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Remarks on the Occasion of the Launch of
Lebone II, College of the Royal Bafokeng
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Good afternoon.

Some of you have travelled many miles to be part of this occasion, and we are happy to have you with us.

We are gathered here today not only to launch our school, but also because our education system is in crisis. It is my wish to engage in a frank conversation with you—some of the brightest and most committed people I know—about how we can work together to address this situation.

I'm sure I don't need to tell you that South Africa regularly ranks at the very bottom of international indices of academic performance. Despite the fact that we spend around 18% of the government's budget on education (more than we spend on any other sector), we don't even feature in the top one hundred countries in terms of reading, maths, or science. And this is merely looking at the aggregate numbers. When you separate the independent and Model C schools from the public schools in rural areas like this, the picture gets a lot more grim. Allow me to highlight some of the specific challenges rural schools in developing communities like ours face.

Here, we teach children to read in the first three grades, but we don't give them any books to practice with. That's like teaching a child to play soccer, but denying him a ball. Many of our schools in rural areas do not have libraries that you or I would recognise as such. In terms of numeracy, we teach children to count, add, and subtract, but we don't teach them the higher order thinking skills they need to be able to compute, analyse, compare, and organise information. Without basic literacy and numeracy skills, our children cannot synthesise information to make an informed decision. They cannot think in three dimensions in order to draw a simple plan. They cannot understand a sequence well enough to carry out a set of instructions. In other words, they cannot function in a world that requires thinking, planning, and understanding. This may not be true of all South African schools, but it is certainly the situation in the schools that serve rural villages such as Phokeng. This amounts to systematic educational inequality in a country that has fought so hard to achieve a level playing field for all.

How are we, as a country, responding to this situation? We are talking about extending the time it takes to get a junior degree, so that universities can offer remedial teaching to students who are otherwise unable to handle university-level work. Is that the correct place to intervene? Is there a reason why we don't offer any formal teaching qualification for educators interested in children between the ages of 3 and 5? Are we blind to the critical importance of early childhood education? Why do we allow schools to continue to be run by school governing bodies consisting of people who are ignorant of their mandate, unaware of their powers, and largely ineffectual? I say this with the greatest respect to our governing bodies, and have no doubt of their commitment.

This isn't true of every school, but it seems to be the rule in schools located in poorer communities. Should we blame government? Apartheid? The unions perhaps, or even the children?

It's time for transformational structural change in our schools. I'm not talking about quick fixes, or about gradual, incremental improvements, but a radical rethinking and retooling of how we do education in areas like ours. This is not a small or simple task, but I'm confident it is achievable. With all the recent research and models at our disposal for transforming dysfunctional schools into vibrant places of learning, I believe it is our moral imperative to take up the challenge, and ensure that we change the prospects of our children in the immediate future.

How do we go about this?

Some of you are educators, principals and policy makers, and your role in this process is clear. Recruit, retain, and empower the best teaching talent you can find, and develop the brightest and most energetic young educators to be the principals, government officials, and policymakers of tomorrow. Set your standards very high, and do whatever it takes to help young people achieve excellence within your sphere of influence.

But many of us are not educators. Those of you in business know that the continued skills shortage in critical trades will have a devastating impact on any growth prospects in South Africa. What can you do? You can be the influential advocates of radical change in our society. Teachers and principals cannot do it all on their own. They need the right legislative frameworks, resources, public support, and opportunities in order to effect needed change. Those of us who share the concern—indeed the obligation—to provide better education to all children must combine forces and speak with one voice on this, the most critical issue of our generation.

For our part here in the Phokeng, we have given a great deal of thought to how we should approach the education crisis facing us. In 2007, we established the Royal Bafokeng Institute (RBI) to oversee educational reform in all the schools in this region. We brought together a team of subject specialists and exam moderators, school management experts, educational psychologists, and gifted educators to tackle educational challenges in our schools. We quickly discovered how bad things were. I'm not joking when I tell you that one of the first things we did was to clean the school toilets—to rid dangerous, hazardous places that were symptomatic of our schools' overall disregard for children. Then we attacked literacy, numeracy and science. We moved on to school safety, nutrition, and loans for tertiary students.

Currently we are developing early childhood programs, technical and vocational training facilities, and a thirteenth year program that aims to prepare prospective university students for a successful academic career. At a broader level, we are in the process of establishing Bafokeng schools as Section 14 schools—public schools on private land, commonly known as charter schools elsewhere. This will allow us to become much more involved in the running of our schools, in partnership with government. With the levers of change more firmly in our grasp, we are much more motivated to make the necessary investments to transform our public schools, along the lines of the charter school movement in the U.S.

Lebone II is an integral part of this plan. I am convinced that the only way to truly achieve excellence is to have living examples of it, against which you can benchmark your own efforts and results. If you've never been exposed to a truly excellent school, how would you know how to build or manage one? A school like Lebone II, which embodies all that we strive for in any of our schools, thus becomes a catalyst for change. To facilitate this, the school was designed as a teaching hospital, incorporating spaces and opportunities for the 1200 teachers in our region, to improve themselves. Our investment in this space, then, has a far-reaching goal: the continual improvement of, and active collaboration with 45 other schools.

On a personal note, I attended Hilton College, which is an excellent school by any standard. But I have vivid memories of black students at Hilton becoming very disoriented about themselves and their identities whilst at school. They downplayed their heritage, and felt embarrassed of their languages and traditions. Many of them became financially and professionally successful people, but this kind of self-loathing doesn't make for a happy or well-adjusted life.

In contrast, I envisioned a place of academic excellence rooted in an African context that celebrates African traditions, replete with stories of pride and upliftment that kids from rural and developing communities like ours can recognise and call their own.

To that end, we designed a school that offers an academic programme as good as any in the world, one that is not elitist, but an institution that embraces and celebrates its context. Like any start-up business, this is a process, but we are confident that we are getting there in leaps and bounds. We felt it was important to ground that academic programme in the history and culture of this specific community. So with open arms, we welcome students from all backgrounds to come here to learn to speak Setswana and participate in our traditions, to appreciate colonial and apartheid history through the lens of the Bafokeng people, and to celebrate the spirit and identity of a small African community that welcomes modernity, change, and growth as opportunities to learn.

I wish you could have all been here last night when the school community gathered to celebrate in a wonderful production of our songs, our stories, our dances, and our values. Every child, from Grade R to Grade 13, took part, and this celebration exemplified the inclusive spirit of our African cultures that I'm speaking about.

We are proud of Lebone II, but I hasten to note that education reform is NOT primarily a question of resources. It is primarily a question of leadership. Leadership in using available resources in the right ways. Leadership in nurturing, empowering, and rewarding excellent teachers. Leadership in pioneering early childhood education to develop young minds in the most formative years. Leadership in understanding that preparing young people for the world of work, does not mean asking them to forget who they are and where they come from.

Lebone II seeks to be a leader in education in South Africa. To that end, we need you to join us, partner with us, challenge us, compete with us, but above all else, share with us in the belief that there is hope for education in South Africa, and that ordinary people like us, in ordinary places like Phokeng, can and must make a difference.