

Minister Angie Motshekga: Basic Education Sector recovery plans for the reopening of schools, following the Coronavirus COVID-19 lockdown adjustment of regulations

30 Apr 2020

Good afternoon!

The past few weeks have affected South Africans in ways we have never experienced before. 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.

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 different 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.

Once principle guiding us was lowering the infection rate, ensuring safety but balance it against protecting lives.

At all times during the consultations we have started with the safety of our learners, teachers and employees. We made safety a priority.

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 a ways of getting back to work without compromising the lives of our learners, teachers and employees.

On the 7th and 26 of April we met and consulted South African Democratic Teacher Union (SADTU), National Professional Teachers of South Africa (NAPTOSA), Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie (SAOU), National Association of Teacher Union (NATU), and Professional Educators Union (PEU).

On the 10th 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)
- Governing Body Foundation (GBF)

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

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

And then on the 22nd 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, ETDPSETA, Nedbank, First Rand, Standard Bank, Zenex, Anglo American, Old Mutual, Kagiso Trust, Dialogue, Deans Forum, Nelson Mandela University, University of Johannesburg, University of Free State, ILIFA, Smart Start.

In all the meetings the principle of opening of schools at the right time was accepted once all the conditions have been met.

They proposed that in order to deal with social distancing they requested the department to use community and town halls, platooning and shifting.

They requested the department to provide Personal Protection Equipment. The department should provide awareness campaign to parents particularly in rural areas. They also proposed 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; it is really helpful.

We are also mindful of the huge size of the sector and the many responsibilities we have in our hands.

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 is 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.

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.

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.

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

As part of our preparations among other things we have developed Standard Operating Procedures 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.

Measures contained in our plans are as follows for 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 sanitized 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), sanitizers, 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;

- (1) Office-based staff to return to work on 4th May 2020. This is in line with the directive from the Department of Public Service and Administration.
- (2) School Management Teams should return to work on the 11th May 2020. This, we have done to ensure that the School Management Teams prepare the schools prior to return of learners.
- (3) Teachers return to work on 18 May 2020 and then
- (4) Grade 12 and 7 learners go back to school on the 1st of June 2020.

As I said earlier the plan 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. Province have reported that nine-hundred and sixty two (962) schools that 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 have been stolen.

Provinces have also reported that foodstuff, meant for the school nutrition programme, have 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 rescue the 2020 school year. 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, 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

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Department of Basic Education