

MEDIA STATEMENT

RELEASED ON 23 JANUARY 2026

EMBARGO: NONE

2026 DBE LEKGOTLA: A SHIFT TOWARDS REALISM, BUT CRITICAL GAPS IN SAFETY AND WELL-BEING

The South African Teachers Union (SAOU) welcomes the new focus on practical realism that emerged during the annual Department of Basic Education (DBE) Lekgotla. The shift from high-level technological "pipe dreams" to strengthening fundamental skills such as literacy and numeracy is a crucial step towards a stable education system.

However, the SAOU emphasizes that policy without accountability and human support will not solve the pervasive crises in our schools.

1. Safety and the recent tragedy of learners: A national disaster

The SAOU expresses its deep disappointment at the lack of real focus on the 14 learners who tragically lost their lives in a recent school transport accident. A few minutes of silence is not enough. This is a national disaster that requires urgent legislation and stricter action against irresponsible transporters. This is also not an isolated case. Our parents deserve the peace of mind that their children will arrive at school safely.

2. The "Silent Revolution" and the importance of trades

The fact that 66% of Bachelor admissions in 2025 come from fee-free schools is proof that talent is not determined by income. However, the SAOU warns against "academic snobbery".

- While university access is important, South Africa has a critical shortage of a skilled, professional tradesmen orientated workforce.
- We call on the DBE to prioritize the "Three-Stream Model" to address the nearly 500,000 learners who drop out of the system annually (the so-called "leaky pipeline"), equipping them with practical skills that ensure meaningful economic participation.

3. Foundations: Mother Tongue and ECD

The expansion of mother tongue education to 12,000 schools and the emphasis on play-based learning in the Early Childhood Development (ECD) phase is wholeheartedly supported. Research

(such as the PIRLS study) shows that literacy is the gateway to all other learning – including coding and robotics.

4. Wellness: The Missing Link

A critical gap in the Lekgotla 's agenda is the psycho-social well-being of both learners and educators. The SAOU reiterates its plea for more counsellors and social workers in schools. A school can only be as strong as the health of its people.

5. Empowerment of the Teacher

The SAOU reaffirms that the professional development of educators remains at the heart of quality education. We will continue to support our members with world-class empowerment opportunities to realize these national priorities in the classroom.