



A DEFINING MOMENT FOR SOUTH AFRICAN SCHOOL LEADERSHIP

The future cannot be delegated

SAPA National President Dr Mashudu Richard Ramulumo set the tone by insisting that the schools of tomorrow will not arrive by chance. The choices made by leaders today will shape whether our schools merely cope with change or learn to lead through it.

That challenge was echoed by national and provincial education leaders. Minister of Basic Education Siviwe Gwarube reminded principals that they are the people who turn policy into practice. She placed the conference within the wider priorities of the basic education sector: stronger early childhood development, foundational literacy and numeracy, safe schools, infrastructure, mother-tongue based bilingual education and wider participation in STEM.

The message was important because it recognised what school leaders know from lived experience: policy only becomes real when somebody makes it work on a Monday morning. The principal is where national ambition meets the timetable, the staffroom, the budget, the parent meeting, the learner in crisis and the classroom.

“The future of our schools will be shaped by the leadership choices we make today.”

Conference message carried throughout SAPA 2026

AI moved from the margins to the centre

Artificial intelligence was one of the strongest threads running through the conference. Minister Gwarube, Limpopo MEC for Education Mavhungu Lerule-Ramakhanya, Professor Mamokgethi Phakeng and Dr Ramulumo all addressed the need to prepare schools for a technology landscape that is already changing learning, assessment and the skills young people will need.

The discussion was not about celebrating technology for its own sake. It was about leadership. How do schools use AI without weakening thinking? How do teachers redesign homework when a learner can generate an answer in seconds? How do we protect professional judgement, academic integrity and learner understanding while also preparing children for the world they are entering?



SAPA Northwest President – Mr Tseko Masina

THE CONFERENCE CONVERSATION CONTINUED ONLINE

SAPA National: framed the gathering as a national conversation about what school leadership must become in a world reshaped by technology and complexity.

Snapplify: highlighted practical AI support for teachers, learners and parents, including teacher-led and curriculum-aligned uses.

Mecer Inter-Ed: emphasised collaboration between education leadership, departments and industry to turn digital skills into meaningful transformation.

GEMS: focused attention on healthy schools, preventative care and the wellbeing of both educators and learners.



THE PRESSURE CARRIED BY PRINCIPALS

Leadership cannot thrive when the system exhausts its leaders

One of the most important outcomes of the conference was that it did not speak only about future technology. It also spoke honestly about the present burden carried by principals. Public reporting after the conference showed how deeply administrative overload, staffing pressures, delayed school funding and burnout are affecting school leaders.

A survey referred to in post-conference reporting found that almost 60% of principals were ready to leave their jobs, while 92% said their administrative workload was higher than five years ago. Those figures should concern every education authority in the country. A system cannot continuously add responsibilities to the principal's office and then wonder why instructional leadership suffers.

Dr Ramulumo used the conference to put forward a practical five-part appeal. At its heart was a simple principle: principals must be allowed to do the work they were appointed to do – lead schools.

THE FIVE PRESSURES SAPA PUT ON THE TABLE

1. Capture school data once and share it across departments.
2. Fund an administrator or clerk in every school.
3. Address educator shortages, overcrowding and infrastructure pressure.
4. Release norms and standards funding on time.
5. Train principals, teachers and learners to use AI responsibly.

When the principal becomes the bank

The conference also surfaced an uncomfortable reality: delayed norms and standards funding can push principals into using personal credit cards, savings or supplier arrangements simply to keep schools running. Stationery, examinations, utilities and basic operations do not wait for administrative delays.

This is not sustainable. School leaders should not have to choose between protecting their personal finances and protecting learning time.

“Burnout cannot be addressed while principals are expected to carry financial burdens without the resources they need to run their schools.”

Dr Mashudu Ramulumo, post-conference reporting



Mr Sibusiso Ndebele and Prof Mamokgethi Phakeng

Delegates follow proceedings during a plenary session – leadership learning also requires attentive listening and reflection.



FROM COMPLIANCE TO COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

Leadership pipelines, school culture and the people behind the title

The National Conference also asked a deeper question: who will lead our schools tomorrow, and how are we preparing them today? Leadership development cannot begin only when a vacancy is advertised. Schools need deliberate pathways that identify potential, build confidence, create responsibility and expose emerging leaders to meaningful decision-making long before they apply for senior posts.

In my own contribution to the leadership track, I focused on moving from compliance to collective efficacy and on building educator pathways and leadership pipelines. My central argument was that sustainable school improvement cannot rest on one strong principal. A progressive school must grow leadership at every level – among deputy principals, departmental heads, grade leaders, teachers and emerging managers.

Compliance remains necessary. Policies, legislation, reporting and accountability matter. But compliance alone will never create a great school. Schools improve when people believe together that they can make a difference, when roles are clear, when expectations are high, when support is real and when staff experience leadership as something that develops them rather than controls them.

“A future-ready school is not built by one heroic leader. It is built by a culture that keeps producing leaders.”

Mathibedi-wa-Medupe, SAPA Gauteng President

Culture still does the daily work

Across the conference programme, themes of school culture, governance, inclusion, resilience and psycho-social support kept returning us to the human side of leadership. Technology may change the tools available to schools, but trust, integrity, consistency, belonging and accountability remain the foundations on which healthy institutions are built.



SAPA National provides a platform where provincial leaders, practitioners and partners can learn from one another and carry ideas back into schools.

Wellbeing belongs in the leadership agenda

GEMS used the conference to focus on healthy schools and preventative care, including the wellbeing of educators and learners. That contribution mattered. The health of a school is not measured only by results. It is also reflected in whether people can sustain the work.

A principal who is permanently exhausted cannot lead at full capacity. A teacher under unmanaged pressure cannot consistently give learners the best of themselves. Wellbeing is therefore not a soft extra. It is part of organisational effectiveness.



LEARNING BEYOND THE MICROPHONE

Exhibitions, partnerships and the professional network

The value of stepping outside our own province

One of SAPA's greatest strengths is the professional network it creates across provincial boundaries. A school leader from Gauteng can sit with a colleague from Limpopo, the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, the Western Cape, North West, Mpumalanga, Free State or the Northern Cape and discover that the context may differ, but many leadership questions are shared.

That is why networking and benchmarking must never be treated as optional extras. Leaders grow when they see how others solve problems, when they test their assumptions and when they build relationships strong enough to continue after the conference has ended.

The welcome cocktail, exhibition spaces, refreshment breaks, parallel sessions, AGM and gala dinner were therefore not gaps between the "real" programme. They were part of the programme. Professional relationships are built in those spaces, often in conversations that cannot be scheduled into a formal plenary.

Industry has a place – but purpose must remain educational

Conference partners and exhibitors brought technology, health, professional development and practical school solutions into direct conversation with principals. LinkedIn reflections from Snapplify, Mecer Inter-Ed and GEMS after the conference showed how strongly AI, digital skills, parent communication and preventative health featured in those engagements.

The test for every partnership is straightforward: does it help the school lead better, teach better, communicate better or care for people better? If it does, there is value in the relationship. If it does not, the conference badge and exhibition stand mean very little.

Thirty years of professional leadership

SAPA was established in 1995 and has spent three decades creating a professional space for school leaders. Its national network now includes more than 1,400 members, supported through provincial structures and national engagement.

That history matters because principals need an independent professional home – one that can advocate, develop, connect and support without replacing the role of unions, governing bodies or education departments. SAPA occupies a distinct space: the professional leadership of schools.

The 2026 conference demonstrated what that space can become when it combines policy dialogue with practical learning, national advocacy with human connection, and future thinking with the very real pressures of running schools today.

“The question is no longer whether education will change. The question is whether we will lead that change.”

SAPA National Conference 2026

For Gauteng, the conference also reflected the value of strong provincial participation within a national organisation. Our task is not to bring Gauteng into the national conversation as a separate voice, but to contribute our experience to a collective South African leadership agenda.





WHAT MUST REMAIN AFTER POLOKWANE

The conference ended. The responsibility did not.

- Treat AI as a leadership and learning issue, not simply a technology issue.
- Keep foundational learning, safety and learner wellbeing at the centre.
- Build leadership pipelines so schools do not depend on one individual.
- Support principals with functioning administration, adequate staff and timely resources.

Progressive leadership is not about predicting the future perfectly. It is about building schools strong enough to respond when change arrives – with courage and humility, vision and systems, technology and humanity.

“Strong schools need strong leaders.”

A national leadership reflection from Polokwane



SAPA National President Dr Mashudu Richard Ramulumo addresses delegates in Polokwane.