

RESPONSE

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Continuity at Basic Education

What does it mean for the education sector that Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga and her deputy, Enver Surty, have retained their portfolios in President Zuma's new cabinet? And was the re-appointment due to Ms Motshekga's being the leader of the ANC's Women's League; or is it a nod to the fact that she did a relatively good job over the last five years? Sentiment about the efficacy of Minister Motshekga's tenure ranges between a knee-jerk 'no' and – among those with a deeper knowledge of education – a cautious 'yes'.

Those who argue that her tenure was less than successful cite the textbook debacle in Limpopo, and the foot-dragging – and subsequent court battles – over publication of the school infrastructure norms and standards. In addition, the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative was meant to fix 500 dilapidated schools by 2015, but since 2011, only 49 schools have been renovated, while another 50 are in the early stages of rebuildingⁱ. There were also the numerous occasions her department had to be reminded by the courts about its obligations to provide pupils with their right to a basic education in terms of section 29(1)(a) of the Constitution.

Those who are in the cautious 'yes' camp argue that not all of education's failings can be blamed on the Minister. The fact that the Democratic Alliance's Helen Zille came to her defence in the dispute with the NGO Equal Education over the infrastructure norms and standards says a lot. Ms Zille said, *'we have never experienced a minister like Angie who knows what the hell needs to be done, has the guts to do it, and then has to do it on her own.'*ⁱⁱ The Federation of Governing Bodies of SA Schools has welcomed Minister Motshekga's reappointment, noting that she was *'the first education minister who was prepared to admit to mistakes and attempted to make improvements.'*ⁱⁱⁱ

And, despite their previous disagreements, Equal Education has also welcomed the reappointments. During the minister's tenure, her department made strides in improving the national pass rate, perhaps one of its biggest milestones being the matric class of 2013's pass rate of 78.2%. In 2009, the rate was 62%. It was also during Minister Motshekga's tenure that two significant policy initiatives were given impetus: the introduction of an African language at all schools, and a draft policy to ensure that Grade R becomes part of formal schooling. She also recently instigated a probe into the 'posts for sale' racketeering allegations levelled against members of the powerful SA Democratic Teachers' Union. There were reports that SADTU members were selling principal and deputy principal positions at schools for upwards of R30 000 each. The probe is a bold move, since many argue that the union's reach in education is deep. It may also signal that the governing party is ready to loosen the grip of the union on education.

If it succeeds, the formation of the National Education Collaborative Trust, a joint government/business initiative, may prove to be the intervention that brings meaningful change to

education. Both Minister Motshekga and Deputy Minister Enver Surty are actively involved in this, another reason why their retention makes sense.

Whatever the reason for her retention in this key portfolio, the minister and her affable deputy will have to dig deep to face education's challenges with the necessary political will, especially in dealing with the administrative shortcoming in certain provincial departments, and above all with SADTU. On the positive side, both the minister and the deputy minister know the needs and challenges of basic education and their re-appointment means that business can continue without the kind of time-lag that would have accompanied the appointment of a new ministerial team. In this respect, though, there is one important proviso: the key position of Director General is currently vacant, and it is crucial that whoever is appointed to this post must be someone who is able to assist the political heads of the department in resolving the many challenges faced by basic education.

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ⁱ <http://www.enca.com/should-angie-stay-or-should-she-go>

ⁱⁱ Carien Du Plessis (2013): Zille: Angie is doing a good job. City Press online: <http://www.citypress.co.za/politics/zille-angie-is-doing-a-good-job/>

ⁱⁱⁱ The Citizen (2014): Motshekga's reappointment welcomed. <http://citizen.co.za/184555/motshekgas-re-appointment-welcomed/>