

**Address by Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal, MP to
Conference on HIV/AIDS and the education sector:**

An Education Coalition against HIV/AIDS
Midrand, Gallagher Estate, 31 May 2002

Deputy Minister of Education, Mr Mosibidu Mangena
MECs of Education

Our dear children and young people who are here to constantly remind us of
who we are really accountable to

Members of the Diplomatic Corps and those from development agencies
Religious leaders

Out distinguished guest, Professor Michael Kelly from the University of
Zambia

Friends and colleagues:

Welcome to our first national conference on HIV/AIDS and Education.

I am really delighted that you are here with us for this historic gathering. This conference sparked so much interest in the education community and beyond that my officials had a battle to avoid a stampede because so many of you wanted to attend. The high level of interest in the conference clearly indicates that there is a great concern about HIV/AIDS in the education sector, and a great desire to do something about it. I am heartened by this response and would like to thank you for having sacrificed your time and for your willingness to go the extra mile for the sake of our children and our nation.

The centrality of education in responding to the HIV/AIDS epidemic

I asked that we gather in this manner because I felt that the HIV/AIDS epidemic, as it is unfolding in our schools and learning institutions and right across the entire sector, could no longer be ignored. More crucially, I felt we needed to place education at the heart of the entire national response to HIV/AIDS because education represents the only hope for an AIDS-free South Africa.

We must acknowledge that we are in an unprecedented situation that calls for an unprecedented and creative response. In 1990, our country and Thailand had the same HIV prevalence rate of 0,8%. Today, more than 10 years later, the prevalence rate in Thailand is around 2%, while our ante-natal prevalence rate has shot up to 25%. The evidence from Thailand, and from other countries such as Uganda, Senegal, the USA and the UK has shown the critical role that education played in their successful combat against HIV/AIDS. In all of these countries, education was the driving force of the preventive measures and helped to protect learners against infection with HIV.

It is in the context of these positive lessons from outside that we meet in order to fashion the major dimensions of the education sector's response to HIV/AIDS.

The personal impacts of HIV/AIDS

I am not going to dwell any further on the statistics dealing with AIDS in our country, and its compellingly awful onslaught. You all know its general features, but more importantly, more and more of you are seeing what AIDS is doing to our society, how it is destroying men, women and children. More and more, you are finding that someone you know has the disease or a colleague or friend is severely affected because someone they love is ill or has died of AIDS. We have amongst us here today learners who have experienced this loss and trauma - and surely our hearts went out to them as they told us what they went through and what they still are experiencing.

Let me share with you the stories told by two of our learners, not just statistics but real stories told by real children. Sbongile, who is 11 years old, says: "It feels bad because always at school I am thinking when is my mother going to get fine and when my mother is going to die. Every time I feel I have to sit with the teacher there because if I am sitting alone, I am always thinking. It is difficult to concentrate. Teachers don't understand, they think you are daydreaming."

And then there is Tebogo who is also eleven. She tells us that: "My problem is that I haven't paid school fees and my mother has passed away. We do not take a lunchbox when we go to school. Sometimes we do not eat in the morning. At school they don't give me food from the feeding scheme because I have not paid school fees."

No doubt many of you here will know of similar or worse instances. And as we know only too well, what is happening with learners is happening also with teachers and education officials across the country.

The crisis that AIDS is creating for education

I want to submit, therefore, that because of HIV/AIDS, our schools, education system and society are experiencing a crisis such as they have never experienced before. And unless we take determined action now, that crisis will last well into the future. As we know, education and health are the central pillars of any nation's human and economic development, prosperity and global competitiveness. But if this epidemic undermines the education as well as the health of our people, then we are in dire straits indeed. We will move backwards, not forward, in human wellbeing. The African Renaissance will bypass us, and we will not be able to capitalise on the opportunities presented by NEPAD.

We cannot allow this to happen. We cannot allow HIV/AIDS to threaten the attainment of our national and personal educational aspirations and goals. We have made great progress towards achieving greater access, equity, redress, quality, efficiency and democracy in our education system. Must we stand aside now and let HIV/AIDS undo all that good work? Can we let HIV/AIDS destroy our dreams and mock our hopes of having an education system that prepares all our young people for the opportunities and challenges of the 21st Century? Having only so recently broken the chains with which apartheid bound us, are we going to let ourselves be bound yet again by the way HIV/AIDS weakens not only our bodies but even systems?

Never, I say. We can never allow this to repeat itself. Our responsibility at this time of crisis in our country and education system is to make our personal and collective commitment to ensuring that we preserve our system and that we overcome the epidemic that threatens to destroy it. If, in this crisis, we fail our learners and fail our educators, future generations will judge us badly. Our children will judge us badly. We will judge ourselves badly.

Education as a social vaccine against HIV

This is our decisive moment. We have seen education making a difference in other countries. We have seen schools in Uganda helping to roll back HIV by delaying the age of sexual debut by two years. We have seen the contribution of educational programmes in Senegal to keeping infection rates at a low level. We are hearing that in Zambia, the more education, the less HIV. We must make this happen here.

It should not surprise us that education has played such a large role in helping these countries come to grips with HIV/AIDS. At present we know of only four possible lines of defence against the disease. These are

- Education and behaviour change
- The use of condoms
- Treatment with antiretroviral drugs
- Anti-HIV vaccines

Vaccines are not ready yet, many questions arise about antiretroviral drugs, while the use of condoms meets with much opposition in some quarters.

That leaves us with education. Apart from education, society has no other universally acceptable and available way of defending itself against HIV infection. At present, this is the only "vaccine" that there is. It is not a medical or biological vaccine, but a social vaccine. It is a powerful vaccine that is affordable and accessible even in the most remote and rural areas, where most of our schools are found. It is a vaccine that is available to rich and poor alike. Education is a vaccine that has been proven to work, and

one we should capitalise on and make work even better by the content and type of education we offer and the way we manage our education system.

This, I believe, is the contribution that our schools must make to life in South Africa today and throughout the first part of this century. We must help our beloved country find its way into a world without AIDS. Even more, every one of us in the education sector, working together, must **lead** South Africa into a future without AIDS.

That is the challenge we face. And when in years to come the history books record the trials and tribulations that HIV/AIDS brought to our people, they will also record how the turning point in the struggle with AIDS came when we met together at this time in the year 2002 and committed ourselves to the most serious task of our lives, the total eradication of HIV/AIDS in our schools and education system, the total eradication of HIV/AIDS in South Africa **through** our schools and education system.

The challenge to this National Conference

We can do this successfully only by thinking "out of the box" about how we are to respond to AIDS and its impacts. The virus has been with us now for two decades. During that time, we have tried many different things, and even though we are beginning to see some results, we still have a long way to go. We know today that our response to AIDS cannot be the same as our response to any other disease or problem that we encounter. We should remember the words of the great physicist, Albert Einstein, who once said "We cannot use the kind of thinking that created the problem to solve the problem." In thinking about what to do with AIDS, we must take Einstein's advice seriously and challenge ourselves to think "out of the box" so as to come up with innovative and effective solutions to dealing with the crisis that is upon us.

In view of this, therefore, I suggest that this Conference should focus on four areas:

1. First, what can the education sector do through its schools, institutions and organisational framework to limit the spread of HIV? What comparative advantage does the education sector have in this regard and how can it put that advantage to maximum use?
2. Second, what concrete actions can the sector take to demonstrate care and support for those who have been stricken by the disease, whether they have been infected or whether they have been affected by it in one way or another? We would be false to our professionalism as educators and our dignity as human beings if we did not respond in some compassionate, caring, supportive way to the needs of Sbongile, Tebogo and millions of learners like them, to say nothing of the needs that AIDS has created for educators and education officials.

3. Third, how can we ensure that the education sector maintains its productivity in the context of potentially increasing AIDS-related sickness and death among our learners and educators? How can we ensure that the sector continues to function and does not collapse under the weight of all the negative impacts of HIV/AIDS?
4. Fourth, what implications does the epidemic have for our planning processes, for our policies, regulatory frameworks and procedures? Are our existing policies adequate, given the situation of HIV/AIDS throughout the sector, or do we need to develop new policy instruments, and if so, which ones?

I submit that we can find answers to these questions if we are honest in examining some aspects of our educational provision and of the context in which this is made. Allow me to highlight some areas that are in need of special attention:

HIV/AIDS in the curriculum

First there is the curriculum. Since my Ministry declared HIV/AIDS a priority three years ago, we have mandated as part of Curriculum 2005, a programme of lifeskills and HIV/AIDS in all our schools. We need to make more rapid progress in this area, continuing to refine the curriculum content, producing the learner support materials, training our teachers, establishing this as a professional component of our teacher education programmes. We cannot afford to be slack about this. The lives of children may depend on the education we can give them in this area. And we must give that education now. HIV/AIDS will not wait to attack them. Why should we wait to provide them with the weapons for self-defence?

School - community relationships

However, one of the things we are becoming aware of is that communities and the schools need to be speaking the same language, if learners are to adopt positive and responsible lifestyles. Otherwise, what goes on in the community runs counter to what is communicated in the school. Thus, the HIV/AIDS and sexuality education programme needs to be supplemented by much broader community and social mobilisation strategies that will help to bring about the necessary changes.

This is not something the education sector can undertake on its own. It needs the involvement of other partners. Transforming social norms and practices so that they provide an environment that is in harmony with what the schools try to communicate requires a coalition of many partners - communities and parents themselves, those in the education sector, those in the private sector, and the many NGOs and community and faith-based

organisations that work so hard and so generously to provide for the educational needs of our people.

School safety programmes

A third area which we should be greatly concerned about is the safety dimension of our schools and institutions of learning. These should be havens of safety and not of risk for young people. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. We must therefore commit ourselves to action against those who rape and abuse our learners. We must weed out practices that lead educators to use their power to exploit young girls for sexual favours.

Legislation and policies exist, we must implement them! We must mean business about this and intensify our school safety programmes so as to ensure the safety and security of every learner, especially the girls in our care. We must be fearless in asking questions and ascertaining why some unacceptable conditions have persisted in our learning institutions:

- Why does society continue to promote the macho image of masculinity when we know that it leads to such terrible consequences for men themselves as well as for the women they violate?
- Why are girls not safe at school, or on their way to and from school?
- Should we be looking at different ways of socialising our children, particularly our young boys? Why are boys socialised to think that being a man means having many sexual engagements?
- What more do we need to do to guarantee the safety and human rights of our girls?
- What mistaken perceptions of professional behaviour lead male educators to abuse girls?

These are difficult questions, but in answering them we will also answer the question: "Why is there so much HIV among our young people?"

Traditions and cultural practices

We must also work with our traditional community partners in drawing the best out of our diverse cultural traditions, beliefs and value systems and promoting these. Many of these entrench respect for women and children and need to be promoted to assist with limiting the spread of HIV/AIDS. At the same time, however, we must challenge patriarchal practices, masquerading as culture or tradition, which have resulted in violent and abusive behaviours against women and girls. This is crucial not only for the

advancement of our indigenous cultures, but also for enhancing the dignity of women and girls.

That leads us to ask whether there are tradition or cultural practices that put lives at risk. Some behaviour originates from values, customs and traditions and some from economic deprivation, lack of socialisation and urban dysfunction. Some of these behaviours are life-enhancing, but some may be life-threatening. Decisions on how to deal with them will mean either that more girls will be protected and live, or that more will continue to be exposed to abuse and the possibility of premature death. So, we simply must take this seriously.

Moreover, since we know that HIV perpetuates itself through sex between older men and younger girls, and that the initiative and decisionmaking in such sexual activities rest almost entirely with men, it becomes even more imperative for us to think differently about these matters. Here again, we must keep reminding ourselves that because of AIDS, business can't be "as usual" - we can't continue the same old things in the same old way.

Making maximum use of educational resources in combatting HIV/AIDS

We must also intensify our efforts to equip our schools as multi-purpose community centres that play a central role in the response to HIV and AIDS. Many of our school are better resourced than the homes and offices around them. They are staffed by professionals, and have links into the community. In many situations, they are the only communal physical facility available within a community.

How then do we use these facilities for the development and support of the communities which schools serve? How do we make sure that the integrated plan by Education, Social Development and Health Departments translates into practical care and support for learners and educators? How do we ensure that orphans and other vulnerable children get the education and other social services that are due to them?

The education sector represents the greatest concentration of understanding, knowledge and skill in the country. We should be making greater use of this in the struggle against HIV/AIDS. Every sub-sector within education, and every educator, from village teacher to university professor, must become aware that they have a role to play in creating a cycle of preventive education and care that goes out from learning institutions to communities and back again to the institutions. And in making this happen, the involvement of women - mothers, wives, daughters and sisters - along with boys and men, is crucial.

Within this framework, we must commit ourselves to supporting and developing our teachers, without whom the education system could not work.

The HIV/AIDS in-the-workplace programme that my Department is working on, in collaboration with the teacher unions, must become a reality and be implemented with immediate effect. Our teachers need to feel supported. They need to become ever more aware that we care for them and are concerned about their personal wellbeing. That is why, as part of developing our schools, we should ensure supportive working environments for our teachers.

Social mobilisation

What we have really been talking about in all these instances is social mobilisation on a large scale. Our own experience from the past half-century in fighting apartheid and, more broadly, the experience of others in tackling AIDS in various parts of the world, demonstrate that we can only defeat an unwanted enemy if we work in coalition, through civil mobilisation. That means balancing the mandates and responsibilities of officialdom with the skills and courage of citizens in all walks of life and work, in mass campaigns, community endeavours and innumerable acts of kindness, however small.

You may have heard the saying: chains do not hold marriages together; it is threads, hundreds of tiny threads that sew people together. Likewise in this struggle with AIDS. Our individual contribution may seem small, but when united in a vigorous coalition with the hundreds of tiny threads coming from other persons and other institutions, the result will be a cord that will bind, a net that will ensnare, a social vaccine that will render HIV/AIDS powerless.

Improving management capacity

Last but not least, we have to build our capacity to respond to this epidemic. We know that even without AIDS, our capacity to manage the education system needs improvement. That is part of the reason why an unacceptably large percentage of our HIV budget remains unspent in most provinces.

So, we must understand that the response to HIV/AIDS, in part at least, is a matter of managing better across the board, for the sake of education, for the sake of those at risk of HIV infection, and for the sake of the orphaned and vulnerable children whose lives alternate between loss and deprivation. Systematic, regular, intensive and comprehensive upgrading of all our managers and management structures should be a priority - for the response to AIDS requires capacity and authority to make decisions and act.

Taking account of policy implications

HIV/AIDS is changing the face of our education system. It is creating situations today that were never considered when the policy frameworks that guide educational provision were first drawn up. At that time, we did not have to be so concerned about absenteeism as a major problem for both learners and educators. Today this is a big issue. Regulations and

procedures governing sick leave were formulated in circumstances where very few might be out sick at one time, but in many parts this is now no longer the case.

Again, we presumed that if educational facilities were provided, children would attend, but with so many orphans today, this no longer happens. We thought of school as a physical place to which children and young people would come for their education. Now HIV/AIDS is forcing us to think about how we can bring education out to where the learners are. We have established student loan schemes, expecting the loans to be repaid over a relatively long period of time, but because of AIDS, the working life of many students, and therefore the period of loan repayment, will be brief.

These illustrations show the need to re-examine many of our policies and regulatory frameworks in the light of what HIV/AIDS is doing to various parts of the education sector. And as we do so, we need to make sure that we maintain contact with the realities on the ground, so that whatever new principles we develop are well-informed by the real HIV/AIDS situations that are being experienced.

Conclusion

Now, just think about this: every one of the approaches I have outlined as being integral to education's response to HIV/AIDS is something we would like to have in any case for a better and more functional education system. Every one of us wants an education system that abides by its own policies, is safe and supportive of all its members, irrespective of their sex, builds on the strengths of all its partners, support its teachers, and is well-managed. Responding to the epidemic actually makes us travel faster along the road to a better education system for a new South Africa!

And so I am asking you to be resourceful and realistic in your deliberations. What we look forward to getting at the end of these two days is a road-map, designed and charted by you, a map that will point the way forward. We rely on you for your observations, your new ideas, your innovative proposals, in order that we may do two things: get the better of HIV/AIDS in and through education, and fulfill our national mandate to provide quality education for all learners in South Africa.

I encourage you therefore, to stand up to the challenge of HIV/AIDS. This is not our inevitable future! We must win! We have won before. We will win again for we are a nation that wins. We have won our way through to the Soccer World Cup that starts today, and many other World Cups before, and we will win our way through in this struggle with HIV/AIDS.

If we commit ourselves to this here and now, we will have started right. If we sustain our education coalition against HIV/AIDS, we will destroy this

disease and at the same time achieve many of the things we want in any case for education in our country.

There can be no turning back. For the sake of our children and of our country, I beg of you to respond with nobility and generosity of heart and service.

Ke a leboga, I thank you!