

Inclusive education should not be a dream for the excluded special needs learners

By Chantel King MP – DA Member on the Portfolio Committee of Basic Education

Chairperson,

Minister, colleagues and guests, it is time we take our focus off the disabilities and place it on capabilities, so we can see the person first. Through the words of Alfred Einstein *“Everybody is a genius, but if you judge a fish by its ability to climb a tree, it will live its whole life believing that it is stupid”*.

The Democratic Alliance (DA) believes that every child must receive the opportunity to reach their full potential. 3856 special needs learners wrote the NSC exams in 2018 and two thirds of these learners are from the Western Cape making up 2471 learners. This prompted the Basic Education Portfolio Committee in March, this year, to conduct oversight to Vukani Special Care Centre in Khayelitsha, Iqhayiya Care and Support House in Khayelitsha and De Heide Childrens Special Care in Claremont.

Minister it is clear where the DA governs that special needs learners have more access to education. Why is it then Minister that other provinces have a lethargic approach when it comes to special needs education?

Human Rights Watch estimated in 2018 that there were 600 000 children with disabilities not attending school in South Africa. The Working Group Protocol mentioned by the President in his SONA will not solve this problem. 600 000 kids don't have time to wait around for discussions papers and summits.

Coding and tablets won't make a difference to special needs learners who are not in school.

The implementation of White Paper 6 has been slow. White Paper 6 was first introduced in 2001 and 17 years later there has not been much progress in the implementation of the inclusive education system, for how long must we watch this space Mr. President?

The implementation of this policy is hampered by lack of teacher skills and knowledge in differentiating the curriculum to address a wide range of learning needs and the inability of schools not capable to screen, identify, assess and support learners.

Despite the fact that universal access to education is enshrined in myriad international bodies and in national legislation and policies, the realization of the right to access education for learners with disabilities remain a challenge for the Department of Basic Education and the State in its entirety.

Chronic underfunding of special needs facilities is placing financial constraints on parents who must pay school fees and hostel fees, in most instances as most special needs schools are not classified as no-fees schools.

Currently the conditions in special schools don't meet the standards set in guidelines as required by White Paper 6. As an example: Sigcau Special school in Flagstaff has appalling and deteriorating conditions, a health and security risk for learners whose basic human rights are violated on a daily basis.

Minister it is time that the national government put its money where its mouth is:

- Allocate new funding to establish more purpose-built, professionally staffed schools for learners with special needs;
- Strengthen special schools so they can act as resources centres and support the entire inclusive education system by offering training on curriculum differentiation, assessment and instruction and improving the already existing facilities to bring them in line with the inclusive education approach; and,
- Ensure Provincial Education departments spend conditional grants earmarked for special needs on special needs education facilities.

Minister to build an inclusive South Africa we must first build an inclusive education system. No learner should be left behind.