

Sentenced to home education

Education Minister Naledi Pandor plans to send unruly and disruptive children home to be educated by their parents. Schools must provide them with learning materials.

Statement by Minister of Education, Mrs Naledi Pandor, MP on school safety

20 October 2006

Legislation supports the creation of safer schools

The murder of Simon Nkosana Mbhele by a fellow schoolboy at Forest High has shocked the nation. Our heartfelt sympathy goes to his family and friends and our fervent hope is that Forest High will be able to recover from the trauma caused without allowing the scars to mark too deeply. I know that the provincial education department has assisted the school, parents and pupils at this difficult time.

When a rape or a murder takes place at school, it violates something deep inside us. After the family, schools are the most important social institution for our people. They influence the prospects of youth and shape their intellect and future character. For these reasons schools should be safe places. If schools can no longer be regarded as safe places, then as a community we have failed our children. This is a failure to infuse appropriate social values and attributes in those who make up our school communities.

We also know that in many of our schools the violence that we see in our society has not made its presence felt. While addressing the problems where they occur, we must also ensure that we do not allow the negative features of some of our communities to gain entry to our schools. "We have to teach pupils to revere life. You are not here to learn only mathematics; you have to learn to be human beings first," said Mzwandile Matthews, who is charge of school safety in the Department of Education, at the memorial service for Nkosana. And he is right.

We all need to respond with vigour to deny violence a permanent place in education. Listening to the outpouring of anger and frustration on talk radio over the past two weeks, it has become clear to me that most principals and parents do not know that a range of powers are available for schools to instill discipline and appropriate behavior in schools.

The first is a set of regulations on school safety that were passed back in 2001. These allow teachers and principals to randomly search pupils for weapons. This power is enshrined in law. School principals are also permitted to request a police or security official within the school to carry out such a search. I wish to remind parents and principals of these regulations. Principal after principal was heard to say that they were unsure as to whether random searching of pupils for weapons is permissible. Yes it is. You have the power. You can delegate the power to a police official or to a guard. But if violence and intimidation make learning and teaching impossible in your school, then the first thing to do is to use the powers you already have at your command.

By way of example, the following are three extracts from these regulations:

The regulations prohibit persons from carrying or storing dangerous objects on school premises and from possessing illegal drugs on school premises

The regulations permit a police official, or in the absence of a police official, the principal or the principal's delegate, without a warrant, to search any person present on the school premises, and to seize any dangerous object or illegal drug found on the school premises.

There are Guidelines for schools to develop and adopt a Code of Conduct. These Guidelines emphasise the obligation on the school to put in place measures to ensure the safety of learners, staff and parents during school activities.

It is thus quite clear that our regulations prohibit the presence of dangerous objects and illegal drugs on public school premises. Possession of weapons is a criminal offence. If principals or pupils see such weapons in schools, they are under an obligation to report their presence to an officer of the law.

Principals have the very important, and sometimes difficult, task of leading in this and must be able to rely on the support of parents and the community. The role of teachers in the day to day work of education is no less important. Many commentators refer to the importance of ensuring that the small things are required to be done. These include ensuring that homework is done and monitored, learners are neatly dressed, punctuality is observed, respect is accorded to other learners in the classroom, the school is kept clean and litter free etc Though seemingly minor, all of these small aspects contribute to the development of a disciplined and secure environment where learning can and does happen. In such an environment of care and attention to duty, the occurrence of any violent episodes is an aberration.

In some cases greater intervention is required by the Department of Education, Particularly problematic schools that I referred to previously will be acted upon in the next few weeks. We will be issuing simplified Guidelines to schools to assist them in formulating an updated Code of Conduct. Schools that continue to experience difficulties will be assisted by visits of officials to these schools to ensure the establishment of a disciplined and safe environment.

I am also considering amending the legislation for schools in so far as discipline is concerned in order to make provision for severely disruptive children. In addition to guidance and support, schools should be allowed to surrender really troublesome children into the care of their parents and or guardians for a short period of time. The schools would be obliged to ensure that the learners are provided with learning material, but the behaviour of the children will be the responsibility of the parent or guardian for that period. While ensuring that we protect the right of these children to education, we cannot allow some learners to completely disrupt the running of the schools and thereby disrupt the learning opportunities of all other learners. Related to this is the consideration of the establishment of Support Centres for particularly problematic learners. These will need to be located at Districts that have particular challenges of discipline.

We will continue to work closely with provinces in this regard to make officials available to assist schools where necessary. A closer relationship will be built with the South African Police Services to provide support to schools.

Steps towards establishing a framework for random testing for drugs will be accelerated and we will request schools to inform us whether provinces are acting on existing legislation as provided in the SA Schools Act. We have been concerned at reports that Officials sometimes take a long time to respond to discipline matters at schools, even when schools have followed the correct procedures as set out in the Schools Act.

Finally we will be working with SGBs to support them in mounting programmes using trained Counsellors to provide the necessary support to educators and parents in these matters. This will require closer work with NGOs and parents interested in being trained as Trauma Counsellors.

The provinces have not been sitting on their hands in regard to school safety. The Western Cape has dealt with the issue most proactively. The WCED launched the safe-schools programme in 1997, partly in response to gang violence on the Cape Flats. The safe-schools programme grew rapidly. Today about 850 schools, half of the 1 500 schools in the Western Cape, participate actively in the programme. The safe-schools programme has provided 100 schools with security infrastructure that includes remote-controlled gates with CCTV cameras, intercom systems to direct evacuations and safety drills, and burglar bars.

The safe schools programme is about to be boosted significantly across all provinces. The Department is in the process of establishing a new model for ensuring safe schools. The model had been piloted and implemented in three provinces (Eastern Cape, Limpopo and the Western Cape). On the basis of extensive research and these pilots, an "early warning system" will be built into the teaching and learning fabric of those schools most at risk. I feel certain that the implementation of this system in all the provinces will do much to allay public fears over the spread of violence in our schools.

However, even these measures and the range of provision in the Regulations relating to school safety, and other provisions in the SA Schools Act, the South African Council of Educators Act and so on, will only be effective if all the affected parties are determined to ensure the safety of our children at school and on the way to and from school. This means that parents, educators, learners, security personnel, the SAPS, and the community itself must demonstrate determination to use the resources available in law and in regulations to protect our children. The greatest support will have to come from parents and the Community. Parents will have to teach discipline at home, prevent their children from taking drugs and weapons to schools and support teachers and schools when they have to discipline the children who have got themselves in trouble.

I am certain that together we can ensure that schools are a safe and secure place for all our children.

Issued by:Lunga Ngqengelele
012 312 5538
082 566 0446
e-mail: ngqengelele.l@doe.gov.za