The Department of Education in KwaZulu-Natal, hosted a historic two days Social Ills Conference at Open Air School on the 25 -26 January 2013. This conference was also attended by MEC for Social Development, Weziwe Thusi, MEC for Arts, Culture, Sports and Recreation, Ntombikayise-Sibhidla Saphetha, the Office of the Premier and representatives from the Department of Health. The main aim of the conference was to come up with practical solutions to overcome sexual abuse, teenage pregnancy and substance abuse.

Various stakeholders including CHILDLINE, SANCA, SACE, SGB Associations, as well as COSAS were also part of the conference.

Both representatives from CHILDLINE and SANCA painted a rather gloomy picture regarding child and substance abuse. They painted a picture that suggested that unless something drastic is done, young people in the province are facing an uncertain future.

MEC Mchunu thanked all stakeholders and outlined the challenges faced by the Department. “Our core function is teaching and learning, but there are various social ills that militate against our core business,” he said. Mchunu said unless the fight against social ills is institutionalised, very little will be achieved. “We cannot
depend on one conference to reverse this trend, we need to form an association on social ills that is going to involve all stakeholders to fight social ills head on,” he suggested. Borrowing from the mantra of Open Air Special School, the MEC declared, “We can and we will” win the fight against social ills.”

MEC Weziwe Thusi lamented about the levels of social ills in the province. “Our province and the country have come a long way since the dawn of democracy, we have made significant gains that have improved the quality of lives of our people, but we stand to lose everything if we fail to deal with the scourge we currently face,” she said.

MEC Sibhidla-Saphetha echoed her colleague’s sentiments and spoke about the role of the Department of Arts and Culture in the fight against social ills. “The Department of Arts and Culture is crucial in discouraging such deviant behaviour in our society. It should play an essential role in anchoring South African society in its traditional values systems of Ubuntu while recognising the global order,” asserted MEC Sibhidla-Saphetha.

On the second day, the three commissions that had engaged on the first day reported on their discussions. All commissions agreed that the fight against social ills should be institutionalised and intensified. In unison, they called for civil activism that is going to fight and defeat these maladies.

During the closing remarks, MEC Senzo Mchunu made proposals that resonated with many delegates. He boldly proposed that condoms be distributed to Secondary Schools. “The reality is that these children are engaging in sexual
activities whether we like it or not - while we need to evangelise spiritedly for total abstinence, we need to be realistic and distribute these condoms for those who will not heed our call," he said. He also emphasised that this distribution will need to take place only in secondary schools and not Primary Schools. He also proposed that HIV testing be done within an organised, professional and consultative framework.

Everything that was agreed upon during this conference will be tabled before the provincial Cabinet Lekgotla taking place on 19/20 & 21 February 2013.

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