

Western Cape schools battling rampant drug use

Cape Town - Statistics obtained from the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) have shown that out of 145 primary school pupils tested for substance abuse, 84 tested positive. At high schools, 478 out of 655 pupils tested positive.

The tests were conducted on pupils suspected of drug abuse. At primary schools 56 of those who tested positive were boys. At high school the figure was 359. The tests were conducted during the first, second and third terms last year.

Jessica Shelver, Education MEC Debbie Schäfer's spokesperson, said: "Safe and secure learning environments are essential if we are to ensure that quality education is delivered. It is imperative that our schools remain drug free. As primary caregivers, parents play the most important role in identifying drug use by their children."

She said most drug use happened at home or within the community, but the sad reality was that pupils came to school in possession of drugs, or under their influence.

"The key goal of the Safe School substance abuse programme is to capacitate teachers with the tool of drug testing to ensure that pupils who experiment with substance abuse are detected early and are placed in developmental programmes to address the abuse," Shelver said.

Social Development MEC Albert Fritz indicated in a recent statement that a study of 851 matric pupils conducted by the Mudita Foundation showed that 30% of the pupils had a high risk of a lifetime prevalence of substance abuse. The foundation, founded in 2010, rendered treatment services to school-going teens affected by substance use problems, he said.

"We cannot allow our children to fall prey to substance abuse and gangsterism. Where children are reportedly using or abusing substances, they are identified through referral pathways between the department and the Western Cape departments of Health and Education, and the City of Cape Town. The Western Cape Department of Social Development funds a number of registered organisations which target substance abuse and prevention," Fritz said.

Dr Ellapen Rapiti, a Cape Town physician who has devoted more than 20 years to eradicating alcohol and drug abuse among the youth, agreed that drug use was on the increase. Rapiti, who has a practice in Mitchells Plain, said pupils found in the possession of drugs should not be suspended but given an opportunity to recover.

"The last couple of months I have come across pupils misbehaving in school and later discovered they were under the influence drugs. Young children experimenting with dagga do not pay attention in class and eventually some of them become drop-outs. "A month ago I treated a medical student who quit his studies due to substance abuse, and further discussions revealed he was using cannabis since the age of 12," Rapiti said. More education, and not more police, was the only solution to the spiralling drug problem, he said.

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