

# It's back to school (if you've been placed)

By SUTHENTIRA GOVENDER

● Schools reopen on Wednesday amid a last-minute scramble to place pupils, along with hiccups in the delivery of textbooks and storm-damaged classrooms.

In Mpumalanga, 7,924 grade 1 and 8 pupils are yet to be placed at schools, with education MEC Cathy Dlamini saying priority was being given to pupils in these grades – who are beginning their primary and high school years.

"We have noted a high demand for English-medium classes in the fast-growing towns, caused [by] an increase in the migration rate from rural to urban areas due to job opportunities," she said.

Dlamini attributed the increase in applications to public schools – particularly former Model C schools – to parents who are unable to afford fees at independent schools. "Parents in some cases refuse placement in schools which have available space. Other parents do not apply on time for admission. All these factors place tremendous pressure on the department, particularly in urban areas where schools are oversubscribed."

The department is also dealing with storm damage to at least 83 schools.

Gauteng education department spokesperson Steve Mabona said they had 13,028 late applications – 6,836 for grade 1 and 6,192 for grade 8. According to the department, "only applicants with complete applications, including a valid proof of home address, were prioritised" for placement. "[A total of] 325,734 of 325,858 (99.96%) applications – that qualified as complete applications – are placed."

In KwaZulu-Natal, an official said "serious security challenges" had delayed the delivery of textbooks and stationery to some schools. Education department spokesperson Muzi Mahlambi blamed burglaries at schools.

The department said 99% of textbooks and 76% of stationery had been delivered to more than 4,000 schools in KZN. "However, due to serious security challenges at certain schools, delivery to these affected areas will be between January 12 and 17. The department is working closely with law enforcement agencies to ensure the safety of both personnel and resources during this period."

The late delivery of support material has been condemned by the Public Servants Association, which accused the department of "falling short of its commitment to have these materials fully distributed by the end of 2024".

The department said 189,060 grade 1 pupils and 205,822 grade 8 pupils had been placed. On "the number still to be admitted, we have 198 grade 8 [pupils]," said Mahlambi. "The deadline was September 30. The walk-ins are serviced as and when they come."

Western Cape education department spokesperson Bronagh Hammond said while they had placed 97% of all grade 1 and 8



Shayne Dewing and her son Eli try out items of his uniform at McCullagh & Bothwell in Hyde Park Corner shopping mall ahead of the schools opening this week. Pictures: Thapelo Morebudi



The Mupamhadzi family shop for stationery at Packaging & Stationery Distributors in Johannesburg.



Lucas Fekisi fits his son Aphiwe with his newly bought uniform. Picture: Kabelo Mokoena

pupils by last month, "it is not yet clear how many additional extremely late applications we will receive, and in which areas these [pupils] will reside". Placement was "in progress for 3,698, or 3%, of grade 1 and 8".

Apart from the growing pupil numbers in the province, budget remains a concern, Hammond said. "The national government's decision to not fully fund the 2023 wage deal resulted in a massive deficit. We are not the only province affected, every province will have to find a way to close the deficit."

Eastern Cape education department spokesperson Vuyiseka Mboxela said the delivery of stationery, furniture and textbooks had been finalised in November. Mboxela said the placement of grade 1 and 8 pupils would continue into the new academic year.

"Other [pupils] are yet to look for schools and others are changing provinces, so this will continue until every [pupil] is in a class. Overall, we are ready to move ahead."

Meanwhile, the cost of uniforms and stationery remains a headache for parents.

Muhammed Pandor of Durban-based retailer Gem Schoolwear, said uniform prices grew 5% year on year. "This is due to the increase in manufacturing costs, including electricity, water and wages."

Pandor said the average cost for a basic uniform kit was about R1,400. At stores such as Pep, a basic kit for a girl – rain jacket, sport shorts, two short-sleeve shirts, skirt and shoes – cost R530, while a boy's kit – pants, sport shorts, shirt and shoes – was R587.

The Legal Resource Centre said: "Reports show that some families spend up to 20% of their income on uniforms alone. Schools need to find cheaper options such as second-hand uniform programmes," it said.