

## **Special needs and LSEN schools must not be left behind**

By **Desiree van der Walt MP** – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Basic Education

Die DA verwerp die voortgesette diskriminasie teen die inheemse tale van ons land. Advertensies wat belanghebbendes uitnooi om skriftelike kommentaar op die BELA-wysigingswetsontwerp in te dien is bedoel om aan alle taalgroepe 'n gelyke geleentheid te bied. Behalwe vir die advertensie in Engels wat reeds op 15 Mei in 'n nasionale koerant verskyn het, sal al die advertensies in ander tale slegs in streeks- of gemeenskapskoerante geplaas word. Boonop sal nege van ons 11 amptelike tale se gebruikers nie die volle 30 dae periode gebied word nie, met Afrikaanssprekendes wat die minste tyd gegun word.

To the Minister, before I continue, please note that we are aware of the competencies of your Department and those under the provincial PEDs. But it does not change that you are the custodian of basic education and when our concerns are not addressed with the MECs in the provinces we need you to act as the custodian and intervene by using the remedies available to you. Surely your Cabinet meetings are such a remedy where you can raise matters with the President.

We have welcomed the transfer of the Early Childhood Development sector into the Department of Basic Education. Being formally part of the foundation phase should improve academic results throughout a child's education.

Of course, it needs urgent focus on getting it right from the start.

The Early Childhood 2021 Census released last week emphasised our earlier concerns raised with the Minister and the portfolio committee that significant financial support, resources and training is non-negotiable to success.

The current financial year's allocation is already on red-alert.

Municipalities, who are failing to deliver services, cannot be trusted to be in charge of the infrastructure of ECDs in their areas. It will surely lead to massive failures.

The Western Cape Education Department's mantra of *"Enter to learn, leave to serve"* carries a deep meaning that every child should be in school for the sole purpose of learning.

It also emphasizes that every child has potential and must be developed to become an active citizen of South Africa. But it seems like the children in the special needs and LSEN schools sector are often treated as "secondhand citizens".

Why do I say this? Conduct unannounced oversight visits – see for yourselves, listen to the learners, teachers, SGBs and parents.

A reply to my parliamentary question on whether there is an allocation to public special needs schools and how are learners of such schools funded, revealed that *"DBE does not have a policy relating to the funding of Special Schools. The draft policy was not approved due to budget constraints"*.

It also revealed that *"the equitable share formula for basic education is based on the age cohort 5 - 17 for school going age and not 7 - 15. There is no earmarked or specific funding for learners above 17 years. The same allocation for the age cohort 5 - 17 is also extended to learners above 17 years"*.

This needs urgent attention. We have to change this sector and ensure they benefit from quality education without discrimination as per the SA Schools Act and the sub programme 'Partnerships in Education' which includes an understanding of human rights.

If the Funza Lusaka-bursary scheme is to address critical educator shortages in specified subject areas, it should include providing bursaries to prospective teachers in sign language and braille for our visual and hearing impaired learners.

This sector should not be left behind with outdated equipment. Technology has advanced beyond the outdated braille machines. Modern equipment is available and should be provided to these learners and teachers.

Now more than ever it is necessary for you to think how your Department is going to resolve the growing need for therapists at schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has left many scars and fears on learners and educators. Substance abuse, teenage pregnancies, violence on school premises or at outings, statutory rape or sexual abuse on school premises, etc is on the rise, yet there are no experts to assist. We need to have urgent discussions with the Minister of Health, as I have requested before.

We have proposed the placement of health care students, like occupational therapists, psychologists, nurses, speech therapists, etc who must do their community service years at schools. Both the schools and students across the country can benefit from such a project.

I conclude with an invitation to you and the Minister of Finance to visit special needs and LSEN schools with me during June, which is youth month, in order to see the real need. We must look after every learner to ensure their futures and allow them to one day leave school to serve their communities and our country.