Entry #1267

PARLIAMENTARY BUDGET SPEECH

From Survival to Success: Rebuilding South Africa's Education System, One Learner at a Time

Honourable Speaker, Honourable Members of Parliament, distinguished guests, educators, parents, and the people of South Africa.

I stand before this House today not as a Minister, not as a millionaire, and not as someone who has never known difficulty. I stand before you as a university student — a young South African whose future has been shaped by the opportunities education can provide and by the barriers that education alone cannot always overcome.

I stand here because I believe that the circumstances into which a child is born should not determine the height of the dreams that child is allowed to pursue.

Honourable Speaker, I want us to imagine two children born on the same day.

The first child is born into a household where there are books on the shelves, reliable electricity, uncapped internet, a quiet bedroom, private tutoring and parents who can afford to help with homework.

The second child is born into a household where the electricity may be disconnected, the food may not last until payday, the nearest library may be kilometres away, and a parent may be unemployed or working two jobs. This child may share a bedroom with three siblings and attempt to study using a borrowed phone and a limited amount of mobile data.

Both children are intelligent. Both children are curious. Both children are equally deserving of opportunity.

Yet, from the beginning, they are not running the same race.

Our responsibility as a government and as a nation is not to guarantee that every child finishes first. It is to ensure that no child is disqualified from the race before it even begins.

Today, I propose an education recovery budget that treats learning not as an expense to be endured, but as an investment in South Africa's economic future, social stability and human dignity.

1. The paradox of South African education

Honourable Speaker,

We must begin by acknowledging that our education system has made real progress.

The Class of 2024 achieved a National Senior Certificate pass rate of 87.3%, compared with 82.9% in 2023. Some 615,429 candidates passed, a record at that time. This is an achievement that deserves recognition. Behind every certificate is a learner who studied, a teacher who taught, a parent who sacrificed, or a community that supported a young person. [1]

But we must also ask a difficult question: what does it mean to celebrate a high matric pass rate if millions of children have already fallen behind long before reaching Grade 12?

The Department of Basic Education's 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study, known as PIRLS, found that approximately 81% of South African Grade 4 learners could not read for meaning in any language tested. The national Grade 4 score fell from 320 points in 2016 to 288 in 2021. [2]

Let us pause on that number.

A child who cannot read with understanding struggles to interpret a Mathematics word problem. That child struggles to follow a Science textbook, understand a History examination question or learn independently.

By the time that child reaches high school, we may be demanding sophisticated answers from a learner who never received the foundational tools needed to understand the question.

In June 2026, Parliament's Portfolio Committee on Basic Education also highlighted concerns about early literacy. Evidence presented by the Right to Read Campaign indicated that only about 30% of learners in Grades 1 to 3 were reading at the expected grade level, while approximately 15% of Grade 3 learners could not correctly read a single word after three years of schooling. [3]

These are not simply literacy statistics. They represent opportunities delayed, confidence damaged and potential left undeveloped.

Our challenge, therefore, is twofold: we must celebrate those who succeed while confronting the system that leaves so many struggling.

2. Why are our learners struggling?

Honourable Speaker,

It would be easy to blame learners. It would be easy to blame parents. It would be easy to blame teachers.

But a national education crisis cannot be explained by one group, and it cannot be solved by scapegoating.

We must examine the conditions in which learning takes place.

First: the legacy of apartheid and persistent inequality.

Apartheid deliberately distributed educational opportunity along racial lines. The Bantu Education system entrenched inferior provision for Black South Africans, while the geography of wealth, transport, housing and employment was also shaped by segregation.

Democracy changed the legal framework, expanded access and opened opportunities that previous generations were denied. We must acknowledge that progress.

But changing the law does not automatically equalise the resources available to every child.

A school in an affluent suburb may have laboratories, sports facilities, a library, high-speed internet and a network of former learners who donate money. A school in a poor rural community may struggle with overcrowded classrooms, unreliable water, limited learning materials and a shortage of specialist teachers.

The question is not whether every school should look identical. The question is whether every learner receives the resources necessary to learn.

Equality does not always mean giving every school the same amount. Equity means directing additional support to the schools and learners facing the greatest barriers.

Second: poverty and hunger.

How do we expect a child to concentrate on fractions when that child is wondering whether there will be food at home tonight?

South Africa's National School Nutrition Programme provides meals to millions of learners. The 2026/27 national budget provides approximately R11 billion for school nutrition, supporting a programme intended to reach more than 9.9 million learners in almost 20,000 schools. [4]

This programme is essential. We must protect it, improve its delivery and ensure that the money allocated for nutrition translates into nutritious meals on school days.

But hunger does not disappear when the final school bell rings.

For children living in food-insecure households, a school meal may be their most reliable meal of the day. Where feasible and properly costed, we should explore targeted breakfast programmes in the most vulnerable schools, without weakening the existing lunch programme.

We must also recognise that malnutrition, poor sleep, chronic stress and untreated health conditions can affect attention, memory, attendance and learning.

A hungry child is not an unmotivated child. A tired child is not necessarily a lazy child. Sometimes, poor performance is a symptom of a much larger social problem.

Third: the digital divide.

Honourable Members, we are educating children for a world increasingly shaped by artificial intelligence, automation, data, robotics and digital communication.

Yet some learners can access online lessons, educational applications and international learning resources at any time, while others cannot afford the data required to download a worksheet.

During the COVID-19 pandemic, this divide became particularly visible. Learners with devices, internet access and adult support were better positioned to continue learning remotely than learners without those resources.

The divide is no longer simply about who owns a smartphone. It is about who can use technology to learn, who has a safe place to use it, and who has the skills to distinguish reliable information from misinformation.

Fourth: the shortage of strong foundational learning and adequate support.

Children do not all learn at the same pace. Some require additional language support, some need help with Mathematics, and others require assessment for visual, hearing, developmental or learning difficulties.

If a child falls behind in Grade 2 and receives no intervention, that child may progress through several grades without mastering essential skills.

We must also support teachers. Teachers cannot be expected to deliver excellent outcomes while simultaneously managing overcrowded classrooms, excessive administrative demands, insufficient learning materials and learners with complex needs without adequate assistance.

A teacher is not a miracle worker. A teacher is a professional who needs training, time, tools and support.

Fifth: social media, distraction and mental well-being.

Honourable Speaker, we cannot discuss modern education as though smartphones do not exist.

Social media can be a powerful educational resource. Learners can access free Mathematics tutorials, language lessons, science demonstrations and university lectures. A learner in a remote village can learn from a teacher thousands of kilometres away.

But these platforms are also designed to compete for attention.

Endless scrolling, cyberbullying, harmful online challenges, sleep disruption, unrealistic comparisons and the pressure to maintain a social-media image can interfere with learning and well-being.

We must not simply declare social media the enemy. Nor should we pretend that it has no costs.

Our policy must teach digital discipline: how to use technology intentionally, protect personal information, identify misinformation, manage screen time and turn online access into a learning advantage.

Sixth: unemployment and the loss of hope.

Statistics South Africa's third-quarter 2025 figures, reported to Parliament, placed official unemployment among people aged 15–24 at 58.5%, and among those aged 25–34 at 38.4%. These figures describe different age groups and are not the overall unemployment rate. [5]

When young people repeatedly see graduates struggling to find work, they may reasonably ask whether academic effort will lead to economic opportunity.

This does not mean education has no value. It means education policy must connect learning to real opportunities, including university, technical and vocational education, apprenticeships, entrepreneurship and employment.

We cannot tell young people to work hard and then fail to build pathways through which their skills can contribute to society.

Finally, we must confront weak accountability, procurement failures, absenteeism where it occurs, uneven management, poor maintenance and the failure to intervene early when schools are in distress.

These problems must be investigated using evidence, not assumptions. Most importantly, public money must be traceable from the budget to the classroom.

3. The proposed R10 billion Education Recovery and Opportunity Fund

Honourable Speaker,

The national government has already committed substantial resources to education. For 2026/27, the Department of Basic Education's Budget Vote is approximately R38.2 billion, including conditional grants for infrastructure, early childhood development and school nutrition. This is not the entirety of public education expenditure: provincial education budgets also fund major responsibilities such as educator salaries and school operations. [4]

I am therefore not proposing that this House disregard existing allocations or pretend that money is unlimited.

I propose an additional R10 billion annual Education Recovery and Opportunity Fund, phased in over three years and subject to fiscal affordability, detailed costing and parliamentary approval.

The money must be additional to existing essential services, not obtained by stripping schools of the funding they already need.

The following allocation is proposed for the first full year of implementation.

Proposed programme	Annual allocation
1. Foundational literacy and numeracy recovery	R2.50 billion
2. Teacher development and classroom assistants	R1.80 billion
3. School infrastructure and learning environments	R1.5 billion
4. Digital access and educational technology	R1.00 billion
5. Nutrition, learner health and psychosocial support	R1.20 billion
6. Career pathways, technical skills and youth opportunity	R0.80 billion
7. Community learning hubs and social-media literacy	R0.50 billion
8. Independent monitoring, audits and contingency	R0.70 billion
Total proposed annual fund	R10.00 billion

This is a proposed policy package, not an official Treasury costing. Before implementation, departments should publish unit costs, procurement plans, staffing requirements, provincial allocations and measurable targets. The R700 million monitoring and contingency allocation should be ring-fenced, separately reported and subject to strict rules preventing it from becoming a general administrative fund.

I will now explain what this money should achieve.

4. Programme One: Teach every child to read and count

Proposed allocation: R2.5 billion a year.

Honourable Speaker, if we could choose one educational priority that would improve a learner's prospects across almost every subject, it would be foundational literacy and numeracy.

I propose a national *Read to Rise* programme for Grades R to 6, with intensive support for learners who are falling behind.

The programme would include:

A simple, reliable reading and numeracy assessment at the beginning and end of each school year.

Small-group catch-up lessons during protected school time and, where appropriate, after school.

Age-appropriate books and learning materials in learners' home languages, alongside structured support for additional languages of learning.

Specialist coaching for Foundation Phase teachers.

Trained reading mentors drawn from universities, teacher-training institutions, retired educators and community organisations.

Holiday learning camps focused on reading, arithmetic and problem-solving.

I propose that this programme initially prioritise the poorest and lowest-performing schools, with funding allocated according to need rather than political influence.

Every learner who falls behind should receive help before the gap becomes a crisis.

A learner should not have to fail Grade 5 before anyone notices that reading remains a struggle.

Our measure of success must not simply be the number of books delivered or workshops conducted. It must be the number of children who can read a passage, explain what it means, solve an age-appropriate problem and demonstrate measurable improvement.

5. Programme Two: Support teachers and restore the dignity of teaching

Proposed allocation: R1.8 billion a year.

We cannot reform education by exhausting the very people responsible for delivering it.

I propose a targeted national programme to train, coach and support teachers in literacy, numeracy, inclusive education and practical digital teaching.

The fund would also support trained classroom assistants and teaching interns in the schools with the greatest need.

These assistants would help educators manage small-group activities, provide reading practice, identify learners who need support and reduce avoidable administrative burdens. They would not replace qualified teachers or be used as a substitute for permanent posts where these are required.

Universities and teacher-training colleges should partner with provincial education departments to develop supervised placements. Student teachers and suitably trained university volunteers could assist in learning programmes while gaining practical experience.

But let us be clear: a programme dependent on unpaid labour will not be sustainable. Where people are recruited into formal assistant roles, they must receive fair compensation, appropriate training and safeguarding.

We should also recognise excellence in teaching. I propose competitive grants for schools that demonstrate sustained improvement in learning outcomes, especially schools that begin with severe disadvantages.

Rewards should never encourage schools to exclude struggling learners or manipulate results. They should recognise progress, collaboration and inclusion.

We must create a culture in which asking for help is not treated as failure and where good teaching is valued as nation-building.

6. Programme Three: Make every school safe for learning

Proposed allocation: R1.5 billion a year.

A learner cannot concentrate in a classroom that is unsafe, overcrowded or unsuitable for learning.

This allocation would provide targeted support for urgent repairs, sanitation, water reliability, electrical safety, classroom ventilation, accessible facilities and essential learning spaces.

It would complement existing infrastructure grants rather than duplicate them.

The first priority must be schools where infrastructure problems threaten health, safety or attendance. Every funded project should have a named implementing authority, a public completion date and an independent verification process.

I also propose a creative approach: a *Fix Our School* community partnership programme.

Local construction businesses, artisans, technical colleges, community organisations and municipalities could collaborate on approved school-maintenance projects. Public funds would pay for properly procured work, materials and supervised training, while technical colleges could provide accredited practical experience where appropriate.

This would not permit unsafe informal construction or bypass procurement rules. It would build skills and community ownership within a transparent framework.

We must stop treating school infrastructure as a once-off ribbon-cutting exercise. A school needs maintenance budgets, working facilities and someone accountable when a repair is not completed.

7. Programme Four: Turn the digital divide into a digital opportunity

Proposed allocation: R1 billion a year.

Honourable Speaker, technology must become a bridge between learners and opportunity, not another wall separating rich and poor.

I propose a *Digital School Commons* programme that combines low-cost devices, offline learning resources, connectivity partnerships and safe access to school-based digital facilities.

Rather than purchasing expensive equipment for every learner immediately, we should pilot shared device libraries, secure charging stations and school-based computer rooms, prioritising underserved communities.

Learning resources should be downloadable and available offline. Learners should not need a continuous internet connection to revise Mathematics, practise reading or prepare for an examination.

We should negotiate transparent, competitively procured connectivity agreements with telecommunications providers, with clear data-security requirements and no hidden commercial access to children’s information.

And we must use social media intelligently.

I propose a national *Scroll to Skill* challenge, inviting learners to create short educational videos in isiZulu, isiXhosa, Sesotho, Setswana, Tshivenda, Xitsonga, Afrikaans, English and other South African languages.

A learner could explain fractions through a soccer score, teach scientific principles using household objects, demonstrate a historical event through storytelling, or explain a matric concept in a sixty-second video.

The best content would be reviewed by qualified educators before being featured on an official, freely accessible education platform.

Learners would become creators of knowledge, not merely consumers of content.

Schools would also teach digital citizenship, critical thinking, cyberbullying prevention, privacy, misinformation awareness and healthy screen habits.

We should not fight technology with denial. We should equip young people to use it with purpose.

8. Programme Five: Nourish the learner, support the whole child

Proposed allocation: R1.2 billion a year.

A school is not simply a place where a curriculum is delivered. It is often the first institution to notice that a child is hungry, distressed, struggling to see the board or repeatedly absent.

This allocation would strengthen targeted nutrition support, school-based referrals, psychosocial services and partnerships with local primary healthcare services.

In the most food-insecure schools, we should test costed breakfast pilots alongside the existing school nutrition programme. These pilots must be evaluated before expansion.

We should also train school staff to identify warning signs and refer learners for professional assistance when they experience bullying, violence, severe distress, substance-related problems or other barriers to learning.

Schools cannot replace hospitals, social workers or mental-health professionals. But they can form a more reliable bridge between a struggling learner and the services that learner needs.

Where appropriate, partnerships with universities and accredited training institutions could support supervised services, while maintaining professional standards and protecting confidentiality.

The objective is not to medicalise every learning difficulty. It is to recognise that educational outcomes are affected by the circumstances in which children live.

9. Programme Six: Connect education to employment and enterprise

Proposed allocation: R800 million a year.

Honourable Members, we must prepare learners not only to pass examinations, but to participate in the economy.

I propose *Pathways South Africa*, a programme that introduces learners in the senior grades to a broad range of careers, technical skills and post-school opportunities.

Every participating school should have access to career guidance covering universities, TVET colleges, apprenticeships, learnerships, artisan training, entrepreneurship and employment.

The programme would support practical partnerships with local employers, agricultural cooperatives, engineering firms, hospitals, universities and accredited training providers.

Learners could participate in supervised career days, workplace demonstrations, practical projects and introductory skills programmes.

A learner who loves repairing machines should see a route into artisan training. A learner who enjoys coding should encounter real digital projects. A learner who wants to become a doctor should understand the academic requirements, costs, bursaries and alternative routes into healthcare.

We must also teach financial literacy, communication, problem-solving, entrepreneurship and responsible use of artificial intelligence.

However, we must never suggest that entrepreneurship can solve unemployment by itself, or that every young person should have to create a job because the economy has failed to provide one.

A strong economy needs skilled employees, professionals, artisans, researchers, public servants and entrepreneurs.

Our education system must prepare learners for all these possibilities.

10. Programme Seven: Bring learning back into communities

Proposed allocation: R500 million a year.

Honourable Speaker, some children do not have a quiet place to study after school. Others lack access to books, reliable electricity, devices or an adult who can help them with difficult work.

I propose a network of *Community Learning Hubs* based in existing libraries, community halls, participating schools and other safe public facilities.

These hubs would offer supervised study sessions, homework support, reading clubs, examination preparation and digital access.

They should operate in partnership with local communities, not as expensive new buildings where suitable facilities already exist.

The programme would also support parents and caregivers with practical guidance on reading with children, supporting homework and managing technology use at home.

We must be realistic: a parent who works a night shift or struggles with literacy may not be able to supervise every assignment. Our goal must be to support families, not shame them.

Through *Scroll to Skill*, community hubs could host learner-led educational media clubs, helping young people transform their digital interests into communication, research and creative skills.

The proposed R500 million should also support independent evaluation of these hubs so that funding is expanded only where the evidence demonstrates real benefit.

11. Programme Eight: Make every rand accountable

Proposed allocation: R700 million a year, including contingency.

Honourable Speaker, public trust is built when citizens can see what their money has achieved.

I propose a public *Education Delivery Dashboard* showing, for every funded programme:

The amount allocated and spent.

The school or community receiving support.

The expected completion date.

Whether the project was completed.

The number of learners reached.

The measured change in literacy, numeracy, attendance or other relevant outcomes.

The dashboard must use accessible language, protect children's personal information and work on low-data devices.

Independent audits, risk-based inspections and public reporting should accompany the programme.

We must investigate credible allegations of corruption and procurement abuse, strengthen controls and recover public funds where the law allows.

But accountability must be fair. A school should not be punished for poor results caused by a lack of resources without first examining the conditions in which it operates.

We need accountability for both performance and fairness: responsibility for the use of public money, and responsibility for providing the resources that make success possible.

12. How will we pay for this?

Honourable Speaker,

A budget speech cannot stop at announcing attractive programmes. Every promise must answer the question: where will the money come from?

The proposed R10 billion package must be developed with National Treasury and provincial education departments through a transparent medium-term funding plan.

I propose four financing principles.

First, conduct a review of underspending, duplicated programmes and ineffective expenditure across education-related programmes. Any savings must be independently verified, and funds must not be removed from essential teaching, nutrition or learner support merely to create the appearance of savings.

Second, phase in the new programmes over three years, beginning with the schools facing the most severe learning and infrastructure challenges. This gives government time to build delivery capacity and test whether interventions work.

Third, explore lawful co-funding and carefully governed partnerships with businesses, philanthropic foundations, telecommunications providers and universities. Private contributions should supplement public responsibility, not determine which children receive their constitutional right to education.

Fourth, submit the full proposal to Parliament for transparent scrutiny, including the fiscal impact, procurement risks, staffing implications and the costs of maintaining programmes after their initial launch.

The fund should have clear spending ceilings, annual independent audits and a requirement that any expansion be supported by evidence.

If the proposed R10 billion is not affordable in a single year, the government should publish a phased implementation schedule rather than borrow irresponsibly or promise money it does not have.

Fiscal discipline and social justice are not enemies. Waste weakens both.

13. What will success look like?

Honourable Members, we should judge this budget not by how impressive it sounds today, but by what changes in the lives of learners over the next three years.

I propose the following initial targets for the first three years. They are policy targets for evaluation, not guaranteed outcomes.

Literacy: reduce the proportion of participating learners who cannot read for meaning by at least 10 percentage points from their measured baseline, with separate reporting by grade, language, province and socioeconomic context.

Numeracy: demonstrate measurable improvement in age-appropriate numeracy assessments, with progress reported annually.

Teacher support: provide structured coaching and targeted professional development to teachers in participating schools, measuring changes in classroom practice rather than counting attendance at workshops alone.

Infrastructure: ensure that all projects funded by this package have published deadlines and verified completion reports, prioritising urgent safety and sanitation risks.

Digital inclusion: measure how many learners gain regular, meaningful access to educational resources, rather than merely counting devices purchased.

Learner well-being: measure participation in targeted nutrition and support programmes, attendance and appropriate referral outcomes while protecting personal information.

Accountability: publish quarterly financial and implementation reports, with independent annual evaluations and explanations for missed targets.

Equity: report results separately for rural and urban schools, no-fee and fee-paying schools, different language groups and learners with disabilities.

We should also track learner retention, progression, subject choices, Bachelor passes and post-school transitions.

A matric pass rate matters, but it cannot be our only measure of educational quality. As the Department of Basic Education has recognised in its 2026 reform announcements, performance must be considered through a broader set of indicators, including retention, foundational learning and progression. [6]

We must measure not only how many learners pass, but also what they have learnt, who has been left behind and whether their opportunities have expanded.

14. A call to Parliament and the nation

Honourable Speaker,

No budget can solve every social problem in one year.

No Minister can teach every child personally. No teacher can reverse centuries of inequality alone. No parent should have to choose between feeding a family and providing the tools needed for a child to study.

This is why education must become a shared national responsibility, backed by competent government, professional educators, involved communities, responsible businesses and accountable public institutions.

We need a government that delivers what it promises. We need schools that are safe and well managed. We need teachers who are supported and learners who are held to high expectations. We need parents to be welcomed as partners, even when they face difficult circumstances.

We must also be willing to confront uncomfortable truths: more funding without effective implementation is not enough; digital devices without good teaching are not enough; a high pass rate without foundational learning is not enough; and inspirational speeches without measurable action are not enough.

As a university student, I know that education can open doors. But I also know that reaching those doors requires more than intelligence and determination. It requires opportunity, support, sacrifice and a system that gives people a fair chance.

When we invest in a child who learns to read, we invest in a future scientist, nurse, engineer, teacher, entrepreneur or public servant.

When we support a teacher, we strengthen an entire classroom.

When we feed a hungry learner, we protect that learner's ability to concentrate and participate.

When we connect a rural school to quality digital resources, we expand the boundaries of what its learners can imagine and achieve.

And when we make public spending transparent, we honour the taxpayer and the child whose future depends on it.

Let us remember that South Africa's greatest resource is not gold beneath our soil, platinum in our mines or data in our networks.

It is the ability, creativity and potential of our people.

We cannot afford to waste that potential.

Let the child in a rural village know that their dreams are as legitimate as those of a child in Sandton. Let the learner in a township school know that their accent does not limit

their intelligence. Let the young person who has failed an examination know that failure is a challenge to overcome, not a final verdict on their worth.

Let us build a country where a learner's future is shaped less by the income of their parents and more by the effort they make, the support they receive and the opportunities we create together.

Honourable Members, the question before us is not whether South Africa has talented children. We see their talent every day.

The question is whether we are prepared to build a system worthy of that talent.

I ask this House to support a serious, measurable and equitable education recovery programme — one that puts foundational learning first, strengthens teachers, addresses poverty's impact on learning, embraces technology responsibly and makes every rand accountable.

Because every child we leave behind today becomes a question our society must answer tomorrow.

But every child we help to rise becomes a possibility for our entire nation.

Let us move from survival to success. From potential to opportunity. From promises to measurable progress.

Let us build a South Africa in which every child, regardless of birthplace, language, income or background, can say:

My future is not predetermined by my circumstances. My country has invested in me, and I have the opportunity to contribute to my country.

That is the budget I ask this House to consider.

That is the investment I ask this nation to make.

And that is the South Africa I believe we can build.

I thank you.