Karen Lotter

“A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to see them from their homes in their own houses. When we gather together in the moonlit village...” — Chinua Achebe, Things Fall Apart

KwaZulu-Natal Education MEC Senzo Mchunu, presented an allocated budget of R17,028-billion for the 2013/14 financial year to the provincial legislature in Pietermaritzburg. His motto is “Dedicated to Service and Performance” and his slogan is “This may sound like a typical slogan to some, but those who know this quiet and humble man know that he means every word of it.”

Mchunu is not a noisy ostentatious politician. He is a former teacher who cares deeply about the state of education and the lives of the hands-on people who thinks outside the box to find solutions to the many challenges in the KwaZulu-Natal education system.

He discussed the steady progress made by the province despite the work-to-rule by the South African Democratic Teachers Union. Even with the challenges of work-to-rule unions, the province continued to progress on the flow of the national guidelines. He also talked about issues among learners, such as hunger, gang violence, sporadic strikes and satanic practices which are all social ills that take toll on learners.

“We want learners to value the quality education opportunities offered to them by not bringing drugs to school. We want them to prioritise learning, come to school every day prepared to learn, and know that any challenges they face are resolveable,” he said.

According to the KwaZulu-Natal department of education, unlike during apartheid, the democratic dispensation is focused on a different set of objectives, namely: Broadening access to education and providing resources; Improving schools’ functional and educational outcomes at all levels; Developing human resource and organisational capacity and enhance skills; Developing schools into centres of community focus, care and support; Ensuring good cooperative governance, management and an efficient administration; and Promoting national identity and social cohesion.

In addition to strengthening curriculum management, the matric improvement plan has targeted programmes for non-performing schools and under-performing schools.

In March 2013 all schools that underperformed in 2012 wrote common tests. These have since been analysed to show which school where the underperformance in each subject area. The same exercise will be repeated this month to help teachers and learners be prepared for the ANA. Mchunu added that, in spite of improvements observed in learner performance, “There is a long way to reach the desired level of education that we spoke of.”

Challenges

The KwaZulu-Natal education department faces seven fundamental challenges:

• Curriculum management and delivery
• Teacher supply and capacity
• Classroom support resources and equipment
• Infrastructure
• Management at different levels of the system
• Finance
• Transformation of the schooling system

“KwaZulu-Natal has only three public agricultural schools. We need to flourish these. We have presented these challenges to all stakeholders within the province. We are confident that when these challenges are overcome, we will have a system nearing the aspirations contemplated in the constitution of the Republic.”

Transformation of the schooling system

Senzo Mchunu is passionate about improving his province’s education. Photo: Karen Lotter

The KwaZulu-Natal education department faces the challenge of transforming the schooling system in the province.

The search for an effective and efficient school management system that will assist the department to deliver quality education in the province, led to the formulation of an unprecedented and comprehensive programme for the transformation of the schooling system, he said. Mchunu announced that KwaZulu-Natal was the first province to take forward a programme to implement a specific component of the national development plan (NDP).

“The NDP has called upon all stakeholders to bring world class education in schools and has proposed a national initiative to improve learning outcomes. We explain: “Together with our key stakeholders, such as Professor Mary Metcalfe, Cheryl Carolus, chairperson of the Lartafe Teachers’ Union, Stephen Saad, the chief executive of Aspen Pharmacare, we are working with the government to develop and implement a programme to achieve our goal of significantly improving learning outcomes, which we are starting to work systematically in three provinces: Limpopo, Western Cape and Pinetown districts, and on the basis of refining the model, will roll this out across all districts.”

Prioritising early childhood development

An important point made in the budget speech was early childhood development. The Economic Freedom Fighters’ allocation of R109-million will go to training 2,000 practitioners at NQF Level 4 in ECD, food garden training for volunteers employed at crèches, and establishing technical education for unemployed youth for promoting food gardens at crèches. A further 273 R classes were opened in 2012/13, amounting to 6,251 grade R classes in the province.

“We understand that you have the best interest of education at heart when you engage us. We need you to partner with us in order to build the kind of education system that we yearn for,” concluded Mchunu.