**Address at the National Teacher Awards Ceremony**

PRETORIA, 26 OCTOBER 2000.

Minister of Education, Professor Kader Asmal,
Cabinet Ministers,
Distinguished Educators and Teachers,
Ladies and Gentlemen.

I would like to thank you most sincerely for giving me the opportunity to participate in this event tonight, to recognise educator excellence and celebrate the achievements of our teachers - men and women in whose hands we have placed the future of our children and of our country.

The common criteria and specified roles that inform the selection of the recipients of the national teacher awards, are important characteristics of the kind of educator our country needs in the on-going process of the reconstruction and development of our society.

As a country that is experiencing a transformation whose scope and scale is not only comprehensive but complex, we are in desperate need of teachers that have a commitment to excellence, who are inspiring to both their colleagues and learners and who constantly seek ways and means of improving the education of all our people.

These are people who flourish in their vocations as educators, work with passion and use the advantage of their education to contribute to the development of our communities and our country.

These are teachers who are defined by values such as hard work, respect for children and women, voluntarism and an insatiable appetite for knowledge and the utilisation of such knowledge to nurture our children and transform our society.

These teachers, whose achievements we are celebrating tonight, should surely inspire all of us to follow their good example, so that we are also able to make our schools exciting places of learning, which children and adults recognise as centres that are central to their intellectual and general human development.

This ceremony is part of a wider effort to bring about this new educator, a new cadre in the service of our society.

Although, the National Teacher Awards cannot, by themselves, create teachers who promote values such as I have mentioned, they do, however, affirm the need for an on-going encouragement of our teachers to make extra efforts to improve the standard of our education.

While we recognise individual teachers for the contribution they have made to improve the quality of education, we would like, at the same time, to stress the importance of collective work and mutual assistance, amongst teachers, in ensuring that our schools succeed and the entire education system is effective.

In addition, the more the teachers and the learners work together and are engaged in consistent and constructive education programmes, the better the prospects of improved and quality education results.

Clearly, we will have to work hard at improving schools' discipline and ensure that both learners and teachers behave, at all times, in an exemplary manner, with the teachers giving the necessary leadership to learners and the community at large.

In this regard, I would like to encourage the Ministry and the Department of Education to consolidate and intensify the important work of bringing about effective governance, administration, implementation and monitoring at all levels of the education system.

I am happy that the Minister has drawn attention to the called for an urgent need for a higher degree of commitment and professionalism on this important matter in the Third Report on the Provinces to the President.

Simultaneously, we must increase our efforts of making all our schools safe and ensure that they are free of crime and violence so that teachers can teach and learners learn in an atmosphere of peace and tranquillity.

To achieve this objective we have to strengthen the links between our schools and the communities that we serve, in such a way that members of these communities see it as their responsibility to make schools safe and peaceful. This is in addition to the further measures that the police must take to secure schools and learning institutions.

We have to work together to defeat and uproot the criminal incidents whereby teachers and learners are attacked and even killed, either by other teachers and learners or by outsiders, leaving an indelible trauma on families many people in our communities.

That is the reason why our schools need to work closely with the communities they serve so that the criminals have nowhere to hide.

Furthermore, it is important that all of us see ourselves as act as partners in the struggle to reaffirm the inalienable right of our children to quality education.

I think we will agree that it is about time that we put the education of our children above any individual or subjective interests, however legitimate we may think these interests are.

This challenge is particularly pertinent to those of us who work in the townships and rural areas, where the legacy of the repugnant system of apartheid education poses additional obligations on all of us to adopt extra-ordinary measures to bring about permanent normality and effective service delivery.

Chairperson,

Although we have made a lot of progress in addressing the many challenges in education, there are still many tasks facing us.

One of these challenges is the way in which as teachers, we can contribute to the overall development of young people. I am informed that there are many schools, particularly in black areas, that do not engage in important aspects of education such as debating sessions as well as sporting activities.

I do not believe that we can fully develop these young people and prepare them for the future if we fail to equip them with these important skills.

Without bringing party politics to schools, we need to make young people conscious of the developments that are shaping their lives, such as the communication and information technology, the important process of the transformation of our society and the centrality of knowledge in the rebirth of our country and continent.

Young people should themselves discuss these issues and be able to locate their education within the totality of these issues. The department could play a central role in assisting schools to engage in these activities.

As far as sport is concerned, we could enlist the support of the private sector as well as the many community members who I am confident will be willing to participate.

In conclusion, I would like to congratulate all the recipients of the national teacher awards. I trust that you will continue with your good work, and that we will all draw inspiration from your achievements.

Through this initiative we are sending a message that in the work that we are doing, we cannot be satisfied with an attitude that seems to suggest that we are happy to do as little work as possible. We are saying that we cannot leave an impression that mediocrity is acceptable in the field of education.

These awards are saying to all of us that it is important to have good teachers who strive for excellence and professionalism. The awards demonstrate the importance of those who go that extra mile for the benefit of the learners and the rest of our communities.

To the Minister and deputy Minister and everyone in the Department, the teachers and learners who have made it possible for these awards to happen, I would like to thank you for your efforts.

I thank you.