

A brand new R45m school for 1 200 kids

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FROM dilapidated barn to gleaming walls, hopes are high that the R45-million Mandela Park Primary School is a glimpse of education's future in rural Transkei.

The new school, built by steel manufacturing giant ArcelorMittal, was officially handed over to Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga yesterday.

For 16 years children have been taught in a dilapidated shed, where they had to share desks, sit on bricks and use two pit latrines.

Broken windows made winter months hard to bear.

Principal Xolisani Neti said Mandela Park Primary was opened in 1996 when community members occupied an abandoned shed used to store agricultural equipment in Transkei's bantustan regime.

The shed was divided into 10 classrooms, but insufficient partitioning proved a challenge. "The situation was chaotic. It was the law of the jungle, where teachers were competing with voices," said Neti.

"Learners in another classroom would shrink when they heard someone being rebuked in another classroom."

Chief J J Ndzambule of the Ngxule Traditional Authority in Mthatha West said people decided to occupy the dilapidated structure out of desperation. Children had to travel far to attend school in other areas, leaving them vulnerable to criminals and accidents.

Locals wrote to the Department of Basic Education asking the government to help fix the school.

Motshekga said they approached ArcelorMittal, with whom the department has a memorandum of understanding (MoU), and that the hurdles and struggles of the past 16 years were a thing of the past.

The multimillion-rand school boasts a solar-powered computer laboratory, a library, ablution fa-

cilities, a kitchen, paved walkways, sports grounds and eight food gardens. There are 24 insulated classrooms, which can accommodate up to 1 200 pupils.

Ndzambule said he expected the facility to boost the status of the area, which had high illiteracy and unemployment rates.

Grade 6 pupil Inganathi Magqazana was thrilled with the new facility and "beautiful classes". Before, they had to put desks together or use bricks, he said.

Parent Boniswa Moki rejoiced: "It will no longer be necessary for parents to send their children to schools outside the area, where they had to walk long distances.

"Walking so far exposes them to criminal elements."

Motshekga said the new school was the product of a collaboration between the state and the private sector. Delivering the main address, the minister recalled that she had described earlier conditions at the school as "inhumane" last year.

"It was a real human disaster," she said.

Motshekga said her department had launched another programme to collaborate with the private sector to eradicate mud schools. The Eastern Cape was the only province left with mud schools, she added.

The corporate responsibility manager at ArcelorMittal, Maggie Mopedi, said the company had signed an MoU with the national education department to spend R250-million on school infrastructure across the country.

The first school, complete with flushing toilets and decent classrooms was built in Mamelodi, Pretoria.

Education MEC Mandla Makupula switched to party political campaign mode, telling the audience the ruling party had inherited mud schools from leaders of the Bantustan government, who were now being "holier than thou and making noise". — *loyisom@sabc.co.za*