

SA youth are not immune to our suicide crisis. Let's make our schools havens

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There are currently no national statistics regarding suicide incidents at schools; hence, there is a need to initiate a National Suicide Incident Report Protocol, writes Angie Motshekga.

As the basic education sector, we are grappling with a grim wave of suicides that has swept across our schools, taking the lives of our pupils too soon. Defined as the act of deliberately ending one's own life, suicide has metamorphosed into a substantial public health issue with severe social, emotional, and economic repercussions.

Recent tragedies underscore the urgent need for collective intervention, including the loss of two girls from Tsakane Secondary School and other suicide attempts in various parts of Gauteng and beyond.

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), over 700,000 people succumb to suicide annually, with a staggering 77% of these tragedies occurring in low and middle-income countries. Alarming, it is the fourth leading cause of death among young people aged 15 to 29 globally.

In South Africa, our youth are not immune to this crisis. The South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) reveals that teen suicide is rising, particularly among females aged 15 to 19. We commemorated World Suicide Prevention Day on Friday, an initiative of the International Association for Suicide Prevention and the WHO. As part of this we advocate a whole-society and whole-government approach.

The triggers are varied and complex, from mental health challenges, past traumas, and substance abuse to societal pressures, bullying, and personal crises. Although facing different risk factors, young men and women are equally vulnerable.

For those of you who may encounter a young person in distress, I urge you to listen without judgment, offer support without conditions, and seek professional assistance. Remember, suicide might not always have visible signs, but the difference you can make by being attentive and compassionate can be life-saving.

We envision a future where our schools are not just centres of academic excellence but also havens of mental and emotional wellness. To realise this vision, we must forge ahead with a proactive, collaborative, and informed approach to suicide prevention.

Our current governmental response to the epidemic is evolving. To spotlight the crisis and foster awareness, I have directed the psychosocial unit to initiate a National Suicide Incident Reporting Protocol. The data we will collect will be more than numbers; they will guide our strategies, interventions, and policies to combat this scourge. We must report on this issue nationally at least annually, akin to our approach to pupil pregnancy.

I implore each one of us to play a pivotal role in nurturing the mental health of our learners. Let us foster open dialogues, facilitate access to specialised support, and educate all stakeholders on the critical warning signs of suicide.

To those who have braved suicide attempts or are grappling with suicidal thoughts, remember that your life has immense value. You are not alone in this ordeal, and various resources and individuals are on standby to assist you in this critical juncture of your life.

As the Minister of Basic Education, I must highlight the integral role of the existing policy in responding to the crisis, i.e. the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP). It is a joint initiative with the Department of Basic Education supported by the Department of Health and Social Development.

A key objective of the ISHP is to identify and address early health barriers to learning. It adopts a tiered approach, serving learners in various phases — from the foundation phase focusing on basic screening and health education to later phases addressing critical issues such as substance abuse and sexual and reproductive health education. The programme is structured to enhance not just the physical but also the mental well-being of our students, ensuring that they are supported at every critical juncture of their development.

In the Eastern Cape and Northern Cape, it is admittedly concerning that no formal campaigns have been undertaken so far; this beckons a call to action for stakeholders in these regions to actively mobilise resources and strategically map out awareness initiatives in the near future.

In contrast, Free State is prepping to raise awareness through a campaign scheduled for the second week of October 2023 in Motheo District.

Meanwhile, Gauteng has taken a commendable step forward, with plans set for a suicide prevention event from 11 to 16 September 2023. Furthermore, the province is enhancing its efforts by partnering with the South African Depression and Anxiety Group (SADAG) for regular suicide prevention sessions facilitated through a Learner Support Agent (LSA) framework. This strategy leverages SADAG's experience in schools, showcasing the province's dedication to nurturing a supportive environment for learners.

Furthermore, Kwa-Zulu Natal has initiated mental health campaigns inclusive of inputs on suicide prevention. Likewise, Limpopo has hatched plans to facilitate suicide awareness campaigns, preferably before the resumption of National Senior Certificate examinations in October 2023.

Mpumalanga stands out with its quarterly suicide prevention awareness campaigns, showcasing a sustained commitment to this critical issue.

The Western Cape has adopted a more personnel-intensive approach, with over 69 social workers and psychologists on board to address learners' mental health challenges. Though direct suicide campaigns have not been conducted, the province is undeniably making strides through training sessions on trauma, anxiety, depression, and suicidal ideation.

In the face of these wide-ranging efforts, North West province, similar to a few others, has yet to launch awareness campaigns, signalling a need for a concerted approach and unified action.

It is clear that while several provinces are taking robust steps forward, others are trailing.

Together, as a society unified in purpose and resolve, let us stand firm against this silent yet potent adversary. Let us vow to safeguard the lives of our young ones, ensuring that they witness the beauty and potential that every new dawn brings.

- Angie Motshekga is the Minister of Basic Education in South Africa.

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