

**Speech by Mrs Naledi Pandor, MP, Minister of Education, tabling  
departmental Budget Vote for 2007/08 financial year**

29 May 2007

"Affirming excellence and challenging mediocrity"

I learned with great sadness yesterday of another death of a learner in one of our schools. I wish to convey my sympathies to the family and to assure them that we will intensify our efforts at addressing violence in our schools. I repeat again my appeal to all parents and community members to support us in creating safe and caring schools. We must do more to teach young people values of respect for each other and non-violence as well as the lessons of conflict resolution.

I am also concerned at the possibility of an educator strike in the next few days. I know that all role players are keen to resolve the current impasse. Government is keen to improve the remuneration of teachers, the R8,1 billion allocated to improving conditions in the sector attests to this commitment. I hope that the excellent record of continuous education of the past few years will not be broken.

It is also worrying that as we meet here there are thousands of children in Khutsong who are being denied education by their own community. It is tragic indeed that the learners of Khutsong are being made sacrificial lambs and are being denied their right to education. History will judge us all harshly for what has been permitted by matured community members and those who have attempted to pretend that boycotting learning will not harm the future of those young people.

Once more I urge parents to assume responsibility for the future of their children, to insist on teaching and learning and to support our young people to realise their fullest potential. If the boycott continues unabated, clearly the MEC must look at options that will provide schooling for the learners. They must not be victims.

Chairperson, in the 2006 education budget the following priorities were identified for action: no fee schools, Quality Improvement and Development Strategy (Qids-up), the implementation of the new curriculum in grades 10 to 12, the expansion of Education Management Information System (EMIS), the improvement of human resource systems and capacity development, the strengthening of special schools, Further Education and Training (FET) college recapitalisation, the expansion of grade R and implementation of the Early Childhood Development (ECD) integrated plan.

Today I report on these priorities and set out the objectives we intend to pursue in 2007.

While I do acknowledge progress in this report it is important to repeat once more, we are not yet where we want to be. In the 2006 debate, I asked whether the education sector and our communities are ready to excel? I return to the theme of excelling this year as it is vital that we redouble our efforts at doing far better than we are doing today.

This year I call on all of us to affirm excellence and challenge mediocrity in the interest of advancing the objective of quality education for all.

I make this call to assert excellence because it is clear that all of us have to give far greater attention to achieving positive outcomes through our work. Such a focus by all of us will ensure that we give effect to our obligation to offer real learning and achievement opportunities to all our learners and students. Furthermore, given that there are schools, principals, teachers, learners, colleges and universities that work well we should acknowledge, replicate and reward positive performance.

I urge South Africans to affirm excellence and reject mediocrity in the interest of nation building, socio-economic development and true liberation. The levels of under-performance in our education system are unacceptably high and an unjust subversion of the historic promise of freedom and democracy that we've put before our people.

At the system level in research and in protest we have spent a great deal of time focusing on the negative, we have appeared far too tolerant of mediocrity in its many guises and extremely neglectful of that which works and of those who are doing what must be done.

We seem to tolerate and assert the rights of children who are abusive, violent and disruptive. Very little is said about young achievers, emerging scientists, successful schools and academic institutions with positive intellectual outcomes. We have become a moaning nation rather than one that celebrates and expands success.

We tolerate parents who don't care to support their children, who don't care to support our schools, who fail in their duty as parents.

We tolerate public officials who are not up to the task of administrative or professional support, who leave work early, who fail to pay subsidies to schools on time and who do not yet reflect the objectives and principles of Batho Pele.

We also tolerate mediocrity in the teaching force. We tolerate too much that is unprofessional. We tolerate late coming, little and sometimes no teaching, constant under-performance and poor academic success.

I know some people will be angry when I say this. It'll be the one thing lifted from my speech, out of the many things that will be said. Nevertheless it must be said.

The defence of mediocrity is supported by unjustifiable arguments. Some cite apartheid. I acknowledge that the legacy of apartheid continues to affect us, but it no longer serves to explain continued failures on our part. Others cite inadequate resources. Yet this is also no longer a persuasive argument.

Our people ask, 'how long do we have to wait?' I want to say today, we intend to intensify our efforts at ensuring that our people wait no longer!

Chairperson, there are positive achievements in the various phases of education that we should and can celebrate:

- \* the 96 schools that achieved passes of 50 or more in maths higher grade (HG)
- \* the 13 schools that achieved over 100 passes in maths HG (not enough I admit but achievers nevertheless)
- \* the nine Readathon schools that were recognised among many entrants for reading

excellence in 2006

- \* the teacher nominees in the National Teacher Awards
- \* rural schools that achieve 100% success
- \* Higher education institutions (HEIs) that achieve top ranking research outcomes and international awards
- \* learners and students who are high achievers and outstanding leaders
- \* the successful hosting of the Commonwealth Conference of Education Ministers in December 2006
- \* the energy and enthusiasm that is evident in the newly recapitalised FET college sector.

This year we will promote and affirm this excellence. We will also actively challenge and reject mediocrity.

We will affirm excellence through performance reward for teachers, for schools, universities and colleges.

We will also act more decisively against under-performance and provide necessary support where disadvantage or inequity exists.

All the departments of education will have to substantially improve their performance. Faster action on agreed priorities and effective support and monitoring of the system will be strengthened.

Chairperson, while we remain seriously concerned at our failings we are able to report progress in regard to the priorities set out for 2006/07.

In 2006, our call to expand access to schooling received concerted attention. We addressed the exclusion of the poorest from our schools.

In 2006 over two million learners (20%) benefited from the pilot introduction of our no-fee schools policy.

In 2007 over five million learners (40%) will benefit from improved funding and freedom from the threat of exclusion.

There have been worrying inadequacies in the introduction of our complex quintile based policy, but the general reports across the system indicate that parents and many teachers regard the policy as a welcome development.

In the 2007 financial year, we will continue to monitor and refine implementation to ensure that schools and learners benefit from the no fee policy. It is clear that there are still administrative gaps to be ironed out. Some schools have also complained that they face a decline in annual income. It was never the intention to reduce income. Rather beneficiary schools should receive increased funding.

The planning branch is working with provincial departments to address the reported failures in our execution of the policy.

All honest commentators confirm that this policy is an important step toward achieving our government's goals of equity in access and quality.

While the policy is a welcome development, the time may have arrived for South Africa to offer all children free primary education in law. This would place us in step with modern democracies worldwide.

That subject is an aspect Parliament could reflect on in detail.

A new challenge has emerged in the process of implementing the policy. Several schools that are in close proximity to no fee schools do not benefit from the policy. Furthermore, there are fee-charging schools that admit hundreds of poor learners, exempt them in terms of our policy and receive no compensatory support from the departments. We have to devise strategies and policy for assisting such schools. These are not wealthy schools, they serve poor communities and are deserving of consideration.

In 2006, we introduced the Quids-Up for the upliftment of schools. The programme was not given the attention we had anticipated in provincial budgets last year. As honourable colleagues are aware provinces determine their own allocations and while we may agree priority areas they are not always funded. However, this year the improvement strategy will be supported and acted upon in all provinces. The targeted poorest schools will receive additional resources and development support. Just over R2 billion has been allocated to this programme over the 2007 Medium Term Expenditure Framework (MTEF).

The House will recall that last year we reported on our plans in regard to the FET college sector. Very positive progress has been made. The new programmes in key skills and economic sectors have been introduced, the college recapitalisation plans have been developed, approved and funded for all 50 colleges. Colleges have new modern information and communication technology (ICT) facilities and many are finalising their new governance structures. We have also published policy on the new National Certificate (NC) Vocational.

We announced last year that in order to respond to the priorities agreed in the Joint Initiative for Priority Skills Acquisition (JIPSA) processes we should aim to admit 25 000 students to the new 11 programmes developed in partnership with industry and key practitioners. We are pleased to report that we have exceeded our target of 25 000 new admissions.

I am also pleased to report a significant agreement with the construction sector. Two centres of excellence in this field will be set up at Tshwane North and North link colleges, 100 funded students will be enrolled this year growing to a 1 000 students in construction skills training in the next five years. The industry will also provide workplace experience for all the students.

Another priority was the expansion of the EMIS through the development of the learners unit record information system and the improvement of human resource systems. This project continues to be a focus for this financial year.

Significant progress has been made in the roll out of the South African Schools Administration (SA-SAMS). This school administration system is maintained by the Department and all provinces have adopted it.

The Department undertook its first ever independent audit of the provision of data by public schools annually in its snap and annual survey. The pilot indicates that some schools are inflating data in respect of registered learners, while some schools do not keep any records whatsoever. Stringent measures will be taken to ensure the provision of reliable information. And we will act against dishonest school managers.

In 2006, provincial ECD budgets increased by more than 40% and in 2007 there is a further increase of more than 40%. This increase is off a low base but the sector and grade R in particular is a priority now and in the immediate future.

Our performance in the ECD domain is one of our poor performance areas. We need to speed up implementation of the integrated plan and consider a sharper review of the current allocation of responsibility for this important part of education. We will strengthen our collaboration with health and social development in an effort to give effect to wider access to quality ECD opportunities.

Chairperson, the Department's direct budget is R16 billion this year. Of this R16 billion, universities receive R13,3 billion. This is an increase of R1,5 billion (13%) over 2006. It is a substantial budget increase.

The R13,3 billion is composed of three main items: block grants, student loans, and merger funds. The largest item is R11,3 billion for block grants. This R11,3 billion is an increase of R1,08 billion (10,6%) over 2006. The second largest item is R1,3 billion for student loans. This R1,3 billion is an increase of R404,7 million (44,5%) over 2006. Of this R404,7 increase, R120 million will be used for teacher bursaries, and R100 million for FET college bursaries. The last item is R600 million for university mergers. By the end of next year R3,1 billion will have been allocated to mergers since commencing with the restructuring process in 2001.

Chairperson, this budget allocates significant new funds into higher education (HE) more than R2 billion over the 2007 MTEF, the funds will support infrastructure improvement on many campuses, improve academic salaries and focus attention on academic support.

But this is not all. We have made more funds available for institutional infrastructure improvement from old funds. Earmarked funds have already been allocated to individual universities for particular initiatives, following extensive joint discussions on student enrolment planning and outputs.

These initiatives include refurbishing existing and building new academic and support buildings, student residences, improving teaching and learning equipment and library facilities particularly at newly merged historically disadvantaged institutions.

In fact over the four years 2006 to 2009 the total funds provided for infrastructure improvement amount to over R4 billion.

Chairperson, I am sure that members will agree that this represents a welcome and absolutely necessary injection of resources into the public HE system. We have made it clear that the earmarked funds must be used in focused and accountable ways, so that they contribute to improved student outcomes and support us in achieving our national human resource development priorities.

The student enrolment planning process that we referred to last year has been finalised. We have an agreed plan for the growth of HE. We believe the plan to grow from 738 000 students in 2005 to 820 000 by 2010 creates the basis for a more efficient and coherent system of HE.

Growth in all disciplines has been accepted as part of the plan. However, the greatest expansion will be in the fields of SET. These are key disciplines for knowledge creation, innovation and human resource development and we will invest in them to ensure that we succeed in expanding success in these disciplines.

A key focus over the next few years will be on well-designed academic development programmes and the provision of student support services on all campuses with a view to enhancing academic success.

The merger processes are reaching finality in most of the institutions. I have now approved all but three of the institutional operating plans of the new universities and the remainder should be concluded within this financial year.

Several of the merged institutions have taken deliberate steps to create new institutions with a single shared identity. For some, however, unity of purpose and full shared collaboration continue to seem elusive. We continue to engage with universities to support the process of developing stronger more able academic institutions in South Africa.

Our universities must be congratulated for the role they are playing in expanding graduate success and human resource development in Southern African Development Community (SADC) and the whole of Africa. We have over 55 000 students in our universities from the rest of Africa.

One of the elusive objectives has proven to be the development of niche excellence and differentiation in our system. New institutions have found themselves under pressure to continue offering old, unattractive programmes that are not supported by skilled and competent academic practitioners.

The support given to the government JIPSA process by vice chancellors and deans of schools of engineering has supported the Department in developing a plan to expand access and success in engineering. Last year over R48 million was allocated to faculties of engineering across the country. We plan to develop a similar partnership with universities of technology.

One of the challenges we still face is that of modernising and refreshing programme structure and content (the curriculum) of all programmes in the university sector. The seeming reluctance to address curriculum reform is a puzzle.

Student financial aid and widening access to poor talented students is also an area that we are attending to. All loan repayees are congratulated for their service to South Africa and its youth. Their contribution to creating new opportunities for young people, their integrity as exhibited by their repayment, all serve to confirm that we have young graduates in South Africa who fully understand each individual's responsibility for giving life to a truly developmental State.

It has to be said that not all practice in the sector is positive. The fee levels at many institutions continue to be prohibitive. I trust that the improvement in state funding will lead to a sectoral review of fee levels.

It has been distressing to note and act on serious if not criminal governance and fiduciary lapses at some of our institutions.

Some of our institution leaders have treated public finances as their personal accounts. Others have failed to give institutional leadership. In some institutions academics appear to have little pride in original intellectual work, plagiarism and unscholarly academic practices do not enhance the profile of the sector and Higher Education South Africa (HESA) must act speedily to address these lapses and avoid state intrusion in academic affairs.

The financial lapses have convinced me that stronger objective oversight mechanisms must be established to protect public finances and the reputations of honest hard working vice chancellors and academics. The work that is being done by the Council for HE on regulation and autonomy in HE will assist us in determining further action.

I have an exciting new project to announce today, a project that will assist us to widen access to further and HE.

More and more people in our country aspire to enter post secondary education. We need to create diverse and flexible mechanisms to support this demand. A significant barrier to access has been financial need. The National Students Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS) has provided welcome relief, but more is needed to address gaps in funding.

It's not just a social need to give more people from more diverse backgrounds access to HE. It's an economic necessity.

We have identified an intervention that we believe will serve this expanded need. I am pleased to announce this exciting response. It is a scheme that will allow South Africans an opportunity to plan and save for the post secondary education of their children.

It will be called the Fundisa Fund. It is a public-private partnership (PPP) between the Department and the Association of Collective Investments. The scheme is a long-term collective investment in which the State will match the regular monthly saving a parent/s invests for their child's education at university or FET college. The intention is to encourage education saving and provide state support to assist families that can put aside small amounts for future education purposes. The fund encourages long term saving for education and it encourages access to further or university education.

I'm pleased to be able to announce today's launch of a three-year pilot of the Fundisa Fund, classified as a domestic fixed interest income category fund, managed by the Association of Collective Investments in partnership with NSFAS.

When I met with the representatives of the Association of Collective Investments, I agreed to the partnership on condition that they secure seed contributions to Fundisa from the private sector. I'm pleased to inform you that this has indeed happened and a number of pledges have been made.

The members of the Association of Collective Investments will also cover all the administrative and advocacy costs of the pilot.

From the side of government, I'm happy to report that the NSFAS board has agreed to set aside a sum of R20 million towards the matching grant component of Fundisa.

If the pilot scheme is a success we'll be able to expand Fundisa's reach. We will not see the impact of Fundisa for many years but when children begin to redeem their Fundisa funds we'll be able to see how far sighted we've been. In future, I hope that qualifying families will be able to draw on a combination of their Fundisa savings and NSFAS funding to support their children's HE. It is a future that will bring new hope to many of our people.

I return now to the theme of affirming excellence. In 2007, we intend to focus on expanding success and enhancing quality in education practice, policy and our own administration.

Several initiatives have been introduced in this financial year as our concrete action on various priorities.

The 2007 budget provides R700 million for teacher bursaries over the next three years, the first R120 million of which has been fully committed for 3 000 student teachers in the Fundza Lushaka Bursary Programme.

The Fundza Lushaka programme gives preference to students who come from rural areas and to students who want to train in priority subject and learning areas where teachers are in short supply such as mathematics, science, technology (including ICT) and indigenous languages, English and teaching in the foundation phase.

The Framework for Teacher Development has been declared policy. It is designed to meet the need of developing a committed competent core of education professionals for a democratic South Africa. It provides an overall strategy for the recruitment, retention and professional development of teachers.

Excellence has been noted in thousands of our teachers. I recognise here today the winners of the 2005 and 2006 Lifetime Achievement Awards, Mrs Mantwa Apane and Mrs Matshediso Mashishi respectively. They represent those teachers who are deserving of performance reward and recognition for professional conduct.

The introduction of R600 million for bursaries (R100 million this year) in the FET college sector is a further positive development in education.

The most encouraging development in this year is the mass literacy campaign that will be implemented from 2008.

The Ministerial Committee has tabled its report, a Secretariat is working hard on the planning for implementation in 2008. We acknowledge with great thanks the support and assistance that we have received from our comrades in Cuba in this process.

This campaign is set to infuse new energy focus and purpose into Adult Basic Education and Training (ABET).

To this end our budget is boosted by a further R850 million for a step up in our ABET programmes (R20 million of which is available this year for planning purposes).

We will not neglect our promise to address the basic foundation skills for learning, reading, writing and numeracy.

Our literacy development and reading improvement strategy continues to be a firm focus. This year we introduce Early Grade Reading Assessment to assist teachers in supporting learning. You will have seen the bags branded with "Drop all and Read". They are part of our campaign to encourage children to read. I acknowledge the great support in this field of the READ organisation, as well as interventions such as the rally to read project.

In 2008 we will have our third national systemic evaluation, provinces must intensify support to teachers for teaching reading skills. The curriculum myth that ignored reading must be challenged and overturned. Our schools and teachers must perform better in the evaluation of 2008.

These, Chairperson, are some of the key priorities we intend to act on to ensure that we affirm, promote and inculcate excellence and root out mediocrity.

In closing, I wish to stress that we will continue to work with colleagues in other ministries and departments to extend success in collaboration that was achieved in 2006. Colleagues in treasury, public works, water affairs and forestry, minerals and energy and of course labour and science and technology have all contributed to our programmes and objectives. I convey my thanks to them.

Thanks too to the hardworking Director-General, Duncan Hindle, the deputy directors-general (DDGs) and all officials in the Department. Thanks too to Deputy Minister Surty, the staff in the Ministry, the chair of the portfolio committee and honourable members and last but not least my husband and our children for their tolerance and patience. I commend the vote to the House in the hope that honourable members will support it.

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