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Memorandum on Equal Education's campaign to fix the 500 broken windows in Luhlaza High School, Khayelitsha

This memorandum has been prepared at the request of the Standing Committee on Education, Cultural Affairs and Sport of the Western Cape Provincial Parliament. The Chairperson of the Committee suggested that it would send a letter urging the Western Cape Department of Education (WCED) to address the matter as speedily as possible, and that Equal Education should draw up a memorandum to be attached to the Committee's letter.

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Summary

Equal Education (EE) is a movement of learners, parents, teachers, and members of community and civil society, working for better quality and greater equality in South African schooling. EE is currently working in Khayelitsha and Kraaifontein in the Western Cape. In June 2008 EE began to focus on the issue of 500 broken windows in Luhlaza High School Khayelitsha, which have been broken for 4 years.

First Equal Education held meetings with learners, parents, teachers, school management and then with the relevant district office of the WCED. After receiving a negative response from the Department, EE got quotations for the fixing of the windows, organised a petition, spoke to the media, attempted to do fundraising for the windows, met with the MEC Yousuf Gabru, and organised a public gathering. Based on these quotations, EE proposed that the R17,000 needed to fix the windows, according to the quotations we had received, would be funded by the school and EE each providing R5,000 and the WCED providing R7,000. EE agreed with the school that from its annual maintenance budget of R28,000 it could not cover the full cost of the 500 windows. During this period EE and its members were harassed and defamed by certain WCED officials.

EE then organised a large public meeting in Khayelitsha. This was attended by the MEC and officials. At this meeting the MEC and Mr Archie Lewis (Chief Director: Institutional, Specialised & Operational Support) announced a R671,000

investment into Luhlaza School, over two financial years. EE has written to the Mr Lewis welcoming this announcement and asking for details in regard to what the money will be spent on, who will be responsible for spending it, and when it will be spent. Equal Education believes the Department is serious about addressing the situation at Luhlaza, and accept the undertakings that have been made in good faith, but we would urge the Standing Committee to assist in providing oversight to ensure that this money is well-spent and that it helps rejuvenate Luhlaza High School towards its former status as the pride of Khayelitsha.

What is Equal Education?

Equal Education is building a research driven, membership based, peoples' movement advocating for educational quality and equality in South African schools. We believe that a culture of learning and a people's movement for education are crucial. Government needs input from local communities for policy reform and implementation, and local communities also need to take ownership of their schools in order to support learning, teaching and efficient governance and maintenance of their schools.

14 years after the fall of Apartheid, the education received by young people in South Africa remains unequal. A basic education is an enabling right to the access of many rights. Education was the foundation upon which inequality was fashioned during the years of apartheid. Unequal educational opportunities remain among the greatest obstacles to equality, dignity and freedom in South Africa today.

The organisation is presently based in Khayelitsha, with the intention to expand provincially and nationally. Its Board is composed of: Prof Mary Metcalfe, Prof Crain Soudien, Zackie Achmat, Tsemi Dipholo, Nathan Geffen, Vuyiseka Dubula, Alan Velcich and Doron Isaacs. The staff includes Lwandiso Stofile, Yoliswa Dwane, Doron Isaacs, Nokubonga Yawa, Joey Hasson, Lukhanyo Mangona, and Khanyiso Hoboyi.

There are eight staff and a large cadre of volunteers doing the daily work of the organisation. The organisation engages in grassroots activity such as working with learners to address problems in their schools, assisting learners with homework and research, meeting with parents to provide information about the education system, and generating debate around educational challenges. It also formulates policy proposals and conducts research into key areas.

Why did Equal Education (EE) begin its campaign work with a campaign about broken windows?

There are many problems that schools face. Some of those problems – like classes of over 60 learners, lack of punctuality by teachers and learners, lack of libraries, and poor security – are easy to see, while others – like the slow pace of teaching and the myriad problems created by the OBE curriculum – are more hidden. After 3 months of research, sitting in cold classrooms with teachers and

learners in the middle of winter, the 500 broken windows at Luhlaza appeared to be an obvious and urgent problem, and also symbolic of the general neglect of school maintenance. Literally, rain, wind and dust would pour in through the broken windows making teaching and learning very difficult. Learners at the school also explained that it was hard to be proud of their school when it looked the way it did.

As one its first projects, members of the Equal Education Youth Group were asked to go into their schools and take photographs of anything that they thought affected their learning at school. One youth group member, a grade 12 learner at Luhlaza, Zukiswa Vuka, returned with a photograph which revealed the devastating state of windows at her school, Luhlaza. This became the symbol of the campaign.

Equal Education also believed that if we could be successful in this first campaign it would give the Khayelitsha schools community a belief in the ability to bring tangible changes to the schools.

How did EE work with School Management?

Equal Education worked closely with school management and learners to raise the issue of broken windows at Luhlaza High School. EE had regular meetings with Mr Robin April, who was the Acting Principal until November. EE also met with the teachers. EE also tried to meet with the School Governing Body. It is very important to EE that we have a good relationship with the management of the school, the parents, the community and the learners.

The school management told us that they had written to the Department about the windows and other problems, but the response had been slow.

Which forms of activism did Equal Education use?

Equal Education created a petition. The petition called for the windows to be repaired, but also requested that learners commit themselves to keeping them that way. Over 1500 signatures were collected in Khayelitsha, and further signatures were collected outside Khayelitsha. The collection of signatures was done by EE members who are learners at Luhlaza and other Khayelitsha schools. A copy of this petition has been given to the WCED.

EE members wrote to the newspaper. Phathiswa Shushwana and Lwando Mzandisi had an article published in the Cape Times on 8 October, which explained Equal Education and the broken windows campaign. (See attached). EE also did radio interviews on community and city-wide radio stations.

EE organised a public gather at Kaizergracht in Cape Town on 10 October. This rally was attended by 450 high school learners from 21 schools, 18 of which were Khayelitsha schools. There was a good public response from people in Khayelitsha and in the newspapers. People appreciated responsible school children raising their concerns in a respectful and lively manner.

Unfortunately Ms Lindela Sophothela, who addressed the public gathering on behalf of the WCED, told the learners, who were from school across Khayelitsha, that Luhlaza was the only school with broken windows. She also said the learners broke the windows. However the windows have been broken for four years. She said the school must fix the windows from its maintenance budget. But the school's maintenance budget for the whole year is R28,000, which is not enough to fix the windows and attend to its other maintenance needs.

Who are the Equal Education members?

Equal Education is made up of learners, teachers, parents, academics, activists, and community members. Minister of Education Naledi Pandor has requested membership in the organisation, and MEC Yousuf Gabru has said publicly that he wishes every learner in Khayelitsha would join EE. Indeed the central members in the organisation are high school learners. There are over 150 members from over 10 schools in Khayelitsha.

These members of EE began to mobilise their school-friends, explaining to them the situation at Luhlaza High School and enlisting their help. The campaign stressed the importance of schools working together to solve their problems. Although the windows were broken at Luhlaza, learners representing almost all high schools in Khayelitsha gave their support to the campaign.

During youth group meetings, members discussed campaign methods and objectives, highlighting the importance of non-violence. Youth group members had fun practicing poetry and songs as a creative way of putting their message across to the WCED. Members created placards with clear messages written on them in preparation for the public gathering. In the lead up to the rally, learners collected more than 30 kilograms of broken glass from the play-grounds of Luhlaza. This glass was later washed and used with coloured beads to make necklaces, bracelets and other items.

The learners selected martials and spokepeople, and were trained as to their role. Radio interviews were given, newspaper articles written, and memoranda and speeches were carefully drafted.

How did EE engage with the Western Cape Education Department?

EE has engaged extensively and openly with the Department of Education. MEC Yousuf Gabru has been particularly responsive to this call from the Khayelitsha learners and has dedicated time and effort to assist in solving the problem. EE would like to thank him and his office for this work.

Unfortunately this has not always been the experience at other levels of the Department. We began by meeting Mr. Botes, a Circuit Manager at the Metropole East District Office, who is responsible for Luhlaza High School. We

explained the situation of windows at Luhlaza, and pledged to work with the department to get them fixed. Botes claimed that the issue of broken windows had never been brought to his attention by the school, and referred us to Mr. Baldwin Bougardt at the WCED head office.

EE then met with Mr. Bougardt, the official responsible for scheduled maintenance at Western Cape schools to try and find out when the windows would be repaired. He too claimed that the issue had never been brought to his attention, and said that there were many schools with much more serious problems than broken windows. Mr. Bougardt explained to us that scheduled maintenance was planned for the school; that this maintenance did not include the repair of broken windows; and that this maintenance would take place in September 2010.

Equal Education had received quotations to fix the windows and the best price was R17,000. The school could contribute R5,000 and EE could contribute R5,000 so we asked the Department for R7,000. These quotations were submitted to MEC Gabru and Ms. Lindela Sophothela from the WCED.

After receiving the MEC's support, EE held a follow-up meeting with WCED Metropole East. The officials promised the windows would be fixed, but no timeline was provided.

Mr Melvyn Caroline (Director of EMDC East) chaired the meeting well and treated EE with courtesy. We appreciate his efforts. Unfortunately, it soon became clear that the main purpose of the meeting, as far as many of those present was concerned, was not in fact broken windows, or the state of Khayelitsha schools, but rather an interrogation of the credentials, integrity, and methods of Equal Education.

Mr Caroline gave EE a chance to introduce its work, and asked a number of initial questions. In response to these questions EE gave an overview of its work, its interest in working with the WCED, and its interactions with Khayelitsha community organisations.

The following officials were present at this meeting: Mr. Melvyn Caroline (District Director), Ms. Joyce West, Ms. Pauline Oliver (Circuit Manager), Ms. Verna Stuurman (Circuit Manager), Mr. Eric Magadla (Circuit Manager), Ms. Ntobiso Manziso (IMG Advisor), Mr. Robin Botes (Circuit Manager), Mr. Bennie Schereker.

Throughout the meeting Mr Robin Botes cast aspersions on the members of EE and sought to undermine credibility of the organisation. Botes was mildly aggressive and confrontational. He made accusations that EE members were dishonest and had misled learners and teachers into supporting the organisation. Mr Caroline intervened to point out that there seemed to be some miscommunication between Botes and EE, and advised better communication with EE in future.

We would like to use this opportunity place on record some of Botes' claims and the facts. Botes claimed that various principals in Khayelitsha had either never heard of, or did not support Equal Education. We can only surmise that pressure was placed on these principals by Mr Botes to say certain things, because we enjoyed good working relationships with all the ones he mentioned. Botes claimed that Robin April, acting principal at Luhlaza, denied having signed the Equal Education petition. This was false. We have since faxed the WCED a copy of the page signed by Robin April. Botes claimed that the signatures collected by Equal Education for its petition for broken windows are mostly private individuals and not students. That is completely false. Eighty percent of the signatories are Khayelitsha high school students. A few significant individuals also signed the petition. These include: Director General of Education Duncan Hindle, Dr Mamphela Ramphele, Mrs Noel Robb, and Judge Dennis Davis. Botes also claimed that learners Pathiswa Shushwana (Luhlaza) and Lwando Mzandisi (Kwamfundo) denied writing the newspaper article of the Cape Times article of Wednesday October 8th 2008. This is another ridiculous claim. Both learners are proud to have written the article and have said so to anyone who has asked.

It appears that Botes continues to tell school principals and SGB chairpersons in Khayelitsha that Equal Education has a hidden agenda. Equal Education has only one agenda, to improve the quality of schools, and to ensure that all schools are equal, with excellent facilities and education. We want to work with government, principals, school governing bodies, parents, learners and teachers in order to achieve this.

The above attacks on EE follow on from Botes' efforts to scupper the gathering held on 10 October 2008. Before the public gathering on 10 October Botes made efforts to pressure principals to stop working with EE or to block learners from attending the gathering. We were informed that a meeting was called for this purpose the day before the gathering.

Perhaps even more disturbing is that more recently Mr Bennie Schrecker, another official at EMDC East, has visited Luhlaza High School looking for Phathiswa Shushwana, the grade 8 learner who wrote the 8 October article in Cape Times. This occurred during the week of 3 November. She was not at school that day, but Zukiswa Vuka, a grade 12 learner, and EE spokesperson was instead questioned by Mr Schrecker. This occurred in a closed office. Zukiswa wrote a four page hand-written letter to the MEC about this incident in which she said he made her feel "sad and humiliated".

The current position

EE arranged a public meeting at Desmond Tutu Hall in Makhaza, Khayelitsha. This was held on 13 November 2008, and was attended by over 200 members of the community. MEC Gabru and education department officials came to that meeting. We would like to thank all those officials who attended the meeting. Equal Education appreciates their taking the time to listen to the concerns of learners and parents in Khayelitsha. The MEC and Mr Achie Lewis, Chief Director:

Institutional, Specialised & Operational Support, announced that the windows would be fixed and that R671,000 would be invested in the school. This is great achievement by everyone who was a part of this campaign!

On 14 November Equal Education wrote to Mr Achie Lewis asking for a breakdown of how the money will be spent, when it will be spent, and asking to be involved in meetings relating to the spending of this money. To date, no reply has been received.

Equal Education appreciates the time and effort invested into this issue by various members of the WCED. Equal Education seeks only a productive relationship with organs of government concerned with education. We believe that the Department is serious about addressing the situation at Luhlaza and we take in good faith the assurances given by the Department. We are pleased that our engagement with the Department will have a positive outcome for our members. We believe however that the Standing Committee can assist Equal Education in monitoring the implementation of the decisions taken to ensure that Luhlaza benefits fully and the project is a success for all concerned, including the Department.