



basic education

Department:  
Basic Education  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**KEYNOTE SPEECH DELIVERED BY THE HONOURABLE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MRS ANGIE MOTSHEKGA, MP AT THE EVENT DEDICATED FOR INTERNATIONAL MOTHER-TONGUE LANGUAGE DAY (IMLD) AT THE EAST LONDON ICC**

**International Mother Language Day 2024, with the theme –  
“*Multilingualism: A Pillar of Intergenerational Learning*”**

*“Nothing is more powerful than an idea whose time has come”  
(Victor Hugo)*

Honourable members of the Eastern Cape legislature led by Deputy Speaker Hon. Qoboshiyane  
Representatives of the Office of the Premier  
MEC Gade, uSosuthu osile umqombothi namhlanje  
Mme MEC Kontsiwe, and your team from the DSRAC (Department of Sports, Arts and Culture)  
The Pan South African Language Board (PanSLAB) Team, Chairperson, CEO and executives present here today  
Political leadership of the province and support structures from all corners of the Eastern Cape  
Officials of the DBE from the national office, and also from all Provincial Education Departments  
Esteemed guests invited from various organisations; NGOs and NPOs  
Academics from various institutions and civil society those who are physically present and those who are online  
Our funding partners and role players in education including stakeholders and the Advisory council  
Indlu yeeNkosi, nama thandazwe onke, kea dumelisa bohle and South Africa at large

Today, the whole world converges on various platforms like this one, acknowledging the value of mother-tongue languages. As you probably know, when UNESCO declared this day in 1999; it was recognised as the International Mother Language Day (IMLD), chosen because of the tragic – yet catalysing events that transpired on that day in 1952, in Bangladesh.

In the same way, that this day is engraved in the hearts and minds of the speakers of the Bengali language, because of the events of February 21<sup>st</sup>, 1952. We also hold a special place in our hearts the young people, who were killed on the 16<sup>th</sup> June 1976, whose sin was to reject the 50-50 language in education policy that African language learners were subjected to; a direct result of competing dominant languages at that time; that wanted Africans to serve two masters equally. We salute our young man and women, who knew that language issues were intertwined with identity, and saw it as a worthy cause; to resist any effort that sought to place the majority in a maze of a hegemonic power struggle. We bow in reverence.

The UNESCO theme of 2024 for this International Mother Language Day is “**Multilingualism, a pillar of intergenerational learning**”. It prompted me to think about the sacrifices made by the generation of 1976 around language; and what can be passed on as a baton to children today. The youth of 1976 did not have a constitution that recognised 12 official languages; then it was English and Afrikaans. We celebrate today on a stronger footing, where Government has a responsibility as espoused in our Constitution, that all official languages must be developed for parity of esteem. The footprint we all leave here today; its fruits will be enjoyed by generations to come. This generation might not appreciate it for now; but as they stand on our shoulders when we are long gone; we hope that they will agree in the affirmative that indeed we made this possible for them.

As the 6<sup>th</sup> Administration winds up its work, it feels good to come back to where it all began – in the province of the Eastern Cape; these hills and plains of this province, bear the indomitable spirit that refused to

accept that it cannot be done. In 2010, they grabbed the bull by its horn and said bring it on – we salute the giants that dared to go it alone; we respect that spirit of resilience.

The African Union has designated 2024 as the ***Year of Education in Africa***, under the theme, “***Educate an African, fit for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century: Building resilient education systems for increased access to inclusive, lifelong, quality and relevant learning in Africa***”. This theme comes at the backdrop of a continent that acknowledges that education systems can only be resilient, if they are built on the resources that its people – their identities, their languages, their cultures and everything that defines being proudly African. A system built on borrowed resources; borrowed identities, borrowed languages and borrowed cultures, is not sustainable and has no relevance to its people. The call by the AU provides an opportunity for all Africans to accelerate the transformation of our education systems on the continent. If we say that education is a fundamental right for all children, then it is our obligation to ensure that *mabafunde bonke abantwana – let all children learn*.

## **The History of MTBBE Implementation in the Eastern Cape**

Esteemed guests present at this event, I still remember I was fresh as a Minister in 2010, when I received a letter from the then MEC Mahlubandile Qwase, requesting me to agree to a Learner Attainment Improvement Strategy (LAIS) Summit decision of 2009 to support the establishment of a Language Unit in line with the National Language Policy Framework of 2023. The province had done its Language Scoping Study in 2005, and had established that indeed the education problem, was a language problem. At the time, the Eastern Cape was not only the last in number, but in quality outcomes as well. Today we are proud to stand here as things have changed – *zizikile izinto*. The Eastern Cape is a province on the rise.

In 2009 that LAIS Summit was chaired by Mr Mlibo Qoboshiyane. It gave the Department no choice, but to establish a Language Unit to

champion the Language Transformation Plan (LTP). The ANC had just lost power in the Western Cape to the Democratic Alliance; and the first casualty to be canned by the DA was the Language Transformation Plan. In hindsight, had the DA then understood the importance of language as all of us do, we would be having this celebration in the Western Cape, where it all started. It is true that one person's trash, is another man's treasure. This one belongs to the people of the Eastern Cape.

Sometimes I worry that we don't seem to accept that it was the late Chief Ngangomhlaba Mathanzima, the Provincial Head of CONTRALESA and the people of Cofimvaba, who stood through thick and thin to defend this programme. I acknowledge the then District Director Mr Mthunywa Ngonzo, who accepted the challenge with open hands, being the only district in the country to have started the pilot – look at where this programme has placed Cofimvaba on the world map.

Such is generational learning – enkosi Jola. For me, it was not a matter of being convinced as a language graduate myself. At the time, I believed that my job was to support the implementation of the Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTBBE) that the province dared to start. The Eastern Cape requested an open-file for versioning the DBE workbooks for Grade 4-6 Mathematics, and the Siyavula Science lesson plans. The ANAs in 2013 in isiXhosa for Cofimvaba, were given freely by DBE, as we knew then that good fruit would be harvested much later.

I am proud to have led the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) that approved all the Language Transformation agenda programmes. This included the request from MEC Gade, who came armed with the late HoD Themba Kojana and Dr Mbude to request that the Cofimvaba cohort, that had reached Grade 12 in 2020 to be granted permission to trial the Grade 12 preparatory examinations in two subjects for Quintile 1-3 schools. As the CEM, we waited with excitement, as we made history in 2020, with the first bilingual Grade 12 trial examinations in the Eastern Cape. Today, because of the seed planted in Cofimvaba, the

Eastern Cape is the only province that has bilingual trial examinations in Grade 12 in isiXhosa and Sesotho for 6 subjects, including Mathematics and Sciences. The seed that the people of this province planted since 2010, has definitely borne the good fruit; we have come to celebrate and replicate this achievement in the entire country.

## **The decoloniality agenda**

The reality of education systems in the African continent, is one that characterises Africa by who colonised it. An education system in Africa, is Anglophone, if it was colonised by the English. It would be Francophone, if it was colonised by French-speaking masters; or Lusophone, if that country bowed to Portuguese masters. The only recipients of Mother Tongue Education in Anglo-, Franco- or Lusophone countries, would be the English, French or Portuguese Home Language speaking minority, with none or little regard for the majority of African language speakers in that African country.

During the colonial era in South Africa between 1806 and 1961, Great Britain was in power. Therefore, the Anglicisation policy ensured the enforcement of the English- or Anglo-hegemony. In 1961, there was an internal colonisation of the country, when South Africa became a Republic through apartheid. Afrikaans, which replaced Dutch, enjoyed this benefit, alongside English. It was only in 1994, that we had official multilingualism post-apartheid. South Africa made strides and enshrined multilingualism in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (Act No. 108 of 1996), and in the Language in Education Policy (LiEP) of 1997.

There is adequate legislative framework and guidelines necessary to promote and implement effective multilingual education practices. If there is ample opportunity for multilingual education in South Africa for all children, why is that the majority of children, who happen to be African language speaking, do not enjoy the benefits provided to English and Afrikaans learners, whose languages are used as Languages of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (LoLTA)?

We must all accept that when we handed this responsibility to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) through section 6 of the South African Schools Act (1996), that SGBs may determine the School Language Policy (SLP); we ended there. We did not monitor the crucial part that says, the School Language Policies must be subject to the Constitution and any national or provincial laws. We did not do enough to guide, support and ensure redress of past language imbalances and equitable access to the curriculum. The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Bill seeks to correct, where we are unable to do this monitoring, by getting closer to issues that allow gaps for any form of exclusion on the basis of race, language or culture. We take responsibility for the period of transition as all transitions have important lessons that we must learn from.

### **What informed this announcement for the MTBBE rollout**

In the context, where the benefits to individuals and societies of being multilingual are increasingly recognised, we need to explore how to harness the rich language resources for achieving inclusive and equitable quality education. A plethora of research studies over 120 years in Africa and in various parts of the world, show that drawing on learners' home language and cultural backgrounds in classroom teaching, validates their identities and provide a strong foundation for additional language learning. Qualitative success of children in an education system, depends on the number of years; they spend learning in their language through their language, and from their language (Pai Obanya, 2010) – while learning additional languages for a minimum of 6-8 years.

The switch that happens after Grade 3, only for African language learners; has far reaching implications for proficiency in their language and in English as well. It plunges children to a perpetual cycle of semi-lingualism, where they do not master any of the languages they are taught. We are fortunate in South Africa, that we witness in all national, continental and international tests, how English- and Afrikaans-speaking learners are the sole beneficiaries of Mother Tongue-based

Bilingual Education. The DBE supported the Eastern Cape pilot to learn valuable lessons.

We all agree that before the introduction of any major change in the system, that would have far reaching implications; one must take lessons from the pilot, and then develop a rollout plan. Africa must graduate from being stuck on unending pilots, unending research studies, whose recommendations are not taken up, but continue to fail the people of South Africa in the process. I want to take this moment to thank officials in the Basic Education Sector, various organisations, our funding partners, individuals, parents and learners in South Africa, for being patient, when we said, let us give the Eastern Cape the pilot time to wind; so that we can learn from their experience. We are here today to celebrate that journey, and move the country a step forward.

In 2022, we established a Language Unit in the DBE, in line with the use of Official Languages Act (2012), that was promulgated by the Department of Sport, Arts and Culture; and we also wish to thank the Old Mutual Foundation for funding its establishment. MEC Kontsiwe, please inform Minister Zizi Kodwa that we have complied as DBE. Our DG just concluded provincial engagements to impress upon provinces to establish Language Units, so that all “languaging” development issues, can be dealt with within context. When people want to describe the reading problem outside of the language problem, we worry that they do not understand how deep language issues cut.

We will journey with everyone in South Africa, even with those experts who are still not clear that it doesn't start with reading for meaning using western logic; it starts with language development in the home languages of children. Reading methodologies that do not address what has been fundamentally flawed with reading pedagogies based on western Germanic languages, will never be sufficient to address the challenge of reading comprehension. The DBE used the opportunity presented by the PIRLS (2021) Report to self-reflect. We have resolved that it is time to use the logic of African languages, to understand what lies at the core of our problem.

There is a paucity of scholarship in the area of reading for meaning in African languages in the entire world. We acknowledge this. We refuse to be stuck in the narrative of those, who unfortunately have been expert in the western logic of teaching reading. We implore everyone to journey with us for an African solution to African problems. It is better to take time to understand a problem, rather than waste resources and time on solutions that are not-fit-for purpose.

In 2022, I commissioned a Rapid Assessment to find out provincial readiness to rollout MTBBE, and do a deeper dive of the Eastern Cape's MTBBE pilot. Our deepfelt gratitude to the Old Mutual Foundation (OMF) once more for funding the Rapid Assessment Survey. The findings of the Rapid Assessment were presented today, and to the National Language Policy Conference that was held on the 23<sup>rd</sup> July 2023, with a theme "***Beyond policy: Classroom benefits of multilingual teaching and learning***". The findings were clear that the Eastern Cape pilot is an educationally reliable prototype, despite challenges like any other transformation programme will have. The DBE can rely on these results.

### **Beyond policy – Classroom benefits of multilingual teaching and learning**

This theme was selected, as the benefits to individuals and societies of being multilingual, are increasingly recognised. But questions remained, as to what this means for teachers in multilingual classrooms, where learners can speak many different languages; or for classrooms, where English has traditionally been the language of learning and teaching; yet the teachers and learners speak other official languages. The conference was designed to explore how multilingual approaches help promote inclusive, quality education in South Africa, and how African languages can be used as Languages of Learning, Teaching and Assessment (LoLTA) beyond Grade 3.

The objectives of the conference were –

- To establish a *network* to support the DBE's Language Policy Unit to realise its objectives;
- To explore examples of bilingual and multilingual *pedagogical practices*;
- To *summarise* discussions that highlight key issues and potential solutions for South Africa;
- To document key *lessons and a way forward* for the DBE; and
- To develop a *multilingual strategy for South Africa*, including summary of commission outcomes, recommendations, lessons learnt and action plans.

Within South African classrooms, learners may have different linguistic and cultural backgrounds; they may speak one language at home and another language at school; or are learning through the LoLT, as an additional language. Classrooms that promote multilingualism, can foster positive identities associated with home cultures, as well as supporting academic success. This position is supported by Richard Ruiz's notion of '**language as a resource**' (1984\), which advocates for the use of learners' home languages as resources for learning and teaching.

One of the most successful approaches to bilingual teaching and learning, has been the purposeful and simultaneous use of two languages in the same classroom, a process that is referred to as **translanguaging**. This approach is designed to enable teachers to constantly draw on, and make use of learners' emergent bilingual skills in a planned and purposeful way. This encourages learners to use the most appropriate linguistic resources they have in the learning process. It also allows teachers to draw on learners' first languages, and on their community funds of knowledge in the classroom. This is not something new; the conference pushed us to commit to making today happen; indeed we have listened.

## The announcement

Ladies, and Gentleman, currently there are more than **six hundred and seventy thousand** (670 592) Grade 4 learners in Quintile 1-3 schools, who are faced with the slump phenomena, as they change the Language of Teaching and Learning in Grade 4, through a weak form of early transitional bilingual education. We do not have a policy post-independence in South Africa, that safeguards mother tongue education for only for English- and Afrikaans-speaking learners. I have a responsibility to ensure that the more than **six hundred and nine thousand** (692 240) Grade 3s in Quintile 1-3 schools, whose parents have pinned their hopes on them, as they move to Grade 4 in 2025. These young people must land safely in Grade 4.

It is my duty to attempt to ensure that we put an end to the Grade 4 slump of learners, who because of the early switch are affected beyond Grade 4, to a life where we play catch up; if they are lucky to remain at school. There will be a phased incremental implementation of Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education, targeting in Phase 1 Mathematics as well as Natural Science and Technology in Grade 4, starting in 2025.

Various provinces will choose models that will work best for them on the available repertoire of LoLTA models. The DBE team has started the engagements with all provinces, and support will be provided; so that the transition is smooth. A key finding of the Rapid Assessment, confirmed by teachers in the July 2023 conference, was that the role of English is overstated. Teachers in our poor and rural schools are not teaching mainly in English; they teach in the languages children understand.

The only issue is assessment; and hence, this rollout is about widening access to the curriculum for all children, affirming that if children need their languages for learning, and be taught in their languages; they need their languages for assessment too. The first phase is incremental, and is flexible, so that we can journey together. The question to be answered is not whether we should do it or not; it is how we will

implement in a most efficient way that is beneficial to the African, poor child whose only resource is their language.

I want to thank the Pan South African Language Board, for ensuring that this event happens; the Department of Sports, Arts and Culture, for ensuring that PanSALB is vibrant in holding our hands; the Eastern Cape Department of Education; all our partners, who are always willing to journey with us, to ensure that we deliver quality education; our stakeholders here today; officials of the Department, and the people of the Eastern Cape. Thank you South Africa, for making us proud; the seeds planted, are beginning to grow; may you be that tree that nourishes the country. History will remember this day. Mabafunde bonke abantwana.

Rea leboa,  
I thank you,  
Ndiyabulela!!