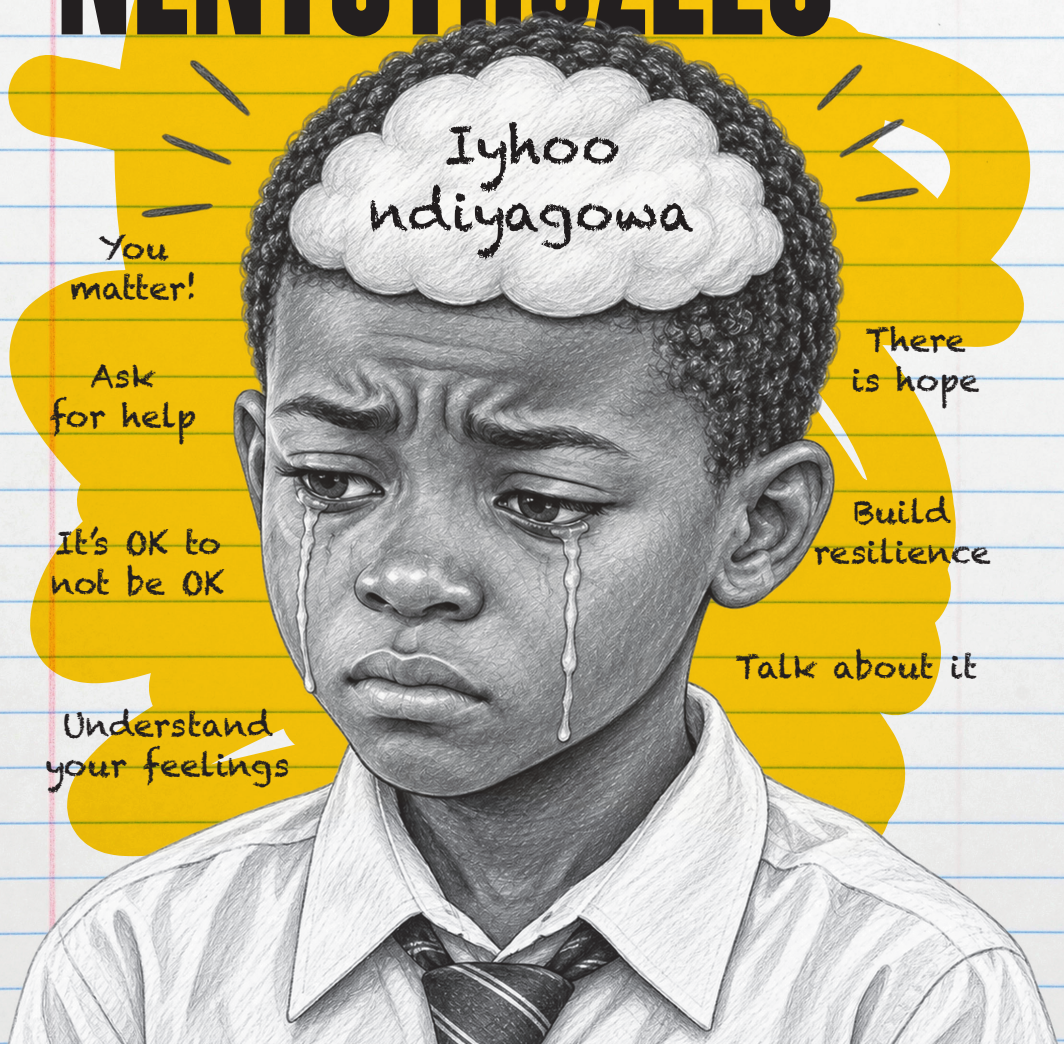
EQUAL EDUCATION

UTHANDO NENTUTHUZELO

A psychosocial support toolkit for learners in schools



This toolkit belongs to:

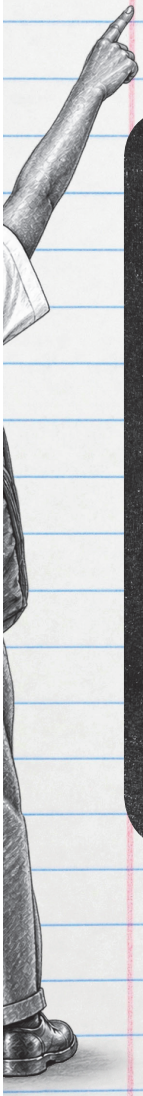


KEY ACRONYMS

CSTL	Care and Support for Teaching and Learning
DSD	Department of Social Development
DoH	Department of Health
DBST	District Based Support Team
SBST	School-Based Support Team
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	School Management Team Member
SIAS	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support
PSS	Psychosocial support
ISHP	Integrated School Health Policy
LSA	Learner Support Agent
NGOs	Non-Government Organisations

This toolkit is created based on important policies and guidelines from the Department of Basic Education (DBE), including the Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Programme, the Policy on Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS), the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP), and other related DBE directive documents like the Guide for Learner Support Agents and Schools on Providing Psychosocial Support to Learners. It aligns with DBE's emphasis on integrated school health policy and school-centred support while ensuring escalation to government-mandated services (DSD for protection, DoH for health-related support).

FIND YOUR WAY



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- SCHOOL
- DISTRICT
- GOVERNMENT
- \+ EXTRA HELP

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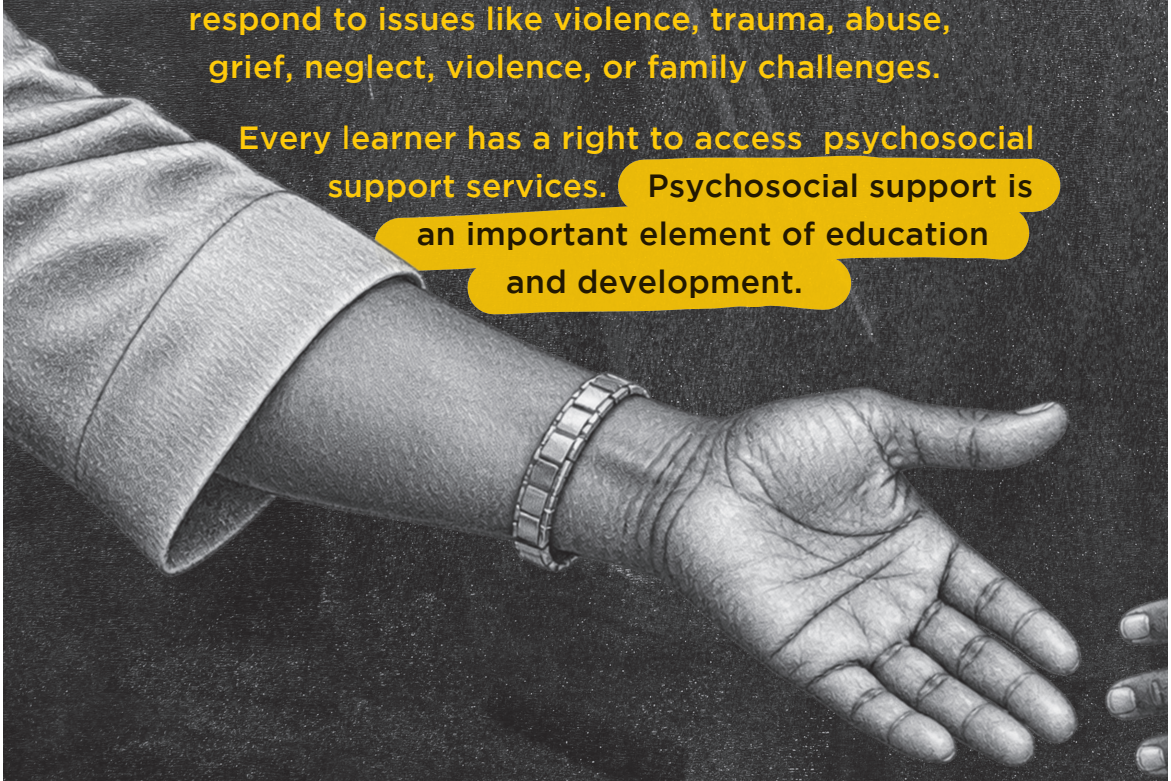
Your wellbeing matters.
You are not alone!

What does psychosocial support mean?

Psychosocial support (PSS) addresses learners' social, emotional, and mental wellbeing to reduce barriers to learning, promote resilience, and respond to issues like violence, trauma, abuse, grief, neglect, violence, or family challenges.

Every learner has a right to access psychosocial support services. Psychosocial support is an important element of education and development.



Core principles of psychosocial support in South African schools

The best interest of a child in all matters involving them is of paramount importance (aligned with the Constitution, Children's Act 38 of 2005, and international law standards).

- Psychosocial support is preventive, early-intervention focused, and tiered (universal, targeted, and specialised).
- Schools must create safe, nurturing, child-friendly environments.
- There should be collaboration across government departments (e.g., DBE, DSD,DoH) and NGOs.
- Families, friends and communities are central for learners' psychosocial support.
- No learner should be left without support referrals must follow when school-level capacity is exceeded.



A GENERATION GROWING UP WIT

The law recognises the right. Learn

YEARS OF LAW & POLICIES

Progressive recognition of the right to psychosocial support

1996	1996	2001	2003	2005
South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 Provides for a safe school environment and learner welfare.	National Programme of Action for Children in South Africa 1996 – 2030 Commitment to children's holistic development and wellbeing.	White Paper 6: Special needs education – building an inclusive education and training system. Early identification and support for learners with barriers.	National Health Act, (Act No 61 of 2003) Mental health care is part of essential health services.	Children's Act (Act No 38 of 2005, as amended) Ensures protecti care and developmental support for all children.

MORE THAN TWO DECADES OF LAW AND POLICIE

THE LIFE COURSE OF A LEARNER

GROWING UP WITHOUT ACCESS TO PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

0–3 YEARS TODDLER



- Unidentified trauma
- Neglect and abuse often unnoticed
- Poor emotional regulation
- Delayed development
- Weak attachment and trust

4–6 YEARS PRESCHOOL



- Anxiety
- Behavioural challenges
- Learning difficulties remain unidentified
- Low self-esteem begins

7–9 YEARS FOUNDATION PHASE



- Effects of abuse, grief and neglect impact learning
- Difficulty concentrating
- Low confidence
- Absenteeism starts

10–12 YEARS INTERMEDIATE PHASE

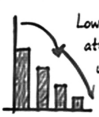


- Struggles with emotions
- Behaviour problems
- Teachers carry burdens they are not trained to address
- Learners suffer in silence

THE LONG-TERM IMPACT: YOUNG ADULT AND BEYOND



Unresolved trauma and poor mental health



Lower educational attainment and unemployment risks



Difficulty forming healthy relationships and social connections



Increased risk of conflict with the law and criminal justice involvement



KEY MESSAGE

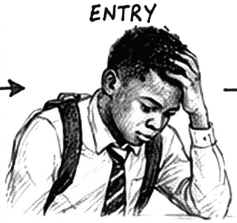
The challenge is no longer whether learners have a right to psychosocial s South Africa's legislative and policy framework clearly recognises tha The challenge is implementation. . Every year that psychosocial su is another year in which a child grows into adulthood carrying preventab undermining their education, wellbeing and future life opportunities.

IITHOUT PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

arners continue to grow up <u>without</u> it.

5	2008	2012	2014	2019	2019
s Act, 38 of as ed) rotection, nd ental for dren.	Care and Support for Teaching and Learning Schools as centres of care, support and wellbeing for learners.	Integrated School Health Policy Promotes physical, mental and psychosocial wellbeing in school settings.	Screening, Identification, Assessment and Support (SIAS) Policy Learners with barriers to learning are to be identified and supported.	National Child Care and Protection Policy Coordinated psychosocial support and protection for children.	Guide for Learner Support Agents and Schools on Providing Psychosocial Support for Learners Practical guidance for schools to provide psychosocial support.

.ICIES... BUT IMPLEMENTATION HAS NOT KEPT PACE. →

ARS ATE	12–13 YEARS SENIOR PRIMARY	13–15 YEARS HIGH SCHOOL ENTRY	15–17 YEARS ADOLESCENT	17–18 YEARS SCHOOL-LEAVING LEARNER
re	 • Emotional needs largely unmet • Stress and worry increase • Physical health screened but psychosocial needs ignored	 • Referrals delayed or unavailable • Shortage of psychologists, counsellors and social workers • Academic performance affected	 • Anxiety, depression and trauma • Exposure to violence and abuse • Bullying and isolation • Higher risk of substance abuse • School disengagement	 • Many learners complete school having never spoken to a counsellor or social worker • Unresolved pain carried into adulthood

risk with und ustice nt



Intergenerational cycles of violence, trauma and poverty



Lost potential, lost productivity, lost opportunities for our nation

THE POLICY GAP

1996 → 2019

More than two decades of laws and policies progressively recognised psychosocial support as essential to children's wellbeing and education.

≠

THE REALITY

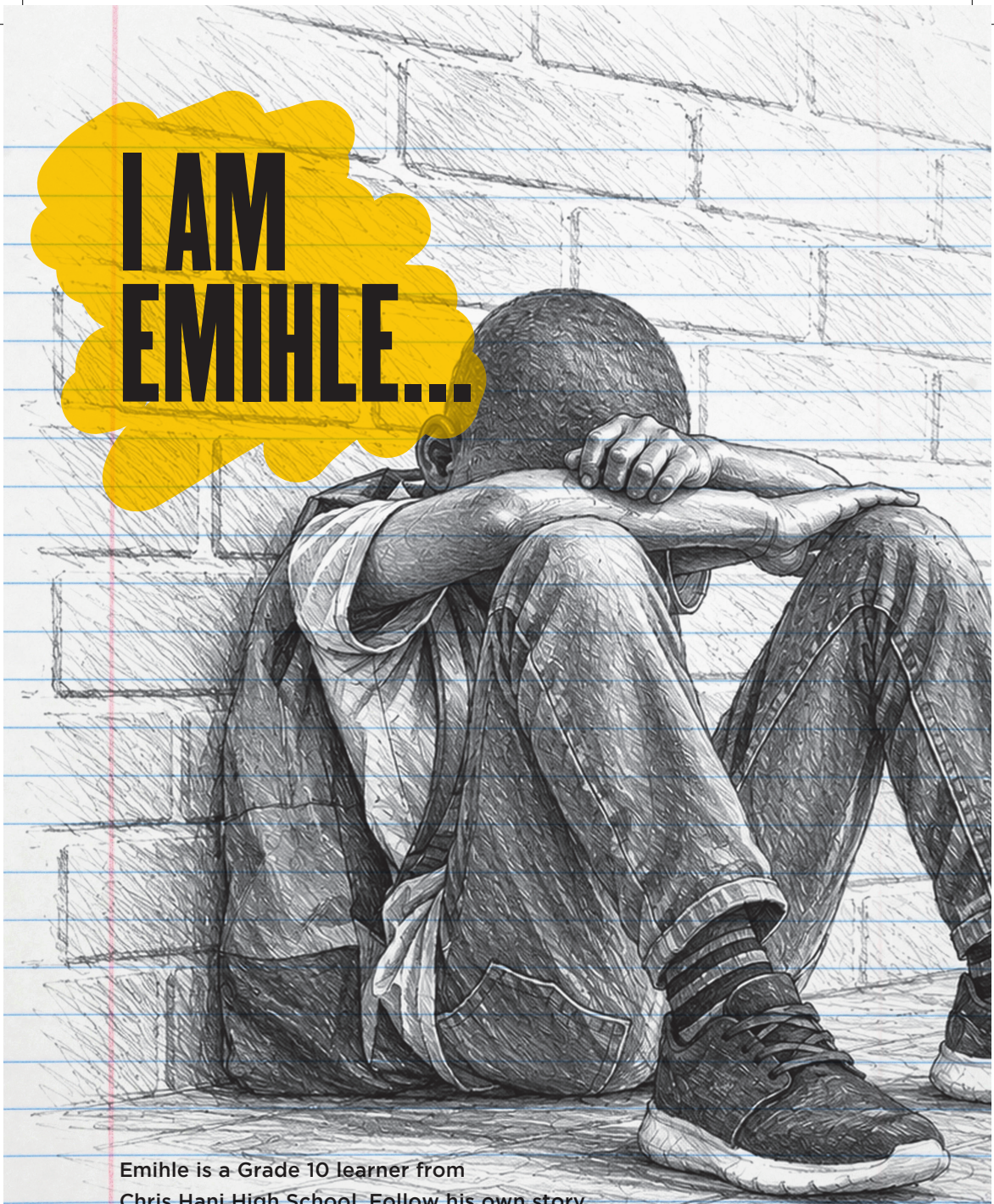
Thousands of learners have progressed from Grade R to Grade 12 without ever receiving meaningful psychosocial support because implementation has not kept pace with legal and policy commitments.

cial support.
<u>that they do.</u>
support is not provided
ntable trauma,

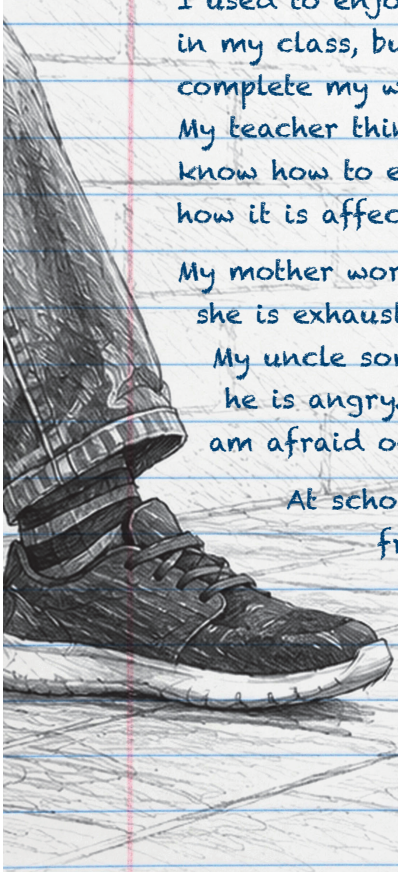
RIGHTS RECOGNISED.
SUPPORT DELAYED.
CHILDHOOD CANNOT BE REPEATED.



I AM EMIHLE...



Emihle is a Grade 10 learner from Chris Hani High School. Follow his own story through the toolkit and get an idea of the struggle a young person goes through when they are trying to cope with the hard realities of growing up...



I am not OK.

I don't know what is happening to me lately. I struggle to sleep at night, and I am always tired. I don't feel like going to school anymore. My uniform is old, and some learners make jokes about it. Others talk about what happened to my brother. I try to ignore them, but their words stay with me long.

I used to enjoy school. I was one of the best learners in my class, but now I struggle to concentrate, complete my work and keep up with my classmates. My teacher thinks I am becoming lazy, but I don't know how to explain what is happening at home and how it is affecting me.

My mother works long hours and when she gets home she is exhausted. I don't want to add to her worries. My uncle sometimes shouts at me and hits me when he is angry. I have learned to keep quiet because I am afraid of making things worse.

At school, I spend most of my time alone. My friend Andile used to understand me. We looked out for each other, but he recently moved to the Eastern Cape to live with his aunt.

I miss having someone I can talk to.

UNLOCKING PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT

step-by-step

I am beginning to realise that no learner should have to carry all these worries alone. I deserve to feel safe, to be treated with dignity and to have someone take my experiences seriously. I need help, but I don't yet know where to find it.

The social, emotional and mental wellbeing of every learner should matter to everyone - from their friends and family, class teacher, all school staff (including omama!), the school principal, SBST, LSA, DBST and DSD officials including social workers, NGOs and all the way up to members of the South African Police Service.*

A psychosocial support system for learners exists, and here is how to navigate it...

*__NOTE:__ At all times, and from all the providers of psychosocial support, the learner must feel safe and cared for and protected.



First, start at HOME

Family is the primary site of care and support.

Providing psychosocial support begins at home, before school interventions. Should a learner require any psychosocial support, they are encouraged to inform their parents.Equally, parents must continuously check on their children's wellbeing and know how to reach out to schools for psychosocial support interventions.



On Monday, my mother noticed that I had hardly eaten and had not been sleeping properly. She sat next to me and asked whether everything was alright. I started crying. I told her about school, the bullying, how much I missed Andile, and how difficult things had become at home.

My mother listened. She said that I was not a burden and that she wanted to understand what I was going through. She asked whether I would be OK with her speaking to someone at school. I agreed. She said she would contact my class teacher to find out what support the school could provide.

I feel so much better. For the first time in a long while, I feel that someone was paying attention. I realise that support can begin at home, with a parent or caregiver who listens, checks in and helps a learner reach the right people.

Next, go to the SCHOOL



Educators are the central point of contact to unlock psychosocial support.

Psychosocial support is not always understood or readily available for learners at home, so school becomes a central point for unlocking psychosocial support.

Identifying the need for psychosocial support interventions for learners does not involve any specialisation or significant capacity. Just noticing that a learner is frequently absent from school, lacks basic school needs such as a school uniform, is bullied or is a bully to other learners is significant. These are some of the main indications for psychosocial support intervention.

Importantly, psychosocial support does not start or end in the schoolyard. It extends beyond, hence teachers must partner with parents to care and support their children; enlist the help of NGO's who offer psychosocial support services; and, if neccessary, escalate concerns further up the relevant education department channels.

Here is the pathway to unlocking psychosocial support for learners in schools...

Home

↓

Class teacher

↓

Learner Support Agent (LSA)

↓

School-Based Support Team (SBST)

The following morning, my mother contacted my class teacher. She explained some of what I had been experiencing and asked for a meeting.

Afterwards, my teacher invited me to speak with him privately. Instead of shouting about my unfinished work and missed classes, he asked me how I was doing. He wanted to understand why I had been absent, why I struggled to concentrate and whether anything was making school difficult for me.

Observe and assess

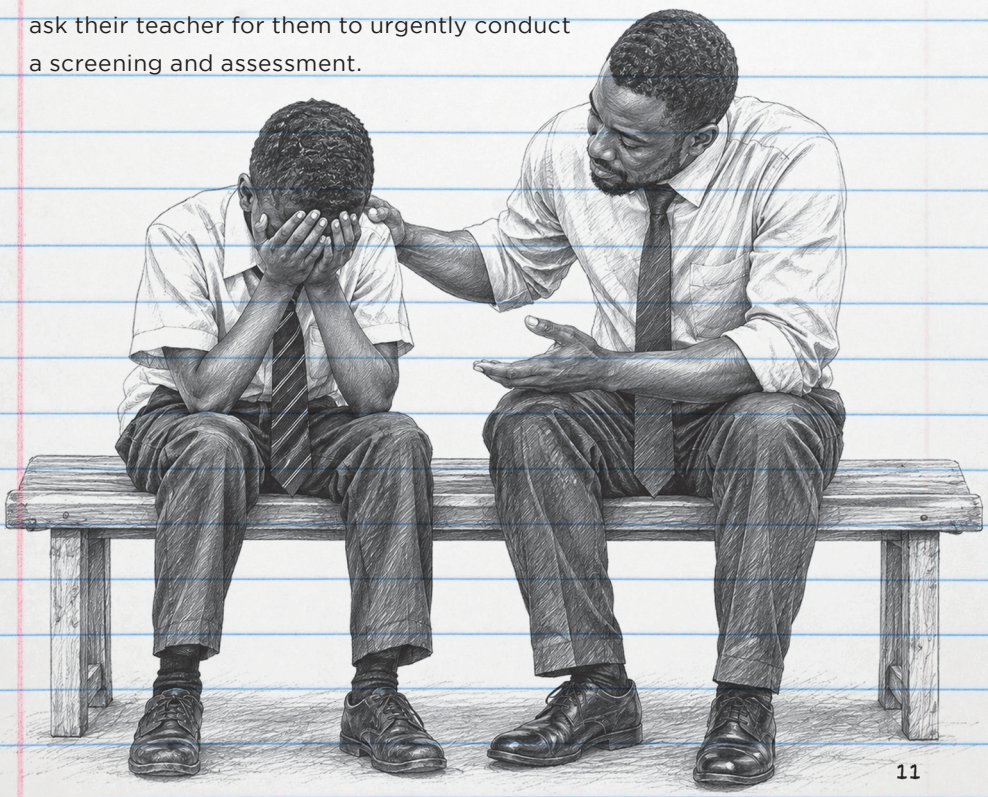
Class teacher

Class teachers are the first responder at school. Their role is to observe and screen **ALL** learners using tools like psychosocial screening checklists and vulnerability assessment tests and provide initial classroom-based support (e.g., caring relationships, emotional check-ins, and basic counselling listening).

Learners can be assessed via learner profiles and one-on-one interviews. Such assessments are encouraged to be undertaken often with learners. If the class teacher fails to do so, learners should know that they are entitled to ask their teacher for them to urgently conduct a screening and assessment.

My teacher really listened to me. He said that I didn't have to wait until things became so bad before asking for help. He is going to speak to the right people at school so that we can work together.

I am still nervous, but at least I no longer feel that I have to pretend everything is fine.



My teacher introduced me to the school's Learner Support Agent, or LSA. She explained that her role was to provide additional psychosocial support to learners who needed it.



Provide specialised support

Learner Support Agent (LSA)

Learner Support Agents (LSAs) are placed in schools by the education department to provide additional support in schools. LSAs are intended to specialise in psychosocial support for learners. They screen vulnerable learners, conduct assessments, offer direct support (e.g., grief counselling, life skills), and coordinate referrals. If the learner's psychosocial needs exceed the class teacher's capacity or is in need of more specialised support, they can reach out to the school's LSA.

NOTE: Not all schools will have LSAs available. In that case, learners must make use of their peers, class teachers and School-based Support Team (SBST) for provisioning of psychosocial support.

Develop a plan

School-Based Support Team

Where there is a high support need beyond the class teacher's capacity, the School-based Support Team (SBST) must intervene.

The SBST is a core school support structure (mandatory under SIAS and CSTL). It can include a school principal, school management team (SMT) member, teachers, an LSA (if available), a School Governing Body (SGB) representative, and ideally someone with psychosocial skills co-opted.

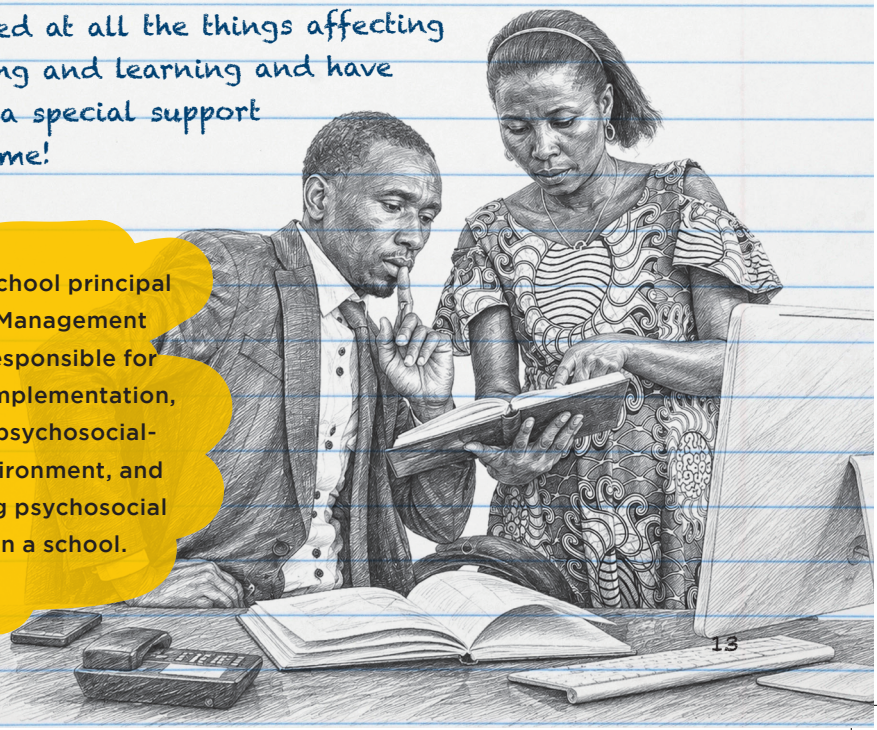
The SBST must, based on the class teacher's assessment and screening, identify barriers, develop Individual Support Plans (ISPs), monitor, and provide short-term interventions.

I've now found out that my situation needs more than a few conversations, so my teacher and the LSA have raised my needs with the SBST.

They've brought together the right school staff to look at my circumstances and decide what support I need.

They looked at all the things affecting my wellbeing and learning and have developed a special support plan for me!

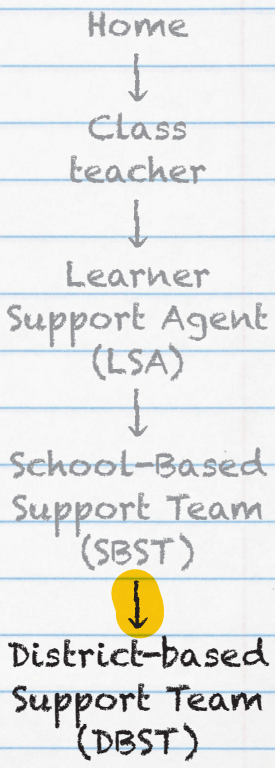
NOTE: The school principal or School Management Team are responsible for overseeing implementation, ensuring a psychosocial-friendly environment, and championing psychosocial support in a school.



If neccessary, escalate to

DISTRICT

The District-based Support Team (DBST) can arrange psychosocial support interventions lacking at school.



If the SBSTs, LSAs, SMTs, and school principals lack capacity to provide psychosocial support, or if learners require differentiated psychosocial support interventions lacking at school, they must not hesitate to refer cases to the District-based Support Team (DBST).

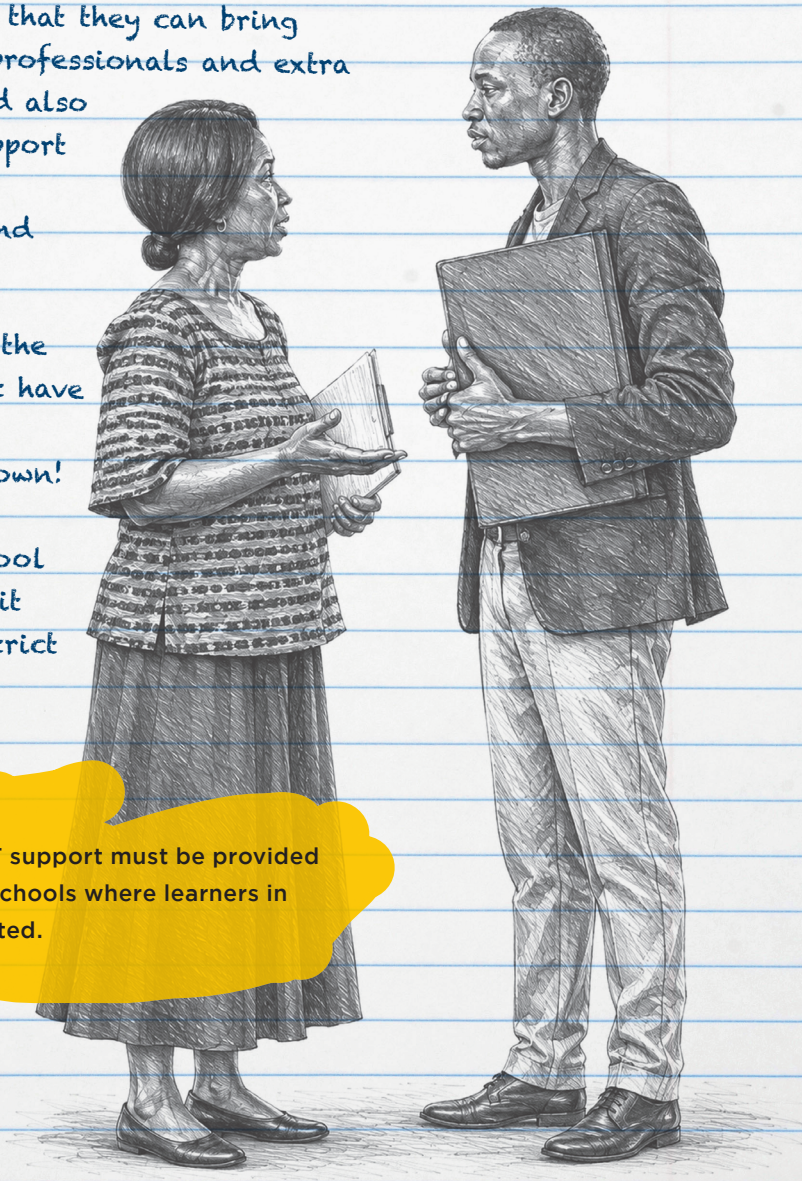
The DBST reviews SBST referrals and intervenes and provides specialised input, additional resources, or co-ordinates multi-sectoral support. The DBST may include social workers, educational psychologists, or outreach teams.

Although the school is helping me, my situation is still difficult. The school recognised that some of my problems need support beyond what they can provide.

The School-based Support Team have now referred my case to the District based Support Team.

The DBST has reviewed the support already provided and considered what additional interventions are needed. They explained that they can bring in specialised professionals and extra resources, and also coordinate support from different departments and services.

I've learnt that the school does not have to solve every problem on its own! If the support available at school is not enough, it can ask the district for assistance.



NB: The DBST support must be provided in-person at schools where learners in need are located.

Refer to other

EXTERNAL GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS

For moderate to high-needs cases.

Home
↓
Class teacher
↓
Learner Support Agent (LSA)
↓
School-Based Support Team (SBST)
↓
District-based Support Team (DBST)
↓
Department of Social Development (DSD)
+
Department of Health

Things have changed.... Because I had told the LSA that my uncle sometimes hit me, the school recognised that this was a child protection issue.

The right referral was made to the Department of Social Developmet (DSD) and a social worker has assessed my circumstances and worked out what protection and support I needed.

The school has explained to me that educators have a responsibility to report suspected child abuse, neglect and situations where a child (me!) is not adequately protected. I learned that asking for help with something happening at home wasn't something I should be punished for.

(Good news! I have been referred for health-related support through the DoH. A health professional is going to help assess the difficulties I am experiencing with sleep, anxiety and my emotional wellbeing, and determine whether I need further mental health support.)

Department of Social Development (DSD)

Designated social workers handle child protection (abuse, neglect, statutory cases under Children's Act). Schools refer via DBST or SBST for investigation (e.g., Section 110 referrals if child in need of care or protection). DSD provides statutory psychosocial services, foster care, or family support.

NOTE: Section 110(1) places an obligation on teachers, among other individuals, who may become aware of child abuse, exploitation, maltreatment, or deliberate neglect or where a child is degraded to report it to the DSD or police station. This means that it is a legal requirement to report suspected neglect or lack of protection for a child.

Department of Health (DoH)

The DoH along with the DBE is responsible for the implementation of the Integrated School Health Programmes. School health teams (nurses, psychologists) offer health-related psychosocial support, mental health screening, or referrals to clinics or hospitals for trauma or psychiatric needs.

Ideally, schools should have school nurses available for learners in-school. If not available in-school, school nurses from the DoH must do school visits. This ensures health support for learners across schools.

NOTE: According to the Integrated School Health Policy (ISHP), school health teams led by professional nurses are responsible for providing services to schools on specified dates, with a priority focus on Grades 1, 4, 8, and 10.

For the first time, I feel like the adults around me are taking my safety and wellbeing seriously.

For reporting child neglect, lack of care or protection, and maltreatment use *Form 22 - Reporting of Abuse or deliberate neglect*

Make use of

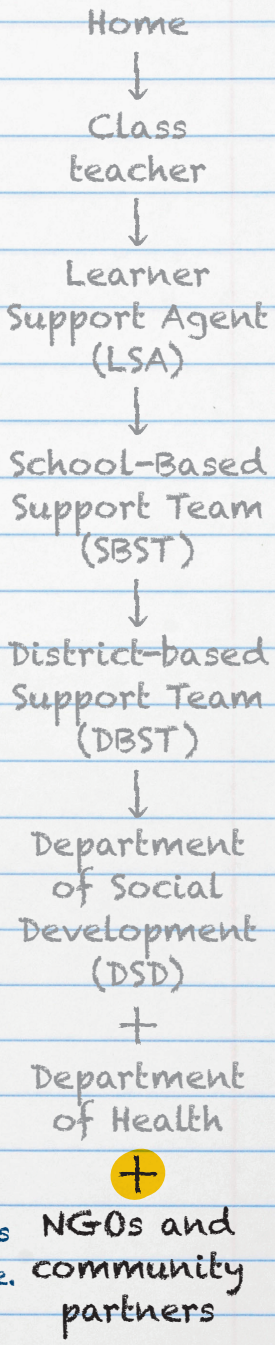
EXTRA HELP

NGOs and community partners are invaluable resources.

Schools, especially SGBs, are encouraged to partner with NGOs offering psychosocial support interventions. Schools must build networks for psychosocial support services for learners, and this is mandatory in terms of Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) Programme. Examples include organisations providing counselling, trauma support, or gender-based violence services. NGOs and community partners services may include the following:

- Child helplines - For urgent cases (e.g., abuse hotline)
- Specialised services - educational psychologists (via DBST), mental health clinics, or child youth care centres for severe cases.
- Urgent or immediate danger cases (e.g., rape, severe abuse, suicidal risk).

To help me and my family access specialised services that they don't have, the school is also going to work with non-government organisations to provide extra counselling, trauma support and other psychosocial services to strengthen the support I received even more.



Summary of process for identifying, reporting and triggering psychosocial support for learners in need...

Teacher identifies concern (classroom support / screening)

↓

Refer to SBST or LSA (support plan developed and monitored)

↓

If unsuccessful, escalate to DBST (co-ordinate mult-isectoral support)

↓

If more specialised or external support is needed, refer to DSD, DoH, NGOs or SAPS.

All Departmental support contact details

Key resources and tools for implementation (for school and departmental officials)

Screening tools

Use DBE psychosocial screening tools (via SIAS Policy or CSTL Handbook) to identify at-risk learners.

Support plans

Teachers must develop individual support plans for each learner requiring psychosocial support in terms of SIAS policy.

Training

The DBE, DoH and DSD must adequately train teachers SGB members RCLs for rendering psychosocial support interventions for learners.

Referral networks

Schools maintain lists of local providers (DSD offices, local police station, NGOs, clinics).

Monitoring

Regular review of learner support needs by the SBST including the tracking of progress and outcomes for psychosocial support interventions.

NOTE: Schools may lack capacity to fulfill certain responsibilities towards child care. However, the lack of capacity must be reported to a relevant provincial education for intervention.

Bonus psychosocial care pack:



Questionnaire for learners requiring intervention for psychosocial support provisioning



Contact details of NGOs providing psychosocial support

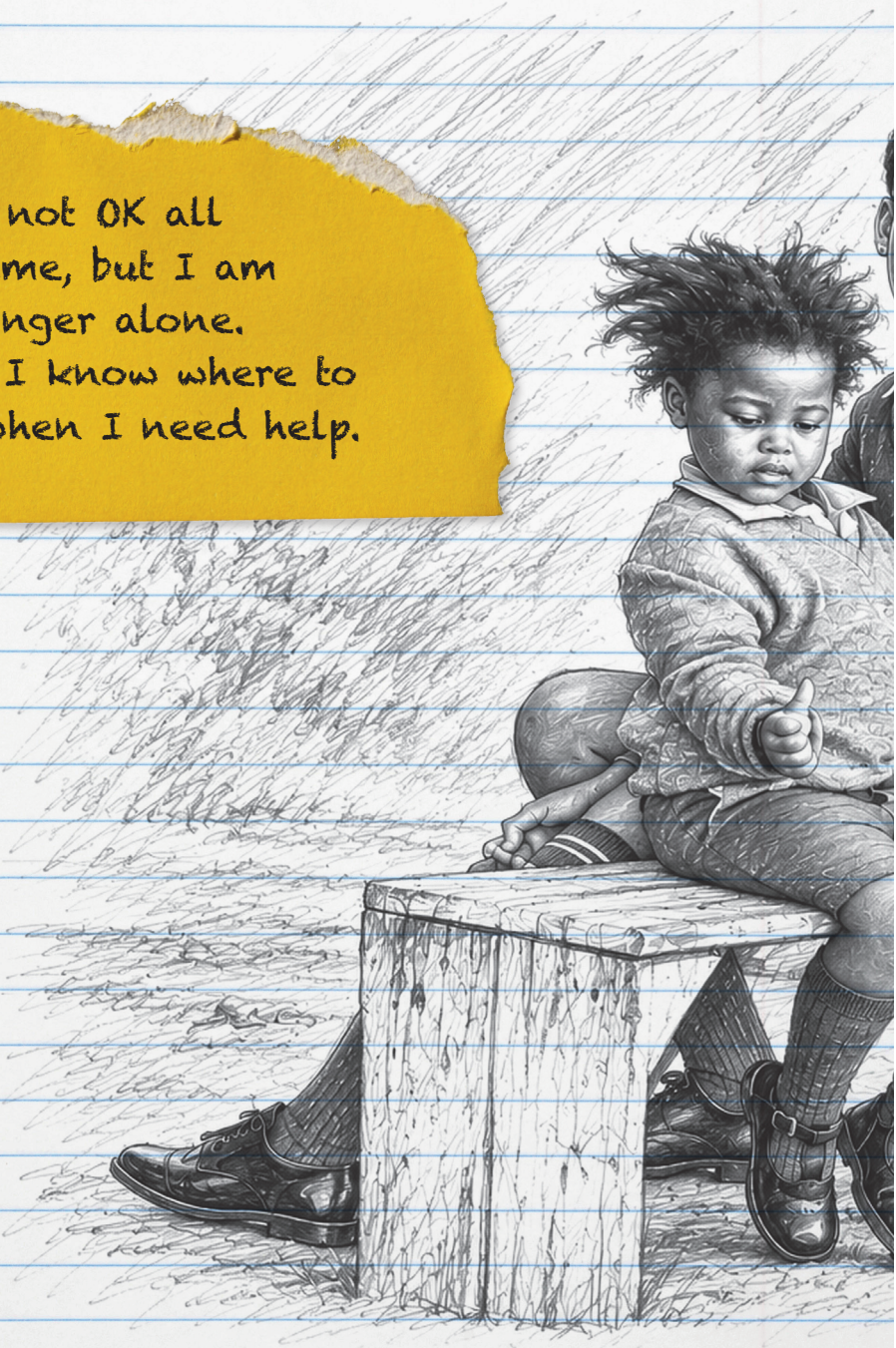
Practical tips for provisioning psychosocial support*:

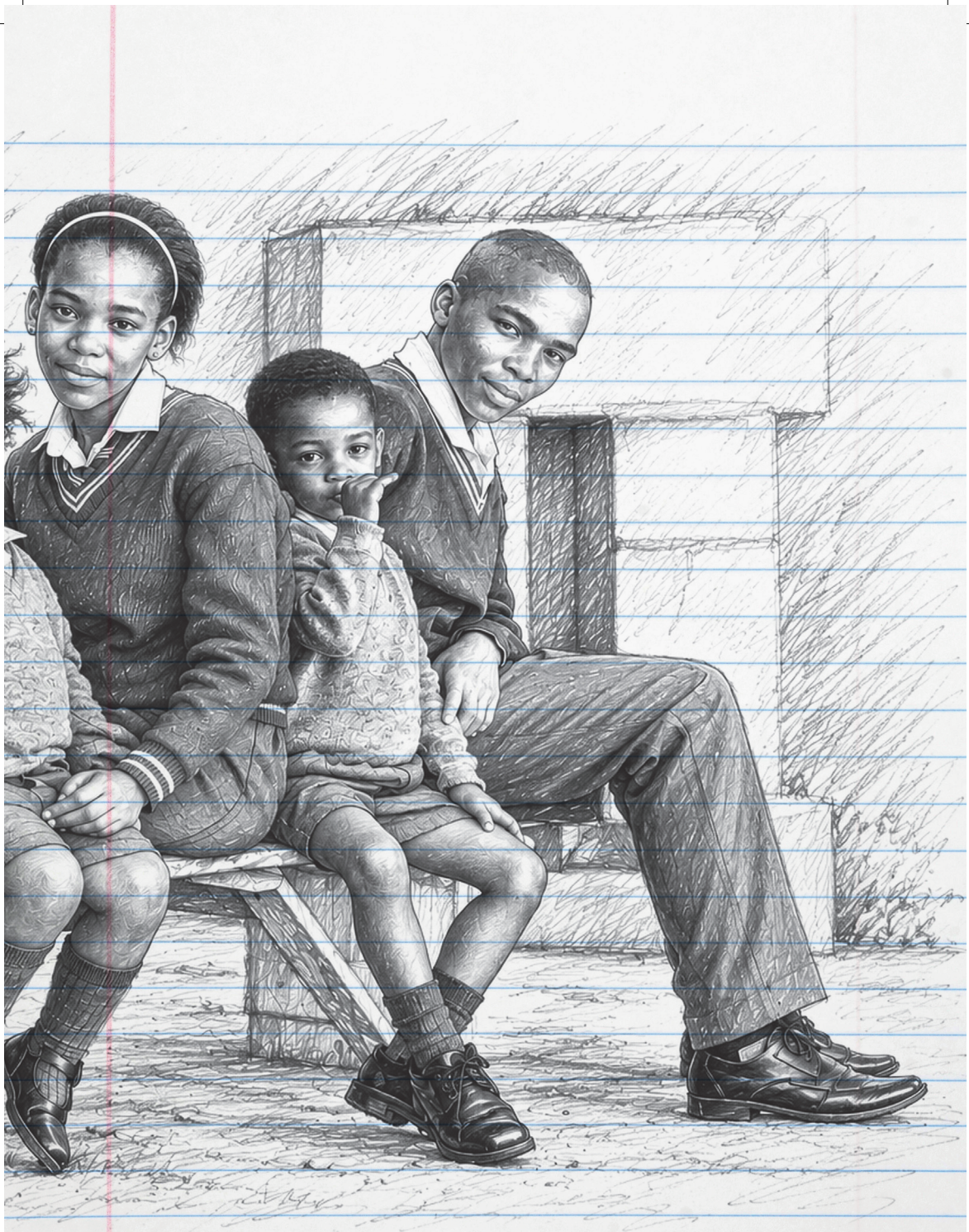
- Schools must promote a psychosocially friendly environment: safe spaces, anti-bullying policies, peer support;
- Involve parents and caregivers, including on training for psychosocial support.
- Optimising the Life Orientation period to be more geared towards learner support interventions.

** as provided by Equalisers*

I have learnt that psychosocial support is not a once-off conversation. People need to keep checking in, reviewing support plans, identifying barriers and making sure that learners continue receiving the help they need – from home, school, district and all the way up to other government departments.

I am not OK all
the time, but I am
no longer alone.
And I know where to
turn when I need help.





Psychosocial support

WORD SEARCH

H I E C N E L O I V E R A C H W L B C D N U Q
G S A I S S H O P E U O R G N I E B L L E W K
U V V U I D E N T I T Y T D K G L C S R P K H
Q I W J R G Y P O V E R T Y A N T O Q E I O O
Z I T K R E D U C A T I O N B O R N J S J F A
A L N S T H G I R D I R W V S I A S Y I Y G F
N D T C C Z O Z C B U A B G E S U T Y L T X R
N B I A L S S E R T S V R Y N S M I U I E N O
B B I G G U L Q S U P P O R T E A T P E I E L
D N M G N N S V S N O A T Z E R I U O N X R L
C Y H N I I S I S A F E T Y E P O T L C N D E
S O F I Y N T S O F A H X H I E N I I E A L S
T M A L L L L L Y O N S A Q V S D R O C Y M I N
L Q S A L E R U S S E R P B M G U N Y C F H U
M T A E U J L E S B C F B E L O N G I N G C O
G B S H B U H U K E Z Y T I L A U Q E B A C C

Laws and policies

CONSTITUTION
SASA
SIAS
CSTL
CHILDREN
EDUCATION
SAFETY
WELLBEING
SUPPORT
RIGHTS
POLICY
INCLUSION
DIGNITY
EQUALITY

Learner experiences

BULLYING
TRAUMA
ANXIETY
STRESS
DEPRESSION
COUNSELLOR
HEALING
BELONGING
RESILIENCE
CARE
VIOLENCE
POVERTY
ABSENTEEISM
HOPE
~~IDENTITY~~
~~PRESSURE~~

EQUAL EDUCATION

This toolkit was made by learners-for-learners. Accordingly, this toolkit has been designed through different consultation stages with learners. Equalisers, who are learner-members of Equal Education, have made it clear as a matter of urgency that learners require mental health support services.

A special thank you to the members of the psychosocial support team, who are learners from different schools:

Refilwe Jankie, Grade 12; **Liso Putela**, Grade 12 (Masibambisane Secondary School)

Ayanda Kholokholo, Grade 12; **Emihle Tima**, Grade 12 (Khanyolwethu Secondary School)

Zusiphe Jafta, Grade 12; **Refeletse Malehase**, Grade 11 (Masiyile High School)

Zimvo Banjathiwe, Grade 10 (Hector Peterson Senior Secondary School)

Mercy Maunde, Grade 12 (Sinethemba Secondary School)

Zenande Nyete, Grade 11 (Thandokhulu High School)

Ahlumile Mpalazo, Grade 12, (Simanyene High School)

Asange Gaba, Grade 11, (Marian Girls High School)

Itumeleng Nontswabu, Grade 12 (KwaMfundo High School)

Lilitha Ntombini, Grade 12 (Hindle High School)

Qhayiya Buyeye, Grade 10, (Mfuleni High School)

Indiphile Thwani, Grade 10, (Oaklands High School)

Ahlume Jele, Grade 10, (Nomzamo High School)

Emihle Mthekeleli, Grade 12, (Leiden High School)

Awethu Mbovane, Grade 12 (Phakama High School)

Refilwe Jankie

I hope this booklet helps learners realise that their mental health as well as their emotional health actually matters, and that they don't have to carry everything in silence. A lot of us go to schools where there isn't a single social worker or therapist on site, so we end up thinking that struggling emotionally is just something we have to deal with on ~~our~~ our own. I want learners to read this, understand their rights, and know that ~~their~~ asking for help isn't a sign of weakness; it's something they deserve. Above all, I hope it breaks the stigma and gives learners the words to stand up for their well-being, knowing that they aren't invisible and that their feelings are valid.

I want to see our schools become places of real, holistic care, not just places where we are judged by our marks. That means fighting for accessible in-school psychosocial support so having a councelor isn't a luxury for a lucky few, but a reality for all of us. But real change also means looking at the whole school community; recognising that teachers, admin staff, and even the security guards at the gate need care too, because we all shape the school environment together. I want a culture shift where mental health isn't treated as an emergency back-up plan, but as an everyday priority where everyone in the school gates feels safe, seen, and supported.