National Winner

Excellence in Inclusive Education Leadership

Name: Mthobi Fihla

School: Phakamisani Primary School, Plettenberg Bay

District: Eden and Central Karoo

Mr Mthobi Fihla is an exceptional educator whose unwavering commitment to inclusive education has transformed the lives of countless learners and reshaped educational opportunities within his community.

His passion for inclusive education began with what seemed to be a simple classroom challenge. Faced with two learners who consistently displayed behavioural difficulties, Mr Fihla chose not to discipline or isolate them. Instead, he sought to understand their strengths and gave them the responsibility of repairing broken classroom desks through welding. The following day, the two learners enthusiastically approached him, eager to point out additional desks that required repairs. It was at that moment that Mr Fihla realised that their behavioural challenges stemmed not from an unwillingness to learn but from a deep desire to feel valued, included and entrusted with meaningful responsibility. This life-changing experience ignited his determination to ensure that every learner, regardless of their abilities or challenges, has a place where they can thrive.

Recognising the broader needs of his community, Mr Fihla became a passionate advocate for inclusive education in Plettenberg Bay. At the time, there was no full-service or inclusive school in the area, forcing learners with diverse learning needs to travel long distances to Knysna. For many families, this was financially and practically impossible, resulting in numerous learners dropping out of school and being denied their constitutional right to quality education. Rather than accepting this reality, Mr Fihla mobilised stakeholders, collaborated with education officials and engaged the wider community to advocate for meaningful change. Through his perseverance, visionary leadership and unwavering commitment, his school was successfully developed into a full-service school, bringing inclusive education closer to the learners who needed it most.

Today, the impact of his work extends far beyond the classroom. Learners who were once excluded now have access to quality education within their own community. They experience a sense of belonging, dignity and acceptance, while educators are empowered to embrace inclusive teaching practices that recognise and celebrate learner diversity. Families who once faced the hardship of sending their children far from home now have renewed hope that their children can succeed academically and socially in a supportive environment.

Mr Fihla's work exemplifies the true spirit of inclusive education. He has demonstrated that every learner possesses unique strengths and potential when given the opportunity to succeed. His compassion, innovation and determination have not only changed individual lives but have also transformed his school into a beacon of inclusion, equity and opportunity.

Mr Fihla is a deserving recipient of the NTA for his outstanding contribution to inclusive education and for his lasting impact on learners, families and the broader community. His legacy serves as an inspiration to educators across South Africa, reminding us that true excellence in education lies in ensuring that no learner is left behind.