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# NDEBELE ARTIST GOGO ESTHER MNGUNI SETS A WORLD RECORD AT THE LEONARDO

*Gogo Esther Mnguni's Superga 2750 Classic sneaker painting sets world record*

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# Mhluzi unites in prayer against violence and abuse

● UNITY NDHLOVU

**MHLUZI** — The Mhluzi community came together for a prayer rally to address rising violence, school-area incidents, road accidents, missing persons, drug abuse and gender-based violence on 29 January 2026.

The walk, organised by Delisile Ncongwane, started at LD Moetanaloo, passed through Kukhamba and BP Garage (4-Way) and ended at Mhluzi Mall. It brought together residents, church leaders, teachers and law enforcement to pray for protection, justice and hope in the community.

The route was chosen because some of the most heartbreaking incidents occurred along the path. Its central location also allows residents, churches and law enforcement to join the prayer walk at various points.

The timing of the rally reflects the urgency of ongoing concerns in the community, including school area violence, road accidents, missing persons, drug abuse and gender-based violence.

The rally was guided by scripture from 2 Chronicles 7:14: "If my people, which are called by my name, shall humble themselves, and pray, and seek my face, and turn from their wicked ways; then will I hear from heaven, and will forgive their sin, and will heal their land." Apostle Nethonooda from Mhluzi said prayer addresses spiritual challenges, which sometimes cannot be measured immediately.

He said the prayer rally also focused on leaders and existing systems, particularly in schools. He explained that participants prayed for wisdom and effective leadership, calling for improvements in school systems to help restore discipline and reduce incidents.

"We are praying for restoration because many families are dysfunctional. Once families are restored, even children will be safe, once families are destroyed, the community will always be divided," said Apostle Nethonooda.

One of the most noticeable changes after prayer is a shift in people's attitudes. When individuals gather to pray, it often signifies that they have exhausted all other options and are now turning fully to God.

Community member Siphon Khoza said the rally was necessary. "There are a lot of bad things happening in Middelburg and surrounding areas and the prayer will make a difference and restore the hearts of people who lost family members in school violence, road accidents, drug abuse and gender based violence," he said.

"Although the gathering was Christian-led it was open to everyone who desires peace, safety and justice," said Ncongwane.



Middelburg Mhluzi Mall, the ending point

## A bowl of hope is changing the lives of people battling addiction in Phola

● MATHABATHA MAILA

**PHOLA** — A small effective project in the centre of Phola is changing the way communities react to drug abuse. A local nonprofit organisation called Phola Family Integrated Research, has adopted a comprehensive strategy to help those from underprivileged backgrounds, especially those who are battling addiction. For addicts who frequently go days without eating, the team makes soft porridge three days a week on Monday, Wednesday and Friday.

Johannes Mtshweni, a 43-year-old ex-addict and former IT lecturer, started the programme. Johannes has now been clean for six years after being in substance abuse for 16 years. He launched this project as a result of his recovery process. "I realised how crucial it is to have someone who understands you," he said. "I am aware of the suffering these people endure. I am aware of their difficulties. To get you into the light, sometimes you need someone who has experienced the same darkness as you."

The organisation registers at least 17 new people every week and serves about 37 people on each cooking day. Proving how many community members need help. With support from local sponsors like MP Rise, Shabonga Cleaning Services, Phola Taxi Association, SoGutjhe Royal House, and Man of Truth, the organisation continues to provide food, care and hope.

The organisation emphasises that dealing with addiction requires empathy, support and access to trustworthy information. The porridge programme has become a safe space for people who frequently feel stigmatised and condemned by society.

According to Mtshweni, the nutrition initiative serves as a platform for education as well. "We are educating people about HIV and AIDS, particularly those who use needles (Bluetooth) or inject drugs. These are risky behaviours that put users at risk for severe infections. It is our responsibility to supply both food and information."

Bonga Nkosi, a heroin user whose life illustrates the severe effects of addiction, is one of the daily beneficiaries. "I don't have anything to eat at home, so I am thankful for the Phola Mdogo nutrition programme," he said. "I work as a car washer to supplement my income." I can earn R400 on a good day, but I need R190 for heroin. It governs my life."

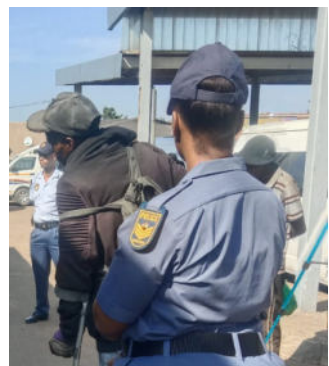
Nkosi, who was diagnosed with asthma in December 2025, says that his addiction has made it harder for him to maintain his health. "I only smoked twice while I was in the hospital because I was unsure of my release date. I'd like to stop, but I can't, I feel as though my addiction is a part of me."

Addiction has a profound effect on families. Sibongile Mpukane, whose brother Skhumbuzo suffers from substance abuse, talked about the psychological toll and the pain. "We have suffered greatly because of my brother's actions. He sells everything from blankets to pots to maize meals. We have made every effort to assist him. We don't know who he has become, so at this point we feel hopeless."

Traditional leadership in the area has taken action to recognise the crisis. Ndabezitha Siphon Mahlangu of SoGutjhe Royal House voiced concern for the youth. "These young people are our children. It is our duty to help them return to their former selves before drugs took over their lives," he said.



Founder Johannes Mtshweni



"the path of the righteous winds upwards to flee from hell beneath us" Prov 15:24



## Urgent Versus Important

By Pastor Chuck Swindoll

*Let the message about Christ, in all its richness, fill your lives. Teach and counsel each other with all the wisdom he gives. Sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs to God with thankful hearts. And whatever you do or say, do it as a representative of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through him to God the Father. (Colossians 3:16-17)*

The conflict between the urgent and the important is inescapable. How easy it is to get the two confused! It is common for us to think that by staying busy and working hard we're dealing with the important things. But that is not necessarily the case. Those things most urgent rarely represent the things most important. And therein lies the reason so many people today feel such a lack of satisfaction after working so hard and for so many hours each day.

Not only is that frustration true in the world in which we live, it is all the more true in the church we attend. When we substitute the urgent for the important in the church of Jesus Christ, we emphasize work, activity, involvement, doing, producing, impressing, and accomplishing. But it leaves us feeling flat and empty. Exhaustion replaces

satisfaction. Furthermore, it smacks of the secularized world in which we work. Who knows how many people have been turned away from Christianity, longing for the true, living God but encountering at their church a secularized substitute?

Perhaps this helps explain why so many activities in so many churches distract from the one essential ingredient that makes a church unique in this postmodern society: worship. When we look at life with a horizontal perspective, the urgent takes center stage. It is loud. It is popular. It is product-oriented. The horizontal highlights all things human . . . like human achievement, human importance, human logic, human significance, human opinion, human efficiency, human results. It demands our time and attention. As that ever-present tyranny screams at us, the most natural reaction is to yield, giving it our first priority. After all, it's urgent! We're very familiar with its voice. The important things, however, are different. They are quiet and deep. They are vertical in their perspective. They highlight the things of God—God's Word, God's will, God's plan, God's people, God's way, God's reason for living, God's glory, and God's honor. And the goal of all these? God's worship.

The underlying objective of a church committed to the important things—rather than the urgent—is the cultivation of a body of worshipers whose sole focus is on the Lord our God.

The Principle of Priority:

# URGENT vs. IMPORTANT

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# Ndebele artist Gogo Esther Mnguni's Superga 2750 Classic sneaker painting sets world record at The Leonardo

● NELISIWE SKHOSANA

**SANDTON** — Ndebele artist Esther Mnguni (84) made history on 27 January 2026 when she became the first artist in the world to paint IsiNdebele art at the top of Sub-Saharan Africa's tallest building: The Leonardo in Sandton, Gauteng.

With the city stretched beneath her and the sun lighting up the glass walls, Mnguni transformed a pair of Italian Superga 2750 Classic white sneakers, recently commemorating their 100-year anniversary, into a masterpiece.

Using her signature chicken-feather brush dipped in paint, she worked with calm confidence, bringing bold black outlines to life and filling them with striking shades of green, yellow, red and blue.

The atmosphere at the top of The Leonardo (234 meters high) was relaxed yet electric. Onlookers gathered quietly, eyes fixed on every stroke, hooked by the delicate precision of her work.

Despite the attention, Gogo Mnguni remained composed, engaging warmly with people while continuing her masterpiece. The final result was so flawless and detailed that many

struggled to believe it was hand-painted.

Visibly moved by the support, Mnguni paused to express her gratitude. "I get encouraged when people support me like this. It motivates me as a Ndebele to do more with my talent," she said. When the final touches were completed, the room erupted into cheerful applause. The customised sneaker stood as a symbol of cultural pride, creativity and excellence with no corrections needed, only admiration.

Mnguni's brand manager, Prince Menzi Mthethwa, said the customised pair will be taken back to Mnguni's home region in Dr. JS Moroka Municipality for a community exhibition. "We want to show young people that you can be cool with your culture. You can take over the world with your culture. Gogo shows us that you can stay who you are and still conquer the world," he said.

The project now aims to become the most viewed artwork in 2026, targeting an ambitious 15 million

visitors, which will be achieved through a tour to eight countries all over the world. Mthethwa added that they want to connect with young people and allow the artwork to travel the world, while the use of a chicken feather brush preserves traditional Ndebele techniques.

The artistic celebration continued at the ground floor art space, another powerful canvas artwork, "The Leonardo Building" was unveiled by Nigerian artist Taiwo Ohu, in collaboration with Esther Mnguni. The artwork reflects a contemporary dialogue on how modern structures mirror culture and heritage within society. "I'm trying to put South Africa on the map through art," Ohu said.

"This artwork represents the first Ndzundza and Manala art of its kind," said Mnguni. "In the old days, IsiNdebele designs were done using mud. As time went on, we started using water-based paints. Even though the materials have changed, the culture remains the same. We are preserving our heritage while moving with the times."



Esther Mnguni above the skyline of Sandton, 234 metres high in the air on the 56th floor of The Leonardo, the tallest building in Sub-Saharan Africa. PICTURE: Nelisiwe Skhosana



Betty showing support to her mother, Esther Mnguni while she was painting a masterpiece



Displayed pair of Superga 2750 after it was painted by Ndebele artist Gogo Esther Mnguni

# Court rulings spark taxi route conflict between MDTA and NDTA

● LUCAS SHONGWE

**MIDDELBURG** — Tensions between the Middelburg and District Taxi Association (MDTA) and the Nasaret and District Taxi Association (NDTA) flared on Monday, 19 January 2026, when members of the rival associations confronted one another over disputed taxi routes connecting Rockdale and Extension 24.

This has reignited a long-running legal battle over operating rights. Both associations claim exclusive rights to operate on the contested routes, citing separate court orders and operating licenses that appear to contradict one another.

The confrontation, which involved the presence of armed private security personnel, did not escalate into violence. However, the incident left commuters shaken and concerned about their safety.

"I am not at ease because we have seen in the past this kind of confrontation did not end well," said community member Letty Skosana. "I am worried, should it continue, about our safety as commuters and how we will manage to get to work on time."

The MDTA did not intend to provoke violence but to follow through on the routes authorised by a recent court ruling. "Unfortunately, our operations were stopped by NDTA members who claimed to have a court order that prohibits us from operating in the area," said MDTA Chairperson Japhta Mtsweni.

In November 2025, the MDTA secured a court ruling that prevented the NDTA from blocking its members' access to those routes. The order was issued by the Mpumalanga High Court. It is a provisional order giving the NDTA until 13 August 2026 to show cause why it shouldn't be made permanent.

The dispute is further complicated by a 2015 Pretoria High Court order that barred the MDTA from operating on the same routes. That ruling also prohibited any form of intimidation, assault, harassment, threats, or violence against NDTA's employees, members, drivers and passengers.

The order stated that there should be "no interference, blockage, or prevention of any members or drivers of the applicant (NDTA) from operating on the routes, as per the lawfully issued taxi permits of the applicant."

The order further directed the SAPS to

arrest any MDTA members, including SANTACO's provincial chairperson Fanyana Sibanyoni and members of the provincial management committee and the Enkangala Regional Taxi Council, should they act in defiance of the ruling.

### MDTA version of events

Mtsweni said the MDTA became involved in the area in 2015 after being approached by the local municipality when the NDTA was experiencing tensions with the Rockdale and Extension 24 communities. "Our operational license permits us to operate within a 50-kilometer radius, allowing us to serve areas such as KwaZamokuhle and Hendrina via the N11," he said.

He added that while the MDTA was operating in the area, a dispute arose that required intervention by the Steve Tshwete Municipality, the then MEC of Public Works, Roads and Transport (DPWRT), as well as representatives from the office of the registrar, the South African National Taxi Council (SANTACO) and the National Taxi Alliance (NTA).

According to Mtsweni, discussions were later held to merge the two associations, but these talks were halted after a court order was issued preventing further engagement.

"We carried on with our operations until 2020, when another court ruling halted our activities in Rockdale and Extension 24," Mtsweni said. "We took a legal route to challenge that decision, and a new ruling came down on 20 May 2025. What's noteworthy is that the NDTA didn't contest this latest order until it was finalised on 21 November 2025, which restored our right to operate on those routes."

Mtsweni also expressed frustration with the NDTA, accusing it of refusing to engage with the MDTA despite the latest ruling.

### NDTA version of events

NDTA chairperson Themba Mncina said that the MDTA entered the area following rising tensions between the NDTA and

the Rockdale and Extension 24 communities, stemming from claims that local taxi operators were being excluded from NDTA membership.

"What started as a simple miscommunication quickly turned into violent protests. In the midst of the ongoing strike, the community sought help from the Middelburg United Long Distance Taxi Association (MULDITA) for commuter transport. However, the local authorities opted to involve the MDTA instead of MULDITA, reasoning that the long-distance association had no authority in the area," he elaborated.

Mncina said the arrangement was intended to be temporary until the dispute was resolved, but the MDTA refused to withdraw once tensions subsided. "This forced us to seek a court order to prevent the MDTA from operating on those routes, thereby protecting our members and drivers from any potential threats or disruptions," he said.

Mncina pointed out that the MDTA blatantly disregarded the court order, which only intensified the conflict and ultimately led to violent confrontations and loss of a life. In August 2021, a taxi driver was fatally shot near Hlalamnandi following a protest in which the N11 was blocked. In April 2021, three people were shot during clashes between the two associations, while two taxis were torched and 28 others damaged. Following the incidents, then MEC for Public Works, Roads, and Transport Mohita Latchminarain, suspended the operating licenses and permits of the two associations after mediation efforts failed. The suspension temporarily barred both groups from operating on the disputed routes.

While the MDTA maintains firmly that its court order supersedes that of NDTA, the NDTA insists that their ruling is permanent and needs to be upheld.

To clarify this confusing situation, we reached out to legal expert Jonas "JB" Sibanyoni for his insights on both court orders. "Actually, these two court orders can coexist, as they address distinct situations. The first order prohibits MDTA from harassing or intimidating NDTA members, while the second allows MDTA to continue using the routes

without obstruction. There's really no conflict between them," Sibanyoni explained.

Steve Tshwete Municipality held an urgent meeting on Thursday, 29 January 2026, led by MMC for Public Safety Joseph Ngobeni, bringing together both associations and their legal representatives.

Ngobeni said the municipality was concerned about public safety amid the dispute over conflicting court orders. "Our aim isn't to interfere with your operations or favour one side over the other. However, we are genuinely worried about public safety. If this dispute persists, it could jeopardise the lives of many," he said.

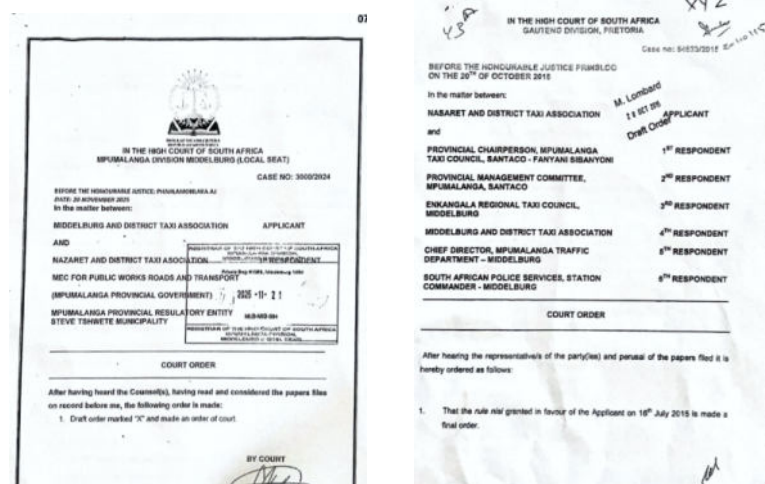
Both attorneys for associations, preferred not to be named shared their interpretations of the court rulings. NDTA's attorney asserted that the court order is valid and permanent, making it impossible to comply with

the MDTA's decree without violating the existing ruling. She further pointed out that instead of resolving the issue, MDTA sought a separate court order to oppose theirs.

She said MDTA should wait until the matter is finalised in court order on 13 August 2026.

On the other hand, MDTA's attorney pointed out that the two orders are indeed valid because they pertain to different routes. He said MDTA is authorised to operate between Middelburg town, Extension 24 and Rockdale, while NDTA order applies to Hlalamnandi and Nasaret.

The lawyer further asserted that MDTA's order is legitimate, protected, and enforceable. He expressed his intention to file for contempt of court if law enforcement fails to intervene when his client is hindered from operating.



Which court order should be implemented? Two taxi associations in Middelburg have court orders allowing them to operate routes, while simultaneously placing restrictions on the other



# Nkangala Mayoral Academic Awards celebrates top-performing learners

● SIMPHIWE JENNIFER MOTAU

**MACHADODORP** — The Emakhaseni Local Municipality hosted the District Mayoral Academic Awards on 23 January 2026 in Machadodorp (eNtokozweni) at Emakhaseni Boarding School.

Executive Mayor Nomhle Adelaide Mashele described the occasion as a great honour and privilege to welcome top-performing learners from across the district. This celebration culminated because Nkangala District increased its matric pass rate, sitting at 87,4%. This is the highest in three years.

District Director Douglas Maja said performance consistency in the final National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations reflected sustained effort from schools.

“It is through education and skills development that we can overcome unemployment,” Mashele said, encouraging learners to remain focused and grounded as they pursue higher education.

Maja applauded the Class of 2025 for their resilience, consistency and commitment to excellence, crediting principals, teachers, learners, circuit managers and subject advisers for the district's strong performance.

The district had set a target of a minimum 80% pass rate per school. However, 43 schools fell below the benchmark and will undergo accountability sessions, while four circuits will undergo intervention and monitoring. Despite challenges faced by some schools, Maja stressed that every school has teachers and that the district is committed to ensuring that each classroom has an educator.

“Conditions do not determine results. We have an obligation to educate the learners of our communities,” he said.

In terms of pass quality, the district achieved: 7,202 Bachelor passes, 5,230 Diploma passes and 2,467 Higher Certificate passes. Maja said the district aims to increase the number of Bachelor passes further to expand university access.

Nkangala District Executive Mayor Thomas Ngwenya described the Class of 2025 as a cohort that has secured its place in national academic history.

“Against formidable odds, this group has inscribed its name in the national record books. They contributed to a national pass rate of 88%, the highest ever recorded in the country,” he said. “Excellence must be sustained. Consistency is what distinguishes a good school from a great one.”

Fariha Carrim, a learner at Middelburg Muslim School (MMS), in the Steve Tshwete Circuit 2, was named best learner in Nkangala District for 2025. She has been accepted to study Medicine and Surgery at the University of the Witwatersrand and hopes to use her future skills to serve others.

Carrim said consistent effort and support from family and teachers contributed to her success. “I feel so excited, blessed and grateful to the Almighty,” she said. “I've always enjoyed seeing how my hard work paid off in previous years. I've learned that when I give my best, I see results. What motivated me particularly in matric was the desire to continue my studies further.” Carrim admitted that keeping

up with the syllabus was sometimes challenging, but she used extra learning resources, including YouTube lessons, to strengthen difficult subjects.

Her advice to other learners is simple but powerful: “Work hard, use multiple resources and learn from your mistakes. Someone else's study methods

might not work for you, so find your own rhythm and keep your goal in front of you. Hard work in the pursuit of academics is never wasted.”

**Middelburg Muslim School given an award for the best overall learner in the Nkangala District Municipality**  
PICTURE: SIMPHIWE JENNIFER MOTAU



Nkangala District 2025: One of the top-performing learners, Atiyya Carrim from Hoërskool Middelburg, with District Executive Mayor Thomas Ngwenya.  
PICTURE: Supplied

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# The Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund board needs young blood for its sustainability

● LUCAS SHONGWE

**MIDDELBURG** – Mtho Xulu, the President of the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SACCI), is advocating for the renewal of the Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund (PMBF) to ensure its ongoing sustainability.

His remarks were made during an event at Mphanama High School in Mhluzi on Saturday, 24 January 2026. The event aimed to motivate students from diverse backgrounds, especially those from low-income families, to consider applying for bursaries starting in Grade 10. Xulu highlighted the need to refresh the board, which currently comprises members aged over 60. “If we do not take steps now, this fund could become inactive, and we may one day look back and realise that there was once a fund available to our community,” he said.

PMBF founder, Siphon Mthombeni, also reiterated Xulu's sentiments, adding that the average age of the board now is 65. “We can't have a board of 65 and be a bursary board. We need 40-year-olds, 45-year-olds. Those are the age groups we want,” he said. “Paul Mthimunye, representing the Bursary Fund, is now quite old, as are the current board members. It is essential for younger individuals to join the board and continue the Fund's mission. I encourage everyone to invite our youth to take responsibility for future generations by participating on the board. This will ensure our resources are allocated appropriately. Achieving success is a collaborative effort; one cannot be successful in isolation.”

### 'I truly believe in its mission'

Xulu, recognised as a key supporter who connected the Fund with various companies, explained why he is supporting the Fund. “I'm not a beneficiary of the Fund. Luckily, I've found other avenues for support. However, I truly believe in its mission, which is why we stand behind it. When I think about the vital institutions we need to nurture and safeguard within our community, the Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund stands out as one of the most important.”

Founded in 2001, the PMBF has empowered countless underprivileged but academically deserving learners in the Steve Tshwete Municipality and Nkangala District by helping them with their educational pursuits.

They fund students who are pursuing Mathematics, Physical Sciences, Accounting, Engineering, Law, and other fields of study in demand in the labour market.

The Fund started funding tertiary students in 2005. Since its inception, the Fund has helped more than 200 high school learners and over 100 tertiary students to qualify in the following fields of study: Electrical Engineering, Chemical Engineering, Mechanical Engineering, BCom Accounting, B Actuarial Science, Information Technology, Internal Auditing, B Pharmacy, BSc Metallurgy, BSc Construction, Financial Information Systems, Medicine, and BSc Environmental Studies.

This initiative stemmed from a vision born out of the realisation that there was a lack of bursaries available for black students, particularly in towns like Middelburg. “Fuelled by a genuine passion to help, I felt compelled to create a bursary programme to bridge this gap,” said Mthombeni.

Mthombeni explained that he named the Fund after Mthimunye because he wanted a name that would resonate with everyone, and Paul Mthimunye was that name. “He was my principal and teacher during my high school years. It did not end there; he continued to play a significant role in enhancing education and uplifting the community. I established this bursary fund in appreciation of his contributions. I

gathered a group of individuals to assist, including some who have received recognition awards and others who have served on the board,” he said.

### The Fund continues to make a difference

In 2024, PMBF funded 23 university students and 185 high school learners. In 2025, they funded 27 university students and 211 high school learners in partnership with the private sector.

The Fund covers essential expenses such as tuition, accommodation, and meals for deserving students who gain admission to tertiary institutions but struggle financially.

Students keen on applying for bursaries in 2026 are urged to submit their applications to the Fund. The application period is set to open on 01 March 2026 and will close on 31 October 2026.

Phiwe Motau, a BCom in Financial Sciences graduate, says she was awarded a bursary in 2022 during her first year at the University of Pretoria. “Receiving the bursary significantly alleviated my financial pressures. The process was seamless from beginning to end. I am incredibly grateful to the Fund for affording me the chance to pursue my education. Without this support, I wouldn't be where I am today, as my family couldn't cover the university fees.”

Augustine Ekunife, now studying Artificial Intelligence, began benefiting from the Fund's support while he was in Grade 11 at Mphanama High School. “They covered my school fees all the way through to Grade 12 and are currently funding my university education as well.”

Mthombeni also urged previous recipients of the Fund to give back by making donations. “The initial intention was for those we supported to start contributing after approximately seven years of work. Unfortunately, this has not occurred,” he said. “We remain uncertain as to why this is the case. Perhaps there is a disconnect in understanding our core values, which emphasise mutual support. I sincerely hope that the young individuals we

assisted do not forget that we invested in them because we believed in their potential. It is our expectation that they, in turn, will believe in and support others striving to reach their current positions.”

### WHO IS PAUL MTHIMUNYE?

Paul Sonny Mthimunye was born on 16 August 1944 in Mhluzi Township, Middelburg, MP. He matriculated at St Francis' College, Mariannhill, in KwaZulu-Natal.

At school, he was Deputy Chief Prefect and Chairperson of the Debating Society.

He studied at the University of Zululand, where he obtained a BA degree and a University Education Diploma. He was elected President of the SRC in 1967. Through private study, he obtained a BA Honours degree (History) and a BED degree from UNISA. He started his teaching career at Sozama Secondary School, Middelburg, in 1969.

### Positions Mr Paul Mthimunye held in education:

- Principal, Sozama Secondary School
- Inspector of Schools (Psychological Services)
- Assistant Director: Middelburg East Circuit
- Area Manager: Middelburg Area Office
- Director: Provision of Education, Highveld Region
- Chief Director: Education Development Services, Mpumalanga Province

### Positions Mr Mthimunye held in the community and other institutions:

- Chairperson: Mhluzi Bursary Fund (a community initiative)
- Leader of the Mhluzi Community Delegation, a body which was instrumental in restoring peace and stability in Mhluzi during the rent boycott in 1991
- Leader of the Liaison Committee which laid the foundation for the smooth establishment of the Greater Middelburg TLC
- Currently serves on the Board of Directors of the Middelburg Care Village
- Served as a member of the South Ndebele Language Board
- Coordinator of the Masifunde Project, a project which was initiated by BHP Billiton to promote Maths, Science, and English in secondary schools



The President of the South African Chamber of Commerce and Industry (SACCI) has thrown his weight behind the Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund (PMBF), calling for the renewal of the Fund's board of directors. PICTURE: Lucas Shongwe



The patron of the Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund (PMBF), Paul Mthimunye, is pictured with PMBF founder, Siphon Mthombeni, after the motivational session with learners at Mphanama High School. PICTURE: Lucas Shongwe



Supporters and board members of the Paul Mthimunye Bursary Fund pose for a photo after receiving certificates of recognition from the Fund.

# Parents cry foul play as Mpumalanga Department of Education fails to place learners

● LUCAS SHONGWE

**MIDDELBURG** - The Department of Education officially closed its school application on 31 August 2025 for 2026's academic cycle. However, since schools reopened on 14 January 2026, parents in the Steve Tshwete municipality have visited the local circuit office seeking placement letters for their children, but many report receiving little or no assistance despite promises from the Mpumalanga Department of Education.

The number of unplaced learners in the province is just shy of 10,000, leaving many learners deprived of education, sitting at home, and parents having to compromise and leave work to queue for space.

Early Thursday morning, on 29 January, a group of parents gathered at the Middelburg circuit office, pressing the provincial education department to issue the placement letters their children urgently need.

Pinky Mahlangu's quest for a spot at the Hoër Tegnise Skool (HTS) for her child has not succeeded. She says she applied on time for grade 8, but faced rejection.

“When the school began accepting applications, I made sure to collect the forms, fill them out, and submit them well within the deadline. I was informed that I would be in the second round of applicants but then received an SMS notifying me of the rejection. When I visited the school, they told me they were at full capacity and directed me to the circuit,” she explained.

Similarly, Kefilwe Molefe applied to four local schools last year but was rejected by all due to lack of available spaces for grade R. “Every time I approached a different school, I was told to return to my circuit, but they said they were also full and recommended I contact the district instead,” she said. “I received their response after the application deadline had passed, that was during the last week of September 2025.”

Thabo Tshiane is seeking placement for a student relocating from Witbank, but he finds himself in a bind. “Once I

got the transfer, I rushed to the circuit to seek available spots in Mhluzi's schools. But, to my dismay, I was told to hold off until next Thursday. My frustration boils down to the fact that the learner is still out of school while classes are in full swing,” he said. “I understand it's late in the game, but this child shouldn't have to remain at home while others are attending school.”

Pinky Boshelo is searching for a place for her younger sister's child moving from Pretoria after her mother lost her job in December. “As the only sister able to help them out, this has thrown us all for a loop. The learner can't afford to miss out on school just because there isn't available space. We urgently need assistance,” she said.

A parent residing approximately 3 kilometers from a school raised concerns about the education department's admission preference policy, which prioritises applicants from feeder zones. “The school is supposed to admit students based on this order, yet I can't help but notice two buses filled with learners from Witbank passing by my house every morning and afternoon, while my son, living just a stone's throw away, is told there's no space for him. It's frustrating,” she shared.

During the launch of the Back-to-School programme in Bushbuckridge two weeks ago, MEC Lindi Masina said urban migration and rising applications from outside feeder zones have placed strain on schools. “There has also been a rise in applications from outside designated feeder zones, along with occasional instances where placement has been denied, even when vacancies are available.”

Masina added that all districts had completed admissions, except a few students still awaiting placement in rapidly growing areas like Mbombela, eMalahleni, Mashishing, Steve Tshwete, and Secunda.

When the *Highveld Chronicle* tried to find out how the department was addressing the issue of unplaced learners in the province, we were met with silence.



Frustrated parents gather almost everyday at the local circuit offices in Middelburg, Steve Tshwete municipality, to get placement letters for their children. PICTURE: Supplied



Schools send parents seeking space to the local circuit offices saying they have reached capacity. PICTURE: Lucas Shongwe

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nesithandathu. Umsebenzi wobukghwari ka-Mnguni bewufaka hlangana i-Superga 2750 Classic White ye-Italy, esanda ukugidinga iminyaka elikhulu yefa nesitayela. “Umgwalo lo ujamele ubukghwari bokuthoma bama-Ndzundza na-Manala,” kutjho u-Mnguni. “Ekadeni, imigwalo ye-IsiNdebele beyigwala ngedaka. Njengombana isikhathi sikhamba, sathoma ukusebenzisa amapende amamanzi. Nanyana izinto ezisetjenziswako sele zitjhuguluka, amasiko ahlala anjalo. Sigcina amagugu wethu sikhamba nesikhathi.”

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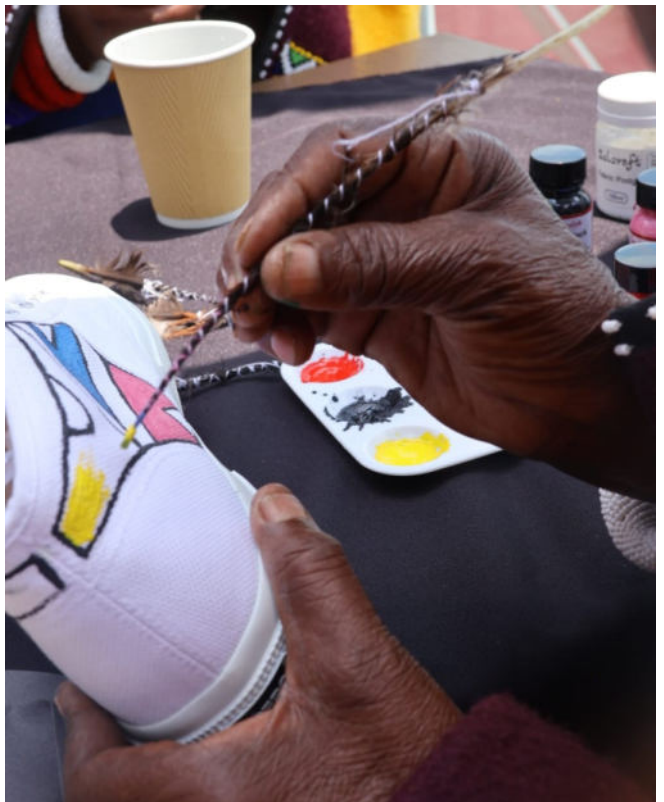
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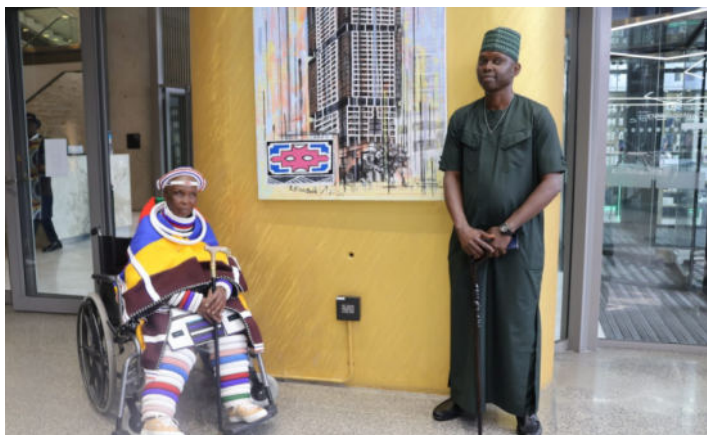
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# MP DARDLEA boosts Dr JS Moroka's flood affected farmers with R15-million worth combine harvester

● PRECIOUS MASHIANE

**LEFISO** — Flood-affected farmers in Dr JS Moroka Municipality received much-needed relief after Mpumalanga MEC for Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA), Khethiwe Moeketsi and Member of Mayoral Committee (MMC) for Safety, Moepe Mmutie Aaron, handed over a R15 million combine harvester.

This intervention follows the declaration of a National Disaster on 18 January 2026 after severe flooding and extreme weather damaged farms across parts of Mpumalanga and Limpopo. In Dr JS Moroka Municipality alone, more than 45 farmers were affected, losing crops and access to productive land.

The Dr JS Moroka grain project currently has 61 beneficiaries (52 males, 9 females) farming in Seabe, Lefiso, Lefiswane, Senotlelo Pankop, Troya, Mmamethlake, Marapyane and Vaalbank. They farm on a combined

2,018 hectares of arable land. Speaking on behalf of flood-affected farmers, Lebeza Aminah welcomed the support, saying the intervention would help restore hope and productivity following the recent floods.

“We are very happy that the MEC is here and that our cries didn't fall on deaf ears. After the floods hopelessness was all we had, asking each other how we'd come back from this, but with the help of the department we will pull through,” said Aminah.

The combine harvester will be shared among grain-producing farmers who were grouped by the department to encourage cooperative work and improve harvesting efficiency.

The department said an estimated R165 million is required to fully support approximately 600 farmers across the province who suffered losses of crops, livestock and infrastructure. While short-

term assistance such as seedlings and production inputs is currently being distributed, long-term infrastructure repairs, including farm buildings and electrical installations, will be implemented once additional disaster relief funding is secured.

Efforts are also underway to reopen access routes to farms that were washed away during the floods.

Following the handover, MEC Moeketsi conducted on-farm visits, delivering seeds, seedlings, compost, fertiliser and JoJo tanks to Moilathlala Primary Cooperative, Kgoteleng Primary Cooperative and the Diphofa Vegetable Project. Addressing the farmers, Moeketsi encouraged them to work collectively and take responsibility for maintaining the combine harvester to ensure sustainable food production.

She also urged other grain producers to register on the department's database to be considered for future assistance.



MEC for Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs (DARDLEA), Khethiwe Moeketsi, hands over seedlings to flood-affected local farmers.

## Heavy rains damaged crops, forcing KwaNdebele farmers to scale down

● NELISIWE SKHOSANA

**THEMBISILE HANI** — What was meant to be a season of growth and harvest has turned into a season of loss for farmers and farm workers, as persistent heavy rainfall between December 2025 and January 2026 disrupted agricultural production.

At Tweefontein D, local farmer Edward Nkosi is counting the cost after nearly one hectare of butternut crops, valued at approximately R15 000, was destroyed by flooding. The damage has forced him to cut production and reduce staff.

Nkosi, who farms on 20 hectares of land, said the season quickly shifted from hope to hardship. “The excessive rain has led to flooded fields, damaged crops, and disrupted planting and harvesting schedules. What was supposed to be a productive season turned into a financial setback,” he said.

He had planned to harvest butternut during the first week of January, but by the time harvesting began, most of the produce had already rotted. “We were ready to harvest, but when the time came, we found that we had lost almost everything. The few butternuts that survived were not good enough for the market,” Nkosi explained.

Unlike previous seasons where rainfall boosted crop growth, this year brought little benefit. “I did not see any improvement in crop growth. We actually made a loss compared to our previous harvest,” he said.

While crops such as spinach and beetroot managed to survive, the financial strain forced Nkosi to scale down operations and employment. “I won't be able to pay all my four employees after losing almost everything,” he said.

**Workers also paying the price**

Beyond the farm gates, the impact has been deeply personal for workers who depend on agriculture as their main source of income. Nkateko Mthombeni (21), an agricultural economics student and intern at Edward Agri Farm, was among those who lost their income due to the financial strain on the business.

For nine months, Mthombeni worked as an agricultural advisor, consultant and general farm worker, gaining practical experience while supporting her family. “Edward Agri was not just a workplace, it was my family. When I lost this job, I did not only lose my income, I lost people who supported me,” Mthombeni said.

As a student entering her third year of Agricultural Economics, the job played a crucial role in helping her cover transport and household needs. “My mother is a single parent and unemployed. This income helped me reduce the burden on her. I was able to contribute to groceries and basic needs. Now I have to return to school without income, and it has caused stress and tension at home,” she said.

Despite the emotional and financial setback, Mthombeni remains hopeful. “Tough times don't last. I pray that Edward Agri recovers and that we can be rehired. Agriculture is not just a job — it is where I am building my future,” she said.

Nkosi believes the challenges farmers face extend beyond individual businesses and affect the wider rural economy. “Farming employment is a big deal in rural areas. When farms do well, households benefit and local businesses grow. When farming suffers, the whole community feels it,” he said.

**Farmers must adopt climate-smart methods**

Further north in KwaMhlanga, ABM Farming Dreams founder Zaza Letsholo has also felt the impact of the persistent rainfall. Letsholo operates a mixed farming enterprise producing short-cycle vegetables including spinach, lettuce, Swiss chard, beetroot, baby marrow, cucumbers and herbs such as coriander, parsley and basil.

His farm supplies local markets within the municipality and employs three permanent workers, with additional seasonal labour during peak periods. Letsholo said excessive rainfall left the land too wet to prepare for

planting, causing serious production delays. “The soil was too saturated to work on. This disrupted planting schedules and reduced our overall output,” he said.

Letsholo estimates that the farm suffered financial losses ranging between R80 000 and R120 000 due to missed planting windows and reduced production. The situation was worsened by flooding along the R573 Moloto Road connecting KwaMhlanga to Cullinan, a key transport route for farming inputs and produce.

“When roads are damaged or flooded, deliveries are delayed, transport costs increase and market access becomes difficult. This affects our ability to compete and remain profitable,” Letsholo said.

Letsholo stressed that climate change is no longer a distant threat. “Climate change is happening now. Farmers must adopt climate-smart methods such as protected agriculture and improved infrastructure if we want to remain sustainable,” he said.

Despite the challenges facing the sector, both Nkosi and Letsholo remain determined to continue farming.

In response to the affected farmers, the Mpumalanga Department of Agriculture, Rural Development, Land and Environmental Affairs said it will need more than R165 million to support about 600 farmers impacted by floods across the province.

MEC Khethiwe Moeketsi said, “We will be visiting all districts in Mpumalanga to assess the extent of the damage on farms. Our department will provide fertilisers and seeds, and we will also assist in repairing damaged access roads near farms to ensure that farmers can resume production.”



Rotten butternut at Edward Agri Farm

## Stop flushing wet wipes and sanitary pads, you are destroying our infrastructure

● ZINHLE MASILELA

**EMALAHLENI** — The Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) has urged communities, civil society and local stakeholders to protect rivers and water sources through its national Adopt-a-River initiative.

The DWS made this plea during its 'Adopt-a-River' stakeholder meeting held at eMalahleni Banquet Hall on 23 January 2026, where government officials, environmental groups and community representatives discussed ways to tackle water pollution and improve river health.

DWS Scientist Noloyiso Mbiza highlighted the direct link between everyday household behaviour and river pollution. “Flushing wet wipes and sanitary pads causes blockages and the eruption of sewage pipes,” Mbiza said, adding that poor waste disposal practices not only burden municipal infrastructure but also contaminate water sources relied on by communities.

The Adopt-a-River programme encourages residents to monitor river health, report pollution and support water conservation efforts. It also aims to equip communities, particularly young people, with environmental knowledge and skills while promoting Integrated Water Resources Management (IWRM).

The meeting brought together representatives from Municipality Environmental Affairs, environmental activists, the eMalahleni Environmental and Waste Management Committee, Friends in Disaster Risk Reduction Africa (FIDRRA), non-profit organisations, and members of the Traditional Healers Forum.

FIDRRA spokesperson Thulani Gatsha Mrhetjha said pollution in eMalahleni remains a serious concern. “Waste being dumped into rivers directly affects water quality. By working together as a community, we can reduce pollution and restore river health,” he said. Chief Siphon Mahlangu from the SoGutjhe Royal House said water is sacred and central to life, culture and healing. “When rivers are polluted, it is not only the environment that suffers, but also our



Noloyiso Mbiza presented the adopt-a-river/citizen science program in eMalahleni

cultural practices,” he said. “We support any initiative that empowers communities to protect what rightfully belongs to them and future generations.”

Environmental activist and citizen scientist Zanele Msibi emphasised partnerships between government and communities. “Citizen science allows communities to move beyond awareness and become part of the solution,” she said. “By partnering with this initiative, we can monitor river health, report pollution, and influence positive change on the ground. It also equips young people with skills and knowledge that can open doors in the environmental sector.”

Residents were urged to avoid the disposal of bottles, plastics and household waste into rivers and streams, as water pollution and scarcity continue to challenge communities.

The DWS said the Adopt-a-River programme is a long-term national effort to promote water care and shared responsibility for water protection. Through active community involvement, the department hopes to reverse environmental degradation, improve water quality and ensure sustainable water resources for generations to come.



All the stakeholders and attendees of the meeting



# Vukuzenzele's early strikes lift them to third on the log

● RODNEY HLATSHWAYO

**DELMAS** — Two first-half goals from Siphesihle Vilakazi were enough to propel Vukuzenzele into third place on the Victor Khanye Promotional League standings after a controlled 2-0 home victory over Black Diamond at Vukuzenzele Sports Ground on Saturday, 24 January 2026.

The home side asserted themselves from the opening stages, pressing high and capitalising on early chances as Vilakazi struck twice before the interval. His clinical finishing set the platform for a disciplined second-half display in which Vukuzenzele

managed the game effectively and denied Black Diamond any clear route back into the contest.

Vukuzenzele head coach Sello Midise hailed the result as a confidence boost for a side still finding its feet in his first season at this level.

“So far, I thank my boys for collecting three points at our home ground,” Midise said. “Our performance has been strong. The discipline, especially in defence, has been good, and the boys are working together to bring dignity to our communities.”

Midise stressed that teamwork and game management will be crucial as the campaign unfolds.

“If we work together as a team, we can beat our opponents,” he said. “Scoring goals early and controlling the tempo of the game is important. This result gives the team confidence as we aim to raise our standards and compete strongly in the league.”

The win leaves Vukuzenzele with three points from two matches, following an opening-round defeat, and places them third on the log as the early-season picture begins to

take shape.

Black Diamond coach Sphiwe Tjhilas admitted his side struggled to recover after conceding early. “We conceded early and that affected our confidence,” Tjhilas said. “Vukuzenzele used their chances well

in the first half and we could not recover from that.” He said attention now turns to addressing mistakes ahead of their next league fixture. “Our focus is to fix what went wrong this past week and make sure we start winning league games,” he said.



Vukuzenzele United Palace

PICTURE: Albert Modise

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