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Caught in the crossfire



OPINION
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School safety: Laser-like focus needed to address a situation now out-of-control

The issue of school safety remains extremely concerning as incidents of violence continue to rise while learners, educators and community members are often caught in the crossfire. Yet, despite the gravity of the situation, KwaZulu-Natal's (KZN) government has been slow to take action.

The KZN ANC-run government's knee-jerk reaction to recent incidents is to be expected after years of not prioritising the matter. In 2019 a flimsy programme was hastily launched by the former premier and his MEC in what can only be described as a publicity stunt in response to public out-

cry at the time.

Unsurprisingly, the plan and all attempts to implement it have fallen flat. Some 1200 Extended Public Works Programme (EPWP) staff were supposed to move to Education and play a role in school safety after their contracts with KZN's Community Safety and Liaison Department ended. This never happened.

Violent crime and the fear thereof impacts negatively on learners and residents, resulting in a decline in quality of life, conflict-ridden communities and violence spilling over into our schools. This was evident during a recent incident at a Piet-

emariitzburg-based primary school which saw a security guard stabbed and two others injured. This in front of very young children who were severely traumatised as a result.

Despite the situation, KZN DoE general policies show no sign of a published school safety programme. This is astonishing given that in 2019 — the last time that statistics were provided — KZN had 202 school violence hot-spots. Earlier this month, the DA tabled a motion in the KZN Legislature, calling for collaboration between KZN's Education and Community Safety departments. We also called for an update on hot-spot areas and for the department to play a far greater role in ensuring safety in and around those hot spots as a start.

It is clear that KZN needs a proper schools' safety programme without

further delay. We reiterate the need for a programme that strives to create centres of excellence with strong community links, quality learning and teaching and effective management and governance, and in so doing, to address the root causes of crime and violence involving our facilities. We call this the whole-of-society approach to school safety. It stands to reason then, that to ensure a safe learning and teaching environment that develops citizens who will contribute to a capable and ethical state, there needs to be a three-pronged approach which encompasses;

- Environmental programmes — for example, how are learners, educators and staff supposed to stay safe in a school with no doors?
- Developmental programmes — To support, modify and influence par-

ent, educator and learner behaviour at school.

- Systems programmes — That incorporate a holistic approach to changing how the whole school operates as far as safety is concerned.

The DA is aware that not all school safety committees are established and not all those established are functional. We are also aware that not all fences and access points are audited, not all schools have EPWP-based guards, let alone any form of security or any kind of established relationship with SAPS. And we are aware that not all schools are represented in the province's war rooms — when we visit them, they tell us. Then there is the question of whether schools are complicit in hiding sexually-related crimes.

Safe schools are possible through

a whole-of-society approach to the promotion of safety and the prevention of violence. This through partnerships with stakeholders including the South African Police Services (SAPS), KZN's departments of Community Safety and Social Development and the eThekweni Metro as well as all capable municipalities across KZN where municipal law enforcement is possible and available.

The approach must also include a return to values that start at home. Included in the whole-of-society approach, parents must assist schools in the enforcement of codes of conduct banning cell phone usage during school hours with parents and communities educated about the harm this does during school time. The DA has already raised concern around the high levels of pornographic ma-

terial circulated amongst learners.

Recently we saw what happened when 400 cell phones were confiscated at a single school and learners themselves took on vile criminal behaviour. We also alerted the former MEC about learners recording sexual activity in a classroom in one of our schools and then circulating it.

In the interests of ensuring improved safety at KZN's schools, the DA will be making ready-made documents and policy positions — that can be adapted for KZN — available to the MEC. We call on her to embrace in good spirit what will be shared with her and to end all discussion of a costly Indaba.

• Dr Imran Keeka is a Member of the DA Caucus in the KwaZulu-Natal Legislature and the DA KZN Spokesperson on Education and Quality of Life. This piece is based on a debate in the KZN Legislature on September 22.
• Column shortened.