Empty stomachs stifle hunger for knowledge

Older pupils lose out in school feeding scheme

PREGA GOVENDER

SENZENI Vilakazi is forced to bunk class at 10am on most days to collect leftovers from the cooks at her school after they finish dishing out food to her juniors.

Although the orphaned Grade 12 pupil and her siblings attend the same school in Mpumalanga, she and her 18-year-old brother, Prince, are among about 460 pupils who are excluded from the feeding scheme because it only caters for grades 1 to 7.

On some days her younger sister, Yuyisile, who is in Grade 6 at Sophungane Combined School, saves some bean soup for her.

The school was forced to introduce two separate breaks for its primary and secondary pupils after starving senior kept on trying to sneak into the food queue out of sheer desperation.

Trapped in a cycle of poverty, Vilakazi had been pinning her hopes on her school to extend the anti-poverty feeding scheme to the older children.

But the Education Department's director-general, Duncan Hindle, this week firmly ruled out that possibility, saying his department first wanted to improve the "quality of nutrition" at primary schools.

"We have said that pupils should now be fed on all school days and we have increased the price per meal from R1.30 to R1.50. If and when there's more money available, we will certainly extend it to secondary schools."

The decision to maintain the status quo was taken by Education Minister Naledi Pandor and her MECs.

"The option was do we just spread the butter more thinly across more students, or do we try to at least make sure that the current programme is indeed a proper one. It was a hard choice extending the feeding scheme to secondary schools, conducted on behalf of the Financial and Fiscal Commission, an advisory body to Parliament, has estimated that at least 11.1 million high school pupils in Limpopo and KwaZulu-Natal alone could be eligible for the feeding scheme. Undertaken at the request of Parliament's select committee on finance, the study found that the school feeding budgets of some provinces would have to be significantly increased by between 50% to 70% if the scheme was to be extended to high schools.

The commission recommended that the Education Department develop norms and standards to guide the implementation of the nutrition programme as a first step towards its expansion.

Researchers Christopher Bowo, Nonno Madubula and Ondele Akinboede found that some provinces reported higher pupil attendance rates on school feeding days.

But they also discovered that provincial budgets did not provide complete menus for needy pupils, pointing out that, in most instances, fruit was lacking.

According to the minimum requirements, pupils should receive five servings of fresh fruit and vegetables a week.

The provinces' menus, which have to be "culturally and socially acceptable" to pupils, include porridge, phutha, fortified maize meal, maize, rice, mashed potatoes and vegetables.

Another study not yet released, which was conducted by the University of Cape Town's Children's Institute to evaluate the government's targeted mechanisms for poverty alleviation, found that there are still problems regarding the implementation of the feeding scheme in primary schools.

Johannes John-Langba, programme manager for child poverty at the institute, said not all qualifying schools and children were receiving nutrition.

During their research at two school feeding sites in the Eastern Cape and the Western Cape, a high school principal informed researchers that one of his pupils had fainted from hunger during an examination.

"He said the feeding scheme should be introduced at secondary schools, because a hungry stomach at primary school or high school or university is still a hungry stomach, John-Langba said.

TELL US: Is the Education Department justified in not providing food to high school pupils? Write to:
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