

# 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 400 pupils who are excluded from the feeding scheme because it only caters for grades 1 to 7.

On some days her younger sister, Vuyisile, 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 seniors 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

### They found that starving senior pupils were trying to sneak into the food queue

that we had to make, but we think it's a responsible one."

This is cold comfort to Vilakazi and her siblings, who rely on hand-outs from neighbours.

More than half of the country's 12 million pupils who attend primary schools from quintiles 1 to 3, which fall into the poorest category, qualify for the scheme. It is aimed at alleviating short-term hunger among pupils.

In the 2007/8 financial year, R1.1-billion was set aside for school feeding, and 81% of it was spent by the end of January. But there are at least 4.4 million other pupils in grades 8 to 12 of whom at least half attend school on an empty stomach.

A study on the feasibility of

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 1.1 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

ceive five servings of fresh fruit and vegetables a week.

The provinces' menus, which have to be "culturally and socially acceptable" to pupils, include porridge, *phuthu*, fortified maize meal, maize rice, 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: [tellus@sundaytimes.co.za](mailto:tellus@sundaytimes.co.za)**