RURAL EDUCATION: ADDRESSING THE CHALLENGES

Good morning everyone.

It gives me great pleasure to participate in this roundtable and to share with you, from the perspective of DBE, the current status of Rural Education and work that has been done to deal with the challenges faced by rural communities and education in general and rural schools in particular. I will then present to you the key elements of our proposed plans that have a specific focus on Rural Education.

CURRENT STATUS

Before we even talk about challenges experienced by Rural Education we need to understand the root causes of these challenges. The answer emanates from our understanding of what the term ‘rural’ means in South Africa and is best understood by reviewing the historical journey the country has traversed.

In South Africa there is no single definition of ‘rural’.

Rurality is characterised by diverse contexts and the Ministerial Committee on Rural Education gave us a very broad definition. The term ‘rural’ can refer to areas that consist of the many tribal lands controlled by traditional leaders, and whilst ‘rural’ refers to settings that are sparsely populated and where agriculture is the major means of economic activity, the definition could be expanded to include areas of dense settlement created by colonial and apartheid-driven land settlements. This means that ‘Rural’ in our context cannot only be understood as a geographical location but must also be understood against the backdrop of the historical settlement policies of Apartheid, colonial dispossession, resettlement and systemic exclusion from economic opportunity.

It is because of this history that South Africans still continue to experience the effects of immense inequalities and socio-economic challenges which are particularly intense in rural areas. These challenges include low socio-economic status characterised by poor and dysfunctional family life, physical paucity of resources and material goods, unemployment, lack of fiscal power and chronic exposure to inadequate infrastructure. Unfortunately, these conditions manifest most obviously in the rural school situation and massively influence the impact of schooling provision.
The historical route of rural education also has great influence on what is happening in our schools. The history of education of the pre-democratic era left deep-rooted challenges for rural schools. Emerging Voices (2005) gives an account of rural school situation under Apartheid. Africans living in rural areas were denied educational opportunities to an even greater extent than those in urban areas. Most rural schools had inadequate resources with poor equipment and books; poor quality infrastructure characterised by mud schools and dilapidated buildings; overcrowded classrooms; unqualified and under-qualified teachers and lack of basic necessities like electricity, decent sanitation and running, potable water. Moreover, children walked long distances to school

Consequently, drop-out and repetition rates were high; opportunities for secondary education were scarce, and a large number of children did not attend school at all. This historical and geographical context in South Africa still has major effects on the quality of education in rural schools today.

Despite significant education reform and a litany of monetary interventions by government, rural schools in South Africa are still performing below set standards for education. A good example is that in the last three years, the bottom three provinces in our matric results were the former homelands in the provinces considered to be highly rural, namely Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal and Limpopo.

So what is the work that DBE has done to reduce the disparities between rich and the poor?

The post-apartheid education reforms in South Africa were informed by an agenda which mainly focused on equity and redress. The main aim of the new education system was to deliver its political and educational mandates by ensuring that the educational imbalances of the past are redressed, and that equal educational opportunities are provided for all sections of the population, regardless of race or geographical location.

In line with the principles of the post-apartheid education system the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has undertaken several initiatives aimed at improving the quality of education in previously disadvantaged schools, including rural schools. One of the major initiatives to support rural schools was the establishment of a Ministerial Committee on Rural Education in 2005. This committee was tasked with producing a report containing practical recommendations to help the basic education sector to develop an integrated multi-faceted plan of action for improving the quality of schooling in rural areas. The committee came up with
eighty (80) recommendations. They foregrounded Poverty as the single most dominant characteristic of rural schooling and proposed increasing funding as the most obvious intervention to address the crisis in rural schools.

Many pro-poor amendments, interventions, projects and programmes aimed at promoting equity and strengthening support to previously disadvantaged schools have been introduced as a response to these recommendations.

- Measures to equalise and redress funding in all schools have been introduced. These include a no-fee schooling policy which saw all rural schools being no-fee schools. To date almost 9 million learners benefit from this policy.
- Another major intervention was closing the resource gap between schools by providing more Learning, Teaching and Support Material (LTSM) to poor schools; The LTSM policy was introduced to ensure that all the injustices and inequalities of the past, with regards to learner support, are addressed. The policy ensures production and selection of quality LTSM, and makes such available to all learners in public schools.
- Through the Accelerated Schools Infrastructure Delivery Initiative (ASIDI) the DBE continues to eradicate unsafe and mud schools. To date 109 new schools have been built, 342 schools have received water for the first time, and 351 schools have received decent sanitation for the first time and 288 schools have been connected to electricity for the first time. As a result of improved infrastructure, a higher proportion of children in rural areas are accessing decent classroom facilities.
- DBE also, provides school nutrition through the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). More than 9 million learners benefit from this, the majority of whom attend rural schools.
- Rural schools have struggled to recruit and retain great teachers. Through the Funza Lushaka Bursary Programme, young people are supported to undertake degrees in education and results in targeted teacher placement in rural schools to deal with teacher shortage in these schools.
- To support schools with multi-grade classes DBE has developed a Toolkit and trained subject advisors on the use of the Toolkit. The training of teachers in provinces has begun and the implementation is planned for January 2016.

We acknowledge that a lot has been done but more work still needs to be done.
DBE has placed specific focus on rural education. A new Directorate was established in 2015 which will develop and coordinate a multi-disciplinary approach to address the challenges still present in rural schools.

The first plan of the RE Directorate was to create a database of rural schools by conducting audits and produce reports on rural school teachers; programmes aimed at teacher development in rural schools; ICT infra-structure and ICT skills for rural school teachers; schools providing scholar transport; rural education structures and stakeholder bodies at national/provincial levels; and national and provincial programmes currently being implemented to improve the quality of education in rural schools. We also planned to make an analysis of learner performance in rural schools so as to develop informed, highly specific and pinpoint targeted interventions. The primary questions are, “how can we best serve our rural learners?” and “what can we do to develop context specific interventions?” The plan was now to move from the generalised pro-poor interventions to micro-level interventions, tailor made for rural schools.

One factor that emerged strongly during the rural education ministerial committee’s consultation process was the great diversity of rural areas. The rural areas of each province have different demographics, geographies, economies and cultures that shape the lives of rural people in fundamentally different ways.

To strengthen the support to rural schools there is a need for Rural Education Policy/Regulations which will add depth to our understanding of rural schools and improve our approach to transforming these schools by:

- Giving a clear direction in what the sector should advocate and promote in pursuit of closing the disparities between rural schools and urban schools as well as within rural schools; and
- Giving guidance to the development of context-specific, relevant and sustainable strategies to deal with the monumental challenges in rural schools.

We needed a solution on what will assist the sector to create a data bank for collecting and disseminating information on rural schools and to manage, monitor and support activities
within the sector that relate to rural education including general curriculum, assessment, teacher development, Human Resource Management, NSNP, learner transport, infrastructure development, implementation of SASA Section 24 agreements and school support services.

So what are the lessons learnt from other countries?

**In America**, for example, there is clear classification of rural schools by the National Center on Education Statistics (NCES) which defines rural schools and assigns them to the three subcategories: Rural “fringe” areas, rural “distant” areas and rural “remote” areas.

These classifications are used in the implementation of the policies that are specific for rural schools like the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and Rural Education Achievement Program (REAP).

In Scotland the SCHOOLS (CONSULTATION) (SCOTLAND) ACT OF 2010 makes special provision for rural schools and designates Rural Schools. It gives clear stipulations regarding the designation of schools by such as consideration of factors such as the size of the population of the community where the school is located and the geographical circumstances of that community, including remoteness or inaccessibility.

In Japan, the PROMOTION OF EDUCATION IN REMOTE AREAS ACT of 1954 aims to reduce disparities in education between isolated and non-isolated areas and to improve the quality of educational standards in these schools.

This Act gives a

- A clear definition of what a school in remote and isolated areas is and criteria to calculate the degree of isolation.

- These designated schools are classified into five grades according to the points of remoteness to assist in the implementation of strategies to support these schools, for example, a special allowance for teachers who work in these schools to receive a salary supplement of between 5 and 25% depending on the classified grade of the schools; and

- The Act clearly defines the role of the Ministry, Prefectural (Provincial) and Municipal Boards of Education in promoting education in these areas;
The starting point of the DBE’s focused attention on rural education is the urgent development of coherent, appropriate and relevant Rural Education Policies and Regulations which will:

- Give a clear definition of a ‘rural school’;
- Designate and classify rural schools;
- Define clearly the roles and responsibilities of the DBE, PEDs and districts in relation to support provided to rural schools,

This work will be done through consultation with rural education specialists, researchers and rural communities.

Rural Education is a societal issue that requires us to work as a responsive collective that both hears and heeds the voices of rural people.

THANK YOU