

Speech by MEC Martha Bartlett: RCL Summit

Program Director
Representatives from our Teacher Unions
Officials from DBE
Senior Management of NCDOE
Principals and Educators
Most importantly, our Learners
Members of the media
Ladies and Gentlemen
Distinguished Guests

It gives me great pleasure to welcome you all at this maiden Summit of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) in our province. This is truly a historic occasion which lays the first footprint for many more similar occasions.

The South African Schools Act (SASA) clearly sets the tone in stipulating the specific outcomes we strive to achieve as a country with our young people i.e. “to provide an education of high quality for all learners and lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people’s talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic wellbeing of society, protect and advance our diverse cultures and languages, uphold the rights of all learners...”

A radical educationist of the then capitalist Brazil, named Paulo Freire, believed that part of the purpose of education was to help learners develop the ability “to ask good questions” in true pursuit of knowledge rather than obedience and conformity. He said it was through this ability that education can help learners in their journey towards liberation and freedom through intellectual curiosity.

It will be a grave mistake to have this event that exalts the voices of learners and not pay homage to the forebears of student politics and student struggle in our country. The fallen heroes and heroines of the 1976 students uprising had a peculiar struggle to conquer during their era. When the language of Afrikaans alongside English was made compulsory as a medium of instruction in schools in 1974, black students began mobilizing themselves and peacefully demonstrated and protested against the government’s directive.

In recent years, we experienced a major paradigm shift in the generational struggle of learners when university students pioneered a nation wide movement best known as the “Fees Must Fall” generation. Therefore, our South Africa has a long history of student struggle going way back to the anti-Apartheid marches that predated South Africa’s democracy.

In the interest of democracy and as part of addressing the injustices of the past, the post apartheid regime had to promulgate legislation that will advocate and ensure that equal and fair participation of all relevant ant stakeholders, amongst others, is the South African Schools Act No 84 of 1996.

As part of the schooling system of pre 1994, learner leaders were identified and doctrines to operate and implement only what the principal and educators deemed to be the “ideal” way. Freedom of speech based on democratic principles did not apply at that time. No platform existed for free, fair and robust engagement between the educators and learners. The views, contributions and participation of the broad representation of learners was always muted resulting in the unfair discrimination of most learners from participator democracy.

As stipulated in this act, “a Representative Council of Learners must be established at every public school enrolling learners in the eighth grade or higher, and such council is the only recognised and legitimate representative learner body at the school”. This is an exciting opportunity for the learners themselves to mould their leadership and organizational skills, and be a partner in the building of a democratic quality public education system.

In reality, our experience is that some schools have elected RCL members, who have been trained in their roles and responsibilities and are effectively utilised as fully fledged members of their schools’ SGBs. Unfortunately the same cannot be said about many other schools in the province and we have noted that many SGBs at schools with Grade 8 and higher operate without their RCL Governors.

The time has come to take the election and functioning of RCLs seriously in the system. The election must happen annually within the first four weeks when the schools re-open. We will not accept any deviation in this regard. We cannot always site reasons such as the Grade 8's don't know one another or it's better to have the RCL election during the graduation diploma ceremonies, or educators decide who the RCL members must be. It is equally important to mention that the RCL election must serve as a reminder of our hard fought democracy. We owe it to the country to lay a good foundation for the second layer leadership.

We must guard schools not to abuse SASA Section 30 and have parallel learner leader structures in place. We know this is happening in some schools in order to render the RCL structures non-functional. When we break into Commissions, please be frank and honest. Reflect on the challenges why we as a system are unable to have vibrant structures in place. Discuss the role and responsibilities of RCL members in realising quality education and improved learners performance. Be realistic and give practical examples on how RCL learners could assist the school.

In conclusion, a central demand of the current generation of students is the need to recognise their dignity, their material needs, their distinct family and cultural backgrounds, and of course their language. It remains the responsibility of the District Directors to know how future leaders are being treated in schools. We must have the commitment from Principals and Governing Body Chairpersons to plan properly every year for the wellbeing and development of our Young Leaders. It must be the responsibility of every class teacher to understand his/her role of what we want to achieve as a Country with our RCL Programme. Let us make a difference in laying a solid foundation for the country next Leadership.

It starts here and it starts now!!

I thank you!!!