

MINISTRY IN THE PRESIDENCY
FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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FOR WOMEN, YOUTH AND PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES
RECREATION AID FOUNDATION (RAF) GRADUATION
CEREMONY

“Celebrating Achievement, Ability and Inclusion”

Greetings, Appreciation and Introduction

The Leadership of the Recreation Foundation, Distinguished faculty and support staff; families and friends gathered here to celebrate with your loved ones; and the **Graduating Class of 2026**, Good Morning! I am deeply grateful, and honoured, by the opportunity to share this special day with you.

Graduation ceremonies mark a significant milestone in one's educational journey, a **culmination of hard work, and of sacrifice**

, endured as much by the student as by the families, the friends, and the many hands that held yours throughout this journey. And so, I congratulate all the uncles, the aunties, the neighbours, and the entire communities who made up the **visible and invisible efforts** of the village of support that carried each of you to this stage.

Having said that, I now wish to turn my attention to the **Graduating Class of 2026** itself — and to invite a deserving round of applause. **You have stayed the course.** President Nelson Mandela had your generation, and its potential, in mind when he said:

“Education is the great engine of personal development. It is through education that the daughter of a peasant can become a doctor; that the son of a mine worker can become the head of the mine; that a child of farm workers can become the president of a great nation.”

On behalf of the **Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities**, I wish to commend the entire leadership of the **Recreation Aid Foundation (RAF)** for your dedication to addressing the educational and social challenges faced by academically disadvantaged individuals, and by **learners with**

Special Educational Needs (LSEN). Please be assured that your efforts have our full support, and our undivided attention.

The Importance of Inclusive Education

Programme Director, I wish to also commend RAF for correctly problematising **inclusive education as a pillar of a disability-inclusive society**. When we speak of “*Celebrating Achievement, Ability and Inclusion*,” we must indeed begin by reiterating that **the greatest barriers faced by learners with disabilities in South Africa do not reside in their bodies or their minds — they reside in the environments we create for them**. The obstacle is not the learner’s difference. It is the **exclusionary design of our schools, our systems, our curricula, and — more often than not — our attitudes**.

We are therefore completely aligned with RAF’s aim “to support people with special needs through academic and vocational training programmes for unemployed youth and academically disadvantaged individuals, equipping them with practical, market-relevant skills that improve their employability and reduce poverty-driven dependency.”

In our townships, rural areas, and in our farming communities , systemic barriers are magnified across our special schools. Too

many of our schools still operate in buildings never designed with accessibility in mind: **classrooms without ramps, corridors too narrow for a wheelchair, toilets that cannot be used by a child with mobility needs**. These physical impediments are not neutral. They actively exclude. If a learner cannot enter a classroom with dignity, the conversation about inclusive education has already failed before the lesson begins.

Infrastructure, however, is only one layer of the barriers we must collectively overcome, both as public and private sector partners. Resources — especially **assistive devices** — remain a critical fault line. Without these tools, the constitutionally enshrined right to education for all remains far from fulfilled.

Despite pockets of excellence, our challenges are also compounded by the fact that many teachers have never been adequately prepared for inclusive classrooms. This is not a personal failing of educators themselves. **Our teacher training and professional development pipeline itself requires reinforcement.**

Beyond infrastructure and resources, perhaps the most enduring barrier to inclusive educational journeys is **attitudinal**. The stigma

on disability that thrives in our communities remains deeply embedded in our schooling system and our communities of practice. In several educational institutions, learners with disabilities are still perceived as “*problems*” or as “*extra work*.” I have said it before, and I wish to repeat it here today: **inclusive education cannot be built on a foundation of pity, or of tolerance. It must be built on respect, on expectation, and on a genuine sense of belonging.**

We are not short of policies — it is implementation that continues to falter. **Our White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities** is lauded on multilateral platforms. To this end, we are steadfast in calling for public and private sector targeted investment, monitoring, and change of attitude, in order to make the vision in our White Paper a reality.

The Road Ahead

Going forward, I wish to put forward **four principles** that must guide our journey to a truly inclusive education system — and, by extension, to a truly inclusive society.

First, we need to **transform special schools into resource and support hubs for the entire education ecosystem**. In developed nations, special schools are not hidden away on the margins —

they are regional anchors of a disability inclusive society. They provide outreach services, adaptive curriculum resources, and specialists who travel to mainstream schools to support teachers and learners. By resourcing special schools to act as **knowledge exporters — rather than silos** — we multiply their impact across entire districts, especially those that are lagging behind.

Second, we need investment sufficient to **embed multi-disciplinary support teams within special schools**. In Canada, for example, leading inclusive schools host multi-disciplinary teams on-site: **occupational therapists, speech-language pathologists, psychologists, and assistive technology specialists** — all working together with teachers. In our context, too many learners wait years for a single therapy session, because services are scattered and overstretched.

And third, I am hoping that initiatives such as RAF can also help us **re-imagine inclusive transition pathways for learners into post-schooling opportunities**. Here at home, too many South African learners with disabilities leave school only to face unemployment and isolation. By making **transition planning part of the special school's core mandate** — linked to local TVET colleges, community projects, and emerging industries — we can

ensure that learners exit with pathways into **work, further study, or entrepreneurship.**

Our Government's Attitude and Legislative Instruments Towards Disability Inclusion

Dear colleagues, for South Africa — and for this government — disability inclusion has been, and continues to be, a constitutional imperative. Disability inclusion is at the heart of the supreme law of the land, which guarantees equal rights and prohibits discrimination based on disability.

We did not simply ratify the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities with no reservations. We domesticated the Convention through the Cabinet-approved White Paper on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities. We further ratified the Continental African Disability Protocol as championed by the African Union.

Our **National Development Plan (Vision 2030)** recognises that *“disability and poverty operate in a vicious circle”* that must be deliberately disrupted. **Nothing must be left to chance.**

The Plan establishes progressive disability equity targets, based on the principle that persons with disabilities constitute **approximately 12.34% of South Africa's population.** With

regard to employment equity targets: by 2030, **a minimum of 10% of all employment opportunities must be ring-fenced for persons with disabilities**. Similarly, work is underway to ensure that a **minimum of 7% of skills development opportunities** are set aside for persons with disabilities.

Catalytic Projects and Areas of Partnership Between the DWYPD and RAF

There are several initiatives on which we need to partner immediately.

First, the **National Skills Fund (NSF) Disability Support Fund**. In 2024, the **Department of Higher Education's National Skills Fund** launched a **R1 billion Disability Support Fund** aimed at providing specialised workplace training, capacity building, procurement support, and enterprise development for persons living with disabilities. The aim is to enhance employment prospects and to promote economic inclusion among persons with disabilities. This is a funded programme — but its success will rely on our government collaborating with experts in the field of disability inclusion. I will therefore be extending an urgent invitation to the leadership of RAF to participate in this initiative, and I will be reaching out to my colleague, the Minister of Higher Education, so

that we can work together to support what is happening here at RAF.

Second, **Pairing Special Schools with State-Owned Enterprises and CSI Budgets**. One of my passion projects is a legacy initiative that seeks to pair every special school in South Africa with a State-Owned Enterprise capable of supporting both the educational and the infrastructural needs of our schools. As part of this effort, we hope to bring together the CEOs of State-Owned Enterprises, the Sector Education and Training Authorities (SETAs), and industry associations, to commit a percentage of their Corporate Social Investment (CSI) budgets towards turning around the state of our special schools, and improving the prospects of youth living with disabilities. Let us work together to make this project a reality.

Third, **the Circular on Meeting the NDP Employment Equity Targets**. This financial year, when it comes to meeting the employment equity targets for persons with disabilities, we are leaving nothing to chance. Working closely with the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA), our Disability Unit has developed a circular to ensure that the 10% target is achieved. However, we cannot achieve this goal alone. We need RAF, and

other sister organisations, to compile a credible database of persons with disabilities from which departments can readily recruit to meet the minimum target.

And fourth, **the Disability Inclusion Research, Advocacy and Mainstreaming Centre of Excellence — the Nerve Centre**. We have developed an investment case for this Centre as a legacy project of South Africa's Chairship of the G20 Empowerment of Women Working Group. Beyond research and advocacy, the Nerve Centre will support special schools across South Africa to train teachers, address the digital divide, and improve educational outcomes for learners with disabilities — developing a model disability-inclusive classroom, and a model disability-inclusive school, for our country.

Once again, to the **Graduating Class of 2026 — congratulations**. Your achievement today is not only your own. It is the achievement of your families, your teachers, and your communities — and of every South African who believes that our society is stronger when every one of its members is included, respected, and equipped to lead. **I thank you.**