



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MRS ANGIE MOTSHEKGA. MP ON THE BASIC EDUCATION SECTOR RECOVERY PLANS FOR THE REOPENING OF SCHOOLS, FOLLOWING THE COVID-19 LOCKDOWN ADJUSTMENT OF REGULATIONS

30 April 2020

Good afternoon!

The past few weeks have affected South Africans in ways we have never experienced before. Not only have we relied on you to stay at home as per the directive of the President, we have also asked parents, caregivers, and relatives to step in, and keep learners occupied. Add to this, there has been an increase in anxiety and confusion in relation with the status of schooling, and when learners would be allowed to go back into their schools. I cannot overemphasise my gratitude for your understanding and patience, as we continued to work tirelessly to get the education system back to on track.

This morning the National Coronavirus Command Council held a meeting to consider the plans for the basic education sector in the context of the COVID-19. Prior to the presentations of the plans at Cabinet, we presented the plans at the National Coronavirus Command Council.

Since 26 March 2020, in the basic education sector we have held just less than fifty (50) meetings with all the relevant stakeholders. In each meeting, we deliberated on the future of basic education,

following the COVID-19-induced national state of disaster, resulting in the national lockdown. At all times during the consultations we have started with the safety of our learners, teachers and employees. We made safety a priority. It is for that reason that we proposed that schools be reopened to allow officials to receive COVID-19 Personal Protection Equipment (PPE), undergo training, and then prepare the schools before the learners arrive. We proposed dates on when this should happen.

The intention was never to send learners to schools at once. We considered a staggered approach to start first with office-based staff, School Management Teams, the teachers follow, and then the learners in selected Grades would go to school. The reason for doing this, was to prepare the system for some learning to resume. We did not intend to open schools at all costs. We agreed that where schools are ready to open, based on the readiness criteria agreed to, they could proceed and open. Where schools and officials are not ready, they must not open. This has been at the core of our planning. The reason for making safety a priority, is because we understand the concerns of parents and the learners themselves.

The Consultation Process

We have consulted extensively in the sector. We have held robust discussions about what needs to be done to reopen our schools. We have not forgotten why we are here; it is because of the coronavirus. As I said, we held no less than 50 meetings in the sector, to find ways of getting back to work, without compromising the lives of our learners, teachers and employees.

On the 07 and 26 of April, we met and consulted the South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU), the National Professional Teachers of South Africa (NAPTOSA), the Afrikaanse Onderwysers

Unie (SAOU), the National Association of Teacher Union (NATU), and the Professional Educators Union (PEU).

On the 10 and 26 of April, we met the following organisations:

- Association for Special Education (SENASE);
- Education Management Association of South Africa (EMASA);
- South African Principal Association (SAPA);
- Federation of Association of Governing Bodies (FEDSAS);
- National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB);
- and
- Governing Body Foundation (GBF).

On the 21 of April, we consulted the Independent Examination Body (IEB), and the National Alliance of Independent Schools Associations (NAISA). On the 25 and 28 April, we met with South African Comprehensive Assessment Institute (SACAI), and the Southern Africa Union Conference of the Seventh-Day Adventist Church (SABBATH).

On 13 and 17 April, we consulted Umalusi, the Education Labour Relations Council, the South African Council for Educators, Education, the Training and Development Practices Sector Education and Training Authority (ETDP SETA), and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT).

And then on the 22 of April, we met civil society organisations that include NASCEE, TeachSA, PSP, COUNT, Maths Centre, CASME, Nal'ibali, Molteno Institute for language and Literacy, Room to Lead, Project Literacy, Read, New Leaders Foundation, Symphonia for South Africa, PILO, Unicef, MIET, Save the Children, Section 27, Equal Education Law Centre, DGMT, IPASA, ETDP SETA, Nedbank, First Rand, Standard Bank, Zenex, Anglo American, Old Mutual, Kagiso Trust, Triologue, Deans Forum, Nelson Mandela University, University of Johannesburg, University of Free State, ILIFA, Smart Start.

The stakeholders supported the reopening of schools. They suggested that, in order to deal with social distancing, they requested the department to use **community** and **town halls**.

They requested the department to provide **Personal Protection Equipment**. The department should provide an **awareness campaign** to **parents**, particularly in rural areas. They recommended that the phased-in reopening, should also include special schools.

We have also received representations from ordinary members of the public, who are concerned about the impact of the COVID-19, insofar as it affects schools. We appreciate all the proposals; as these are really helpful.

The size and shape of the Basic Education Sector

I wish to remind the South African public that we are a huge national system, comprising the national DBE; nine (9) provincial education departments; seventy-five (75) districts; eight hundred and eighty four (884) circuits; and twenty-five thousand schools – more than twenty-three thousand (23 000) public schools, and about two thousand (2 000) independent schools.

We are servicing a total of more than twelve million four hundred learners in our public schools; and a total of more than six hundred and thirty thousand in our independent schools – giving us a total of more than thirteen million learners in our basic education system. Finally, we have about four hundred and ten thousand educators in our public schools; and about thirty-eight thousand in our independent schools – giving us a total of about four hundred and forty-five educators in our basic education system.

Therefore, our public schooling system comprise 92% of our schools; servicing 95% of our learners; who are taught by 92% of our

teachers. If we are not careful in managing the reopening of schools, the Corona Virus pandemic could have devastating effects on our communities.

Learner support interventions

Following the announcement of the national lockdown by the President, the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) agreed to focus on a catch-up programme, and double our efforts towards the promotion of learning and teaching in homes; and towards the preparation a catch-up programme, when the children come back to schools.

We are grateful that our partners that the Department of Basic Education and partners, have made great strides to reach out to as many learners as possible with the provision of curriculum support during the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Department has used one-hundred and twenty-three (123) radio stations, and six (6) different television channels with a total reach of more than thirty-five (35) million people.

The initiative was put in place as an intervention to bring curriculum lessons to households across the country to assist learners as schools remain closed. This in a bid to minimise the impact of the Corona Virus on basic education.

In addition to the thirteen (13) radio stations of the SABC, which broadcast in all official languages, one-hundred and ten (110) community radio stations are also involved in carrying curriculum content on a daily basis.

The *COVID-19 Learner Support programme* is aimed at limiting the impact of the lockdown to the school calendar. The initiative is part of the broader efforts to prevent a total loss of school year, since

the lockdown was announced by the President, as a measure to combat the spread of the Corona Virus, also known as COVID-19.

The radio lessons broadcast are providing curriculum support lessons to learners in various Grades, including Early Childhood Development (ECD). Some of the subjects covered, include Maths, Physical Sciences, English FAL, Life Sciences, and Accounting. A variety of African languages, are also covered under the ECD basket. Learners are encouraged to check their local listings for the exact slots for radio.

We also made available resources online for those who can access such online resources. We appreciate the contribution by our partners for the zero-rated platforms, which carry curriculum content for use in the current situation of the lockdown.

We acknowledge that all these efforts are not perfect; however, we needed to put in place measures to close the vacuum that would have existed as a result of the COVID-19 lockdown.

The Impact of COVID-19 on basic education

The impact of COVID-19 will be felt for a long time to come. In the immediate period, the virus has affected schooling in general, but more specifically, learner admissions for the 2021 school calendar year, which normally start in April each year. We will communicate a new schedule of dates in that regard, especially for Grades 1 and 8.

We have taken a decision to postpone the May/June Matric rewrite examinations. The exams were due to be written by more than three hundred and fifty thousand (350 000), mainly part-time candidates, from the 04 May and conclude on 26 June 2020.

Due to the lockdown, we have not been able to complete our preparations, which include the printing and distribution of questions papers, the appointment of invigilators, markers, and the general readiness in marking centres.

The examinations will therefore, be merged with the November examinations. A new time-table for the merged examinations will be communicated urgently, as part of preparing the system for the biggest matric examination ever seen in the country. We estimate that one million and one-hundred thousand candidates, will sit for the end-of-year matric examinations in this merged format, which includes the *Amended Senior Certificate* and *National Senior Certificate*.

The Corona Virus is still with us, and it will be with us for some time. It is for that reason that we have taken a decision to cancel all our school enrichment programmes, such as Spelling BEE, the South African Schools Choral Eisteddfod (popularly known as the SASCE), school sports, school trips, and assemblies. All of these, will not be permitted in schools, until such time that we inform the public otherwise. I will speak about the measures to be implemented in schools later.

Due to the infection rate, it is clear that we need to continue to work together, to contain the transmission of the virus. As a sector, we have to play our part together with all our key stakeholders.

On School Fees

The CEM took note of the concern, regarding the issues of school fees. We indicated from the start, that school fees are payable, where the children attend fee-paying schools. We received reports that in some schools, parents did not pay fees; and this has affected the salaries of SGB-appointed teachers. It was agreed that provinces

would look into the matter, to find an amicable but implementable solution. In the meantime, we urge all parents to continue paying school fees. If you cannot pay, because your circumstances have changed as a result of the COVID-19, please approach the school, and communicate your challenges with them.

The Recovery Plan

In the past weeks, we have worked with provinces to prepare for the reopening of schools.

Each province, district, circuit and school, must have a practical and comprehensive catch-up plan to be implemented. The plans must talk to the risk profiles of the areas in which schools are located, and this must be based on the infection rate in the specific geographic areas.

As things stand right now, and based on expert advice, we should be able to manage the spread of the Corona Virus, such that the negative impact on schooling is minimised. We however, need to work together to make this possible.

Ladies and gentlemen, the truth is that we are still in danger, when it comes to the Corona Virus, especially looking at the infection and death rate in the country. We should therefore, not expect all learners back in school together with teachers at the same time.

Government relies on expert advice. The decisions that are taken, are based on scientific considerations. We have been advised to adopt a phased approach in the reopening of schools. Uppermost in our planning, is the health and safety of our school communities – particularly learners and teachers.

Some international experiences

Here are some experiences from other countries, regarding measures put in place to protect learners and teachers from the virus:

- **Taiwan** closed schools only for two weeks, and resumed after that. They introduced strict **social distancing** measures, **temperature screening** in the morning, compulsory **face masks**, and regular **hand-washing**, and **plastic dividers** on desks.
- **China closed all schools** between 20 January and 06 February 2020. They returned different Grades in phases, with Grades 9 and 12 first. Compulsory **cloth masks** and **temperature screening** were introduced, and **hand sanitizers** were made available.
- **Denmark** opened ECD centres and primary schools to Grade 5. There was no face mask requirement; but **desks were separated up to one metre (1 m)**. Regular **hand washing** and **hand sanitisers** were made available. The **playgrounds were cordoned off** to limit interaction and playgroups. **Break times were staggered**. Very **limited uptake** though, as most parents refuse to send children to school. The reopening of schools is into the third week though.
- **Singapore did not close schools**. They have had a **recent spike** in new infections. Recently, the Singaporean government, announced that **all schools and universities to be closed** from 20 April. But **some schools** and **ECD centres**, serving children of the workers who provide essential services, **to remain open**.

Standard Operating Procedures for the containment and management of COVID -19

We developed **Standard Operating Procedures** (SOPs) for the containment and management of the Corona Virus for childcare facilities, schools, and school communities. This we did, in consultation with the Department of Health. The Standard Operating Procedures will provide **guidelines for all administrators** on the **steps to be undertaken** in order to prevent the spread, and manage cases of COVID-19, including:

- Guidance for childcare facilities and schools on **preventing the spread** of the Corona Virus;
- Role of childcare facilities and schools in **responding** to the COVID-19;
- **Management** of COVID-19 cases in a childcare facility or school;
- Guidelines for Heads of Departments and Supervisors on COVID-19 – **procedures regarding employees**;
- Management and monitoring of **absenteeism** in schools;
- Management of **learner transport measures**;
- **Closure of a unit / component / office / department**, if an employee tested positive for COVID-19; and
- How to *clean educational establishments*, where there were learners, staff members, or others, with suspected or confirmed cases of COVID-19.

Pillars of our sector plan

In our case, the CEM agreed on a number of steps that must be taken to ensure that the health and safety of our learners and teachers are not compromised. These measures are contained in the Standard Operating Procedures Booklet, which will be used in all schools.

The following are **guidelines on social distancing**:

- Physical distances in classrooms, includes **not more than 2 learners** sharing desks;
- No **hugging or handshaking**;
- **Direct contact** must be avoided;
- **Cloth masks** to be worn by learners and teachers at all times;
- **No mass public events**. All sports matches, choral practices and festivals, eisteddfods are not permitted; and
- **Extra classes** should be arranged in **small groups** that maintain social distancing.

Infrastructure and Furniture:

- Sanitize classrooms **prior** to the start of school day;
- sanitize hands on **entering** of classrooms;
- Limit **movement** of learners between classes; and
- No **clustering** of desks in classrooms.

Transport:

- We are working with the Department of Transport to ensure that **buses are sanitised** prior to start of all trips;
- Everybody to sanitize hands on **entering** of the buses;
- The **distance** between learners in the buses must be managed; and
- The **wearing of masks** throughout the school day, starting before boarding transport, is **compulsory**.

Remedial measures

The provincial education departments have identified three thousand five hundred schools that critical water supply challenges. These schools are spread all over the country, except for the Western Cape. The highest numbers of these schools are in KwaZulu-Natal, Eastern Cape, Limpopo and Mpumalanga.

The Department of Water and Sanitation has initiated an Emergency Water Supply programme, through which **water tanks** will be installed at critical supply points; and **portable water** will be delivered to these tanks, using **water trucks**. The DBE will participate in this initiative to get water tanks installed at the identified schools, and to get portable water delivered to these tanks.

Basic hygiene and sanitation package

A basic and **essential hygiene** and **sanitation** package has been developed, and provinces are procuring the critical items. These, include cleaning and disinfection materials, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), sanitisers, hand-washing soap, gloves, cloth masks and thermometers.

The DBE has developed **Guidelines** for schools on maintaining hygiene during the COVID-19 pandemic to provide recommendations on the proper cleaning, and use of Personal Protective Equipment, based on risk exposure including:

- Basic principles of **infection prevention** and control;
- **Risk reduction** methods for schools, classrooms, toilets or bathrooms, offices, and food preparation areas;
- Daily **duties** of cleaners; and
- **How to use** Personal Protective Equipment.

Screening and testing

- **Screening** of learners and educators will be done at the reopening of schools, starting with Grades 7 and 12. **Temperature** checks will be administered; and
- Learners or staff members who present with **raised temperatures**, will then be considered for **isolation** and **testing**.

On the Reopening of Schools

There are preconditions for the reopening of schools. We have developed a **curriculum recovery framework**, which is guided by the following **principles**:

- **Responsiveness** to the national COVID-19 programme to ensure that the national regulations, programmes and protocols are strictly adhered to;
- **Inclusion and equity** to ensure that all learners, and in particular the most vulnerable, access the planned programme;
- **Targeted approach**, taking cognisance of the unique needs of schools, phases and Grades;
- **Size and scope** to ensure that the curriculum plans are determined in a flexible way, guided by the size and the scope of the crisis, a short- or long-term lockdown, and the implications that this will have on teaching and learning;
- **Partnerships** that promote full participation and ownership of all key stakeholders;
- **Safety and security** in order to maintain the safety, the health and the well-being of teachers, learners and support staff;
- **Time management**, as the time is of essence in the recovery plan, and a focus on skills, knowledge and values;
- **Nationally coordinated approach**, through which, the DBE will provide clear directives of what is expected of each provincial education departments, followed by strict monitoring of compliance to the given directives.

Orientation and training as well as psychosocial support programmes

We have decided on an orientation and training programme for all stakeholders in the sector.

The purpose of the orientation and training programme is to enable learners, educators and non-teaching staff to **adjust** to and become **familiar** with the **special arrangements** at schools, following the outbreak of the Corona Virus in South Africa.

The orientation programme provides **guidelines** for **interaction** with learners, parents, educators and non-teaching staff in the school community. All **learners, educators** and **support staff** will receive orientation and training at the start of the school reopening, commencing with Grades 7 and 12.

We are aware of the impact of the COVID-19 lockdown on families and society in general. It is unprecedented, and as a result, an increase in **social, mental, psychological and emotional difficulties** amongst learners, educators and officials, is anticipated, due to losses and trauma experienced through COVID-19. Schools, as social institutions, are serviced by the Psychosocial Support Services of the **Departments of Social Development and Health**. We have also been working closely with other departments in the Social Cluster.

In addition to these, the Basic Education Sector has **psychologists and social workers**, who had prior training on counseling. They will be able to use their skills to support schools. We are mindful of the needs of learners with disabilities. The DBE is working with provinces to ensure that special schools are adequately provided for in all the plans we have put together.

On the revised School Calendar

As I had indicated earlier the CEM was not rigid in looking about the reopening date. In our school readiness plans, we needed to make sure that they are aligned to the Risk Adjusted Plans, taking into

account epicenters of the spread of the Corona Virus in the different provinces and the Metros.

The original school calendar year, started on 15 January 2020, and would have ended on 04 December 2020.

This morning the National Coronavirus Command Council approved that the School Calendar for 2020 be adjusted as follows

- Office-based staff to return to work on **04 May 2020**. This is in line with the directive from the Department of Public Service and Administration;
- School Management Teams should return to work on **11 May 2020**. This, we have done to ensure that the School Management Teams prepare the schools prior to return of learners;
- Teachers return to work on **18 May 2020**; and then
- Grade 12 and 7 learners, go back to school on **01 June 2020**.

As I said earlier, the plan is to have officials in the schools, to receive the material that is required for the safety measures; but also to prepare the school for learning and teaching under the new conditions.

The school calendar will be **gazetted** once the administrative work has been completed.

Special arrangements will be made to permit learners and teachers, who are currently in other towns or cities, provinces and/or neighboring countries, other than those where their respective schools are located, to return to their schools and places of residence.

A special dispensation will also put in place for learners who experience barriers to learning, taking into account the severity of barrier.

On the vandalism of schools

We want to express our deep concern about what is happening in our schools since the lockdown was imposed. Provinces have reported that nine-hundred and sixty two (962) schools have been vandalised in almost all our seventy-five (75) districts. The theft, vandalism and burglaries have taken place in all provinces. In almost all the incidents, administration blocks and laboratories have been targeted, and ICT equipment has been stolen.

Provinces have also reported that even foodstuff, meant for the school nutrition programme, has also been stolen. The Umlazi District in KZN, is the hardest hit, with forty-one (41) schools affected. This is shocking and disturbing. We are extremely concerned by this level of criminality.

We welcome the work done by the Police thus far, in arresting the suspects, some of whom, were found in possession of the items believed to have been stolen from the schools.

The barbaric acts of vandalism, must be condemned by all of us. We cannot afford a situation, where the education of our children is further compromised by criminals, over and above what the Corona Virus has brought upon us.

We appeal to members of the public, to work with the Police, to ensure that all the culprits in all the incidents of vandalism, theft and burglaries of our schools, are convicted and jailed for long periods.

Conclusion

We will work together with all stakeholders to ensure that the plans are implemented to the letter. We will establish COVID-19 Control Teams in every province and every district, circuit and school. We will intensify our communication modalities to ensure that communities, parents, teachers and learners know and understand the challenges faced, and the remedies that are necessary to keep everyone within our school premises safe and healthy. We will need lots of help from the community to protect learners and teachers from home to school and back. It has to be a working partnership.

I want to thank all our partners (they are too many to mention), who have come on board to support the work being done to ensure a safe and healthy environment in our schools. The COVID-19 has been a revelation. It has demonstrated that we can find each other quickly, work together to find solutions for the good of the country.

It is our view that the gains made in this crisis, must be maintained going forward. The unity among stakeholders has been phenomenal, and it shows that as a people, we have potential to grow South Africa together. We have a lot of work to do still, the virus is still with us. But through our collaborative efforts, we can, and we will overcome.

We appeal to each one of us, to cooperate with us; and ensure that we put the interest of the children on top of the priority list.

Thank you

Ends