

Fellow Scholar Transport Drivers Critical

By Viwe Mazwana

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Barely a week after the 2026 school year had started, South Africa was shaken by an accident that killed 13 learners in Vaal on Monday, 19 January 2026. Thirteen young lives were cut short while simply travelling to school, a journey that should never be a death sentence.

Preliminary investigations, described as pointing to negligence, indicate that the taxi transporting the learners collided with a truck, resulting in the tragic loss of life. In a media statement, the Parliamentary Basic Education Committee confirmed these findings, calling the incident “a national tragedy that demands accountability”.

“This tragic loss of young lives underscores the urgent need for stricter oversight, enforcement of road safety regulations, and accountability within the scholar transport sector,” said committee member Ms Maimela, adding that authorities are expected to intensify scrutiny to prevent similar tragedies in the future.

The painful truth is the widespread problem of overloading. Scholar transport operators admit that transporting children, particularly from working-class communities, is expensive. With parents struggling to afford fees, some operators overload vehicles to make ends meet. While this reality explains the pressure, it does not excuse endangering children’s lives. Overloading turns transport vehicles into death traps and must be condemned.

Zola Mshazi, a scholar transport driver from Palm Ridge, Ekurhuleni, condemned the actions of the driver involved in the Vaal crash, saying: “When you are a driver, you protect the lives of the people you are carrying at all costs. What happened in Vanderbijlpark was reckless.”

On Tuesday, 20 January 2026, scholar transport drivers across Soweto woke up to a heavy police presence, with officers stopping vehicles, conducting inspections, and impounding those deemed unroadworthy or unlicensed. While such enforcement is necessary, it remains reactionary rather than preventative.

The accident highlights the state of the scholar transport industry in South Africa, which operates largely unregulated and unsupported. Road safety should be enforced every day, not only after tragedy. Consistent policing could have removed dangerous vehicles and reckless drivers from the roads long before innocent lives were lost.

Mthokozisi Matthews, a scholar transport owner from Soweto, says that unlike the taxi industry, scholar transport receives little to no government funding, and this neglect worsens safety risks. “The scholar transport industry doesn’t receive any funding from the government. Things would be better if the state did what it did with the taxi industry — taking old vehicles off the road and giving operators enough funding to get safer, newer ones,” Matthews said.

He added that regulation should not be feared. “If it means we can receive incentives as the taxi industry does, then there’s nothing wrong with regulating the scholar transport sector.”

The deaths of these 13 learners were the result of carelessness, poor regulation, and state neglect. If South Africa is serious about protecting its children, urgent regulation is required. Scholar transport drivers must undergo proper training and vetting. Government funding and subsidies should be introduced to ensure vehicles are safe and roadworthy, especially in working-class communities. Law enforcement must move from crisis-driven responses to visible policing that prevents tragedy rather than merely responding to it.

Most importantly, thirteen families are now grieving because warnings were ignored and responsibilities were neglected. Communities must work together and reach collective decisions to prevent such tragedies in the future.

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