local economy through agriculture and related small and medium enterprises.

Curriculum development work is done almost entirely on Android tablets connected to a portable hotspot. The Department of Science and Technology will build a wireless mesh network to bring localised educational content and web services to mobile users in the wider KwaManzi community, and schools across the St Marks circuit in Queenstown.

The province's school infrastructure is also getting a huge facelift. Three months ago, two out of 49 mud schools identified for an upgrade were opened by President Zuma accompanied by the Minister of Basic Education, Ms Angie Motshekga.

Though MEC Makupula found the department ailing, he has been able to steer the ship in the right direction. Scholar transport has been reinstated and allocated to the relevant department, SGBs and parents are involved in the feeding scheme and school infrastructure is getting a huge facelift. The department will now focus on its main function, taking care of issues in the classroom. 📱