Speech by the Minister of Basic Education, Ms. Siviwe Gwarube, MP

Plenary Session: How Can Education Systems Provide the Stability that Encourages Learning and Builds Confidence to Change

Monday, 19 May 2025 | Fleming/Whittle Plenary Hall

Programme Director,
Distinguished Guests,
Colleagues and Partners in Education,
Ladies and Gentlemen,
Good morning.

Today we are exploring a topic that lies at the very heart of our shared mission: how can we, as stewards of education systems, build the kind of stability that encourages learning, and in doing so, builds the confidence to embrace change.

This is not just a technical question. It is a moral one. Because when education systems fail to provide stability, it is the poorest children, the most vulnerable, who suffer the most. And when education systems fail to prepare young people for change, we rob them of the tools to shape their futures.

In South Africa, our education system is caught between two realities. On the one hand, we are seeing historic highs in our school-leaving results. We are seeing more learners passing our national school-leaving qualification than ever before. Our matriculation pass rate is at its highest level ever. We are also producing a record number of distinctions. And, we are seeing more young people, particularly young women from our poorer communities, completing high school and gaining access to tertiary education than ever before.

These are not small achievements. These are signs that, as a country, we have improved access to basic education and that we are incrementally improving the quality of education outcomes in our school-leaving phase. They speak to the resilience of our learners, the dedication of our teachers, and the collective effort of a sector that believes in the power of education.

But on the other hand, we face a crisis at the very base of our system — the foundation phase. Research shows that over 80% of South African learners cannot read for meaning in any language by the age of 10. This is not just a statistic. It is a warning bell.

This means that children are moving through primary school without the essential building blocks for lifelong learning. They are not mastering basic literacy and numeracy. And without these foundations, everything we try to build on top, whether it is mathematics, science, or coding and robotics — becomes precarious.

We are witnessing the impact of these weak foundations in subject choices that learners are making when they reach high school. There is a noticeable decline in the uptake of gateway subjects, such as mathematics, physical sciences, accounting and economics – disciplines, which are crucial in a data-driven, digital economy of the future.

Learners are turning away from these subjects not because they do not see their value, but because they do not feel confident they can succeed in these subjects.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
Ours is an education system that is heavily skewed in favour of the school-leaving phase, to the detriment of the foundation phase — and it must change.

We are therefore undertaking a strategic reorientation of our basic education system to correct this imbalance in our sector.

Our priority is to build strong foundations. That means strengthening the quality of foundational learning so that every child entering our system is equipped with the tools to read, write and count meaningfully so that they may ultimately participate and excel in gateway subjects.

To do this, we are expanding access to Early Childhood Development (or ECD, as we refer to it) to include 1.2 million children between the ages of 3 and 5 who are currently not in any form of ECD programme. These are the most critical years for brain development, and yet too many of our children from rural areas and poor communities are missing out.

But access alone is not enough!

We are also improving the quality of ECD through a comprehensive approach. South Africa's Early Childhood Development sector is largely driven by women-owned, small enterprises, many of which operate in informal environments with minimal support. Until a few short years ago, Early Childhood Development in South Africa was a social development priority, focused on care and support. Today, Early Childhood Development is a national priority focused not only on care and support, but also education.

To improve the quality of ECD offerings to children in our most vulnerable communities, we are upgrading the compliance levels of ECD programmes by providing fire safety and emergency first aid kits. We are supporting curriculum development for ECD and developing and providing quality age-appropriate learning materials. And we are investing in the professional development of ECD practitioners. We have set an ambitious target to register 10 000 Early Childhood Development centres by the end of this year alone so that these centres may benefit from an expanded government subsidy programme.

Our goal is simple: to ensure that by the time children reach the reception year of their formal schooling (what we call Grade R), they are developmentally ready to engage meaningfully with literacy and numeracy. Expanding access to quality Early Childhood Development opportunities for children is critical to achieving this.

Furthermore, we are increasing the number of teachers in the foundation phase, ensuring that classrooms are not overcrowded, and that teachers are supported to deliver the curriculum effectively.

One of our most promising innovations is the expansion of mother tongue-based bilingual education – a priority, given that South Africa is home to 12 official languages. Children learn best in the language they understand. And yet for too long, our system has expected children to learn in languages they do not speak at home. This disconnect leads to confusion, alienation and academic failure. The results of recent international benchmark tests and our own South African Systematic Evaluation show that learners who are taught in their mother-tongues significantly outperform those learners who are being taught in a language they do not speak at home.

By aligning the language of learning and teaching with the language children speak at home, we are not only improving comprehension but also improving the confidence of learners to understand complex concepts.

Ladies and gentlemen,
All these interventions are designed with one goal: to stabilise our education system by getting the foundations right. Because when a child can read with understanding, when they can calculate with confidence, when they feel supported in the classroom — they begin to believe in their own potential. And that belief becomes the fuel for ambition, innovation and change.

Once these foundational skills are in place, we can then confidently introduce the technologies and future-facing subjects that are necessary in today's world. Coding, robotics, digital literacy — all of these are important. But they will only make an impact if our learners have the foundational skills to engage with them meaningfully. Without strong foundations, those investments are wasted.

Colleagues,
True stability in education does not mean resistance to change. Quite the opposite. It means creating an environment in which learners and teachers feel secure enough — supported enough — to explore, to innovate, and to take risks.

This is why we are also investing time and resources in partnerships. Education does not happen in isolation. It happens in homes, in communities, in places of worship, on playgrounds, and in workplaces. Our partnerships with civil society, with industry, with teacher unions, and with international development partners, are critical to building an education system that is inclusive, equitable and resilient.

We are working with the private sector to bring real-world learning into our schools, to expose learners to career pathways, and to provide the mentorship and support that many of them lack at home. More importantly, the private sector is helping us to plug the funding gaps we have experienced as a result of nearly 10 years of under investment in the education system.

We are investing in teacher development — not just in content knowledge but in also in classroom management, curriculum delivery and adaptive leadership. Because we cannot expect teachers to foster confidence in their learners if they themselves feel unsupported.

We also want to leverage the power of technology to bring quality teaching to our rural communities. During my visit to UNESCO headquarters in February, I discussed with Assistant Director-General Giannini the support that UNESCO can provide to South Africa in the area of technology-mediated learning and teaching. Through digital learning platforms, we hope to bring high-quality materials to remote and under-resourced schools. We will train teachers in digital pedagogy and ensure that no learner is left behind as the world moves toward a more connected, tech-enabled future.

Ladies and Gentlemen,
The path forward is clear. We must build from the ground up. We must invest in the foundation phase, not only to improve academic outcomes, but to give every child the confidence to learn, to question, to create, and to lead.

In so doing, we will create an education system that not only provides stability but becomes a launchpad for change. An education system that says to every learner, “You are seen. You are capable. And we will equip you with the skills you need for the world that awaits you.”

This is the future we are working toward in South Africa. And I know that many of you in this room are on similar journeys.

Let us walk this path together. Let us collaborate and co-create better, stronger and more resilient education systems.

Thank you!
Ndiyabulea!
Asante Sane!