

FROM AUCKLAND TO SOUTH AFRICA

The leadership lessons, cultural encounters and global conversations that made ICP 2026 more than a conference

By Mathibedi-wa-Medupe | President: SAPA Gauteng | Writing on behalf of SAPA National



South Africa carried its identity proudly at ICP 2026 in Auckland, joining school leaders from across the world in a shared conversation about the future of education.

In September 2026, the International Confederation of Principals brought the world of school leadership to Tāmaki Makaurau, Auckland. For the South African delegation, led by Mr James Ndlebe, the journey was never simply about attending another international conference. It was about listening, comparing, questioning, connecting and returning home with ideas strong enough to influence what happens in our schools.

South Africa was represented by 68 delegates, including officials from the Department of Basic Education and provincial education departments, serving and retired principals, deputy principals and other education leaders. That diversity mattered. It meant that South Africa did not arrive with one narrow view of schooling; we arrived carrying the realities of a complex education system and the responsibility to learn on behalf of many others.

ICP 2026 AT A GLANCE

Formal convention: 16-18 September 2026

Venue: New Zealand International Convention Centre, Auckland

Host: New Zealand Principals' Federation (NZPF)

Theme: Purapura kōrari, ka ruia e te hau - The seeds of the flax bush are dispersed by the four winds

South African delegation: 68 delegates from school leadership and education structures

Purpose: Global learning, leadership connection, culture, equity and innovation

THE FOUR WINDS: CULTURE, EQUITY AND GLOBAL CONNECTION

Seeds carried across borders

The convention theme, “Purapura kōrari, ka ruia e te hau”, speaks of the seeds of the flax bush being dispersed by the four winds. In Māori thought, the flax bush carries powerful ideas about generations, protection, growth and equity. Not every blade receives exactly the same support; each receives what is needed to thrive. For an international gathering of school leaders, the metaphor could hardly have been more fitting.

Aotearoa did not hide its identity

One of the strongest impressions of New Zealand was the visible relationship between culture and education. Te reo Māori, karakia, waiata, pōwhiri and the principles of Te Tiriti o Waitangi were not treated as decorative additions. They were part of the language through which belonging, responsibility and partnership were understood.

The deeper lesson for South Africa is not that we should copy another country's cultural practices. It is that our own schools must become places where learners do not have to leave their language, heritage or identity at the gate in order to succeed. Diversity is not a problem to be managed. Properly led, it is a strength to be cultivated.

“A child must be able to walk into a school and feel: I belong here. My story matters. My language matters. My future matters.”

A South African reflection from ICP 2026

A professional home beyond our borders

ICP reminded us that principals across the world are carrying many of the same pressures: workload, wellbeing, recruitment and retention, accountability, rapid technological change, community expectations and the unrelenting demand to improve learner outcomes.

The power of a gathering such as ICP lies in recognising that there is wisdom outside our own system. A principal from another country may be dealing with a different curriculum or governance model, yet the human challenge of leading people through pressure can be remarkably familiar. Networking is therefore not social decoration. It is professional learning.

For SAPA, this international connection strengthens our core purpose as a professional association for principals and deputy principals. It gives our members access to ideas, relationships and benchmarks that can sharpen leadership back home.

GILBERT ENOKA: MINDSET, CULTURE AND THE COURAGE TO BELONG

Leadership begins before performance

Among the most memorable voices at ICP 2026 was Gilbert Enoka, internationally respected for his work in mental performance and team culture, including more than two decades in the All Blacks environment. Yet his message did not begin with elite sport. It began with a personal story of hardship, uncertainty and the refusal to allow one's starting point to dictate one's destination.

Three ideas cut through strongly: we do not rise above the opinion we hold of ourselves; choices rather than chances shape destiny; and the past does not have to equal the future. His challenge to leaders was to confront the habits and internal narratives that no longer serve us.

“Don’t let your past define you. Let your past refine you.”

Gilbert Enoka



Ms. Zanele Mlambo and Mr Gilbert Enoka.

The invisible backpack

Enoka’s image of the “invisible backpack” belongs in every school. Every learner, teacher and leader arrives carrying something - expectation, fear, family pressure, self-doubt, disappointment, social judgement or exhaustion. When schools create no safe way to talk about pressure, the silence itself begins to damage teams.

The leadership question is not whether people carry pressure. They do. The question is whether our culture gives them enough trust to name it, manage it and still perform with dignity.

Culture is caught

A phrase repeated through the leadership conversations was that culture is caught, not taught. Values on a wall have little meaning if they are contradicted by everyday behaviour.

The standard a leader walks past becomes a standard the organisation learns to accept. Excellence, respect, punctuality, accountability and care are therefore not posters. They are habits.

This is particularly relevant to schools. Learners observe what adults tolerate. Staff observe whether leaders are consistent. Communities notice whether principles survive pressure.



SAPA National President – Dr Mashudu Ramulumo and the learners from Auckland

Children remained visible in the convention conversation - a reminder that leadership learning must ultimately reach learners.

NEW ZEALAND THROUGH A SOUTH AFRICAN LENS

Reform, evidence and the place of identity

A system willing to confront its weaknesses

New Zealand is not presented here as a perfect education system. It is confronting its own challenges of achievement and equity. What was instructive was the openness with which reform was discussed and the emphasis placed on evidence.

The reform agenda shared at ICP included a more knowledge-rich, year-by-year curriculum, structured literacy with explicit phonemic awareness and phonics, structured mathematics, regular assessment and a stronger expectation that data should lead to early intervention. Early literacy results presented at the convention suggested encouraging improvement, including among Māori learners and children in disadvantaged schools.

For South Africa, the message is familiar but urgent: data cannot remain a compliance exercise. When results tell us that children are struggling, the first question should not be how we explain the result. It should be what we will do differently tomorrow.

Equity is not sameness

Examples from New Zealand schools also reinforced a principle that resonates deeply with our context: fairness does not always mean giving every learner exactly the same thing. Different children may need different pathways, more time or more support, while the destination and expectation remain high.

Te Tiriti and community-rooted leadership

Te Tiriti o Waitangi forms an important foundation in Aotearoa New Zealand. In schools, its influence can be seen through partnership with local iwi and hapū, increased use of te reo Māori and tikanga, bilingual environments and a stronger effort to ensure that Māori learners can achieve without surrendering identity.

This challenged us to think about South Africa's own constitutional values, languages and communities. Our schools should not merely serve communities from a distance; they should be rooted in them. Leadership becomes stronger when trust is built through presence, consistency and genuine partnership.

School visits reinforced that point. The most interesting practices were not necessarily expensive. They were often relational: how leaders welcomed people, how local identity appeared in the environment, how learners were given authentic roles, and how schools used their context as a learning resource.



School visits gave delegates an opportunity to see leadership, culture and community partnership in practice. – Mathibedi-wa- Medupe & Mr Maurice Mulabisana

“Your means should not determine your destiny.” This reform principle captured a central message of the convention: education must expand possibility rather than reproduce disadvantage.

WHAT WE BRING HOME

From international experience to South African action

The value of international engagement is measured after the flight home. It is easy to be inspired inside a conference centre. The harder work is translating that inspiration into routines, conversations, decisions and systems that improve schools.

Principal wellbeing is not a luxury

One of the most necessary discussions at ICP concerned the wellbeing of school leaders. The modern principal is expected to lead teaching and learning while simultaneously managing finance, human resources, infrastructure, safety, discipline, policy, technology, parent expectations and staff wellbeing. Many leaders reach the end of a week with little left in the tank.

Strong systems cannot depend indefinitely on exhausted people. Professional associations therefore have an important responsibility: to advocate, develop, connect and support. SAPA must continue to be a professional home where principals and deputy principals do not lead in isolation.

Networking must lead to benchmarking

International engagement interrupts the danger of believing that our current way is the only way. We return from Auckland with new questions about school culture, induction, data use, wellbeing, learner belonging, community partnership and leadership development. The challenge now is to turn those questions into deliberate benchmarking and action.

South Africa also brought something valuable to ICP: resilience, diversity, Ubuntu and the experience of leading schools in contexts of enormous inequality and possibility. Global learning is not a one-way exchange. We have lessons to receive, and lessons to offer.

WHAT SOUTH AFRICA MUST CARRY HOME

- Belonging must become a deliberate leadership practice, not a slogan.
- Culture is built by what leaders model, reinforce and refuse to walk past.
- Data must trigger intervention, not simply satisfy compliance.
- Equity means responding to need while keeping expectations high.
- Principals and deputy principals need professional homes, peer networks and wellbeing support.
- International benchmarking only matters when it changes practice back home.



South African leaders used the convention to build relationships, exchange ideas and strengthen the professional network that continues after Auckland.

The seeds we now plant

One Māori whakataukī shared during the wider convention experience asks: “He aha te mea nui o te ao?” - What is the most important thing in the world? The response is simple: “He tāngata, he tāngata, he tāngata.” It is people, it is people, it is people.

Policies matter. Curriculum matters. Infrastructure, technology and data matter. But at the centre of all of them stands a human being: a learner, a teacher, a parent, a principal, a deputy principal, a community member. ICP 2026 reminded us that leadership becomes meaningful when it serves those people with courage, integrity and care.

Somewhere in a South African classroom there is a learner who will never know that a convention took place in Auckland. That learner does not need to know. If those of us who attended return home thinking more deeply, leading more consistently, listening more carefully and acting more courageously, that learner can still benefit from what happened there.

We went to Auckland carrying our experience. We returned carrying seeds. Our responsibility now is to plant them.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Mathibedi-wa-Medupe is President of SAPA Gauteng and a serving school headmaster. This national reflection is written in his provincial leadership capacity on behalf of SAPA National following the South African delegation's participation in ICP 2026.

FACT CHECK / SOURCES

Convention dates, theme and host information were cross-checked against the official ICP 2026 website, New Zealand Principals' Federation and the New Zealand International Convention Centre. SAPA organisational information was checked against SAPA National. Verified 4 October 2026.