

**14 JULY 2020**

## **STATEMENT BY THE COUNCIL OF EDUCATION MINISTERS FOLLOWING A VIRTUAL MEETING HELD TODAY**

The Minister convened a Special CEM meeting this morning, to reflect on the address by the President to the nation last Sunday, and to get the latest assessment about schooling.

The country is entering the peak of the infections of the virus. It is therefore incumbent on everyone to contribute in enabling the health system to deal with the peak of COVID-19 infections. It is undesirable to deplete the capacity of the health sector, especially at this time, as that capacity will be desperately needed by the country.

It's important to remember that government's decision to gradually lift the lockdown, was and still is predicated on saving lives and livelihood. Schooling is very much part of our livelihood. Schools and indeed the system, are dealing with a completely new environment; and we need to afford the opportunity and space to gradually settle in dealing with the new normal of operating under COVID-19, in line with the Risks Adjusted Differentiated Approach in Reopening schools; otherwise schools may also become overwhelmed.

In terms of the Directions, schools that have demonstrated the ability to adhere to the health, safety and social distancing measures, and are able to settle additional learners faster and easier, will be allowed to continue phasing-in more grades. The Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19, the Department of Health, and the Basic Education Sector will continue to closely monitor the developments in schools, in terms of the virus and the pandemic; and advise the Council of education Ministers (CEM) and Cabinet accordingly. CEM will continue to monitor and evaluate the situation on a weekly basis.

The government is extremely concerned about teachers, principals, non-teaching staff who use any platform to attack government for going back to work; ostensibly creating an impression that they should be treated differently from the rest of the other public servants.

CEM has resolved to take legal action against all individuals and groups that continue to disrupt schooling. We would like to emphasise the fact that the reopening and closure of schools is a legislative responsibility accorded to national and provincial authorities only. Groups and individuals who are not empowered by law do not have the authority to close schools.

CEM wishes to restate that over and above section 51 of the South African Schools Act, which provides for Home Education, there are three additional arrangements made available to those parents who choose not to bring their children back to school.

### **Media Enquiries:**

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CEM has further noted the resolution by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), in which they call for the closure of schools. The decision on whether schools will be closed or not, will be taken by Cabinet.

Having said that, one of the main reasons for the phased-in reopening of schools, was to make sure the unfettered right to basic education for all children, is equitably provided. During Alert Levels 5 and 4 of the national lockdown, most children from the most rural and remote areas of the country, especially learners from quintiles 1-3 schools, could not access any form of online teaching and learning. This, inadvertently negatively affected these children's unfettered right to basic education. It is particularly the poor, who continue to be at risk, if schools do not reopen. Critical in the phased reopening of schools, was adherence to the health, safety and social distancing protocols as determined by the Department of Health.

**On School Nutrition**, the basic education sector is only resourced to provide learners from poor socio-economic backgrounds with daily nutritious meals at our schools. One of the important reasons we wanted to reopen schools, was to enable the poor learners to access the school nutrition programme. There are the learners, who were deprived of the meals due to the national lockdown. With the reopening of schools, we are now feeding our learners; and have further expanded the feeding to learners, who are not yet back in schools. We have now arranged for them to collect food parcels from the schools closest to their homes.

**On corruption**, the Auditor-General is presently auditing the procurement of COVID-19 essentials for schools.

**On learner support**, the sector continues to provide support to learners, using a variety of platforms, including radio, television, online, and of course physical teaching and learning in schools. The DBE has over 330 digital content education sites, that have been zero-rated; and have good curriculum content that can be accessed by any learner, whether they have data or not. The DBE and its partners have also broadcasted and streamed over 3 000 hours of lessons to support learners through television, radio and online platforms. These interventions are part of the Department's effort to ensure unlimited access to rich content for learning during this time.

**On international lessons**, the DBE has repeatedly reported that in our preparations for the phased return of learners to school, we were guided by our science, health and education experts; as well as learning from international experiences. We have repeatedly reported that countries of the world directly affected by the COVID-19 pandemic, have responded differently to the pandemic. Some have completely reopened their schools, some have partially reopened their schools; some even reopened and closed their schools when the realities pertaining to the pandemic forced them to do so. South Africa is definitely no different from international practices.

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**On school attendance**, South Africa is doing admirably quite well. On average, current learner attendance at our schools stands at around 80%; which is much better than most of the countries of the world.

CEM expressed its concern on the increase in infection in communities, and the impact it has on schools. The Council implored all stakeholders to collaborate in the fight against the pandemic.

We would like to reiterate the fact that there are ongoing discussions in government and Cabinet regarding how the phased reopening of schools could maintain the momentum but help to ease the pressure from the health system to focus on dealing with the peak of the pandemic. At the appropriate moment Cabinet will take a decision on the matter.

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