



No! to just opening schools. Yes! to opening schools justly.

Society is not ready to safely reopen schools and education centres!

The government plans to reopen schools on 8 June 2020. But Covid-19 infections and deaths are rapidly increasing. Testing is still severely delayed, and effective tracking and tracing isn't yet in place. In response to this, the government seems inclined to *narrow* the criteria for who gets tested even while pushing to reopen schools! But we need all these public health measures to identify infection clusters and learn how reopening schools affects viral spread so we can respond appropriately. Announcing re-opening dates before schools have all safety measures in place and before we are able to track and trace the pandemic is arbitrary and premature. Any decision to re-open must follow the evidence of health and safety at schools and the societal state of spread / containment of the virus.

Some loud voices insist that children are at lower risk of suffering Covid-19 symptoms so schools must reopen immediately. But the evidence on how children transmit the virus is not yet clear in South Africa or internationally. We do not know how much children can infect adults, especially those who are elderly or at high risk. It is irresponsible to insist on using partial and conflicting evidence to make unqualified claims about the safety of opening schools.

Given this context, society is not yet ready to safely reopen ordinary schools, special schools, special care centres, and early childhood development centres. The risks of school infections are especially high because:

1. Many schools lack sufficient water, toilets, soap, masks and classrooms (and once these are supplied, schools need time to establish safe routines)
2. Budget cuts mean there are not enough teachers for social distancing in schools
3. Many teachers are at high risk because of their age and illness profiles, and there are insufficient measures in place to protect them
4. Learner transport is unsafe and too crowded

Opening justly - not just opening

Our education system is unequal and unjust. The short-term plan must use this time of school closure to prepare and strengthen education and contribute to the goals of a longer-term plan so that we have a unified education system that serves all our children justly, freely and equally. We have an unusual opportunity to address long-standing injustices. We should not waste it!

We must all think creatively, together, about how to educate each other in this time of crisis; and how to use this time to bend schooling towards free, equal education for all. Education is wider than schooling: education is about learning to live together critically in the world as it is, struggling towards the better world we must build. This social learning must lie at the heart of our struggle against Covid-19, the social crisis it has intensified, and the unjust, unequal education system.

Who decides?

Schools and education centres are social resources and human communities for the public good. Millions of learners and caregivers, and hundreds of thousands of teachers and ECD practitioners, are involved in education. The minister and education bureaucracy can't unilaterally announce when it is safe to reopen. People themselves, in local school communities, must be integral to deciding democratically whether and when they are ready to re-open schools, in context, equitably and safely across society. People's involvement must extend beyond "consulting" SGBs.

In line with democratic principles, we demand that the national and provincial education departments make policymaking transparent and open to real public engagement:

1. Education departments must make public which experts they are drawing on, what research they are using to inform their decision-making, and the minutes of all meetings
2. They must recognise and seek out the invaluable contextual knowledge that teachers, support staff, learners and caregivers have: they are experts who know their own contexts best
3. They must invite the public to participate directly in developing policy – not just inform them via National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) representatives
4. They must invite the public to guide budget priorities and monitor contractual deliverables and spending

Importantly, the national Department of Basic Education must develop clear roles and responsibilities, and hold provinces to account for failing to comply with its directives. This will reduce the petty power struggles and bickering over responsibilities which have made our schools a battleground for party politics, spreading confusion and undermining coherent and realistic policymaking.

Prepare infrastructure and support teachers

Poor infrastructure and insufficient support for teachers are central obstacles to responding effectively to Covid-19. So the Department of Basic Education should work hand-in-hand with the public to pursue the following concrete measures, with all effort, immediately:

1. Ring-fence a portion of Covid-19 funds for preparing and strengthening the education system
2. Work with the Department of Public Works to build and rehabilitate school infrastructure, and encourage the employment of local community members.
3. Support and work with teachers to:

- a. Identify teachers at risk and work with them to identify how they can safely participate in education: for example, by collectively developing open-access textbooks, storybooks, and learning aids
- b. Identify young and unemployed teachers and integrate them into the education system on equal terms with public sector teachers
- c. Identify all teachers employed by School Governing Bodies as their jobs are at risk: they must be formally employed by the state on equal terms with public sector teachers
- d. Identify teachers who are teaching out of phase and out of subject, and work with them to reallocate them appropriately
- e. Work with teachers to develop more creative physical distancing solutions, where schools decide with their learners and teachers how best to use their space and time equitably.
- f. Work with teachers to build a realistic school calendar and timetable for learning that is structured around the pandemic instead of an artificially-imposed “academic year”

Support schools to serve communities

Communities have real, serious needs for nutrition and childcare, because the economy is forcing caregivers to risk their lives and return to work for others’ profits and to earn just enough to eat. We must address these needs by understanding and using schools as community resources while they are closed for formal teaching and learning. When teaching resumes, schools will have stronger relationships with their community, and continue to build on these programmes.

To this end, the Department of Basic Education must work together with the Department of Social Development to recognise and strengthen the social role of schools in communities:

1. Use schools as nutrition centres for children and adults: children need to eat to learn, but all people need nutrition to learn and live
2. Use schools to distribute public health awareness literature
3. Use schools to identify at-risk families and provide psychosocial support through social workers
4. Use schools as spaces where other state support programs can be supported and housed, such as SASSA grant disbursement
5. Use schools as tracking and testing spaces for specific areas surrounding school.

Support schools for social learning

Government’s obsession with “saving” the academic year is unrealistic and unjust.

It is unrealistic because the government's regulation that only 50% of learners can be at school at any time means that learners (outside of grade 12) will be out of school half the time. Schools that reopen may need to re-close; many teachers and learners will spend time at home, in quarantine or isolating. Given this, it will be impossible to "complete" the CAPS curriculum on its own terms.

It is unjust because the curriculum has already been failing us, as struggles for free, decolonised education have articulated. Curriculum should define what people and communities believe is important for everyone to know and be able to do, and identify human knowledge and skills which should be accessible to all.

Moreover, education should enable and enrich life, learning, and life-making, together for all. It is not just about ensuring that the minority of learners who matriculate have a certificate for an inequitable and unjust job market. The government's insistence on completing "saving the curriculum academic year" prioritises saving face over supporting everyone to learn.

Together, we can build a just and emancipatory popular education using social learning. To do this, national and provincial education departments must work together with schools, families and communities to support learning.

First, learning happens at home and in the community as much as it happens in school. Education departments must support this learning through:

1. Asking caregivers how they cope during holidays and sharing this to guide childcare practice and policy
2. Rolling out public mobile libraries to support reading at home
3. Rolling out public toy libraries to support playing at home
4. Implementing realistic and practical distance learning initiatives accessible to all. Instead of the government's unrealistic and inequitable emphasis on 4IR and online learning, we must use public and community radio and television for distance learning. Here we can learn from what other countries are doing and have done. This should be complemented with the delivery of printed materials through schools.

Second, national and provincial education departments must pay special attention to children who have been unjustly excluded from the education system:

1. Hundreds of thousands of children with special needs who are excluded from formal schooling
4. Millions of children who are pushed out of schooling for socio-economic reasons and then blamed as "drop-outs"
5. One million undocumented children (most of whom are South African) who were excluded until this year from accessing basic education

Education departments must publicly acknowledge that the education system has failed these children, and openly ask for the public's help to fundamentally transform the education system to ensure equitable and truly inclusive participation for all.

Strengthen education financing and governance

Over the medium term, the national Department of Basic Education must recognise that three issues are the key drivers of inequality and injustice in education: financing, school choice and decentralisation.

Financing

The national Department of Basic Education has a duty to:

1. Pressure Treasury to protect and increase the education budget over the next three years to reduce teacher-student ratios. The education budget must not be cut after years of decreasing real spending per learner. Education funding must be increased significantly to build a just, free, equal schooling system. And this must not be used as an excuse to cut funding for early childhood development and post-school education, or other social spending
2. Pressure Treasury to prioritise education over non-social spending, such as the Security Cluster. Buying military-grade weapons for the police is violently unjust when children don't have toilets at school and police routinely kill people
3. Revise the equitable share formula to allocate budget equitably and progressively across provinces, redressing long-standing inequities: the current formula, which only considers the number of learners in each province, doesn't consider that education is more expensive to provide in the poorest provinces - in part because rural provinces, with more schools, have higher institutional costs for the same number of learners (more institutions, more principals, etc)
4. To pressure other organs of state, such as SARS, to crack down on illicit financial outflows and tax evasion in order to improve public finances
5. To pressure other organs of state to revise tax laws to incorporate a wealth tax and strengthen a progressive income tax which better targets the upper bracket of earners.

We demand that government recognise that school spending is an investment in our people and our future, a public good, not a 'cost' to be reduced no matter the consequences.

School choice

The national Department of Basic Education has a duty to:

1. Publicly acknowledge that policy enabled the creation of no-fee public schools, fee-paying public schools and private schools. This allows the middle class and rich to opt out of true public schooling and capture a disproportionate share of education spending.

It must work with the public to develop a plan to reintegrate these schools back into a tuition-free public sector, in the same way that the Department of Health is working with the public to develop a National Health Insurance scheme to create a unified people's health service. In the interim, it must place an absolute cap on school fees in public and private schools.

2. Publicly consider how the policy of allowing teachers and learners to choose which schools to attend has fostered race and class segregation. The Department must work with the public to demarketise schooling and implement the recommendations of the Hunter Report, which it ignored during the transition to democracy.

Decentralisation

The national Department of Basic Education has a duty to:

1. Publicly recognise that the creation of provinces was a key concession in the CODESA negotiations. The provinces have strong spatial and institutional overlaps with apartheid bureaucracies. This means that the anti-democratic ethos of apartheid institutions has manifested itself in many provinces – through white enclaves and ethnic provinces.
2. These provinces have a high level of autonomy over budgets and the hiring and firing of staff. It is difficult for either the national government or the public to hold them accountable. While recognising the entrenched political power of the provinces, the Department must work with the public to address this fundamental driver of inequality.
3. District and circuit structures need to be reorientated to serve schools by supporting teachers and learners, instead of imposing unrealistic plans on schools and pressuring them to comply.