

NATIONAL ASSEMBLY

FOR WRITTEN REPLY QUESTION 1809

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Ms H Weber to ask the Minister of Education:

- (1) Whether she has taken any action with regard to the challenge of educating children with physical disabilities by initiating the construction and reconstruction of schools; if not, why not; if so, what steps are being taken with regard to ramps and the availability of toilets in this regard;
- (2) whether the construction of ramps and toilets has been put out on tender with explicit regulations regarding the slope of ramps and the size of the toilets; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details;
- (3) whether she intends ensuring that all schools for the disabled are equipped to teach learners up to grade 12; if not, why not; if so, what is the time-frame for achieving this;
- (4) whether she is taking any steps to ensure that schools for the severely disabled obtain teaching aids such as computers and augmentative readers; if not, why not; if so, (a) what steps and (b) what is the time-frame?

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REPLY:

(1) The Ministry of Education and provincial departments have taken steps to address the education of children with physical disabilities by developing new schools and upgrading of existing ones to comply with national building regulations in terms of access.

All new schools are now designed with disabled learners in mind. The provision of ramps, ablution blocks with an identified toilet for the disabled (including the required equipment), access and mobility within the site are part of the design criteria. Within existing schools, the provision of ramps and disabled toilets is part of the infrastructure programme that the provincial departments of education are implementing within their infrastructure capital budget allocation.

The national audit of all public schools, which is currently underway, will help identify infrastructure currently available for learners and educators with disabilities.

The Department of Education is also upgrading 30 designated primary schools situated in poor communities to become full-service schools. The purpose of the conversion process is to ensure that these schools will be equipped, both in relation to building features and specialised equipment and assistive devices, to accommodate a full range of learning needs of children with disabilities.

Finally, a comprehensive audit on physical conditions in schools and equipment that is available was conducted by the Department of Education in 2002. The findings of the audit have informed a comprehensive intervention plan that was approved by the Council of Education Ministers in June 2005 and is currently being implemented in the provinces.

(2) In line with government procurement processes, all infrastructure programmes are put out on tender. Our tender documentations include all the details and specifications of the scope of work that is required at the identified school. Disability needs would therefore be included as a deliverable and identified in the tender documentation.

Specifications for ramps and disability toilets are stipulated by the requirements of the National Building Regulations for access to buildings.

(3) Traditionally, schools for the physically disabled have enrolled learners right up to Grade 12. In implementing the new curriculum, the Department of Education has ensured that the curriculum is sufficiently flexible to accommodate the learning needs of all learners. In this regard, there is a special focus on ensuring the availability of learning and teaching material in braille and large print for learners with sight impairment. The training of educators in the use of braille is already receiving special attention.

(4) The drive to provide equipment for learners with disabilities is ongoing. In 2003 to 2004, 30 schools for visually impaired and blind learners were equipped with high-quality computers and Braille printers. This process is now being extended to cover other learner needs, including augmentative communication devices. In 2006/7, 30 full-service schools will be provided with resources and equipment to meet the needs of learners with disabilities. These will include computers, assistive devices and other specialized equipment. Once the new funding norms for inclusive education are in place, all special schools and full-service schools will have access to the relevant support devices for learners with severe and complex disabilities.