MINISTER
BASIC EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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Speech by the Minister of Basic Education, Ms Siviwe Gwarube Delivered at the City of Cape Town's Early Childhood Development Indaba
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Programme Director,
Mayor Geordin Hill-Lewis,
Convenor of the ECD Indaba, Alderman Eddie Andrews,
National, Provincial and City officials,
ECD stakeholders,
Members of the private sector,
Development partners,
Ladies and gentlemen,

Good Morning

Thank you for inviting me to join you at this important Early Childhood Development Indaba. It is an privilege to stand before a gathering of people who have committed themselves to nurturing the youngest members of our society, and through them, the future of our country.

Let me begin with a story, a tale of South Africa's two ten-year-olds.

One child lives in a leafy suburb. She was born into a household where books are abundant, they are read to, and every milestone is nurtured with intent. From age two, she was enrolled in a quality early childhood development centre. She was read to daily. She learned to count, to play, and to express herself confidently.

The other ten year old, born into a less fortunate family, has not had the same opportunities. She spent her first five years at home, often under the care of a grandparent or a neighbour. His family did their best, but lacked resources — no books, no formal early learning, and limited exposure to rich language environments. She enteres Grade 1 already behind, the first time she encounters a book is when she enters the gates of our primary school. By Grade 4, both ten year old are expected to take the same standardized international benchmark test, by that time the gap has widened too far and the results reflect this.

These two children live in the same country. But their prospects are not equal.

Colleagues, this is not just anecdotal , it's systemic.

The latest national assessments confirm that 8 out of 10 Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning. This shocking statistic is not merely about reading. It is about whether children will be able to comprehend the curriculum, stay in school, or secure a future of dignity and opportunity. It is about whether our country can build a generation equipped to participate in the Fourth Industrial Revolution and an AI-powered economy.

This dire state is the reason why, since taking office, I have led a strategic reorientation of the basic education system to strengthen the foundations of learning. We are shifting the system towards early intervention, and injecting quality from the earliest years. This is the only sustainable path to improving educational outcomes.

Yes, we face a profound challenge.

Recent data reveals that 58% of children aged 2 to 5 are not enrolled in any form of ECD programme. Most of these children come from rural, informal, or other disadvantaged communities.

This is unacceptable. We cannot allow birth circumstances or geography to dictate a child's destiny.

We must ensure access to quality early learning for every child, regardless of where they are born or live.

One of our critical priorities is the Bana Pele ECD mass registration drive to register and support ECD centres, especially those in underserved areas. Unregistered centres, despite often serving the most vulnerable children, are excluded from key government support. They miss out on the ECD subsidy, the nutrition grant, access to training, and inclusion in quality assurance systems. This impacts children's development, well-being, and readiness for school.

The Department of Basic Education is therefore embarking on a community-engaged, multi-sectoral drive to support ECD centres in rural, informal communities and disadvantaged communities to meet registration requirements. We will target the specific barriers that prevent registration, be they infrastructure, compliance capacity, or administrative hurdles.

The availability of ECD infrastructure in rural areas also remains a challenge. To address this, we are developing a model to repurpose existing school infrastructure, especially in small schools with unused classrooms or those earmarked for rationalization, to allow private operators to run functioning ECD centres from our schools. This is aligned with the National Framework for Rural Education, which calls for context-specific approaches to rural schooling.

It is also essential to highlight the vital role of our partners in the private ECD sector. For years, private ECD centres have augmented government capacity, particularly in delivering Grade R, long before it became legislated.

The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act now makes Grade R compulsory and establishes it as the formal entry point into schooling. However, we must be honest: no additional funding has yet been allocated to fully realise this mandate.

We therefore see the continued partnership with private ECD providers as not only desirable, but essential. We encourage private operators who already offer Grade R to continue doing so and to expand their Grade R services. This will ensure the universalisation of access.

To protect quality and equity, we are aligning standards across all Grade R provision, whether public or private. This includes:

- Curriculum alignment and content oversight
- Ensuring that Grade R teachers have appropriate qualifications and are registered with SACE
- Providing state-developed workbooks and exploring mechanisms to extend these to private Grade R centres
- Creating pathways for accredited private ECD centres to register to deliver Grade R in compliance with BELA

This is the foundation of a public-private partnership that works, one that shares the responsibility of giving our children the best start in life.

Another critical component of quality ECD is language development or as neuroscientists call it, language nutrition.

We know that 85% of brain development happens before the age of 3, and that language exposure during this window is the strongest predictor of long-term academic success. Yet many of our children, especially in poor communities, are deprived of this opportunity.

That is why the DBE is expanding the Mother-Tongue Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) approach. From early learning right through to the Foundation Phase, children must learn in the language they speak at home and the language they understand best, while also building bridges to other languages of learning.

This is not just about culture or identity, it is about cognition and comprehension. A child who thinks in their mother tongue is more likely to read with understanding, apply concepts, and stay engaged in learning. Our goal is to ensure that rich mother-tongue exposure is stimulated across all ECD centres both public and private.

We are currently piloting and scaling MTBBE initiatives across provinces, with teacher training, materials development, and community engagement at the core. We invite all ECD providers to join us in this important shift.

Let me conclude by saying: we are at a moment of transformation and opportunity.

We have the policy foundation through the BELA Act and the integration of ECD into basic education. We have evidence from science and research. We have a willing and capable network of partners in the private sector, civil society, local government, and beyond.

But we must now match intention with action. We must register ECD centres, standardise quality, support our educators, and expand infrastructure in underserved areas. Most importantly, we must place the child, the ten-year-old, the three-year-old, the newborn at the centre of every decision.

Together, let us commit to ensuring that every child, in every community, has access to quality early learning.

That is how we build a nation from the ground up.

Thank you.