OFFICE OF THE MEC
FREE STATE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION

Member of the Executive Council
for Education
FREE STATE PROVINCE

Keynote Address by Honourable MEC Dr MJ Maboya at the Official Launch of the Free State Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) – Programme, Tharollo Primary School, Qwaqwa | 30 June 2025

Programme Director, ***please allow me to start by acknowledging the***:

Representatives from the Department of Basic Education, Provincial and District Education Officials,

Traditional Leaders and Elders of our Communities,

School Governing Body representatives,

Representatives from Teacher Trade Unions,

Academics and Linguists present in our midst,

Principals, Educators, Learners, Parents and Caregivers,

Distinguished Guests,

Ladies and Gentlemen,

Dumelang, Goeie môre, Good morning,

Programme Director today is not merely an occasion, nor is it simply the launch of a programme - it is the reawakening of a dream long deferred, a sacred reclamation of our voices that were once silenced, shamed, and systematically subjugated under the crushing weight of empire, conquest, colonial distortion, and apartheid erasure.

Language - our first inheritance from our mothers - was among the earliest casualties of that violent history. Its marginalisation robbed generations of their dignity, their identity, and their rightful place in the story of knowledge and human progress. Today, from the sacred soil of Qwaqwa - this storied land nestled in the heart of the Free State - we rise to plant a seed of liberation that has been nurtured by centuries of resistance, ancestral wisdom, and intergenerational hope.

And what better moment than now - during the Youth Month - to proclaim such a renaissance. The launch of the Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education (MTbBE) programme is not coincidental to the spirit of June 16; it is a deliberate continuation of its legacy. It is a living response to the cries of the youth of 1976, who rose against an education system designed to oppress and disfigure the African mind.

On that momentous day, they did not merely reject Afrikaans as a medium of instruction - they rejected the systemic imposition of inferiority. Today, through MTbBE, we honour that sacrifice not with statues or slogans, but with structural change. We are rewriting the very script of knowledge production, restoring African languages to their rightful status as instruments of thought, power, and freedom. It is a profound tribute to those young martyrs that, nearly 50 years later, we choose not to remember them in silence - but to teach in the languages they fought to protect.

Ladies and Gentlemen, today marks a radical turning point in our collective journey to reclaim the power of African languages as Languages of Teaching, Learning and Assessment (LoLTA). Through this bold initiative, we declare that no child shall be exiled from their own language in order to access education; that true transformation begins when we teach our children not only how to speak, but how to *be* - in their own tongue, with their own voice, and in their own power.

Programme Director, this moment compels us to look beyond policy and pedagogy - into the very soul of who we are as a people. For at the heart of this transformation lies a profound truth: that language is not merely a medium of instruction, but the foundational thread through which **selfhood, memory, and destiny** are woven.

To teach and assess in our mother tongue beyond grade 3 is to affirm our humanity, to root education in the lived realities of our children, and to reconnect with the ancient wellsprings of wisdom that have sustained African societies since time immemorial.

Long before borders were drawn and flags were stitched, language was the original act of creation. From the breath of the ancestors to the first utterances around ancient fires, language carried not only meaning, but memory, identity, knowledge, and sacred power.

As Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o reminds us, ***"Language, any language, has a dual character: it is both a means of communication and a carrier of culture."*** To lose a language is not merely to lose words - it is to lose entire worlds. It is to sever a people from the essence of their identity, their memory, and their soul. This is why we observe a troubling decline in learner performance from Grade 3 to Grade 4 - because as learners transition into unfamiliar languages of instruction, they are often stripped of the linguistic tools that once anchored their understanding and confidence.

When the colonial project spread its imperial shadows across the globe, it did so not only with violence and law, but with a deliberate assault on native languages. In the classroom, in the courtroom, and in the pulpit, indigenous languages were demonised, delegitimised, and dismantled. In South Africa, as across the continent, generations were taught to abandon isiZulu for English, to silence Sesotho for Afrikaans, to trade isiNdebele and Tshivenda for foreign tongues in pursuit of a warped idea of civilisation. But that modernity, as Frantz Fanon warned us, was built on our dehumanisation - **on the epistemicide of African knowledge systems**.

Indeed, language became both the battlefield and the prize. And so today, we take a bold and irreversible step toward dismantling that colonial inheritance that has for too long alienated African children from their intellectual birthright.

We affirm, with clarity and resolve, that education rooted in the mother tongue is not a sentimental nod to heritage, nor a mere cultural experiment - it is a scientifically established prerequisite for cognitive development, critical thinking, and meaningful learning. It is a neuro-linguistic necessity. As confirmed by UNESCO (2021) and echoed by cognitive scholar Jim Cummins, early education in a child's home language strengthens foundational comprehension and enhances second-language acquisition, literacy, and abstract reasoning. When children think, count, and imagine in the language they understand best, their academic and psychological outcomes improve exponentially.

It is no coincidence that the world's leading economies - Germany, China, France, and Japan - all instruct their children in their native languages. They understand that language is not just a vessel of tradition, but a powerful engine of innovation, science, and national development. Why, then, should the children of Qwaqwa, Petsana, Maokeng, Kwakwatsi, Thaba Nchu, and Botshabelo be forced to learn in languages that are foreign to their homes, their hearts, and their dreams?

Let us be clear: this is not an indulgence in cultural essentialism, nor a retreat from global relevance. It is a strategic, future-focused investment in the intellectual empowerment and cognitive flourishing of our learners. A child whose educational journey begins in Sesotho or isiXhosa does not arrive at a disadvantage.

On the contrary, such a child enters the realm of learning with a sharpened mind, anchored identity, and the profound neurological advantages that multilingualism confers. It is through this rootedness that our learners become not only more adaptive and resilient thinkers, but more expansive, empathetic, and fully realised human beings - ready to engage both their immediate realities and the wider world with confidence and clarity.

Programme Director, education that erases identity is not neutral - it is violent. It is a quiet continuation of colonial domination through the curriculum. But through this launch, we declare: **no more**. We will no longer ask African children to abandon themselves in order to be educated. We will no longer measure intelligence by fluency in foreign idioms. We will no longer confuse assimilation with progress.

Through Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education, we begin the great restoration - the reweaving of broken lineages, the recovery of ancestral wisdom, and the rebirth of a generation that will speak, learn, and lead in the full dignity of their languages.

As we celebrate Youth Month and remember the brave spirit of June 16, let us honour our young people not with slogans, but with systemic change. This programme must serve as our generational response - a revolutionary act of justice in the classroom, where freedom truly begins.

Indeed! The time has come to undo the damage!

The time has come for our schools to reverberate with the living voices of our mothers - not as background noise in playgrounds or songs at assembly, but as legitimate, authoritative languages of instruction in textbooks, science laboratories, and mathematics classrooms.

The dominance of colonial languages in these critical domains of learning has, for too long, perpetuated the myth that African languages are ill-suited for intellectual inquiry or scientific precision. This myth has stifled the intellectual confidence of generations. Yet, research continues to affirm what many African scholars have long argued**: children learn best when taught in the language they understand most deeply**.

UNESCO (2021) states unequivocally that mother tongue instruction improves comprehension, promotes inclusive education, and significantly boosts academic outcomes in the early years. Cognitive scientist Jim Cummins also affirms that literacy skills developed in a learner's first language provide a strong foundation for acquiring literacy in a second language - a process known as **Common Underlying Proficiency.**

This is the essence of what we mean when we speak of Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education: an intentional, empowering approach that elevates African languages as vehicles of scientific thought, academic rigour, and cultural affirmation - while also ensuring that learners are equipped to participate confidently in English-dominated global discourse. It is not a question of either-or, but of both.

A child who can conduct a science experiment in Sesotho and present her findings in English is not only linguistically versatile, but cognitively empowered and socially affirmed. As Professor Neville Alexander once said, ***"Multilingualism is a resource, not a problem."*** Through this model, we are not simply changing the language of instruction - we are transforming the architecture of learning itself, decolonising the classroom, and aligning education with the linguistic and cultural realities of our people.

And what better place to begin this renaissance than in Qwaqwa - a region whose people have long been custodians of language, heritage, and resistance. In the words of Prof. Neville Alexander, a leading linguist and language activist: ***"Any society that aspires to democracy must, by definition, be multilingual. Monolingualism is the enemy of diversity, and therefore of democracy."***

This initiative is a declaration of our democratic and developmental intent. It is not a retreat from global engagement, as I have emphasised earlier, it is a redefinition of our term s of participation. For South Africa's future cannot be built on the erasure of its past. Economic growth, technological innovation, and nation-building cannot succeed if they are rooted in alienation.

Let me be even more direct:

You cannot build African excellence on European epistemology alone. You cannot develop children who feel inferior to their language. You cannot decolonise education if your language of learning is the language of conquest.

Postcolonial studies have long argued that the material and psychological legacies of colonialism must be confronted and transformed - not merely critiqued. Scholars such as Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Achille Mbembe challenge us to imagine pedagogies that are grounded in the lived realities of the African child. Mbembe writes, ***"The challenge of our time is to start from where we are, in Africa, and reimagine the human through African knowledge systems."***

Ladies and Gentlemen, our response is this programme.

A mother-tongue education is not just about language - it is about rehumanisation. It is about economic development that is inclusive. It is about cultural revival, about re-establishing dignity, about ensuring that learners do not grow up believing that knowledge only begins when English begins.

Consider this: a child who dreams in Sesotho, who plays in isiZulu, who is scolded in Xitsonga, is suddenly expected to think, calculate, and express herself only in English from Grade 1. That is not empowerment. That is a fracture - a forced psychic exile.

In this fractured world, Africa must speak many tongues, but she must not forget her own. We must birth a new educational order where the African child no longer has to choose between being educated and being herself. This programme is not an event. **It is a paradigm shift**. It is a bridge across the centuries - from the oral wisdom of our ancestors to the digital futures of our descendants.

We will train our teachers. We will develop our materials. We will strengthen our pedagogies. And most importantly, we will centre the African child - not as a passive recipient, but as a co-creator of a new world. A world that mirrors the spirit of Ubuntu.
A world that echoes the truth of Steve Biko, who said: ***"The most potent weapon in the hands of the oppressor is the mind of the oppressed."***

Today, we take back that mind - one word at a time. Let us build an education system where no child must leave her language at the school gate. Let us forge an economy that grows from indigenous intelligence. Let us become the ancestors our children will thank.

Tharollo Primary School will go down in history as the birthplace of this turning point - a site of educational justice, spiritual alignment, and cultural resurrection. Let every child who walks these corridors know: Your language is not a limitation. Your culture is not a curse. Your mother tongue is a weapon of wisdom.

In conclusion, I draw once more from the great Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, whose wisdom continues to light our path: ***"To starve or kill a language is to starve and kill a people's memory bank."*** **We refuse to let that happen on our watch.**

Let us rise. Let us teach. Let us reclaim. Let us mother our languages back to life.

Ke a leboha. Thank you.