



INTERNET ARTICLE

Mpumalanga Learner Crowned National Winner at 2026 South African Youth Water Prize

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A 17-year-old learner from Mpumalanga has been crowned the national winner of the 2026 South African Youth Water Prize (SAYWP), earning the opportunity to represent South Africa at the prestigious Stockholm Junior Water Prize in Sweden later this year.

Sinenhlanhla Sikhulile Nkosi from Sintintile Secondary School in Mbombela emerged victorious during the national finals of the South African Youth Water Prize held from 28 to 29 May 2026 at the Protea Hotel OR Tambo in Kempton Park, Gauteng.

Nkosi impressed adjudicators with his innovative project titled "*Barrier Coatings for Reducing Microplastic Release and Chemical Leaching in Plastic Containers,*" which addresses growing environmental concerns surrounding plastic pollution and water quality.

The annual competition, hosted by the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS) in partnership with the Water Research Commission (WRC), brought together the country's top young scientists and innovators from all nine provinces to showcase research projects and innovative solutions aimed at addressing South Africa's water and environmental challenges.

As the overall winner, Nkosi will represent South Africa at the Stockholm Junior Water Prize in Stockholm, Sweden, in August 2026, where he will compete against some of the world's brightest young water innovators.

Second place was awarded to Alissa Pillay from Star College Durban in KwaZulu-Natal, while third place went to Moegamat Panker and Rylee Joseph from Kimberley Technical High School in the Northern Cape.

The two-day competition served as more than just a contest. It provided learners with a unique opportunity to engage with experts, researchers, engineers and professionals within the water sector while gaining insight into career opportunities in science, technology, innovation and environmental management.

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Opening the national competition, Acting Deputy Director-General of the Department of Water and Sanitation, Mr Luxolo Mditshane, congratulated the finalists for reaching the national stage and described them as future leaders whose creativity and dedication demonstrate the immense potential of South Africa's youth.

He encouraged learners to use science, innovation and research as tools to develop practical solutions to water-related challenges facing communities across the country.

Throughout the programme, participants attended presentations and engagements led by various Department of Water and Sanitation initiatives, including the Citizen Science Programme and the DWS Learning Academy, as well as strategic partner organisations such as the Water Research Commission.

Speaking on behalf of the Citizen Science Programme, Ms Noloyiso Mbiza highlighted the importance of youth involvement in environmental protection and sustainable development.

She encouraged learners to continue applying science and innovation to address environmental challenges and reminded them that safeguarding natural resources requires active participation from all citizens.

One of the highlights of the programme was a motivational address by Water Research Commission Chief Executive Officer, Dr Jennifer Molwantwa, who challenged learners to become creators of opportunities through innovation, research and entrepreneurship.

She encouraged participants to remain curious, resilient and solution-oriented, reminding them that every successful innovation begins with identifying a problem and having the courage to solve it.

The Department's Learning Academy also introduced learners to educational and career opportunities available within the water sector. Learners were exposed to bursary opportunities, internships, graduate programmes and specialised career pathways in fields such as Hydrology, Geology, Geohydrology, Water Resource Management, Microbiology and Geomatics.

On the second day of the competition, Gauteng Provincial Head of the Department of Water and Sanitation, Mr Justice Maluleke, reflected on the importance of water security and sustainable water management in South Africa.

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He highlighted challenges facing the sector, including acid mine drainage, water pollution, wastewater management and growing water demand, encouraging learners to view these challenges as opportunities for innovation and scientific discovery.

"I urge you to sharpen your minds while you are still in school and to fully embrace the learning experience and engagement opportunities presented through this competition," said Maluleke.

Learners also received encouragement from Ms Nanga Breakfast, who praised their commitment and determination while highlighting the long-term impact of the South African Youth Water Prize programme in shaping future professionals and leaders.

A particularly inspiring moment came from former SAYWP participant and current Department of Water and Sanitation Production Civil Engineer, Mr Mashila Phihlela.

Having participated in the competition in 2013, Phihlela shared his personal journey from a rural village in Limpopo to becoming a professional engineer responsible for dams and hydraulic structures.

Although he did not place among the top winners during his year of participation, the experience opened doors to bursary opportunities that ultimately led to a successful engineering career.

Encouraging learners to believe in their potential, he shared a powerful message:

"I am somewhere in the future, and I look much better than I am looking now."

His story served as a reminder that participation, perseverance and determination can often be as valuable as winning.

Projects were evaluated by a seven-member adjudication panel comprising representatives from the Department of Water and Sanitation, Water Research Commission, Nelson Mandela University, Rand Water and Thungela Resources.

Learners competed in two categories: the Awareness Category, which focused on identifying water-related challenges and recommending practical solutions, and the Innovation Category, which focused on developing technical models, inventions and scientific solutions to address water-related issues.





The adjudicators praised the quality of research, innovation and presentation skills demonstrated by participants and encouraged learners to continue developing their projects beyond the competition.

In recognition of their achievements, all national finalists received bursaries and laptops.

As the competition concluded, the Department of Water and Sanitation congratulated all finalists, educators, adjudicators, mentors, regional coordinators and strategic partners who contributed to the success of the programme.

Now celebrating more than two decades of empowering young people through science and innovation, the South African Youth Water Prize continues to play a vital role in developing future scientists, engineers, researchers and environmental leaders who will help safeguard South Africa's water future.

The 2026 competition once again demonstrated that young South Africans are not only aware of the country's water challenges but are actively developing innovative solutions that have the potential to create lasting change for communities and the environment.

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