

Education department's electricity cut off for owing millions of rands

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Eastern Cape provincial education department's offices in Nelson Mandela Bay have been in the dark since December.



Department of Education offices in Nelson Mandela Bay owe the municipality millions of rand in unpaid electricity bills. Photo: Thamsanqa Mbovane

Staff at the Department of Education offices in Nelson Mandela Bay have been working in the dark, without electricity since early December.

But the provincial department says it has come to an agreement with the municipality for power to be restored to its offices.

The provincial department owes the municipality more than R11m in unpaid bills. When we visited the office on Monday, we saw dozens of parents and learners, some requesting to rewrite their matric exams, being turned away.

Officials at the offices in Sidwell, Gqeberha and Cannon Street in Kariega told *GroundUp* that the power was switched off on 10 December. People visiting the offices were filling out forms outside in the yards and sitting in dark corridors.

A security guard at the premises said that a municipal official had arrived there in December and told the guards to inform education officials inside that he was about to switch off the electricity from the kiosk box. “Ever since then, officials have been knocking off at 1pm daily. They knew the department owed the municipality. It’s not the first time they switch off power due to debt,” said the guard.

A senior official, who did not want to be named, said: “I came here to get my [ten years or more service] award but it could not be printed, because computers are off. An award comes with prize money, so we cannot claim our prizes because our awards have been stuck on those computers since last year.”

Nelson Mandela Bay municipal spokesperson Mamela Ndamase said: “The department’s services were disconnected due to non-payment of accounts. The department was informed at least 14 days before the disconnection took place.”

Ndamase said the department had owed the municipality R46.9m but had recently paid R17.9m. “An additional R17.4m was promised within the next seven days. The balance outstanding will then be R11.6m which the department has promised will be settled by the end of April,” she said.

“The obligation to pay for rates and services is the same as it is for other debtors,” she said.

Eastern Cape education spokesperson Malibongwe Mtima admitted that they owe the municipality. “We have now made payment arrangements with the municipality, and everything is now back to normal at district offices.”

He said lights were switched on over the weekend, but did not give further comment when informed that they were still off when we were at the office in Sidwell on Monday.

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