basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Keynote Address by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, MP, at the Professional Educators Union (PEU) Conference held at Doxa Deo Church, Pretoria

06 October 2022

Programme Director

The President of PEU

National Executive Members of PEU

Delegates

Distinguished Guests

Ladies and Gentlemen

I am pleased to officially welcome delegates to this important gathering, the annual Professional Educators Union (PEU) conference.

I have said it before, and I repeat it today, you are an important ally in the basic education sector.

By its very nature, the basic education ecosystem is built around professional associations, labour unions and bureaucrats.

Your professionalism and eagerness to partake in basic education policy discourse are widely welcomed in the sector.

We thank you and wish your union well into the future.

The theme of this conference is ‘Reflecting on an attitudinal change toward a re-energised and professionalised Union with Teachers at the heart of Education Recovery.’

It is a powerful statement that foregrounds basic education recovery post-Covid-19 at the heart of professional teachers.

Yesterday, we celebrated World Teachers’ Day under a similar theme.

It was celebrated under the theme, “The transformation of education begins with teachers”.

Both themes call for the Government to support teachers in their professional duties and obligations towards the learners without too many bureaucratic impediments.

World Teachers’ Day 2022 highlighted the critical work of teachers and called upon governments to ‘invest in teachers, involve teachers, and trust and respect teachers.’

We salute the indomitable spirit of all teachers, especially those affiliated with PEU.

Our teacher’s determination and diligent efforts during the Covid-19 pandemic stood our country in good stead.

Thus, we should be celebrating our teachers every day.

Nonetheless, we used the 2022 World Teachers' Day to honour some teachers for their innovation and hard work with the retail giant Woolworths.

The Woolworths-sponsored SHERO Awards add to the growing list of teachers' appreciation programmes.

Today, I appeal to society to support teachers, honour them, understand them and most importantly, work with teachers in their children's learning journey.

Today, we acknowledge and celebrate you as part of a cohort of outstanding patriots who have chosen a path less travelled to be of service to their homeland.

We value your role in society in shaping our collective future.

On the behalf of our Government, we encourage you to continue and never become weary.

Programme director; the role of teachers in the country's economic development remains critical as they provide education that enhances people's quality of life.

Our teachers are the world's pride and joy, a national treasure worth celebrating every day.

Programme director, your theme asks the teachers to have individual consciousness, to possess a particular trait: to be re-energised and professional.

In other words, in Government speak, to 'Put People First,' which is the cornerstone of Batho Pele.

Interestingly, the theme and conference occurred days after our Government completed the Integrated Public Service Month, celebrated under the theme *'Batho Pele Revitalization – Walk the talk.'*

The Integrated Public Service Month programme is a service delivery improvement programme and an integral part of the Batho Pele Revitalisation strategy.

It seeks to instil good ethics and professionalism in public servants' work, an attitudinal change, as you call it.

We use the service month to recognise and celebrate public servants' hard work and commitment throughout the country.

Furthermore, to recommit and rededicate the public servants to the principles of Batho Pele and the Service Charter.

These include self-introspection, open and transparent responses to critical issues like professionalism, ethical conduct, commitment, patriotism, and corporate ethos.

The thrust of Batho Pele, as I have said, is Putting People First.

As we know, professionals such as teachers and principals are the heart of any school, the sharp-end as it were.

Our appeal is for all teachers to walk the talk. Putting Learners First.

If a principal is in tune with the community he/she serves, the whole school will follow.

Programme director, the next logical step to keep a re-energised and professional workforce is to focus on teacher wellness.

As we know from literature, teacher well-being is a positive emotional state that combines the personal needs and expectations of both learners and their teachers.

Teachers are emotionally affected by the enormous intersecting vulnerabilities of children whom they have to teach and overwhelmed by social ills (e.g. alcohol and drug use, violence, bullying, gender-based violence, and sexual abuse).

Still, most learners are often victims but sometimes perpetrators.

Thus, teacher well-being and job satisfaction strongly influence teacher behaviour and are positively related to school and classroom climate and pupil achievement.

Thus, I declare again that teacher well-being is our core business.

It is core to the sold plans to improve the overall standard and performance of the basic education sector and reach the developmental milestones as set in the National Development Plans (NDP) by 2030.

The issue of teacher well-being cannot be divorced from a relentless pursuit of improved learner outcomes.

We must understand that the improved standard of basic education and better learner outcomes are a by-product of an energised, professional, emotionally stable teacher.

We must do more to protect teachers from environmental factors such as those emanating from school safety and security.

Both teacher effectiveness and learner performance are intrinsic to the re-energised, professional and emotionally stable teacher.

It is the only way we can allow each (teacher or learner) to reach their potential unimpeded by stress and depression caused by environmental factors.

As a matter of urgency, not by 2030, we must address the occupational hazards occasioned in part by the growing learner ill-discipline and rising incidents of crime and corruption in our schools.

I am looking forward to the ideas shared during this conference.

This matter is urgent for me because of the ongoing battle with the invisible enemy, Covid-19 and the overall impact of school safety on the schooling system.

Teachers, as we know, bear the brunt of grief resulting from Covid-19 and other tragedies as learners increasingly come face-to-face with death.

Not to mention deaths of teacher colleagues and bereavement in their own families.

Our teachers have acted as lay counsellors to our learners, safety officers, and even midwives for many years.

Yet, they receive no adequate training for these roles, let alone compensation.

We can have endless philosophical debates about whether these roles performed by our teachers in local contexts daily are the core or periphery of the main task of teaching.

In my address to the teacher well-being seminar last year, I said in theorising about teacher well-being, we must move from the premise that teachers are also emotional beings.

In other words, teachers are community members before becoming teachers.

At any rate, the social ills that bedevil our society also affect our teachers.

Researchers conclude that at the core of any teaching philosophy is resilience and mental health, which provide a critical foundation for effective learning and academic success.

Resilience is recognised as the ability of individuals, in this case, teachers, to manage and cope with life's challenges, bounce back from adversity, and maintain equilibrium.

It underscores my earlier point: Teacher well-being is the core, not the periphery.

It is not the side chick of curriculum implementation and stuff like that.

However, I am in awe of the resilience and tenacity of our teachers.

As we know, any stab wound to a learner by another on school premises or outside affects the teachers significantly.

I shudder to think about how teachers cope when their star pupils succumb to illness or becomes a victim of a violent crime.

To address the teacher's well-being, we collaborate with the Education Labour Relations Council (ELRC), Teacher Unions and our international friends.

For instance, on 23 July 2021, we convened a seminar on teacher well-being to explore various orthodox and unorthodox ways to address the psychosocial needs of our teachers.

At the said seminar, we agreed that the teacher well-being portfolio should be treated as a standing item on the agenda of all Provincial Education Labour Relations Councils (PELRCs).

Reports thus far show that teacher well-being is one of the performance indicators of the ELRC.

Therefore, the PELRCs must provide quarterly reports to prove that teacher well-being programmes are being implemented in all provinces.

We urge all teachers to participate in the teacher well-being programmes, including debriefing after traumatic school incidents and bereavement.

Programme director, we have designed specific targeted measures to improve learner well-being in our schools.

I know, I always say we have to do a lot more for the girl child.

Yes, we have to, but lessons emerging from that ground are that we must equally focus our attention on adolescent boys without disputing the vulnerabilities of adolescent girls.

In this regard, we must prioritise the roll-out of Comprehensive Sexuality Education implementation - orientation of stakeholders and training of educators.

We must focus on the hot potato of teenage pregnancies and prioritise prevention, especially in highly affected areas.

We need more advocacy campaigns to prioritise the roll-out of critical sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services to all qualifying learners with our school partners.

We must continue to expand the placement of Learner Support Agents (LSA) in schools to strengthen the Psychosocial Support Service (PSS) provision.

In a nutshell, the following are the deliberate steps undertaken by us to address these critical matters of learner well-being which, if done right, will ease the burden and take the pressure off the shoulders of our teachers.

In conclusion, I must state that we are bullish about the prospects of the basic education sector.

We note the learning losses of the past two years, standing at 50 per cent, but we are undetected.

It is all hands on deck to mitigate the learning losses and get the system firing from cylinders.

I wish you well at your conference.

Ora et Labora = Work & Pray.

I thank you.