

# **SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MS. SIVIWE GWARUBE, ON THE NATIONAL ANNOUNCEMENT OF THE SAFE INITIATIVE BACKLOG ERADICATION | 4 APRIL 2025**

Programme Director,  
MEC for Education in the Limpopo province, Ms Lerule-Ramakhanya,  
Senior Management from both the National and Provincial Spheres,  
School Governing Bodies,  
Teacher Unions,  
Religious and Traditional Leaders,  
Ladies and Gentlemen,  
Good morning.

Today is a moment of reckoning—one where we must reflect on the power of ambition in governance, acknowledge our past failures, and set our sights on the future.

Today, I will update the people of South Africa on what the Department has achieved in eradicating identified pit toilets under the Sanitation Appropriate for Education (SAFE) Initiative.

From the outset, I must acknowledge that while we have reached a notable milestone, today is also a moment of great humility and even greater accountability from us as the Government.

## **The Origins of the SAFE Initiative and the Children We Lost**

Ladies and Gentlemen,

The SAFE Initiative was born out of tragedy. We cannot speak of this project without remembering the children who lost their lives in pit toilets.

We remember five-year-old Michael Komape, who drowned in a pit latrine in Limpopo. We remember Lumka Mkhethwa and Langalam Viki from the Eastern Cape, who suffered the same terrible fate in 2018.

Their deaths were not just accidents; they were failures of the state, failures of a system that allowed such conditions to persist in the first place.

These children should have been safe at school.

Their names must never be forgotten, and their memories must remind us of why we embarked on this journey to eradicate undignified and unsafe pit toilets.

## **The Power of Ambitious Targets in Government**

In this context, governments must be bold in addressing seemingly intractable challenges - each of you deserves nothing less.

We must not only set ambitious targets but also take action which drives us beyond what we previously considered possible.

When we announced the deadline of 31 March 2025 for the eradication of the identified pit toilets under the SAFE Initiative, the scale of the challenge was daunting, with countless schools across the country still relying on unsafe, undignified pit toilets—facilities that were not only unsanitary but, in some cases, deadly.

Critics called the initiative unrealistic. Understandably, some suggested that incrementally addressing the challenge over generations was the only way to go.

But we must never fall into the trap of low expectations - particularly regarding our children's lives.

Our country finds itself where it is today, with a stagnant economy, extremely high unemployment rates, bouts of load-shedding, water-shedding, potholes, rampant crime and corruption, amongst many other ills, all because of a culture of low expectations.

This Government must dare to dream bigger, act faster, and solve problems once considered intractable.

### **The Final Tally: 96% of SAFE Schools Now Free of Pit Toilets**

**Gauteng, Northern Cape and Western Cape** had no pit-toilets identified in the 2018 Audit.

**North West** had 72 and they have eradicated all 72, achieving a 100% eradication rate.

**Mpumalanga** had 111 and they have eradicated 100%

**Free State** had 105 identified schools with pit-toilets, 100% has been eradicated

**Limpopo** had 391, they have eradicated 390, achieving 99,74%. Only 1 remains.

**KZN** had 1254 schools identified by the 2018 audit, 1209 were eradicated, 45 still remain. This translated to an eradication rate of 96,4%

**Eastern Cape** had 1439, it eradicated 1343, 96 remain. 93,3% eradication.

Today, it is my duty to announce that of the pit toilets identified in the SAFE Initiative's 2018 audit, as of 31 March 2025, we have eradicated 96%.

This is significant progress from 7 years ago when Government identified nearly 3372 schools across the country which relied on these dangerous structures. Today, we have just 141 of those identified toilets left.

This is an achievement of scale, but it is not a victory.

I am well aware that the 2018 data for the SAFE Initiative may not be complete and, therefore, may not account for pit toilets may still exist in some of our schools but for a number of reasons were missed by the audit. While we have made extraordinary progress in replacing pit toilets with appropriate sanitation facilities, we must acknowledge that the job is not done.

## **Taking Responsibility and Apologising to South Africans**

South Africans,

Our goal was clear: to ensure 100% eradication of the identified pit toilets backlog identified under the SAFE Initiative. We came very close, but we came 4% short.

While we have come incredibly far, the fact remains that 141 of the schools identified under the SAFE Initiative still have unsafe toilets. However, I take comfort in the fact that 90 out of the 141 will be completed in April, May and June, therefore by July 2025 we will be over 98% completion rate and we will be within touching distance of 100% eradication of the SAFE Initiative backlog.

I want to assure the nation that we are doubling our efforts to ensure that these final numbers are urgently completed.

## **Terminating Delayed Private Donor Projects and Allocating Them to Provinces**

In the past, one of our persistent challenges under the SAFE Initiative concerned weak implementation capacity. While provinces received support from private donors who generously offered to assist in eradicating pit latrines, ultimately, too many projects failed to reach completion.

While the Department achieved a 96% completion rate, the donor projects unfortunately only achieved a 74% completion rate.

I am incredibly proud of the partnerships we are forming with the private sector, and we will continue to do so. Still, we must ensure that efforts are directed appropriately and achieve results.

Therefore, in the future, stalled donor projects will be transferred to the provincial education departments, which will ensure that construction is completed without further delay.

The reasons for delays on the other projects include inclement weather, with various part of the Eastern Cape and KZN experiencing heavy rains leading to flooding and rural roads being washed away. This make certain villages inaccessible to contractors. In the built environment, a week of rain means 2 week of stoppages. With the unusually high amount of rain we have been experiencing, the delays have been even longer.

Our sites have also been victims of the nefarious activities of the construction mafia, who have wreaked havoc in both private and public sector sites across the country. When contractors workers face incidents of violence, the department must pull them out to prioritise their safety to avoid loss of limb and life.

The programme has also had several instances of poor contractor performance, which lead us to terminate their contracts as part of consequence management. Due process must however be followed to replace poor performing contractors, which means starting the procurement process from scratch, this inevitable adds to the delays in completing projects.

## **A New Audit: Ensuring No School is Left Behind**

Fellow South African, in 2018, the Department conducted an audit to determine how many pit toilets needed to be eradicated. However, as we near the end of this process, we must go further and deepen our efforts.

To that end, working with the Department of Basic Education, we are working towards a new audit to ensure that any schools missed in the initial count are identified and included.

While this requires significant funding that is not readily available through the public fiscus, we need to be resourceful, drawing on the contributions of civil society and our corporate and social partners, to ensure that we build an accurate database that is complete and that will enable us to ensure that every learner in this country can access safe and dignified sanitation facilities while they are at school.

As we take these urgent steps, members of the public can assist us in identifying any pit toilets that our audits could have missed or which could have sprung up after the 2018 audit.

You can report any remaining pit toilets through our online app at [safeschools.gov.za](https://safeschools.gov.za).

We have received 166 reports from the public on the app; while some of the reported schools are not necessarily pit toilets but rather schools with unmaintained toilets, this partnership with school communities is a step in the right direction.

We therefore encourage every school and community to participate in this effort to close the final gap. If you see a pit toilet in a school, please alert the Department through [safeschools.gov.za](https://safeschools.gov.za).

## **Maintaining the Toilets We Have Built**

Colleagues,

Building safe and hygienic toilets is only half the battle. If we do not maintain them, we will return to square one in a few years. We have seen too many cases where new infrastructure deteriorates because of a lack of maintenance.

As part of our 2024 Guidelines on Infrastructure Maintenance, schools must prioritise toilet upkeep. Maintenance budgets must be ring-fenced, in line with the 80/20 principle (which requires Provincial Education Departments to spend 20% of their budgets on non-personnel items, like school infrastructure development and maintenance).

Furthermore, district officials, school principals and School Governing Bodies need to be held accountable for ensuring that school facilities, including school sanitation facilities, are well-maintained and functional so that these facilities can remain safe and dignified spaces for our learners.

But maintenance is not just about sanitation — it is also about safety. Toilets in schools have, tragically, become sites of misconduct. Sexual assaults, bullying and even rapes often happen in school toilets. This is an issue we must confront directly.

I am therefore calling on all district officials, all school principals and all School Governing Bodies to take this issue seriously. Toilets must be adequately monitored and well managed if they are to be places of safety. Learners must feel safe using these facilities. And where safety concerns are raised, we must act decisively.

This requires our district and circuit officials to check the state of school toilets during every school visit and to ensure that a plan is in place between the provincial education department and the school to address issues that are identified.

This requires our school principals, who are responsible for the management of our schools, to ensure that staff are deployed to monitor and manage how school toilets are used and maintained; this requires School Governing Bodies to put in place policies and pursue projects that ensure that the school's sanitation facilities are appropriately maintained and managed.

The DBE is also implementing the National School Hygiene Programme (NSHP) with Unilever which comprises an in-school 21-day hygiene programme integrated into the Life Orientation subject to instil lifelong hygiene habits, targeting grade 1 learners in all public primary schools.

This initiative reinforces daily hygiene routines, encouraging learners to take responsibility for maintaining cleanliness in their school environment.

The DBE is currently developing strategies to ensure that all schools follow procedures and guidelines that ensure school sanitation facilities are safe and hygienic, institutionalising practices that maximise safety and hygiene.

The DBE is also currently working with key stakeholders, including the Departments of Health and Water & Sanitation and other partners, including Unilever, GIZ, UNICEF, and PILO, to develop guidelines and tools based on international best practices, that will empower school management teams and School Governing Bodies to consistently and rigorously manage and monitor sanitation facilities in our public schools.

This will include a self-assessment tool that will help all stakeholders identify and act on issues as and when they arise. The system was tested on a pilot basis in 26 model primary schools in Gqeberha, with 18 completing the self-assessment.

The results highlighted the importance of regular sanitation checks, as many staff and School Governing Body (SGB) members had never inspected learner toilet facilities before this process.

These pilots are now being tracked using a three-star approach to measure progress. Building toilets is half the battle won, keeping them clean, functional and safe is a daily effort. I will report on this further in due course.

## **A Future of Dignity and Safety for Every Learner**

In conclusion,

This initiative has taught me important lessons. It has shown me that Government can deliver when it commits itself to a clear and ambitious goal. It has shown us that bold targets are necessary to

move South Africa forward. But it has also shown us that we cannot rest until every school in this country is a safe and dignified place for learning.

We have come far, but we are not finished. Our children deserve better.

Let us finish what we started. Let us ensure that no learner ever again has to rely on dangerous toilets. And let us work together to build an education system that is not only functional but also safe, dignified and enabling for success.