

SPEECH

PREMIER OF KWAZULU NATAL MR WILLIES MCHUNU DURING THE LAUNCH OF THE REUNION OF THE PHOLELA HIGH SCHOOL ALUMNI HELD IN DURBAN ON 27 OCTOBER 2018

Programme Director;

**Members of the Organising Committee of the Pholela High School
Alumni Association;**

Members of the Alumni Association of Pholela High School;

Distinguished Guests;

Ladies and Gentlemen;

Good Afternoon!

Theme: “Restoring Pholela High School to its former glory”

I wish to start by thanking the Organising Committee (which I am told is called the Central Committee), for giving us the opportunity to address this gathering of the Pholela Alumni Association.

We have for the past year, been made aware of efforts by the Organising Committee to initiate the Pholela Alumni Association which thankfully, have now borne fruit.

Since the formation of Pholela in 1937, this Alumni gathering naturally and for the first time ever, brings together several generations of learners who as they say “set foot on the yard of the school”. We can imagine the work that has gone into the coordination and logistics that have led to us all being here today. We therefore wish to congratulate the organisers on this major accomplishment!

This gathering is driven partly by the need for old friends to meet and in the process to make new friends.

Essentially though, we are gathered because there is an urgent need to put our heads together, and to dip our hands in our pockets as we lift Pholela back to its former glory. We as Alumni of Pholela should intervene before our school is washed away by history for lack of maintenance, repair and refurbishment. I would argue though, that our objective is much more than the narrow focus on one school, which nestles under the Mountains of Mahwaqa and where winters are extremely cold. I suspect that we have sacrificed our Saturday afternoon for more than that.

Programme Director,

Correctly so, we must see ourselves as post-apartheid missionaries who want the child of Africa to have a good, if not world-class education. For that reason, we have to believe that Pholela High School, which has been in existence for over 80 years now, must not die. Pholela must continue to live and grow even stronger. There should be many choices available to the children of KwaZulu Natal, not fewer. At the same time, those educational choices must provide a safe, secure, healthy and productive environment for learners who are ready to function in a modern, technologically-driven world.

Programme Director,

As we gather today, we are guided by the declaration of 2018 as the Year of Nelson Mandela and Mama Albertina Sisulu. That we are celebrating the centenaries of these heroes of our people this year, tells of the journey we have travelled from apartheid to a democratic South Africa.

As Madiba and MaSisulu were born in 1918, a revolution had taken place in the Soviet Union in October of 1917, and the world was cleaning up the mess of the First World War. Eight years earlier, in 1910, the Union of South Africa had been declared to the exclusion of the majority. In response, the ANC would be formed in 1912, to lead a united approach to tackling what was then seen merely as the exclusion of black people from political power.

Later, a younger generation would realise that the struggle needed more than persuasion.

When in 1961 the declaration of South Africa as a Republic again excluded black people and continued to consolidate the system of apartheid oppression. The people's response was clear. To paraphrase ANC President Oliver Tambo, the time had come for the nation to either fight or submit.

The choice was clear. The people would fight back on all fronts including through the people's army Umkhonto we Sizwe. I mention these snippets of history without any great detail, merely to state that like political organisations, educational institutions are shaped by their responses to existing political and economic conditions. Pholela High School and many others are a reflection of the times in which they were established, why they were established and to what extent they were able to fulfil their mission and what type of students they produced for society at different times.

I was at Pholela Institute during painful, difficult but also interesting times in the history of South Africa. Nelson Mandela had just been sentenced to Robben Island in 1964. It was also in our year in 1966 that Hendrik Verwoerd was killed. You can imagine the effect those times had on our generation at the time.

We are witnesses why like no other, the education sector in South Africa reflects the evolution of society, serving both as a tool of oppression and a platform for liberation. The intention of the apartheid state was to use education to create a docile "native" who would be educated enough to take the commands of the white economic and political establishment. Its intent was to produce a race that would forever be "drawers of water and hewers of wood".

For a while, mission education went hand in hand with efforts to christianise the native only for that purpose, and to ease the way for the expansionist programme of the Dutch East India Company since 1652. These early missionaries saw the African as, to quote a well-used saying, "a malleable spirit that was ripe for the noble onslaught of civilizing and Christianizing endeavours". Importantly, embedded in this approach was the notion of racial and cultural hierarchy that saw the ways of the West as superior to those of the "natives".

This assumed order was contained in the so-called “doctrine of manifest destiny”, in which the missionaries were supposedly tasked by higher powers to bring the Christian light to heathen countries and peoples.

Programme Director,

These are some of the pronouncements that informed the work of missionaries such as Dr John Philip of the London Missionary Society and the Wesleyan missionary William Binnington Boyce.

As we said earlier, these reflected the prevalent thinking of the 18th and 19th centuries. Thus knowingly and unknowingly, mission education became part of the colonial and later imperialistic and apartheid schemes, reflecting the benevolent mission and manifest destiny orientation.

When in the mid-nineteenth century, missionary education began to emphasise industrial education and training, its aims was as Cape Governor, Sir George Grey’s said, to “detribalize, educate and befriend the native”. Sir Grey even persuaded the British government to subsidise mission institutions so that black people could be trained as interpreters, evangelists and schoolmasters amongst their own people.

It was not a well-meaning mission. Grey said the following and I quote: **“We should try and make them a part of ourselves, with a common faith and common interests, useful servants, consumers of our goods, contributors to our revenue. In short, a source of strength and wealth for this colony, such as Providence designed them to be”**.

It would not be until the twentieth century, that mission education began to reflect several changes and critically, opposition to racial thinking and practice in South Africa. In the ensuing period, mission schools such as Lovedale, Pholela and many others, would serve as islands of quality in a general environment geared to undermine the destiny of the black child. Instead of producing labour for the apartheid economy, mission education produced an intellectual class that would see themselves as no less than their white counterparts. Mission schools instilled values of intellectual quality, hard work, discipline, honesty and spiritual uprightness, characteristics that allow any learner to thrive anywhere in the world. In many ways they also produced patriots and revolutionaries.

When in 1994 the process of transforming education was implemented, it was never meant to destroy these schools. As a democratic government, our aim is the progressive and substantive realisation of educational objectives in order to transform and develop society.

Today we cherish the values of human dignity, the achievement of equality, and the advancement of non-sexism and non-racialism and human rights. We have declared the desirability of creating a single coordinated education system, so we can respond better to the human resource, economic and development needs of South Africa. Our major challenge, is the legacy of an inferior school infrastructure that we have inherited from our painful past.

In general, we want our education to mobilise human talent and potential through lifelong learning, provide competent workers and managers, as well as successful business people in a knowledge-driven society; but also to produce a holistic human being, who is worth the democracy he/she espouses. In short an “upright being”.

This is necessary for the growth and prosperity of our modern economy. As we have said before, education is essential if we are to attain the vision of a transformed, democratic, united, non-racial and non-sexist country.

Pholela and its challenges

Programme Director,

Fellow Alumni,

As we stated in the beginning, we are worried at the deterioration of Pholela High School. Institutions like Pholela are today caught between the need for quality education and the reality of inadequate infrastructure and public finances. These institutions are also victims of the success in broadening access to education. This development has seen Model C schools take up learners who would otherwise go to schools such as Pholela, Mariannahill, Amanzimtoti, Inkamana, Inanda Seminary, Ohlange Institute and Eshowe among others. Among others, these dynamics have seen these schools seek increasing funding from government. In the process, many have lost their independence and character, which previously set them apart from the rest.

We are here to register our support for all efforts aimed at the revival of the school, to ensure that it returns to its former glory or even better. The most important thing about events such as this one is to start. Many such initiatives have failed, taken years to take off simply because there was too much planning and thinking that one eventually gave up. Sometimes it takes a crisis such as this one to mobilise people towards a common objective.

As Madiba once told us, **“It always seems impossible until it is done”**.

We are inspired by efforts to mobilise former learners to form the core group of supporters of the “Return Pholela to its former glory initiative”. We are in full support of this move. It is important that we as Alumni register our unqualified support for this idea of forming the Pholela High School Association. Like all of you, I am also here to pledge my full support for this initiative.

We must use all our contacts to support the efforts to refurbish Pholela, restoring it to become a school that can stand its own in the country. The Department of Education and the Department of Public Works will in the meantime, make the necessary and urgent repairs to the school. As government we will make sure that Pholela is refurbished so that it continues to provide academic excellence in an environment that moulds a child for success and good citizenship. Pholela must be given all the support and facilities to produce academic and sporting excellence in children who can go and take on the world with confidence.

The structural refurbishment of Pholela is very urgent and necessary, but we must also be clear about instilling a set of values that guide the school. We have an opportunity to ensure proper and ethical management of the school, the redirection of the curriculum to reflect better the needs of the modern world and critically, active involvement of the community, parents and Alumni in ensuring the financial welfare of the school. One feature of all successful schools is this – the active involvement of the community, parents and alumni.

The child to be produced at Pholela High must be of “Excellent” quality in the world. The Association must spare no effort in achieving this noble goal.

Fellow Alumni;

Let me end on a lighter note. Understandably, the build-up to a reunion like this one is sometimes tense and even stressful. This is because Alumni sometimes think that a reunion is akin to a competition, where one is expected to show off one’s success in life since school!

At a reunion one expects to be surprised by that one student that was very quiet and reserved at school, but who in the meantime has become a major success in their chosen field somewhere in the world. We recall the underground guerrilla who it turned out, was communicating with the ANC in Lusaka and soon disappeared to join MK.

Ahead of a reunion, we sometimes wonder if one Alumnus might arrive in style in a limousine or in a helicopter. That Alumnus will gladly remind

everyone that she/he is the one who was the butt of jokes at school, but is now able to say: “Look at me now”.

Conversely, we also wonder what became of that learner who was very, very popular at school. We also wonder if there will be that dark horse student who arrives at a reunion and says very little, demonstrates and shares nothing about their success.

They will keep quiet for the whole time, yet a week or so after the event you will hear they are major shareholders of Coca Cola and Facebook. Then you will blame yourself why you did not take their numbers during the reunion.

Programme Director,

I want to use this platform to insist that the only qualification you require to be an Alumnus of Pholela or any other institution, is that you were once a student or learner there. Nothing else! Alumni have one characteristic, they are Alumni! Let us join in numbers! At the same time we must make sure that every Alumni is treated with respect, and given his or her place as an Alumni without any preference.

As I end, allow me to borrow a few words from Madiba which he used in the context of eradicating poverty, but which are relevant today particularly to the people in this room.

Madiba has this to say: **“Sometimes it falls on a generation to be great. You can be that great generation. Let your greatness blossom.”**

Programme Director;

Fellow Alumni;

Today the responsibility falls on this generation gathered here to be great.

The responsibility falls on this generation of the democratic post-apartheid South Africa, to resuscitate to its former glory, an institution such as Pholela High School.

Today the responsibility falls on former learners like yourselves to take the cudgels and revive the fortunes of your school, for the sake of our past and for the sake of our future.

This is your historic responsibility! This is your historic mission!

Fellow Alumni, Return Pholela High School to its former glory!

End.