

Minister Debbie Schäfer
Provincial Teaching Awards
National Theme for 2018: "Be the legacy"

Premier, Helen Zille

Mr Brian Schreuder - Head of the Western Cape Education Department

Special guests

Senior management of the WCED, District Directors and officials

Members of the Teaching Profession and unions

Ladies and Gentlemen

And most importantly, tonight's Award Recipients

Good Evening and a very warm welcome to all our teachers here tonight.

It is great to be with you once again to celebrate our excellent teachers. It could also be my last event of this nature as elections loom next year, so I'm going to make the most of it.

I have travelled a lot across the province and seen schools and teachers in all kinds of places and contexts. And I must say that we are very fortunate in the Western Cape to have many excellent educators who continue to go selflessly beyond the call of duty to ensure that their learners receive the best quality education.

As a department, we place great emphasis on acknowledging excellence and recognizing teachers who inspire and motivate our children every day and I am so pleased to meet so many of you here tonight, to honour you and to thank you for your commitment to the teaching profession.

The theme for this year's awards is "be the legacy".

The dictionary defines Legacy as a gift or a bequest, that is handed down, endowed or conveyed from one person to another.

It is something descendible one comes into possession of that is transmitted, inherited or received from a predecessor.

So we need to ask ourselves – what kind of legacy do we want to leave?

Legacies can be positive or negative, of course, and I would certainly believe that everyone in this room would like to leave a positive one.

I am very privileged to have just returned on Monday from a trip to London where I was invited to speak by the Education Development Trust, and there I got to meet Global Teacher of the Year winner, Andria Zafirakou. What a lovely woman – open, warm and clearly passionate about her job and the children in her care.

Her prize for winning was a million US dollars – that’s around R14m. Sorry – that does not feature among tonight’s prizes!

At this event, we were told that she is spending ALL of that money on the promotion of arts programmes in UK schools. Now THAT is a legacy. I have to say I am not sure I would do that if I won a million dollars, which is probably why I am not a teacher, but that shows the kind of person so many of our teachers are – completely selfless.

Now we can’t all do that, obviously, but we can do other things.

There is a song called “heartless” by American rapper YFN Lucci that says the difference between fame and notoriety is that fame is when people know you, and notoriety is when people know your work.’

I find that rather strange, as notoriety is usually associated with having done something bad, but in this context, fame is seen as often not respectable, but notoriety is, because that leaves a legacy.

And the same could be said for teachers. While a handful of you may win provincial, national or even international awards and become “famous”, most of the work you do is anonymous – quietly changing and improving the lives of learners in your care every day. But THAT is leaving a legacy in the lives of every child who passes through your classroom.

You can leave a legacy by instilling in your learners the attitude that they can achieve what they want to if they work hard, that if they are poor it does not mean they are stupid, and it doesn’t mean they have to stay poor.

You can instil hope in people who have none. And our teachers in Khayelitsha are clearly doing that. I heard this week that all our matrics who lost their homes in the devastating fire a few weeks ago are writing their exams. Why? Because they don’t want to live in shacks anymore and know that the only way they will get out of that situation is if they pass their exams and get a good education.

Now they ARE victims – but they are not letting their circumstances get in the way of what they want to achieve, and I pay tribute to them and their teachers for that. Not to mention teachers who are taking learners into their own homes to give them a safe place to stay while they write.

You can use difficult circumstances as an excuse, or you can use them as a reason for improvement and look for solutions.

You can teach children to be victims or victors.

I was invited to attend Delft Primary School yesterday, for their year-end celebration and thank you to their staff. We all know the issues that plague that community.

I was amazed at what I saw. A 28 year old school in lovely condition, well-maintained, clean and tidy.

The school pledge on the wall of the hall encouraging the children to take responsibility and be the best they can be.

School values written on the stairs.

Happy, well-mannered children learning in the classrooms.

A governing body that is supportive and active.

And people who are PROUD of their school.

This is a no fee school in a poor, gang-stricken community. They achieved a 97% pass rate across the school last year (and I asked if it was REAL pass rate, not progressed pass rate) and have about 1400 children there.

The refrain was clear with everyone I spoke to or who spoke at the event – the focus is the children. Every decision they make puts the interests of the children first.

This school has bought into the vision of the Metro North Education district, that they do not want children walking past schools closest to them because they think other schools are better. They want communities to be proud of their schools so that their children can have access to education close to their homes.

This school is an inspiration to me and I would really like other schools that face similar difficulties to visit them and learn from what they are doing. THAT is a legacy for that community. Of course, the principal is also an excellent leader who drives those values, and who has the attitude that he cannot sleep at night if he knows there is a child who could have had a better opportunity that he didn't give them.

This is the kind of legacy that we need to leave.

In a world filled with violence, poverty, racism and illness, we often feel overwhelmed and powerless to change things. But as teachers you have so much power to influence a child's life in a positive way, simply by caring.

The care that you have for your learners is shown in the way you teach and your passion for the subjects that you teach, passion for listening to the learners, your ability to understand a child's life circumstances and challenges, and your ability to assist them to adapt to continuously changing environments.

It is shown when you know intuitively when a child just needs a listening ear or a shoulder to cry on.

You are there and you are here tonight, because you care.

And it is this constant care and the interest shown that your learners will remember most about their teacher each school year, and will continue to remember long after they have moved on.

As an organisation we also need to show care for you, our valued educators. We know that teaching is not easy. We know the difficulties you face. And we are concerned at the violent attacks some of our teachers have faced.

I wish to assure you that we take a zero tolerance approach to that and strong action will be taken against anyone found guilty of it.

I would like to congratulate in advance all our winners tonight – and all those who do not take the number one spot, as it is a huge achievement just to be here. And I don't say that lightly, as a platitude – it really is.

And as I close, I want to encourage us all to seriously consider what kind of legacy we are going to leave behind. In doing so, I want to remind us of the well-known quote from Maya Angelou, which I think may assist in that regard:

“I've learned that people will forget what **you** said, people will forget what **you** did, but people will never forget how **you made them feel.**”

Let's go out there and BE the change we want to see in the world – BE the legacy. And let's be Victors, not Victims.

Thank you.