

**SPEECH BY THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MS SIVIWE GWARUBE**  
**Champions of Change Gala Red Carpet Dinner**  
**12 April 2025 | The Houghton Hotel, Johannesburg**

Programme Director,  
Esteemed hosts from Vuyoletu's Haven,  
Leaders in the disability and education sectors,  
Educators, caregivers, parents,  
And above all, our extraordinary children and young people living with autism,

Good evening.

It is truly a pleasure to join you tonight at the Champions of Change Gala Dinner — This Autism Awareness Month, as we celebrates courage, commitment, and the collective journey towards inclusive education in South Africa.

Let me begin by thanking Vuyoletu's Haven for your leadership in organising this important event. You remind us that creating an inclusive society does not begin nor end in a boardroom or a policy document — it begins with love, with advocacy, and a deep belief in the limitless potential of every child.

Tonight, we are here to celebrate, yes. But more than that, we are here to reflect, recommit, and recognise the very real work that lies ahead in ensuring that children with special learning needs are not only included, but embraced, empowered, and uplifted by our education system.

For far too long in our communities, children who live with physical and cognitive disabilities were condemned to a life of shame, to spend their days hidden away in the bedroom so that visitors would not see them.

When I was appointed as the Minister of Basic Education last year, I visited the length and breadth of this country visiting provincial education departments, districts and schools. I stand here with the full knowledge that we are at a turning point in the history of our education system. The Department of Basic Education is taking bold steps to move from intent to action.

Chief among these efforts is the establishment of the Ministerial Task Team on Inclusive Education. This task team brings together educators, therapists, psychologists, policy makers, advocates, and, importantly, people living with disabilities themselves — because we firmly believe: *Nothing about us, without us.*

This task team is currently conducting a comprehensive review of how we implement inclusive education in South Africa. Their work is focused on identifying what is working,

where we are falling short, and what must urgently be done to ensure that learners with special needs are no longer excluded from the promise of education.

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Inclusion is not a favour. It is a right. And inclusion is not just about placing a learner in a classroom — it is about providing that learner with the resources, the teaching support, the emotional safety, and the opportunity to thrive.

We must remember that when we educate a child with special learning needs, we are not simply helping them learn to read, write, and count. We are building their confidence, their communication, their self-expression — and most importantly, we are helping them build a life of dignity.

Education must be a springboard — to jobs, independence, creativity, and participation in society. This means that our special schools must be equipped and trained to welcome learners who are differently abled.

That is the future we are working towards: one where no child is left behind.

Behind every child living with autism is often a village of support — parents, grandparents, caregivers, siblings, teachers, therapists. Tonight, we honour you. We honour the educators who adjust their teaching styles, the caregivers who spend long nights researching better therapies, the parents who fight daily battles in silence, and the children themselves who wake up every day to a world that still struggles to understand them — yet they keep showing up.

The emotional toll, the financial sacrifices, the systemic barriers — we see them. And we recognise that it should not be this hard.

Society has a collective responsibility to do better. Government alone cannot create an inclusive society. It requires partnership.

- The private sector must invest in programmes that create job opportunities for neurodiverse youth.
- Universities and colleges must open their doors wider to learners with special needs, with the necessary supports in place.
- Civil society organisations, like Vuyolethu's Haven, must be supported and funded so that they can continue to provide the critical bridge between communities and government.

- And all of us — in our homes, in our faith communities, in our workplaces — must challenge harmful stereotypes and cultivate spaces of compassion and inclusion.

This evening, as we bask in the warmth of solidarity and celebration, we must also acknowledge that there are still thousands of children with special learning needs in our country who remain outside of the education system — children for whom school is not yet a reality, but a distant hope.

That is why, as Minister of Basic Education, I want to use this platform tonight to make a clear and public commitment:

We will expand access to inclusive education.

We will accelerate the rollout of special schools.

We will prioritise teacher training on neurodiversity.

We will collaborate with departments of health and social development to provide wraparound services that support both learners and families.

And we will continue to engage directly with families, NGOs, and advocacy groups to make sure that our policies are grounded in lived experiences.

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To every child in this room tonight who is living with autism and other disabilities in this country.

You are not invisible. You are not a burden. You are a gift.

This country needs your insight, your creativity, your brilliant uniqueness.

To the parents and caregivers: You are not alone. The Department of Basic Education will walk beside you. Your struggles are real, and so is our commitment to support you.

To the educators and professionals: You are the engine of inclusive education. Your willingness to adapt, to learn, and to love is changing lives every single day.

Let me close with words I once heard from a disability rights activists who said:

*Inclusion is not something we do for people with disabilities. Inclusion is something we do for everyone. Because when we create a world that works for people with disabilities, we create a better world for all of us.*

Let this gala dinner be a reminder that inclusion is not a project — it is a principle.

Thank You!