

# Improving safety in schools

The National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) convened a National School Safety Summit attended by government, unions, SGBs, principals, learners, business, development partners, labour, faith-based organisations and universities. Scheduled during the global 16 Days of Activism for No Violence Against Women and Children awareness campaign and in support of South Africa's theme 'Count me in: together moving a nonviolent SA forward', the summit adopted a declaration on joint actions to improve safety in schools.



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Research shows that school violence is escalating despite the measures put in place to address the problem by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and schools themselves. Teachers and learners appear justified in fearing for their own safety, which affects learner progression and achievement. This is becoming a matter of national concern.

In her address on the state of learner safety in South Africa, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga, said, "Schools are often characterised by violence, by bullying and fear, impacting negatively not only on direct educational outcomes, but also on the healthy socialisation and development of children and young people."

Violence in schools can take many forms, ranging from incidents of physical violence (including corporal punishment); verbal, emotional or sexual abuse; neglect; bullying; youth gangs; harassment and stigmatisation. The Minister also noted that the violence occurring at schools was not limited to incidents between learners, and included acts perpetrated against, and by, educators.

## Violence commonplace at schools

Unfortunately only a few high-profile incidents receive media coverage, ignoring the more fundamental problem of school violence and its more common form: repetitive, on-going forms of violence (physical or emotional) that impact on young people's participation and performance.

According to the Centre for Justice and Crime Prevention, violence is commonplace in schools across South Africa and impact negatively on children in a number of ways. It results in low learner academic achievement, disruptive behaviour, ill discipline, dropping out of the schooling system, use/abuse of illegal substances, and pursuance of violence or affiliation with alternative group activities, such as gangs.

"The National Development Plan calls for active citizenship when it comes to dealing with issues of education, it calls for us to be involved in creating conditions which are going to improve the quality of education in the country," said Sizwe Nxasana, Chairman of the NECT in his welcoming address at the summit. The safety of our children at school is envisioned in Chapter 12 of the NDP and the NECT is dedicated to strengthening partnerships among business, civil society, government and labour in order to achieve the education goals of the NDP.

Vuyo Zali, South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU) Gauteng Chairperson commented, "It is sad that 20 years later, there's still perpetuation of violence against learners by some of our members, it is a disgrace that we also want to condemn. We have committed ourselves together with some of the MECs to help create an exciting environment at schools, so that indeed schooling becomes what it's supposed to be - a second home".

## **Learner representation**

The summit hosted representatives from all stakeholder groups, including strong learner representation, all of whom gathered with a single objective: to find a positive way forward to address violence in schools.

Learner representation ensured that their voices were heard too. Khulekani Skosana, General Secretary of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) strongly held their view that teachers cannot simply dismiss the rights of learners, but remained committed to working with stakeholders to find a solution.

A panel of experts and stakeholder representatives provided inputs to the summit before delegates broke into commissions to discuss critical issues such as corporal punishment and discipline; sexual violence in schools; the protection of learning spaces; and youth marginalisation, crime and violence.

## **Declaration created**

The discussions resulted in a declaration towards joint actions, which was presented by Godwin Khosa, CEO of the NECT. The declaration acknowledged that school violence in South Africa remains unacceptably high and the negative impact thereof on the learners, their communities and the future of the country. It further stated, "This Declaration binds all stakeholders present here today to work together to build peace, stability and security in and around all our educational institutions. It also lays the basis for the development of a roadmap for future action involving the various stakeholders to build a culture of peace and non-violence in all our schools to enable effective learning and teaching."

The stakeholders further committed themselves to strengthen relationships between learners, teachers, parents and communities; building transparency and trust within schools; eradicating corporal punishment and working towards a culture of positive discipline; ensuring learners learn without fear of violence or abuse; respecting teachers; and increasing parental and community support and partnerships in safety. The education authorities committed to provide support to teachers and schools to improve classroom management and behaviour management practices, and to provide support and training to school management and governance to build accountable management practices.

"We all need to provide a safe environment for which teaching can take place in our country," said Nxasana. "If we do so we'll be able to create an environment in which opportunities can be created to all of our citizens to enable them to achieve their full potential."

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