

Address by the Basic Education Minister, Mrs. Angie Motshekga, MP, at the Ministerial Briefing of the NCOP Sitting, held virtually via the Zoom Video Conferencing on progress made on measures to manage the impact and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in schools

Honourable Chairperson
Honourable Members and Colleagues
Distinguished Guests
Ladies and Gentlemen

Honourable Chairperson, we thank you for the opportunity to update the nation on measures and progress made to manage the impact and spread of the COVID-19 pandemic in our public schools.

It is also an opportunity for us as a sector to account for our work to the elected representatives of this august house.

We take our responsibility, both, to manage public schooling on behalf of the national executive, our people, and being available to be held accountable very seriously.

Our hard-won democracy was through the sweat and blood of our people, thus it can't be allowed to become a theatre of no consequences. We encourage the Members of this august house to continue asking probing questions both oral and written. We will oblige and provide answers to the best of our ability.

Our only appeal today is for the Members to limit their oversight especially of physically visiting schools amidst the COVID-19 lockdown measures. In the midst of the new normal, our principals are under immense pressure to keep our schools functioning while battling the pandemic.

We want to assure this house that the decision to reopen our schools was not taken lightly. We understand the immediate threat that the COVID-19 pandemic poses to our teachers, learners, and the broader society. We believe that teachers and learners are members of the various communities that are already battling the pandemic, thus they might have been exposed to the pandemic before the schools reopening.

In terms of the epidemiology of the COVID-19, it is unlikely that the cases picked up at schools across the country since June (08) reopening originated from our facilities. These are classic community transmission cases. Our schools must prepare for the eventuality of the community transmissions becoming the bushfires in our schools. It is not a matter of if but when.

As Minister responsible for Basic Education, I extend our sincere condolences to all learners, teachers, and non-teaching staff who have succumbed to this virulent pandemic.

Your loss cuts deep into our hearts as we know that the battle is far from over. Your untimely passing should galvanise us to strengthen our response and redouble our efforts as a nation. We are in this together. We shall fight as a collective. We shall overcome as a united front. We shall heal as one. In times of war, I will run, when I become tired, I will walk, when I also become tired, I will crawl, when I also become tired, I will roll and roll until I roll no more. The spirit of no surrender shall guide us, always. May God bless South Africa and protect her people!

Our approach to gradually reopen our schools was guided by the reality that our schools offer more than just learning. We are centres of health, hygiene, and nutrition.

Thus, we are best placed to offer an additional layer of protection to the majority of learners who have no other avenue to pursue schooling and access to additional services available in our schools.

We agree with the Health Ministry that our schools are now the new frontier in a war against the COVID-19 pandemic. We should all consider the reopened schools as the epicentres of surveillance, screening, contact tracing, and testing of cases that otherwise would have fallen through the cracks.

In this regard, we shall move the mountains to win this war. It's a marathon that we have been forced to undertake without the necessary prior training and the latest running pair of shoes. Nonetheless, we will spare neither strength nor expense. Saving lives while protecting livelihoods is our only priority. In fact, it is a human right issue, a matter of social justice which is the pillar of our Constitution.

Our aim to salvage the academic year is a necessary imperative but we won't reopen at all costs. Nothing is more supreme than human life. Our strategy is guided by the call of the President to protect both lives and livelihoods of which public schooling plays a strategic role.

We also intend to resume our moral and legal obligations to feed our children nutritious meals and nourish their brains through the provision of basic education and other related services.

Honourable Members, international evidence from the UN agencies amongst others already support our decision to reopen schools. In one advisory they (UNESCO, UNICEF, and WFP) say the COVID-19 pandemic presents an unprecedented risk to children's education, protection, and wellbeing. It is now established that disruptions to instructional time in the classroom can have a severe impact on a child's ability to learn at a later stage. It gets worse for the poor. The agencies say the longer the marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. Earlier research had confirmed that children from the poorest households are already almost five times more likely to be out of primary school than those from the richest.

Despite the empirical evidence, as I said earlier, we are not reopening our schools at all costs.

We will do this while implementing our compulsory additional measures to combat and manage the spread of the COVID-19 pandemic. We have created our version of the cardinal pillars.

The key to the cardinal pillars is the good old hygiene of hand washing using soap, and where applicable using the alcohol-based sanitisers and the novel social distancing methods.

All schools were decontaminated before reopening and are cleaned daily using the Health Department approved COVID-19 cleaning guidelines.

No school can be reopened unless it meets the minimum COVID-19 standards which essentially mean the Basic Sanitation & Hygiene Package. All essential staff are being trained through the new COVID-19 orientation on the management and combating of the pandemic using the new Basic Sanitation & Hygiene measures. These measures include cleaning and disinfection materials, provisioning of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), hand sanitisers with at least 70% alcohol, hand washing soaps, gloves, cloth masks & thermometers.

This also means the availability of water & sanitation facilities and the presence of hygiene workers otherwise known as cleaners. In respect of water and sanitation provinces can be applauded for a tremendous effort to ensure that emergency water tanks have been supplied to thousands of schools in time for the reopening.

Our partnership with the Rand Water, Department of Water and Sanitation, Development Bank of South Africa (DBSA), The Mvula Trust (TMT), as well as the South African National Defence Force to ensure that schools needing emergency water and sanitation are being prioritised, has yielding desired results.

Every school must have full-time screeners. The hygiene measures are also applicable to all those involved in the National Schools Nutrition Programme.

Honourable Members, I can report that all food handlers have been trained and provided with the COVID-19 essentials including masks, gloves, and disposable aprons. We have also provided those handling food with cleaning and sanitation materials. The Nutrition Programme re-started successfully in most provinces for Grades 7 and 12 learners. There were challenges in some Circuits in Limpopo (foodstuffs not delivered), which were addressed by the Provincial Department swiftly.

On route to school, all operators of learner transport facilities must, on regular intervals, provide adequate sanitisers or other hygiene dispensers for washing of hands for learners, and adhere to the newly published loading capacity guidelines.

Other non-pharmaceutical measures that are non-negotiable such as the novel social distancing. In the context of schooling, this means the deployment of various timetabling models that the School Management Teams must choose in order to adhere to the guidelines. These include platooning, alternating days per week, and bi-weekly rotational attendance to maintain a minimum of 50 percent capacity per schooling day.

We are seized with the matter of the provision of mobile classrooms to deal with the social distancing measures and avoid overcrowding as a temporary measure. Work is ongoing on finding Incubation Camps for Grade 12 progressed and weaker learners.

We have had to find additional financial resources to augment our teaching cohort, so new posts have been created to eliminate the possibility of overcrowding. These additional substitute posts will also assist in standing in for staff who are absent due to illness, age, and comorbidities otherwise known as existing underlying medical conditions. As we know comorbidities such as hypertension, diabetes and cardiac disease are the three most commonly associated with serious illness if one contracts COVID-19.

For example, the Free State has received 1 887 applications from teachers who have applied to work from home; Mpumalanga has received 237 applications from teachers; the Northern Cape has registered 1 495 teachers with comorbidities.

We have a plan in place to also support learners at risk, of which the Schools Management Teams and parents are going to play a key role. This support is also extended to non-teaching staff.

In terms of assessments, the Grade 12 are expected to write the set fully-fledged examinations, based on covering the entire curriculum, and other grades will be given a reworked curriculum and assessed on 80%. As we have already announced the May/June Exams for the National Senior Certificate (Grade 12) will be combined with the October/November Exams and rescheduled for November/December 2020.

We have developed a master curriculum recovery plan and all provinces have established the Curriculum Committees at all levels.

We have also developed a Psychosocial Support plan on the impact of the COVID -19 and, our counsellors are ready to hit the ground running.

Plans are in place for all special schools to resume teaching and learning.

The basic guidelines on the reopening apply including additional measures to suit the special nature of the special needs schools. There will be compulsory sanitising of assistive devices before use, on exit, and re-entry to the classroom.

In times of pandemics, communication is vital. We are pulling all stops to reach all the schooling communities constantly through radio, television, social media, and other digital

platforms. We are also facing an onslaught of fake news intended to cause harm and create public panic. There are new Folk Devils lurking amongst us. We are fighting on all fronts. We are battle-hardened and ready.

We are also acutely aware of our responsibility to develop a new working social compact with our partners to achieve these commendable plans. We consult with all our partners on an ongoing basis including the organised labour fraternity, Principals' Associations, School Governing Bodies Associations, and Civil Society/NGOs amongst others.

Honourable Chairperson, let me address the hot potato, on what happens when a positive COVID-19 case is identified at a school level.

According to the Standard Operating Procedures for the Containment and Management of COVID-19 for all schools, a school, and or unit/component/office/department may be closed if someone tested positive for COVID-19. These are temporary closures to enable the Health Department and us to take over the management of the case including decontamination, contact tracing, and testing amongst others. All suspected and identified cases will immediately be attended to through the Health Ministry's existing COVID-19 guidelines including testing, contact tracing, self-isolation, and quarantining amongst others.

We appeal to all school communities not to cause unnecessary panic. There's no need for panic when a positive case is identified and a school is closed. We will endeavour to communicate which of our schools have been affected, but we won't release personal information that may put positive patients (learners or teachers) at risk. It is not the responsibility of principals to communicate school temporal closures to the media. The Health Department has an existing COVID-19 communication protocol of which all of us must abide by it.

In conclusion, I am happy to indicate that all provinces are now finalising management plans for the return of Grades R, 1, 2, 3, 6, 10, and 11 on the 6th of July 2020.

We have been burning the midnight oil with all Education MECs. We are satisfied that the system is ready to restart amidst the new COVID-19 induced measures. We appreciate the support, monitoring, and accountability mechanism emanating from the NCOP to keep us focussed on our mission. We shall indeed overcome. As a nation, our resilience is legendary.

I, thank you.