

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

International Day of the Boy Child – 16 May 2025, Theme: "The Legends, The Youngins and The Boys"

Programme Director,

Deputy Minister, Dr Mhaule

Deputy Minister, Ganief Hendriks

Deputy Minister for Women, Youth and Persons living with disabilities, Mapaseka Steve Letsike

MEC for Education in Gauteng, Mr Matome Chiloane

DBSA CEO, Boitumelo Mosako,

Director General of the Department of Basic Education, Mr Mathanzima Mweli

My Junior Minister, Koketso Leburu

Our guests on the virtual platform

Young men and learners present today,

Ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

Today, we commemorate the International Day of the Boy Child, under the global theme **"Boys' Health & Wellbeing,"** highlighting the physical, emotional, mental, and social dimensions of boys' development.

Like many other nations, South Africa is waking up to a challenging truth: In our efforts to address gender disparities — many of them rightly focused on the empowerment of girls — we have overlooked and unwittingly left the boy child behind in our classrooms, and more broadly, society at large.

Evidence of a Boy Child Left Behind

Recent studies paint a troubling picture. In the South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE) and the Fifth Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ V), boys consistently underperform compared to girls across subjects, grades, regions, and socioeconomic levels.

- In Grade 3 reading literacy, there is a 20-percentage-point gap between boys and girls at the Emerging level.
- Boys have lower health knowledge than girls across all surveyed contexts.

- They are likelier to drop out of school, repeat grades, or disengage entirely from education.

And behind these numbers are lives of vulnerability. Over 50% of boys in sub-Saharan Africa have experienced physical abuse, often at the hands of those meant to protect them.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

These statistics are not just numbers. They are signals of a fraying social fabric and are a call to action for all of us.

We must ask why Is the Boy Child Being Left Behind?

The reasons are layered and structural. Firstly, society continues to cling to rigid notions of masculinity. From a young age, boys are taught, often unconsciously, to suppress their emotions, to "man up," to avoid expressing fear or sadness, or any emotion for that matter. This conditioning begins in our homes, is reinforced by our schools, media, and peer networks, and becomes a script that boys internalise.

The consequences are profound. Emotional suppression turns into depression, anger, or behavioural challenges. Many boys, unable to articulate their pain, act out through violence or withdraw into silence.

We also know that some boys engage in risky behaviours — unsafe sex, substance abuse, and violence — not out of malice but because these behaviours are aligned with distorted societal expectations of what it means to be a "real man."

The lack of safe, non-judgmental spaces for boys to talk about their emotions and experiences compounds the problem.

Programme Director,

This crisis affects not only individual boys. It threatens the potential of our continent. Africa is home to the youngest population on Earth, with over 60% of our population under 25. In South Africa alone, the youth comprise a significant portion of our population.

The potential of this demographic dividend is enormous if we invest in it. But how will we ever realise this promise if half of our youth — the boys — are being left behind?

A continent cannot rise if its sons and daughters are not growing together. A country cannot thrive if its classrooms are filled with disengaged, unsupported young men. And a community cannot flourish when its boys are burdened by silence, shame, and societal neglect.

The Role of Education: Creating Space for the Boy Child

Education is our most powerful tool for social transformation, including transforming boys' lives. Through the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) unit, the Department of Basic Education is working to combat gender-based violence and create inclusive, nurturing school environments.

This work has illuminated an urgent need: we must invest in support systems that address the unique vulnerabilities of boys, just as we do for girls. This is not a competition. The empowerment of girls and the upliftment of boys must go hand in hand.

Our schools must be places where boys learn not just mathematics and science, but emotional intelligence, empathy, and the skills needed to build respectful relationships. We will be undertaking the following:

- Intergenerational dialogues through events like today's assembly to spark conversations across generations.
- Encouraging the inclusion of positive male role models in school environments.
- Supporting research into boys' experiences and challenges to shape better-targeted interventions.
- And looking into a national framework to support boys' emotional, mental, physical, and social development.

Colleagues, let me be clear:

Addressing the needs of the boy child does not mean taking away from the gains we have made in advancing the girl child.

Rather, it is about balancing the scale and ensuring that every child, regardless of gender, can thrive. We want to see the successes we have seen in our interventions targeted at the girl child, replicated in the boy child.

A Junior Minister with a Mission

I am particularly pleased to share that with me today is Koketso Leburu, he will be shadowing me in all my meetings and engagements. He is serving today as the Junior Minister of Basic Education. He is a bright, passionate young man who represents the dreams and potential of the boy child.

Koketso symbolises what is possible when we invest in boys.

A New Story for the Boy Child

The theme that the DBE has decided on for today's event, "*The Legends, The Youngins and The Boys*," reminds us that we are all connected.

The legends — our elders — have walked this path.

The boys— our role models — are paving new ways.

And the boys — our future — are watching, listening, and learning.

Let us write a new story for the boy child, one of hope, of dignity, of growth. Let us provide him with the space to cry without shame, to dream without limit, and to rise without fear.

To every boy here today and those who will hear this at home, you matter.

The DBE is committed to ensuring that no child is left behind. Indeed, that means no boy child will be left behind.

Thank you very much!

Ndiyabulela!

Kea Leboga!

Baai Dankie!

Nakhensa!