

# Failure to extend child grant 'raises dropout risk' p. 6

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CHILD rights groups say Finance Minister Trevor Manuel's failure to extend the monthly child support grant to 18-year-olds leaves millions of vulnerable teenagers at risk of dropping out of school.

The grant goes to children under 15 whose parents earn less than R2 300 per month. In April, it will increase from R230 to R240, and President Kgalema Motlanthe committed the government in his State of the Nation address to extending the grant to 18-year-olds.

But while Manuel on Wednesday acknowledged there was "compelling evidence" of benefits from past extension of the grant, he said in his Budget speech that more consideration was still being given to further extension, "subject to affordability".

Meanwhile, child rights groups said a progressive extension was "clearly" affordable, following Department of Social Development calculations that moving the maximum age to 16 this year would cost only R1.9 billion and benefit 700 000 children.

Patricia Martin, director of the Alliance for Children's Entitlement to Social Security, said the ANC had committed in a meeting with the organisation to a progressive rollout of the grant, starting this year.

Meanwhile, advocates at the Children's Institute at the University of Cape Town warn that withholding the grant could hurt approximately 2.4 million poor children between the ages of 15 and 18 whose care givers "desperately" needed the child support grant to help them feed, clothe, house and educate their children.

Finance Ministry spokesperson Thoraya Pandy said the ministry could give no further comment at the time, and the extension of the grant was still under study.

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