

Cabinet agrees on plan to catch school dropouts

Ambitious scheme aims to offer adult basic education and matric programmes for free

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THE cabinet has endorsed a report by a ministerial task team, which recommends that community learning centres be established across South Africa to cater for school dropouts.

The proposed centres will give them another chance to complete matric and will also offer adult basic education and training programmes, as well as vocational and occupational courses.

The institutions, which will be expected to offer education to at least one million people by 2030, will target young adults who are either unemployed or not studying, as well as illiterate adults.

A seven-member task team appointed by Higher Education and Training Minister Blade Nzimande has recommended that the centres be separate and distinct from the 50 further education and training colleges and 23 universities.

The task team's 100-page report, which was gazetted for public comment on Friday, suggests that besides using existing schools, other teaching venues could include FET colleges, community halls and vacant buildings.

The minimum criteria proposed by the task team for the establishment of the centres include:

- A minimum suite of programme offerings, including formal, non-formal, literacy and vocational;

- The provision of basic fa-

cilities, including a library, classrooms, reading rooms and computer facilities; and

- A full-time staff complement, including teachers and administrators and a minimum number of learners.

It strongly advises that the centres should not charge fees.

According to the report, those enrolling for programmes "should be entitled to quality education, which will make it possible for them to progress in learning, training and development".

At least 120 000 children aged 7

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to 15 were not attending school in 2010, and a further 368 624 teenagers between the ages of 16 and 18 had dropped out of school without completing matric.

The report, which was developed after extensive consultation with the adult education and training sector, states that South Africa's FET colleges have a poor "second chance" track record of getting large numbers of youths through secondary education.

"It [the FET college sector] also has a poor track record of working with young adults who have a poor schooling profile and whose greatest priority is to find employment," the report states.

"FET colleges do not neces-

sarily provide the most appropriate platform for meeting the education, training and work needs of unemployed youths and adults."

The task team found that the provision of education and training opportunities for school dropouts, as well as those who were unemployed, was "inadequate".

The report recommends the creation of an adult and youth community learning agency, which will be responsible for the governance and establishment of the centres.

It also recommends that the department appoint a new task team to work on the phased implementation of the project and a funding plan.

Higher education and training director-general Gwebinkundla Qonde confirmed that the cabinet had approved the report and that it was "very appreciative" of the initiative.

"It's going to cost the country a fortune, but it's a worthwhile fortune. We have to set up the physical structures and provide adequate facilities. You have to diversify the curriculum and programme offerings."

He said it was difficult to say when the project would start, although the department wanted it to happen in the "immediate, foreseeable future".

Steven Ngubeni, chief executive of the National Youth Development Agency, said it fully supported the proposed establishment of community learning centres.

"We believe it is the way to go and it is in total sync with what the agency is trying to do."