



SOUTH AFRICAN PRINCIPALS ASSOCIATION (SAPA)

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Opening and Welcome Address

South African Principals Association: Gauteng Province Annual Conference 2026

Opening Ceremony | 4 June 2026 | Emperors Palace

Delivered by Mathibedi-wa-Medupe, SAPA Gauteng President

Programme Director,
SAPA Gauteng MANCO,
SAPA Gauteng PEC,
Head Office officials,
District officials,
Representatives of School Governing Body Associations,
Principals, Deputy Principals and school leaders from across Gauteng,
Distinguished guests, partners, exhibitors, ladies and gentlemen,

Good morning.

What a privilege. What an honour. What a deeply humbling moment it is to stand before you this morning as we gather for the South African Principals Association, Gauteng Province Annual Conference 2026.

Allow me, first and foremost, to acknowledge with sincere appreciation the presence and contribution of the Honourable MEC for Education, Sport, Arts, Culture and Recreation in Gauteng, Hon. Lebogang Maile, and the Acting Head of Department, Mr Albert Chanee, who addressed us earlier and had to leave due to other pressing official obligations.

Honourable MEC, Acting HOD — in your absence, we still want it to be recorded that your presence and messages were deeply appreciated. You could have simply sent apologies, but you chose to honour school leaders by being physically present at the beginning of this important conference. That gesture speaks volumes. It says

that school leadership matters. It says that the work of principals and deputy principals is recognised. It says that SAPA Gauteng remains a valuable partner in the ongoing project of strengthening education in this province.

We receive your messages with gratitude, and we commit ourselves to engaging further, partnering meaningfully and continuing to serve the education system with professionalism, courage and integrity.

Ladies and gentlemen, on behalf of SAPA Gauteng, I warmly welcome you to this important gathering of school leaders, education officials, governance partners, stakeholders and friends of education.

Today, we are not simply opening a conference.

We are opening a space of reflection.

We are opening a space of renewal.

We are opening a space of professional growth.

We are opening a space of collective responsibility.

We are opening a space where the voice of the school leader must be heard, strengthened and respected.

We gather here at Emperors Palace not as ordinary delegates, but as leaders who carry schools, communities and the hopes of thousands of learners. Every principal, deputy principal & Departmental head present here knows that our work does not begin when the school bell rings, and it does not end when the last learner leaves the gate.

We carry our schools in our minds.

We carry them in our hearts.

We carry them in our homes.

And, at times, we even carry them in our sleep.

That is why this conference matters.

It matters because school leaders need encouragement.

It matters because school leaders need professional support.

It matters because school leaders need to be developed, heard and trusted.

It matters because the future of our schools depends on the quality of leadership we provide today.

Ladies and gentlemen, this year SAPA is 31 years old. Thirty-one years of professional leadership. Thirty-one years of advocacy. Thirty-one years of giving

principals and deputy principals a professional home. Thirty-one years of reminding the education sector that when principals are supported, schools become stronger; when schools become stronger, communities become stronger; and when communities become stronger, the nation rises.

I stand before you today with deep humility because this is my second official opening address since I was elected as SAPA Gauteng President in April 2025. I do not take this responsibility lightly. I understand that I am not standing here on my own strength. I stand on the shoulders of those who led before me, those who built this organisation, those who protected its dignity and those who ensured that SAPA remains a respected professional voice in education.

To our Head Office officials, and District officials, thank you for being here. Your presence reminds us that education is a system. A school cannot succeed in isolation. A principal cannot succeed alone. We need districts, circuits, head office, school communities and stakeholders working together with clarity, consistency and commitment.

To the representatives of School Governing Body Associations, we welcome you with appreciation. Governance and management must never be enemies. They must be partners. Where principals and governing bodies work together with mutual respect and a shared vision, schools become stable, accountable and focused.

To every principal, deputy principal and school leader in attendance, welcome home. You are the heartbeat of this conference. You are the people who open schools in the morning, manage crises during the day, respond to parents in the afternoon, support teachers, guide learners and still go home carrying tomorrow's responsibilities.

Today, we see you.

Today, we honour you.

Today, we welcome you.

Ladies and gentlemen, as we gather here today, it is important that we do not only open a conference; we must also open our hearts to the people who make education what it is.

At this point, allow me to acknowledge and honour different groups within our professional family.

May I kindly request all delegates who are attending the SAPA Gauteng Annual Provincial Conference for the very first time to please rise.

Colleagues, we welcome you warmly. Welcome to SAPA Gauteng. Welcome to a professional home of school leaders. May this conference strengthen you, connect you, inspire you and remind you that you are not alone in the leadership journey.

Thank you, colleagues, you may be seated.

May I now request all colleagues who have been recently appointed or promoted into leadership positions to please rise.

Colleagues, we congratulate you. Promotion is not only recognition of what you have done; it is a call to serve at a higher level. May your leadership be marked by humility, courage, wisdom, fairness and excellence. May you lead not for position, but for purpose.

Thank you, colleagues, you may be seated.

May I request all colleagues who are preparing for retirement, or who will be retiring soon, to please rise.

Colleagues, we honour you with deep respect. You have given years of service to education. You have carried schools, supported learners, guided teachers, worked with parents and contributed to the building of communities. Your legacy cannot be measured only in years of service, but in the lives you have touched, the learners you have shaped and the leaders you have mentored.

We salute you. May this next chapter of your life be filled with peace, joy, good health and fulfilment.

Thank you, colleagues, you may be seated.

Ladies and gentlemen, we also pause to remember those who are no longer with us.

We remember our colleagues in education who passed on while serving schools and communities. We remember School Governing Body members who gave their time, energy and wisdom in service of schools. We remember officials who supported the system and contributed to the improvement of education. And with heavy hearts, we remember learners whose journeys ended too soon.

Their absence is deeply felt. Their contribution, their presence, their laughter, their service and their dreams remain part of the story of our schools and our province.

As SAPA Gauteng, we honour their memory by continuing the work of building schools that are safe, caring, functional, progressive and future-focused. We honour

them by leading with compassion. We honour them by refusing to give up on the children of this province. We honour them by serving education with renewed commitment.

At this point, Programme Director, may I humbly request that we all rise and observe a brief moment of silence in remembrance of all our departed colleagues, SGB members, officials and learners.

Moment of silence.

May their souls rest in peace, and may their memory continue to inspire us to serve with greater purpose.

Thank you, colleagues, you may be seated.

Ladies and gentlemen, this moment of acknowledgement, honour and remembrance brings us back to the heart of our 2026 conference theme:

“Future-Forward Leadership: From Functional to Progressive Schools.”

This theme is not a decorative slogan. It is not only a phrase for banners, programmes and conference packs. It is a call to action. It is a challenge to every school leader in this room. It is a mirror placed before us.

A functional school opens on time.

A progressive school opens minds.

A functional school follows the timetable.

A progressive school protects teaching time with discipline and purpose.

A functional school submits reports.

A progressive school uses data to change learner outcomes.

A functional school has policies.

A progressive school lives its values.

A functional school manages today.

A progressive school prepares learners for tomorrow.

Gauteng cannot afford schools that merely function. South Africa cannot afford schools that merely survive. Our children deserve schools that are alive with purpose, schools that are safe, schools that are academically focused, schools that

are digitally aware, schools that are inclusive, schools that are ethical and schools that are courageous enough to become better every year.

Colleagues, when I think about this theme, I am reminded of the difference between chickens and eagles.

A chicken scratches the ground.
An eagle studies the sky.

A chicken runs with noise when there is confusion.
An eagle rises above the storm.

A chicken looks for comfort in the yard.
An eagle looks for possibilities beyond the mountain.

A chicken moves with the crowd.
An eagle is not afraid of altitude.

This analogy is not about looking down on anyone. It is about challenging ourselves as school leaders. In education, we cannot lead like chickens when our learners need eagle leadership. We cannot spend our days only scratching around problems, complaining about what we do not have, running from one crisis to another and remaining trapped at ground level.

The theme calls us to rise.

Future-forward leadership is eagle leadership.

It is leadership that sees beyond the immediate crisis.
It is leadership that rises above noise and confusion.
It is leadership that has vision.
It is leadership that is not afraid of difficult winds.
It is leadership that understands that storms are not always there to destroy us; sometimes storms are there to lift us higher.

When eagles face strong winds, they do not panic. They spread their wings and use the wind to rise. That is exactly what progressive school leaders must do. We must take the challenges of overcrowding, limited resources, learner discipline, staff fatigue, curriculum pressure and infrastructure problems, and turn them into opportunities for sharper systems, stronger collaboration and more courageous leadership.

A functional leader asks: “What is happening today?”

A progressive leader asks: “What must this school become tomorrow?”

A functional leader says: “This is how we have always done it.”

A progressive leader asks: “Is this still serving the learner?”

A functional leader manages the yard.

A progressive leader studies the sky.

This is the shift SAPA Gauteng is calling for: from ground-level leadership to eagle-level leadership; from ordinary functioning to progressive transformation; from survival to strategy; from noise to vision.

And colleagues, this message comes at a very important time.

Across our schools, our learners are currently writing their mid-year examinations. At this very moment, while we are gathered here, learners in Gauteng are sitting behind desks, writing papers, solving problems, reading questions, managing pressure and trying to prove what they have learned.

But in truth, it is not only learners who are being examined.

School leaders are also being examined.

Our systems are being examined.

Our curriculum coverage is being examined.

Our intervention programmes are being examined.

Our teacher support is being examined.

Our learner discipline is being examined.

Our school culture is being examined.

Our planning is being examined.

The mid-year examination season is a mirror. It tells us whether the first half of the year was properly led. It tells us whether our schools protected quality teaching and learning time. It tells us whether learners received meaningful feedback. It tells us whether learners at risk were identified early. It tells us whether high fliers were stretched. It tells us whether our academic improvement plans were alive documents or just files on a shelf.

So, as we open this conference, let us remember: we are not here to escape the work waiting for us at school. We are here to become better for that work.

We are here so that when we return to our schools, we return with sharper minds, stronger hearts and clearer systems.

The late South African poet and activist Don Mattera gave us the powerful title, “Memory is the Weapon.” Today, as SAPA turns 31, memory must indeed become our weapon — not a weapon of anger, but a weapon of wisdom. We must remember where we come from so that we can lead where we are going.

We remember schools that had very little but produced much.

We remember principals who led without resources but never without vision.

We remember teachers who taught under difficult conditions but never gave up on learners.

We remember communities that believed education was the road to dignity.

But memory must not trap us in the past. Memory must equip us for the future.

Future-forward leadership means we must be brave enough to move beyond routine. It means we must respect policy but not hide behind policy. It means we must honour tradition but not be imprisoned by tradition. It means we must embrace technology but never lose humanity. It means we must demand excellence but never forget compassion.

In the South African gospel tradition, we often hear songs that remind us to remain grateful, to keep walking, to keep believing and to keep serving even when the road is difficult. That spirit must live in us as school leaders. We may not always have perfect conditions, but we must have an unwavering commitment to the children we serve. We may not always have enough resources, but we must never run out of vision.

Principals do not lead from comfort. Principals lead from conviction.

Deputy principals do not serve from convenience. Deputy principals serve from commitment.

School leaders do not wake up every morning because the work is easy. We wake up because the work is necessary.

Colleagues, the principalship has changed. The principal is no longer only an administrator. The principal is an instructional leader, a community builder, a conflict mediator, a strategist, a financial steward, a policy interpreter, a crisis manager, a technology leader, a pastoral leader and sometimes the last line of hope for a child.

This is why SAPA exists.

SAPA exists to ensure that school leaders are not alone.

SAPA exists to create a professional platform where principals and deputy principals can learn from one another.

SAPA exists to support, strengthen and connect school leaders.

SAPA exists because the school leadership profession must be respected, developed and protected.

SAPA exists because when decisions are made about schools, the voices of those who lead schools every day must be heard.

Even though the Honourable MEC and the Acting HOD had to leave due to other official commitments, we want to state clearly that SAPA Gauteng remains ready to partner. We are ready to contribute. We are ready to engage. We are ready to be part of solutions.

We do not gather here merely to complain. We gather here to lead.

We are not gathering to admire problems. We are gathering to build capacity.

We are not gathering to repeat what is wrong. We are gathering to strengthen what must be right.

We are not gathering as victims of the system. We are gathering as leaders within the system.

We are not gathering to wait for the future. We are gathering to shape it.

Let us be honest: our schools are facing real pressures. There are schools battling overcrowding. There are schools dealing with infrastructure challenges. There are schools under financial pressure. There are schools facing serious discipline challenges. There are teachers who are tired. There are learners who are wounded. There are parents who are anxious. There are communities that expect miracles from schools, sometimes while giving schools very little support.

But even in the face of these challenges, we must remain leaders of hope.

Hope is not weakness. Hope is leadership discipline.

Hope says: I see the challenge, but I refuse to be defeated by it.

Hope says: I acknowledge the shortage, but I will still organise what I have.

Hope says: I know the learner is struggling, but I will not write that learner off.

Hope says: I know the teacher is tired, but I will still encourage professional excellence.

Hope says: I know the system is imperfect, but I will still lead with integrity.

That is the spirit of SAPA Gauteng.

As we begin this conference, let us recommit ourselves to the core business of schools: teaching and learning. Everything else must support that. Meetings must support teaching and learning. Budgets must support teaching and learning. Governance must support teaching and learning. Infrastructure must support teaching and learning. Discipline must support teaching and learning. Technology must support teaching and learning. Leadership must support teaching and learning.

If a school loses the centre, it loses its purpose.

Our learners must read with understanding. They must calculate with confidence. They must think critically. They must communicate clearly. They must understand their rights and responsibilities. They must be prepared for higher education, vocational pathways, entrepreneurship, citizenship and service.

We must build schools where academic performance is not left to chance.

We must build schools where data is not feared, but used.

We must build schools where teachers are not abandoned, but developed.

We must build schools where learners are not labelled, but supported.

We must build schools where excellence is not an event, but a culture.

The great South African writer Es'kia Mphahlele taught through his life and work that education must shape identity, dignity and consciousness. In that spirit, our schools must do more than produce results. They must produce whole human beings — young people who can think, serve, question, create and lead.

The writer Bessie Head reminded us through her work of the deep human search for belonging, dignity and humanity. Many of our learners are also searching for belonging. They come to school carrying burdens we do not always see. Some carry poverty. Some carry trauma. Some carry hunger. Some carry fear. Some carry silence.

And then they meet us.

They meet the principal.

They meet the deputy principal.

They meet the teacher.

They meet the clerk.

They meet the general assistant.

They meet the coach.
They meet the counsellor.
They meet the school.

The question is: when they meet us, do they meet hope?

Do they meet order?
Do they meet fairness?
Do they meet excellence?
Do they meet adults who believe in them enough to discipline them, guide them, support them and expect more from them?

Future-forward leadership must therefore be deeply human. It must combine accountability with care. It must combine standards with support. It must combine innovation with values.

Ladies and gentlemen, this conference must not end as a beautiful programme only. It must leave footprints in our schools.

When we leave Emperors Palace, something must change in how we lead.

Our school improvement plans must become sharper.
Our staff meetings must become more purposeful.
Our academic tracking must become more honest.
Our learner support must become more structured.
Our relationship with SGBs must become more constructive.
Our use of technology must become more intentional.
Our communication with parents must become more regular.
Our leadership teams must become more united.
Our schools must become more progressive.

A conference is successful not because the venue was beautiful, not because the programme was full and not because we enjoyed good hospitality. A conference is successful when leaders return to their schools with renewed conviction and practical tools.

To every principal, deputy principal and departmental head here: thank you for choosing professional development. Thank you for choosing to be here. Thank you for investing in yourself. Thank you for saying, "Even as a leader, I am still willing to learn."

That humility is powerful.

The most dangerous leader is not the one who does not know. The most dangerous leader is the one who refuses to learn.

May this conference remind us that leadership is a lifelong classroom.

Most importantly, may we keep the learner at the centre.

Not politics.

Not ego.

Not position.

Not title.

The learner.

The Grade 1 learner entering school with excitement.

The Grade 7 learner preparing for high school.

The Grade 9 learner trying to choose a pathway.

The Grade 12 learner carrying the pressure of a family's hope.

The learner with special needs.

The learner who has lost confidence.

The learner who excels and needs stretching.

The learner who misbehaves but is really crying for guidance.

The learner who believes school may be the only safe place in their life.

That learner is why we are here.

South African poet Keorapetse Kgositsile reminds us through his work of the power of voice, memory and struggle. Today, our voice as school leaders must be clear: we believe in public education. We believe in the professional dignity of principals. We believe in progressive schools. We believe in ethical leadership. We believe that Gauteng can lead. We believe that South Africa can rise.

But belief must become action.

Let this conference be remembered as a turning point.

Let it be remembered as the conference where SAPA Gauteng said: we are ready for the future.

Let it be remembered as the conference where principals and deputy principals recommitted themselves to excellence.

Let it be remembered as the conference where we moved from fatigue to fire, from pressure to purpose, from functionality to progress.

Let it be remembered as the conference where we said: tomorrow's schools must be shaped today.

Honourable guests, distinguished officials, school leaders and colleagues, I welcome you with warmth. I welcome you with gratitude. I welcome you with pride. I welcome you with confidence that this gathering will strengthen school leadership across Gauteng.

May our engagements be honest.

May our discussions be practical.

May our partnerships be meaningful.

May our leadership be courageous.

May our schools become better because we were here.

May SAPA Gauteng continue to be a strong, respected and future-focused voice for school leaders.

As we begin, let us carry one conviction: we are not only managing schools; we are shaping the future of a province, the future of a nation and the future of generations yet to come.

With appreciation to every guest, every official, every partner, every PEC member, every MANCO member, every school leader and every contributor to this important gathering, I say:

Welcome to the 2026 SAPA Gauteng Annual Provincial Conference.

Welcome to a conference of courage.

Welcome to a conference of renewal.

Welcome to a conference of progressive leadership.

Welcome to a conference where we choose the future.

Ladies and gentlemen, with honour, humility and great excitement:

I now declare the 2026 conference officially opened.