

INTRODUCTION BY THE MINISTER OF EDUCATION

When I announced the Implementation Plan for Tirisano, I noted with regret that our national and system-wide response to the challenge of Special Education would be delayed, but brought to the public as soon as we had analysed the comment on the Consultative Paper (Department of Education. Consultative Paper No. 1 on Special Education: Building an Inclusive Education and Training System. August 30, 1999). I am, therefore, glad to announce our response in this White Paper.

I am especially pleased that I have had the opportunity to take personal ownership of a process so critical to our education and training system which begun some five years ago in October 1996 with the appointment of the National Commission on Special Needs in Education and Training and the National Committee on Education Support Services. I say this because I am deeply aware of the concerns shared by many parents, educators, lecturers, specialists and learners about the future of special schools and specialised settings in an inclusive education and training system. They share these concerns because they worry about what kind of educational experience would be available to learners with moderate to severe disabilities in mainstream education. I understand these concerns, especially now, after I have observed what a difference special schools can make when they provide a quality and relevant learning experience.

In this White Paper, we make it clear that special schools will be strengthened rather than abolished. Following the completion of our audit of special schools, we will develop investment plans to improve the quality of education across all of them. Learners with severe disabilities will be accommodated in these vastly improved special schools, as part of an inclusive system. In this regard, the process of identifying, assessing and enrolling learners in special schools will be overhauled and replaced by structures that acknowledge the central role played by educators, lecturers and parents. Given the considerable expertise and resources that are invested in special schools, we must also make these available to neighbourhood schools, especially full-service schools and colleges. As we outline in this White Paper, this can be achieved by making special schools, in an incremental manner, part of district support services where they can become resources for all our schools.

I am also deeply aware of the anxieties that many educators, lecturers, parents and learners hold about our inclusion proposals for learners with special education needs. They fear the many challenges that may come with inclusion - of teaching, communication, costs, stereotyping and the safety of learners - that can be righted only by further professional and physical resources development, information dissemination and advocacy. We also address these concerns in this White Paper.

Beginning with 30 and expanding up to 500 schools and colleges, we will incrementally develop full-service school and college models of inclusion that can, in the long term, be considered for system-wide application. In this manner, the Government is demonstrating its determination that through the development of models of inclusion we can take the first steps of implementing our policy goal of inclusion.

This White Paper, together with Education White Paper 5 on Early Childhood Development, completes an extraordinary period of seven years of post-apartheid policy development and policy making outlined in Education White Paper 1 on Education and Training that began in the final quarter of 1994. It is a policy paper that took us more time to complete than any of the five macro-systems policies that it follows upon. This means that it has benefited the most from our early experience and knowledge of the complex interface of policy and practice.

It is, therefore, another post-apartheid landmark policy paper that cuts our ties with the past and recognises the vital contribution that our people with disabilities are making and must continue to make, but as part of and not isolated from the flowering of our nation.

I hold out great hope that through the measures that we put forward in this White Paper we will also be able to convince the thousands of mothers and fathers of some 280,000 disabled children - who are younger than 18 years and are not in schools or colleges - that the place of these children is not one of isolation in dark backrooms and sheds. It is with their peers, in schools, on the playgrounds, on the streets and in places of worship where they can become part of the local community and cultural life, and part of the reconstruction and development of our country. For, it is only when these ones among us are a natural and ordinary part of us that we can truly lay claim to the status of cherishing all our children equally.

Race and exclusion were the decadent and immoral factors that determined the place of our innocent and vulnerable children. Through this White Paper, the Government is determined to create special needs education as a non-racial and integrated component of our education system.

I wish to take this opportunity to invite all our social partners, members of the public and interested organisations to join us in this important and vital task that faces us: of building an inclusive education system. Let us work together to nurture our people with disabilities so that they also experience the full excitement and the joy of learning, and to provide them, and our nation, with a solid foundation for lifelong learning and development. I acknowledge that building an inclusive education and training system will not be easy. What will be required of us all is persistence, commitment, co-ordination, support, monitoring, evaluation, follow-up and leadership.



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