To: The Vice Chancellor of the Nelson Mandela Metropolitan University, the Dean of the Education Faculty, honored guests, conference participants and delegates – Good evening to you all. Thank you for attending this conference. This is a special event for two important reasons:

1. It is the first of its kind in the country to focus on the topic of the community school as a model for school improvement in South Africa.
2. It highlights the art and practice of possibility – and by this I mean the work of the schools that are participating in this conference.

So this is a special conference, and indeed a timely one, given the current state of schooling in the country. We are seeing, more so now than ever before, a strong public spotlight being thrown on our education system. This spotlight has also highlighted some significant challenges in the education system. We know much about this – from the poor academic performance of schools to the difficulties of the national and provincial governments as well as districts to provide adequate support to our schools and create an enabling environment for school improvement.

The State of Education in South Africa

A recent report commissioned by the South African government shows that primary schools are not providing adequate instruction in reading, writing, and mathematics to almost 80% of the country’s learners; these disadvantages accumulate as students move on to high school, where 79% of the country’s high schools fall into the “poorly performing” category as measured by the Matriculation or Senior Certificate examinations, which students take at the end of grade 12. The low skill levels at high school also catch up with many students who make it to university. A study of one cohort of students who enrolled at university in 2000 showed that almost 30% of them dropped out after the first year; half of the total group dropped out before completing their degree.
Currently, the national and provincial education departments are attempting to respond to the need for school improvement by focusing on the aforementioned school-related aspects of education. Their efforts include putting systems in place to improve teaching and learning, supporting the professional development of teachers, and introducing programs to increase literacy and numeracy levels in schools.

In addition to all of this, studies on the quality of schooling in South Africa concur that poverty remains by far the most powerful determinant of school improvement and educational opportunity in the country. Social context matters: negative social forces like poverty, unemployment, crime, and violence that are prevalent in many communities invariably affect the schooling process and impact students’ educational experiences and outcomes. These forces emerge as an outcome of both South Africa’s historical legacy of apartheid and the socio-economic arrangements of the current political dispensation—where the adoption of neo-liberal economic policies has contributed to growing inequality and poverty in the country.\(^1\)

In South Africa, poverty and the negative forces related to it, like hunger, illness, crime, and violence, are concentrated in many urban townships and rural communities. South Africa’s poverty rate stood at 57% in 2001 (SA Human Sciences Research Council, 2004),\(^2\) and the unemployment rate was 40% in 2004 (Kingdon & Knight, 2006). These forces conspire to severely limit the opportunity for achievement among the children and young people who live in these communities.

International research shows that inadequate housing, health care, and nutrition, as well as unemployment and unsafe environments, all have negative effects on the learning and development of children (Books, 2004; Duncan & Brooks-Gunn, 1997; Dryfoos, 1994). The same challenges are found in many of South Africa’s township schools, and contribute to high absenteeism rates, poor academic performance, violence on and around the school premises, and low morale and motivation amongst educators (Budlender, 1999; Fiske & Ladd, 2005; South African Human Rights Commission (SAHRC) Report, 2006).

\(^1\) The gap between the rich and poor in South Africa has increased significantly in the last few years. The Gini coefficient, the instrument used to measure income inequality, continues to rise, making South Africa one of the most unequal societies in the world. The Southern African Regional Poverty Network (SARPN), http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000990/.

\(^2\) The poverty line in South Africa for a household of four members is R1,290 (approximately $170 US) per month. SARPN, http://www.sarpn.org.za/documents/d0000990/. 
Further compounding these already difficult circumstances is the growing devastation caused by the HIV/AIDS pandemic. In 2001, four and a half million people, 10.3% of the nation’s total population, were living with HIV/AIDS; 600,000 children have been orphaned by the pandemic (UNAIDS, 2002). The effects of HIV/AIDS are increasingly felt in many township communities and their schools. The national Health Ministry revealed that the yearly death rate due to HIV/AIDS has doubled (“Minister,” Nov. 2009, p. 3). Almost 300,000 people succumbed to the disease in 1997 and by the end of 2008, this figure had climbed to 756,000 people. In addition to the issues of poor health and poor school attendance, the prevalence of the disease has also contributed to higher levels of psychosocial trauma, fragmentation of family units, and an increase in the number of child-headed households and orphans who attend schools (Abt Associates, 2000; Badcock-Walters, 2001; SADC Workshop, 2001; Smart, 1999; Swart, 2005).

Now, given this background of what may seem extremely daunting and even overwhelming challenges to improve the academic, social, and emotional outcomes for our children, we are faced with the question “What can be done?”

**Schools that make a difference**

This conference is about responding to that question, and tomorrow we will focus on the work of a group of schools that are addressing some of the social challenges to education. These schools are part of a small number of schools across this province and in the country that provide an effective education against the odds. They represent the art and practice of possibility, and there is much we can learn from them. In essence these schools have developed a clear understanding that if the children in their communities are to succeed educationally, then they will have to change the way they operate in their core functions. These schools focus on the academic growth of students and deal with many of the social challenges that affect their cognitive and psychosocial development. They choose not to be limited by their social circumstances, but rather to act upon it. They do this by building active partnerships with parents, community members and organizations, businesses, religious groups and other education stakeholders. The notions of self-agency and collective efficacy drive their work, and they have developed an integrated approach to school improvement that incorporates outside support and development programs into the operational functions of the school to support teaching, learning, and student development. In essence, these
Community Schools focus on the holistic development of the child and situate their work within the context of school improvement and community development. This, to me, is the essential feature that defines the Community School.

Central to the work of any school is the inner circle. This is the core work of schools, which we refer to as effective teaching and learning. Teaching and learning is not only the core work of schools, but also the district, and this should be reflected at both the organizational and personal levels of all those involved in the educational enterprise.

The instructional core consists of three components – the teacher, the student or learner, and the curriculum. These three components are held together by an interactive and dynamic
relationship. Thus, learning occurs when a teacher who is skilled, teaches a student who is engaged, using content that is relevant.

Around the instructional core we find the organizational structures of the school, which should be designed to support the core. In other words, these aspects of school functioning should create the enabling conditions in which effective teaching and learning can occur.

However, we do know that in many instances the influence from the external environment can disrupt the core functions of schools and negatively affect the quality of education. I have mentioned the effects of some of these forces earlier. This is where the Community School comes into its own. It seeks to work in the area outside of the school also to address some of the challenges it faces from the external environment. This is where it builds active partnerships with parents and community members, religious organizations, businesses, universities etc. to support student learning and development. These activities are often directly related to instruction (e.g. running a Saturday Maths Programme for students) or indirectly related (like addressing some of the health challenges to students). The activities are also context-specific and relevant to needs and requirements of a particular school-community. As I mentioned earlier, these schools adopt an integrated approach to school improvement that incorporates outside support and development programs into the operational functions of the school to support teaching, learning, and student development.

What are some of the effects of the work on the schools?

1. Improved school readiness
   The three schools in this study have made consistent efforts to reach out to parents and encourage their support for their children in academic and other school-related activities.

2. Increased student attendance
   Despite challenges associated with student absence due to ill health, caring for sick family members or siblings, and other social problems, all three schools in the study reported improvements in student attendance.

3. Increased parent involvement
   Parental involvement was increased by reaching out to parents around issues affecting the children as well around social needs in the community.

4. Access to health care
   The schools have a strong focus on the health of students.
5. *Strengthening teaching*

The programs at the schools contributed to supporting and strengthening teacher practice.

6. *Access to extended learning opportunities*

The programs also expanded learning opportunities for the students.

7. *Building skills and creating employment opportunities*

In addition to the effects of the programs on schools, a number of the activities also brought benefits to the communities. This not only included dealing with some of the health issues, but also with the problems related to poverty. The schools sought to facilitate activities for parents and community members that would lead to sustainable livelihoods and some form of income.

Another effect of the strong school and community connections is the contribution it makes to nation building in the country. The work in these schools is based on notions of inclusion, empowerment, and collective decision-making. In essence, it develops community “voice” and fosters a sense of democratic participation in these communities.

All of the above effects suggest that the programs brought benefits to the schools and communities, and serve as important factors that support student development and learning in the schools.

Now I don’t want to romanticize or oversimplify the notion of the Community School as a flawless model for school improvement school improvement in South Africa. These schools will testify that this work is incredibly hard, very complex, and is often characterized by setbacks. After all, schools are located at the intersection of a number of competing social, political, and economic forces in society, the effects of which are often experienced in schools. The concept of the Community School should not be thought of as a programme or project, with fixed beginning and end dates. It should rather be thought of as a process, as a way of life, a way of functioning in society, as a dynamic journey that involves continual cycles engagement and reflection.
So why does the concept of the Community School warrant further attention and what are the factors that enable us to establish more schools like these?

Schools in many of our communities are well positioned to take on the task of addressing some of the needs that arise from the social context. A number of factors enable schools to do this. Firstly, schools, together with religious and other organizations, serve as sites of social cohesion in many communities, where they bring a number of stakeholders together around the educational enterprise (Gold, 2002; Shirley, 1997; Warren, 1998). Parents and other education stakeholders can therefore be mobilized to address a broader range of issues that affect students.

Secondly, many schools serve as shared public spaces. Community members use them for purposes other than education, like church services and community meetings. The organizational linkages that schools have to these groups can be used to build a network of support around students and their families (Brown, 1998; McKnight & Kretzmann, 1993; Noguera, 1996).

The third reason why schools are well situated to address the needs that arise from the social context is that they have direct access to a large number of students to whom support and services can be provided, and indirect access to officials across the public service spectrum (education, health, welfare and social services) that can provide these services. These are all factors that favour the establishing of Community Schools in the country.

What can we do to support the Community School?

Firstly, while the work is school-driven it should not be regarded as school-only, and by this I mean that schools on their own are expected to solve the problems of society. This, I believe is unfair. We cannot expect schools to solve the problems of society on their own. It is also one of the reasons why schools are reluctant to address some of the social challenges on their own. Improving schools should be is our collective responsibility. This IS the Moral Imperative of our time.

While resources are very important and always welcome, this is not the only way in which schools can be supported. We all know what some of the challenges of educational delivery are, but government can also create policies that lead to greater cross-sectoral collaboration to support schools like these, where, for example there is a coordinated approach between the
Education, Health, and Social Services Departments to deliver programmes to schools and communities.

Business can help with the building of a skills pipeline that starts at primary school and goes through to Higher Ed. Sector. An example of this is the Coega Development Project right here in this province. What kinds of skills will we need for the jobs required here and how can we make learning relevant to this work at the early stages of schooling?

Universities too can support the work of the Community School by not only offering courses to build skills and capacity, but also by producing scholarship that is both rigorous and relevant. There is much we can learn from these schools, this is knowledge built from the ground up. So what is the research agenda we can build around it, with research teams that comprise members of faculty as well as school-community members?

I just returned from an international conference, where we raised the issue of Africa as a source of information rather than source of knowledge production. The Community School provides a wonderful opportunity for African scholarship to emerge, and I am already thinking of a title, which could be “Redefining Peoples Education in a Democratic South Africa”.

So there is much all of us can do in supporting the Community School.

In conclusion, as we consider the work of such schools tomorrow we will encounter a group of principals, teachers, parents and other community members who are redefining the roles and functions of their schools in South Africa. During the apartheid dispensation, the purpose of schools like these was to reproduce the unequal social relations in society based on race. These schools and their principals offer new possibilities as they seek to develop a critical consciousness that sees the conditions in which they live and work as neither “unalterable nor inevitable” (Freire, 1973), and take action to change the circumstances within which they find themselves.

In short, these schools choose not to be defined by their contexts; rather, they strive to reshape the social realities in which they operate. They do this by setting high learning standards for their students and developing programmes for them, by creating employment
opportunities for parents, by attending to the health needs of students. These are but a few of the ways in which they are changing the conditions around which teaching and learning occur.

More importantly, the work of these schools opens up new spaces for human agency—the actions that people take, both individually and collectively, to change their circumstances and improve the conditions in which they live and work. This is the humanizing pedagogy that Prof. Zinn speaks about. It is also the practical manifestation of a Paulo Freire’s Pedagogy of Hope. These schools and others, carry the torch of hope for our country. The big question is: Will we join them?

Thank you again and I look forward to our interactions tomorrow.