



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

19 MAY 2020

Let start by acknowledging Deputy Minister Mhaule and DG Mveli, members of the media, good afternoon.

The Coronavirus has brought a lot of trauma and anxiety to all of us as a nation and the rest of the world. It has turned our lives upside down and there is a lot of fear about what will happen next.

Since we started planning for the reopening of schools we have received many representations from parents and organisations. We highly appreciate all the inputs made.

I am aware that parents and their children, teachers and non-teaching staff and all South Africans have been asking questions about the future of the academic year.

There was always certainty that school would have to be reopened. Cabinet agreed that as much as it was important to save the academic year key principles to guide our work should be informed by the safety of learners, teachers and workers in our schools whilst ensuring that the reopening of schools does not contribute in any way to the spread of the virus.

We agreed that we needed to rise from the coronavirus pandemic, working closely together and move forward albeit under different conditions. If there is anything that we have learned and appreciated from the CO-VID-19 pandemic, it is that we are all in this together.

This is uncharted waters and that is why we have relied heavily on the advice of experts in the medical fraternity under the leadership of the Department of Health. There is a whole debate on the impact of COVID-19 on children and adults and we are following those debates and use them to guide us.

The forced closure of schools to slow down the spread of the coronavirus was a necessary step to take. It remains an important step that was taken to contain the virus as quickly as possible and to save lives. The lockdown followed and as you know today it is Day 54 since it was put in place. In that time a lot of work has taken place.

In addition to this countries around the world have been easing restrictions on economic activity while putting in place measures to contain the spread of the virus. We have had to consider reopening schools under strict conditions as well.

Before I talk about the plans for the reopening of schools let me once again condemn the vandalism that has taken place. We have now One Thousand Five Hundred and Seventy Seven (1,577) schools broken into around the country. Four Hundred and Sixty Three (463) of the schools are in KwaZulu-Natal and 336 are in Gauteng. This is truly a disturbing trend that will set us back in our efforts of trying to get back the academic programme. We appeal to members of the public to help the police bring the perpetrators to justice.

State of readiness

The Council of Education Ministers (CEM) met yesterday to consider the latest reports on the state of readiness for the reopening of schools. CEM was noted the progress that has been made. We wanted School Management Teams to open schools and receive the material required. The first consignments have arrived in schools and more deliveries will be made as time progresses.

We are confident that the reopening of school across provinces will happen as outlined in the protocol that has been developed. The reports we got are showing that preparations have been taking place and good progress has been made. All indications are that the preconditions for the reopening of schools will be met obviously with the premium being on saving lives.

The delivery of the COVID-19 Essentials are being done in all provinces to ensure that they are stored in safe places. The items regarded as essential are; sanitizers, masks, water and sanitation, and of course the schools will be cleaned and most are being cleaned as we speak.

CEM agreed that provinces must move at the same pace to ensure that nobody is left behind. CEM emphasized the need to pay special attention to the health and safety of all learners, teachers and all employees in schools.

Earlier today we met with teacher unions and school governing associations together with the principals association. We updated them regarding our plans.

On Co-morbidities

The Department working with health professionals has profiled the sector and it will be issuing guidelines on how to manage them. We are working with the Department of Public Service and Administration of this aspect.

We also urge parents to work closely with schools to ensure that learners with pre-existing illness are also assisted. Schools will work with parents to obtain the information which once again needs to be treated with the utmost care.

This matter is of paramount importance and we appeal for cooperation in this regard.

Water provision

DBE entered into an Implementation Protocol agreement with the Department of Human Settlements, Water & Sanitation and Rand Water. We will ensure that no schools goes without water. Just-in-time delivery will be made.

Re-engineering basic education

It has become clear that the coronavirus has forced us to re-engineer the basic education system. A fundamental review of the system has become necessary if we are to minimize the impact on the sector in the long term. However in the short term and in keeping with the goal of managing the academic year, we have come up with several measures to help the sector recover some of the lost time.

The amount of time available in a school day to will determine the duration of the period by subject. We will be using innovative methods about how we meet health, safety, social or physical distancing requirements. The trimmed curriculum will be sent to school for planning purposes, it is being worked on a continuous.

We expect that the role of the School Principal and School Management Team (SMT) will be affirmed in assuming the overall responsibility of the day to day running of the school. They are expected to put measures in place for equitable allocation of periods or time for teachers to cover the scope of the curriculum in saving the academic year.

Schools must be aware that all curriculum enrichment programmes will be put on hold until further notice. We want to focus on the core business of basic education which is curriculum implementation.

Earlier today a parent wrote to me and asked if I was going to address the issue of sporting activities in schools. He said he was aware that some schools would continue with sporting

activities. Let me make this clear; school sports will not be permitted as they will increase the chances of infection and undermine our efforts of containing the coronavirus. When class is dismissed, learners must go home. We urge parents to work with us on this matter.

School Nutrition Programme

The National School Nutrition Programme has adjusted the 2020 feeding calendar in accordance with the phased-in approach of schooling and the Curriculum Recovery Plan of the basic education sector.

The Nutrition Programme will be reopened for all learners when Grades 12 and 7 are reintroduced to schools on 1 June 2020. All food handlers will be supplied with the required personal protective equipment including gloves, aprons and cloth masks. These have already been procured by provinces as part of a basic health and hygiene package.

The school nutrition budget will be utilised according to the revised school calendar and where feasible, school meals will also be extended to catch-up programmes for the Grade 12s.

Learner Transport:

We are working with the Department of Transport to ensure that safety protocols are maintained.

- Everybody to sanitize hands on **entering** of bus.
- Manage **distance** between learners in the bus.
- Compulsory **wearing of masks** throughout the school day, starting before boarding transport.

On the Reopening of Schools

The National Coronavirus Command Council and Cabinet have approved the reopening of schools as of June 1, 2020. Independent and public ordinary schools will open even in the metropolitan areas. Every school must adhere and observe the health and safety protocols that will be put in place.

We will start with grades 7 and 12 and small schools. The other grades will follow in due course.

In reopening of schools we have been guided by three basic principles; to save lives.

Learners and teachers who are in other provinces will be able to return to their residence. Arrangements are in place.

All **learners, educators** and **support staff** will receive orientation and training at the start of the school reopening commencing with Grade 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 been working closely together 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 counselling. 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

Now that the NCCC has confirmed that schools could open on 1 June, the revised school calendar will be gazetted soon. It indicates the opening and closing dates and the breaks in between. We will work with provinces to make sure that no school is left behind.

Special schools

During consultation with social partners it became clear that we need a different approach when it comes to special schools. We are working with organisations who are advising us on the best way forward regarding the phased-approach of the special schools.

Our planning and procurement has considered the needs of learners with disabilities and those in special schools. Provinces have put in place plans that will ensure that no child is compromised.

Early Childhood Development Centres

The easing of the lockdown restrictions has seen many more people in addition to those providing essential services returning to work.

The regulations for Level 3 are being finalised and we believe there will be a solution to this matter very soon. We understand that Early Childhood Development centres also provide the necessary caring and feeding services for children from families. Due and careful consideration will be made to ensure that we maintain the delicate balance between allowing ECDs to operate, alongside the safety and health of the children and their caregivers. We are working together with the Department of Social Development on this matter as it straddles both departments at the moment.

Conclusion

I want to thank my colleagues in provinces; the MECs and their HODs, the deputy minister and DG and his team at DBE.

I also want to extend my gratitude to civil society, our partners the teachers unions and SGB associations for the contribution made thus far.

I trust that we will continue to walk the journey together. We have only just begun, there is a lot of work to do still ahead of us.

The biggest task will be monitoring. As in all other previous occasions all the plans, the standard operating procedures, the guidelines and relevant documents will be made available on the DBE website from tomorrow. This is important for accountability and more important for support. It is important that we understand the work that needs to be done so we can support schools accordingly.

We have appointed a consortium of independent monitors to help us. The success of the reopening process depends on the availability of basic services. We have partnered with other government department to help us.

We will work with more urgency to ensure that all schools are adequately prepared for the return of learners back to learning even though it will be under different conditions.

Thank you

Ends