

Business Day 4 August 2006

Adult learning needs urgent overhauling

Sue Blaine

Education Correspondent

Government and nongovernmental organisations would have to change the way in which adults were taught and assessed if illiteracy was to be halved by 2012 as planned, Deputy Education Minister Enver Surty said yesterday.

“One has to be honest and admit that over the last decade adult education in SA has been trapped between meagre resources and overly ambitious expectations,” Surty said in Johannesburg at the start of Adult Learner Week.

Surty said Education Minister Natedi Pandor admitted in April last year that neither the formal adult basic education and training system nor a more informal government-funded approach had produced results.

Adult education had become “utilitarian and narrow” and adults were also not given enough opportunities to learn how to read and write, and gain other education, he said.

Eradicating illiteracy has been a government priority since 1994 and its education programme was introduced in 1995. However, the number of people over 20 who have no schooling has not changed much in the five years since they were measured at 4.5-million by Census 2001, nor has the 4-million people who have “some primary schooling”.

Earlier this year Prof John Aitchison, head of a ministerial task team, said SA’s high unemployment rate created a problem for illiterates. He said unemployed illiterates who would most benefit from education were often left out of the training loop, even though there was a skills development levy, a tax of 1% of payroll, which is used to fund the training of those with little or no skills but are employed in the various economic sectors.

Surty said the ministerial committee on literacy, which visited Cuba, Venezuela and New Zealand earlier this year, had presented Pandor with a report which was receiving urgent attention from government so that an adequately resourced strategy could be planned.