



MEDIA STATEMENT

Mpumalanga learner to represent South Africa at prestigious Youth Water Prize in Sweden

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Mpumalanga has reached a historic milestone after a Grade 11 learner from Sintintile Secondary School was named the 2026 national winner of the South African Youth Water Prize (SAYWP), earning the opportunity to represent South Africa on the global stage in Sweden later this year.

Sinenhlanhla Sikhulile Nkosi, from Kanyamazane in Mbombela, was crowned the overall winner at the 27th SAYWP national finals held on 29 May 2026 at the Protea Hotel OR Tambo in Kempton Park, Johannesburg. His victory marks the first time Mpumalanga has won the prestigious national title, placing the province firmly on the map for youth-led innovation in science and water sustainability.

Hosted annually by the Department of Water and Sanitation (DWS), the South African Youth Water Prize is an educational initiative aimed at learners in Grades 9 to 11. The competition encourages young people to identify water-related challenges in their schools and communities, conduct research, and develop innovative, practical solutions that respond to environmental and water security concerns.

Nkosi impressed judges with his groundbreaking project titled “The Sentinel Barrier”, an innovative engineered silicone-based elastomeric coating applied to the inner surface of Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET) plastic bottles. The invention is designed to prevent microplastic release and chemical leaching into drinking water, offering a practical response to one of the world’s growing environmental and public health concerns.

As the national winner, Nkosi will represent South Africa at the Stockholm Junior Water Prize in Sweden in August 2026, where he will compete against top young innovators from more than 30 countries.

Speaking proudly and with gratitude, Nkosi said, “Winning still feels hard to believe. More than a personal achievement, I am excited to share my invention with the world. Stockholm is where leading water experts come together, and taking my solution from Kanyamazane in Mpumalanga to that global platform means a great deal to me. It demonstrates that innovation does not always require extensive resources or large institutions, only a problem to solve and the determination to address it.”

Looking ahead, Nkosi said he plans to pursue Mechanical Engineering after completing matric.

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“My invention addresses a materials-based challenge, and Mechanical Engineering will equip me with the technical knowledge to improve it further and develop scalable solutions. Mechanical engineers play an important role in designing systems that improve water treatment and water quality. I want to contribute meaningfully to solving the growing challenge of microplastic contamination through my future work,” he said.

He also encouraged fellow learners to continue pursuing innovation regardless of competition outcomes.

“Not win the competition does not define the quality of an idea. He emphasised that every project contributes to learning and improvement, helping to strengthen future work. He further advised learners not to compare their progress with others, but to focus on their own growth and development.

Department officials congratulated Sinenhlanhla on his remarkable achievement and praised the role of teachers, mentors, and schools in nurturing young talent and innovation. The Department further reiterated its commitment to strengthening collaboration with the Department of Basic Education to enhance water education and broaden opportunities for meaningful youth participation in the water sector.

Nkosi’s success stands as a proud moment for Mpumalanga and a powerful reminder of the critical role young innovators continue to play in shaping sustainable solutions for South Africa and the world.

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