



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MRS ANGIE MOTSHEKGA ON THE STATE OF READINESS FOR THE RETURN OF THE SECOND COHORT OF GRADES BACK TO SCHOOL

5 July 2020

Good afternoon

The last time we briefed the media, was on the 07th June 2020, a week after schools reopened. We asked all MECs to join us at that time to speak about the work done in their respective provinces in preparing for the reopening of schools. We are back here again, almost a month later, and the MECs are with us once again.

So much has taken place, since then in the basic education sector. We have spent many hours and days in consultations with our strategic stakeholders, partners, and within government, looking for solutions on how to proceed in this difficult environment. We have sought and obtained advice from scientists, medical and education experts, which informs the decisions that we make on a daily basis within the basic education sector.

At the last media briefing on 07th June 2020, we indicated that 97.6% of schools were ready to receive learners on 08th June 2020. The technical report of the basic education sector, the external monitoring and evaluation report of the research consortium, led by the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), the report from Rand Water on water provision, as well as the reports from national teacher unions, national school governing body associations, the South African Principals Association (SAPA), and the national

associations responsible for learners with special needs, confirmed this.

When we met as Council of Education Ministers (CEM) on Thursday, 02nd July 2020, we considered several reports, including the Monitoring and Evaluation Report compiled by the independent verification consortium, led by the NECT. These reports aptly painted a clear picture of the basic education landscape, the strategic innovations introduced, the impact of the virus on schooling, as well as the impact and benefits of the programmes we have introduced. At the outset, we wish to remind South Africans that there is currently no cure for COVID-19. All of us must simply follow the health, safety and social distancing protocols on COVID-19. If we fail to do so, the road ahead will be difficult for all of us.

Directions for the phased-in reopening of schools

South Africans will recall that on 29th May 2020, we published the Directions in terms of regulation 4(3) of the Regulations promulgated under the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act No. 57 of 2002), regarding the phased-in reopening of schools, and measures to address, prevent and combat the spread of the Corona Virus in the national Department of Basic Education, all Provincial Education Departments, all Districts offices, and schools in the Republic of South Africa.

On 01st June 2020, we amended the Directions to introduce a definition of Early Childhood Development (ECD), to specifically state that ECD referred to Grade R and lower strictly in schools. We also inserted Grades 1 and 2 in the second cohort of Grades there expected to return to school on 06th July 2020.

On 23rd June 2020, we provided, amongst others, for –

- (a) deviations from the phased-in approach to include more than the Grades deemed necessary, but with the proviso that health, safety and social distancing measures must be complied with;
- (b) school attendance, and the application for exemption from school attendance using section 4 of the South African Schools Act, 1996, (Act No. 84 of 1996);
- (c) the phased-in reopening of schools for learners with special education needs, as well as the reopening of school hostels;
- (d) the curriculum trimming, the reorganisation of the school timetables; as well as clarification on the National Senior Certificate examinations; and
- (e) an alignment of the issuing of permits and certificates with the Regulations issued by the Department of COGTA.

On 29th June 2020, as agreed with the Minister of Social Development, we deleted all references to pre-Grade R in the Directions. Arising from the meeting of the Council of Education Ministers held on Wednesday, 02nd July 2020, we will further amend the Directions in the manner I will state later.

It is important to stress that the Directions are intended to provide for uniform processes and mechanisms to ensure compliance with the health, safety and social distancing measures on COVID-19; as well as safeguarding the basic education system as a unified, democratic and transparent system. The fact that South Africa, like all countries of the world, are faced by a new “normal”, brought on the nations of the world by the COVID-19 pandemic, the basic education system has to continue to be implemented, monitored and strengthened, in compliance with the prescripts of the Constitution, as well as applicable legislation and national policies. The Directions for the basic education sector, are definitely not intended to create unjustifiable deviations and exemptions from

applicable law; but to streamline and strengthen the requisite compliance imperatives.

COVID-19 cases affecting schools

We must continuously remind South Africans that schools are a direct microcosm of societies in which they are located. On a daily basis, we see an unprecedented rise in COVID-19 infections, due to a number of factors, including non-compliance with the health, safety and social distancing protocols on COVID-19.

What we see in our communities, is the same phenomenon that is beginning to creep into our schools. Since our Grade 7 and 12 learners returned to school on 08th June 2020, nine hundred and sixty-eight (968) of the twenty-five thousand, seven hundred and sixty-two (25 762) schools, were closed and reopened.

This is almost four percent (4%) of the total number of public and independent schools in our country. Even the survey conducted by teacher unions, confirms that between four percent (4%) and eight percent (8%) of schools had to close, due infrastructure challenges, or the inability of the schools to fully comply with the COVID-19 protocols.

It must be noted that the average duration for the deep cleaning, decontamination and fumigation of schools, and the preparation of schools for the resumption of teaching and learning, is three (3) days.

Again, since the return of the Grade 7 and 12 learners on 08th June 2020, two thousand, seven hundred and forty (2 740) teachers, of the total number of about four hundred and forty thousand (440 000) teachers, were infected by the virus. This is equivalent to less than one percent (<1%) of the entire teacher population in our

country. In the same period, one thousand, two hundred and sixty (1 260) learners were infected by the virus. This implies that zero point zero one percent (0.01%) of our learners, were infected by the virus.

Not surprising, the highest number of infections, followed the national trends, with the Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng having recorded the highest number of infections for both teachers and learners. Even the report of the consortium of researchers coordinated by the NECT, confirms these facts.

We unfortunately lost the lives of eleven (11) teachers and four (4) non-teaching staff in the Eastern Cape to the virus; as well as three (3) learners, who are reported to have succumbed to COVID-19. The reports show that some of these teachers and learners could not have the opportunity of reporting back to school on school reopening. We convey our deepest condolences to the affected families. May their dear souls rest in eternal peace.

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

On comorbidities

The return of principals, teachers and non-teaching staff to school requires that the risks of vulnerable employees, including those over 60, and those with comorbidities be evaluated and appropriately managed. The concession process to follow for employees with comorbidities, is prescribed in Collective Agreement No. 01 of 2020 for those employed under the Employment of Educators Act, 1998 (Act No.76 of 1998).

High risk vulnerability medical conditions, as determined by the national Department of Health, are listed. We wish to remind the

nation that the basic education sector has about four hundred thousand (400 000) State-employed teachers. Of these State-employed teachers, ten thousand (10 000), who have applied for concessions, have been approved to work from home. This represents two-and-half percent (2.5%) of the teachers on the State payroll. In the coming days, schools have streamlined this area, so that they indeed continue to be functional. The Department will increase its turn-around time when processing applications for concessions.

Water supply sanitation in schools

When we started the discussion on the reopening of schools, the Provincial Education Departments identified about three thousand, five hundred (3 500) schools with water supply challenges. Municipalities came on board, as part of the cooperation between the DBE, COGTA, SALGA, and MISA.

We must report that some schools had existing on-site storage tanks, and just required assistance with filling them up with water. There were however, several schools that did not have on-site storage tanks. Rand Water, contracted by the DBE, assisted with the procurement and delivery of additional on-site storage tanks and water supply.

To date, tanks have been delivered to an additional two thousand, one hundred and seventy-five (2 175) schools. In total, Rand Water assisted with filling on-site storage tanks at three thousand, three hundred and eighty (3 380) schools. It is important to note that over and above the Rand Water contribution, there are several other Water Boards and Municipalities working hard to ensure sustainable water supply and appropriate sanitation at our schools.

In terms of sanitation, we can report that in the Eastern Cape, all nine hundred and ten (910) schools requiring proper sanitation,

have received proper sanitation. In Limpopo, all four hundred and fifty-three (453) schools requiring proper sanitation, have proper sanitation.

National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)

COVID-19 essentials, such as face masks, gloves, disposable aprons, as well as cleaning and sanitation material, have and continue to be provided to food handlers, as well as for kitchens and storage facilities. School feeding for Grades 7 and 12 learners, resumed successfully in all provinces.

Now we have even expanded feeding to learners, who are not yet back in schools. Plans are in place to provide feeding to learners not yet in school using different options, including staggered feeding at school, cooked food collected at school, food parcels collected at school, parcels collected at collection point other than school.

Home Education

There are parents who have decided to keep their children at home during this period of COVID-19 pandemic. These parents are continuously advised to apply to Provincial Education Departments for home learning in terms of section 4 of the South African Schools Act, 1996 (Act No. 84 of 1996). We advise these parents not to go to schools, but rather approach the Provincial Education Departments for help.

Learner support interventions

We are still constrained by COVID-19-related challenges, that we cannot afford to have all learners returning to school at once. To mitigate the resultant challenges, we continue to provide support to learners at home, with a variety of platforms, including radio,

television, online; and of course in school. We have one hundred and ninety-seven (197) sites that are zero-rated; and have good curriculum content that can be accessed, whether one has data or not.

These interventions are part of the Department's effort to ensure unlimited access to content for learning during this time. I must convey our appreciation and sincere gratitude to the Department of Communication and Digital Technologies for the continued supported in this regard. The list of zero-rated is available on the DBE home page, www.education.gov.za

The lessons we have learnt from the COVID-19 must be strategically used to plan for the future. We must strive to bring forward some of the strategic plans under development, for implementation. All of this, should be done during our term of office. Strategic plans on the improvement of school infrastructure, including the general maintenance of schools, the provision and sustenance of water and proper sanitation, and our plans for the roll-out of ICTs, must be brought forward and fast-tracked to finality. As South Africans, we have agreed that education is a societal matter. We therefore, have an obligation to turn these noble words into tangible action.

Vandalism of schools

Almost all provinces are currently doing repairs to one thousand seven hundred and eighteen (1 718) schools, which were vandalised during the national lockdown. What is disturbing though, is that the criminals continue to cause havoc in our schools.

In Gauteng alone, three hundred and fifty-one (351) schools have been affected by vandalism; and six (6) were vandalised just this week; and these are burglaries taking place in schools previously targeted.

In the North West, a school was torched this week, resulting in three (3) classrooms to be damaged. The province reports that burning tyres were used to set the school on fire.

This is a serious set-back to the communities affected by these barbaric acts, which cause so much damage to our infrastructure.

Orientation at school

Orientation programmes for principals, school management teams (SMTs), non-teaching staff and teachers have been developed, provincialised, and have been delivered with officials from provincial departments and district offices, training principals and school staff.

Grade 7 and 12 learners, in turn, were orientated on the first day of arrival at school. Provinces are in the process of finalising preparations for the return of second cohort of Grades on 6th July, 03rd August 2020, and beyond. The new “normal” has created avenues for us to continuously engage with school principals for new strategies and approaches to curb the spread of the virus, and improve teaching and learning in our schools.

Differentiated timetables and trimming of the curriculum

When the Grade 17 and 12 learners returned to school on 08th June 2020, we did not have challenges related to spacing and school furniture. However, our monitoring of schools, has indicated that many schools may have spacing challenges once more Grades return to school.

Almost all schools are going to have to adopt innovative approaches with respect to timetabling and classroom management, in order to ensure that all children can return to school; while at the same time, maintaining the necessary social distancing measures.

Options, such as platooning, rotating different Grades coming to school on particular days of the week, and other innovative approaches based on the different contexts, will need to be considered. Most provinces are inclined to favour the rotational option, rather than the platoon option.

We are also painfully aware that a lot of school days have been lost this year already, and for some Grades more than others; many more school days will still be lost. We are therefore, encouraged to note that revised Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) have been developed and adapted by provinces, and have been communicated to schools and teachers. In some cases, innovative approaches are being used, like training teachers using Microsoft Teams and other virtual approaches.

It is of critical importance that young people are kept constructively occupied, engaged and connected through schooling, because the young ones, especially the most vulnerable, are faced by a number of social challenges, particularly violence, unplanned pregnancies, drug abuse, and many other social ills. It takes a village to bring up children; therefore, we implore our communities to support our children at home.

Monitoring and evaluation for school readiness

A number of overall patterns, continue to emerge from the monitoring and evaluation process carried out by the DBE. Across most thematic areas in the tool, there were relatively high levels of readiness on average, with the lower levels recorded for psychosocial support, school nutrition, and personnel provisioning; as well as the highest levels of readiness recorded for facilities, water and sanitation, and compliance to COVID-19 protocols.

The Director-General is continuing to convene one-on-one meetings with the Heads of the Provincial Education Departments,

to ensure that there is continuous sharing of experiences and working together. Interestingly, there is concordance between the reports generated from these one-on-one meetings with those generated by the consortium of researchers coordinated by the NECT.

On the return of other Grades to schools

On Thursday, 02nd July 2020, the Council of Education Ministers considered a number of variables, which *inter alia* included the rising community infections across the country, and the risk adjusted differentiated approach in dealing with the returning Grades to school. This is what made CEM to consider staggering the returning Grades, which were planned to return on the 06th July 2020, and the 03rd August 2020. Firstly, CEM agreed that only Grades R, 6 and 11 will return to school tomorrow, Monday, 06 July 2020.

CEM also noted that provinces may be at different levels of readiness for return of Grade R learners. Therefore, CEM agreed that those provinces that are not ready to receive Grade R on 06th July 2020, must provide strategic and realisable plans for ensuring the reincorporation of Grade R learners to schools within, but not later than the end of July 2020. However, the provinces that are ready to receive Grade R learners on Monday, 06th July 2020, can proceed to receive those learners.

What is critically important is that all Grade R and pre-Grade R learners who have already returned to schools, must remain in schools; and those schools that meet the health, safety and social distancing protocols, can reopen for their Grade R and pre-Grade R learners.

We will continue to work with the national associations responsible for learners with special needs to streamline the return of these

learners to school. A further agreement by CEM is that all Grades that are part of the second cohort, should return to school in an orderly staggered fashion within, but later than the end of July 2020.

Before I conclude, let me reflect on two critical phenomena, namely, the impact of the disruptions, the closure and reopening on schools on schooling; and well as the reported dates for infection and the risk brought about by the reopening of schools to teachers and learners.

The impact of disruptions, the closure and reopening of schools

On the first issue, it should be emphasised that temporary closure of the less than four percent (4%) of schools after the school reopening on the 08th June 2020, is much better than a system-wide closure over the same and even longer period of time. This would come at an unacceptable cost of lost learning and school feeding for an entire generation of children, with a consequent worsening of social and economic inequalities for years to come.

It has not been possible yet to measure the impact of the current school closures on learning, since no significant assessments of learner performance has been done. However, the international and local evidence around the typical impact of losing school time, due to disasters, strikes, etc., suggests strongly that learning losses may well be greater than what is suggested by actual days lost. This is so, in large part because disruptions result in learners forgetting some of what was previously learnt.

One forthcoming survey of households across South Africa – the Corona Virus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM), is collecting information on child care activities, child hunger, and access to

educational content, when children are being kept home from school. Preliminary (unpublished) results from the first wave of data collection, indicate an alarming increase in child hunger, since the national lockdown began.

The survey is also suggesting a significant increase in child care responsibilities, with an increased burden falling most heavily on women. The survey is also confirming that less than a third of children, have accessed educational content through the internet; with larger proportions accessing such content through books, television and radio. However, the effectiveness of these latter two activities is uncertain, and is likely to be far less intensive than attending school.

The survey also confirms the usefulness of books and printed material for learners to take home, and use in under-resourced and rural communities. From the planning side, we will be convening a DBE discussion on the findings of this survey, as results become available.

The reported dates for infection and the risk brought about by the reopening of schools to teachers and learners

On the second issue, unfortunately, we do not currently have any data or dates for infection and confirmed numbers of COVID-19 infections amongst teachers or learners in South Africa; much less any valid way to attribute infections to the impact of attending school and dates. Therefore, we do need to rely quite heavily on a few of the best international studies that have been conducted, and on expert epidemiological views.

Among the experts, the understanding shifted in or around April 2020, from the virus, as a flu-like virus, which was spread easily by children, to the understanding that not only did young children not get infected by the virus; they were also exceptionally weak transmitters of the virus. This is in part, what prompted global

bodies to call for the end of school closures, and for countries, such as South Africa, to reopen schools fairly quickly. In addition to concerns about health, wellbeing and protection from society's ills, the case for reducing learning loss is clear. The progress and improvement seen in international and national assessments in the last two decades could be erased the longer children stay out of school.

However, the epidemiological rationale, has not been well understood by the public. As a result, many parents and teachers over-estimate the personal health risks they face, which in turn, can lead to excessive risk-avoidance, which is detrimental to schooling. At the same time, the fact that older children and adolescents are more likely to transmit the virus, and that strategies at the primary and secondary level need to be different, has also not been clearly communicated.

Within an environment of budget cuts, the expansion of access to materials and pre-school education, are particularly vulnerable as a result of the pandemic.

Conclusion

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, and it will remain so, for some time to come. But through a collaborative effort, we can and we will overcome.

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

Thank you

Ends