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## **DOES MR LESUFI DESERVE A PASS?**

*Theuns Eloff: Chairman, Advisory Board of the FW de Klerk Foundation*

The Gauteng MEC for Education, Andrek Panyaza Lesufi, is an interesting man. A large part of the mainly black population think the world of him. He is a MEC who is “hands-on”, and is seen and heard wherever there is trouble in the Gauteng school system. He is regularly in the media and holds a press conference once a week - usually on a Sunday afternoon at his home. He was even mentioned as a possible successor to the current Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga. Another part of mostly the white (and Afrikaans) population is of the opinion that he is waging war on Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools - and in addition to that, harbours anti-white sentiments.

Mr Lesufi has a brilliant struggle history, especially for someone who is now only 51. According to his official profile, he was in custody as apartheid activist in 1985 (at the age of 17). In 1995 (after the first democratic elections of 1994) he again landed up in a Durban prison - apparently because he “pushed a higher education and transformation agenda”. His transgression is not revealed. It is also not revealed in what and whether he obtained a first degree at the then University of Natal. He does have an MBA (but we don't know from which university). He has already made significant inroads in the ANC and is deputy chairman of the organisation in Gauteng.

But what is Mr Lesufi's track record in education as MEC in Gauteng? One of the things that he (rightly) places much emphasis on, is that every child must have access to quality education. At the start of each year, however, Gauteng struggles with tens of thousands of learners who cannot be placed, because schools are overcrowded. In 2014, Mr Lesufi promised that he would build 1 000 (one thousand) new schools in the next few years. One has to assume that he had the budget available to tackle this huge task. It is estimated that between 50 000 and 70 000 new learners from neighbouring provinces arrive in Gauteng annually, and therefore at least 50 new schools per year need to be built.

How many schools have been built in Gauteng during Mr Lesufi's “watch” (as he likes to say) over the past five years? According to the Gauteng Department of Education, 13 schools were built in 2014/15, 16 in 2015/16, eight in 2016/17, a paltry six in 2017/18, and only four in 2019.

Of the total of 1 000 he promised, he built only 47 - 4.7% of what he promised.

But maybe these schools are at least model schools, well-equipped and top performing? Unfortunately not. Over the past few years, the media has been carrying stories of new schools that are poorly equipped, or where computers are stolen because of insufficient security. In other new schools, computers are locked away in cupboards because there is no internet access. A high school in Olievenhoutbosch has a brand-new centre for consumer sciences, with shiny stoves and fridges, but not enough cooking equipment to teach the subject properly. A primary school in Tembisa had to turn their laboratory and



computer centre into classrooms, because the school was initially built with too few classrooms. So they only have a library, which is also poorly equipped, with just a few books that are not relevant to primary school learners. The supply of teachers from the Department for all schools is minimal, and classes have between 50 and 80 pupils each.

A further problem caused by Mr Lesufi is that he frequently crosses the line as political head of the Department and plays CEO - and then makes pronouncements about anything and everything. In doing so, he assumes the responsibilities of the appointed official in the post of head of education in the province. In addition, he also often shoots from the hip - think of when he distributed addresses on social media of teachers who later appeared to be innocent of racism on social media.

Should Mr Lesufi get a pass for this? Judge for yourself... Granted, his media profile is sky-high and he looks and sounds like he “does something” ... but the facts prove the opposite.

Of course, among Afrikaans-speaking people, Mr Lesufi is more notorious, especially concerning his attitude towards Afrikaans in Gauteng’s public schools. He and his supporters insist that he has nothing against Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools, he is merely focussed on integration. But in May 2019 (on national TV), this myth was shattered when he apparently became incensed over a question about the new online admissions system. The gist of his remarks were along the lines of “Why do people fight for Afrikaans education; there are no longer Afrikaans universities in South Africa? I am actually protecting these learners so that they are not learning in a language that they cannot study further in.” Apart from being factually incorrect (NWU-Potchefstroom and Stellenbosch still offer Afrikaans education), it is condescending and arrogant. I, the great Lesufi, protect this bunch of Dutchmen against themselves! I help them avoid studying in this backward language. Obviously, this is a self-serving argument: Mr Lesufi’s other ANC colleagues ensure that Afrikaans is destroyed at university level, and he completes the circle by ensuring that there no longer is a demand for Afrikaans!

A favourite saying by Mr Lesufi is that under his leadership there will no longer be schools for “klein basies” (“little masters”). Afrikaans schools are therefore actually just white schools and continue apartheid. This argument contains two errors:

- There is no longer a single public school in Gauteng (or in the rest of the country) where Afrikaans is used as the language of instruction, and where there are only white learners. This Mr Lesufi discovered for himself after the Overvaal incident in 2018, when a former black learner of High School Overvaal jumped to the defense the school. So there are no more schools for “klein basies”...
- Secondly, Afrikaans is spoken by more coloured/brown South Africans than white South Africans, and it cannot be dismissed as merely a “white man’s language” or apartheid mechanism. At the beginning of 2018, even the English newspaper, the *Citizen*, published an article : “It is a ‘war on Afrikaans education’ in Gauteng ... the government appears hell-bent on weeding out Afrikaans as a language of instruction in schools in the province”. The piece dealt with 119 double-medium schools in Gauteng that were



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converted to English-only schools; among these, there were 43 schools in coloured (and mainly Afrikaans) areas. This caused great dismay in the coloured Afrikaans community, as it deprived Afrikaans-speakers of their constitutional right to mother-tongue education (as proven in Eldorado Park).

In June 2019, in a video interview, Mr Lesufi noted that a school could have three languages and three sets of classes: one in Afrikaans, one in English, and one in Sesotho. But after classes, learners should “integrate” with each other and play together. If Mr Lesufi believed this was check-mate as far as Afrikaans-speakers are concerned, this commentator has news for him. If he is serious about his proposal, and if he can get the budgets for it, and can provide enough posts, and if he shows that he is for multi-lingualism and non-racialism, the majority of Afrikaans-speaking parents will support him. Many parents, including those that claim mother-tongue education as a constitutional right, see the benefits of multi-racial schools.

The problem is that with his policies and practices to make double-medium schools English-only and in so doing, destroying multi-lingualism, he has already made his own proposal questionable. If he can't even allow two languages in a school, what about three? And in Afrikaans single-medium schools, the supply of teachers is already very limited. Where will he get the budget to offer three languages in a school? Or does he not know that more languages require more teachers? His proposal of three languages in a school, therefore, actually highlights his hypocrisy towards Afrikaans, and his ignorance of practical educational solutions that, as required by the Constitution, should put children first.

Mr Lesufi's actions and style are therefore dangerous in two ways:

- He is dangerous for the ANC (national and Gauteng) because he creates expectations that he cannot meet, and he makes promises he does not keep (1 000 schools). It will catch up with him and the ANC eventually. A good media profile will only help him to a point. He won't help the ANC keep Gauteng.
- He is also a danger to good inter-group relations. If it is a priority for President Ramaphosa to be a President for all South Africans, Mr Lesufi's attitude and statements are an insurmountable obstacle in his way. He has the dubious honour of being the ONE person with the ability to polarise moderate Afrikaans-speaking people of all races, to alienate them from the ANC and government, and raise suspicions around their commitment to multi-lingualism and mother-tongue education. And if one takes the *Citizen's* above-mentioned article as a benchmark, even English-speakers realise it.

President Ramaphosa must therefore be careful not to get excited over Mr Lesufi - or be blind to his shortcomings. He is not the good MEC for Education he makes himself out to be in the media. He has grievously neglected some of his duties and is a burden to the ANC, which the organisation will feel in the medium-term. And he is standing directly in Cyril



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Ramaphosa's path to reconciliation between all South Africans - particularly millions of Afrikaans-speaking South Africans.

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