

Submission by the Democratic Alliance to President Cyril Ramaphosa on the matter of the possible re-closure of schools
17 July 2020

This document has two main arguments:

- **Schools should remain open in the majority of cases**
- **The risks of closing schools are considerable. Schools are not “ready to close” and are not ready to provide education if they are to be closed.**

A vigorous public debate has emerged since schools partially opened after the Coronavirus lockdown in early June. As more learners were brought into schools after the three months' closure, voices objecting to the opening have become louder. Once the South African Democratic Teachers' Union added their voice to those objecting, the President deemed it necessary to give more serious consideration to their concerns. We wish to submit our views to the President, in the light of this development.

1) Keeping schools open

Various groups have a stake in whether or not schools remain open. The President will have to perform a difficult balancing act in deciding whether or not to keep schools open.

Five different groups have an interest in whether schools are open or closed - the learners, the teachers, the parents, employers and society as a whole. All of these groups, we argue, need schools to remain open, for different reasons.

The learners: Section 28(2) of the Constitution states that a child's interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child. As regards the opening of schools, it is, on balance, in the interests of learners that schools remain open, and harmful to children if they do not. We find Servaas van den Berg and Nick Spaull, two of our leading educational experts, extremely convincing in their substantial work on this subject. They join voices with South Africa's lead scientist Dr Abdool Karrim in showing that research demonstrates that children's vulnerability to Covid is extremely low - lower than their vulnerability to influenza, while at the same time their need to attend school is of supreme importance, particularly in a middle-income country such as our own. The South African Paediatric Association went so far as to prepare a position paper advocating for schools to reopen earlier this year, And the South African Human Rights Commission has also come out in support of schools staying open. Unesco, too, believes in the paramount importance of continuous schooling.

Unlike societies in the first world, we are a society with many people living in poverty, where online learning cannot realistically replace face-to-face teaching for the majority of children in poor communities. Our internet coverage is too poor and uneven, too many children, and even teachers, are not internet-literate enough to make it work, and there is the ongoing problem of data availability for the poor. (We address this problem in more detail below) And for such children absence from school can seriously damage their chances

in a number of respects. The longer it continues the more likely it is that they will suffer very serious consequences later in life. There is an entire body of research on the long-term educational effects of missing out on months of schooling on children's educational achievements as well as their future earning capacity. There is also an increased chance of their dropping out of school.

It is contrary to the South African Schools Act for children not to be in school. There will not be sufficient money to employ extra teachers, nor sufficient accommodation, to carry an additional grade for a year. And if schools close again there is no question that this year will be lost.

Learners in specific years of study will be particularly prejudiced. If schools close, learners in matric will sacrifice their chance to obtain a matric qualification this year, and will have to repeat the entire year in 2021. The same applies to those in Grade 7, who are expecting to move up into high school in 2021. In fact, all learners will have to repeat the year, meaning that new Grade 1s will not be able to be admitted in 2021, that there will be no Matric class in 2022, and thus no qualified matriculants to enter Universities and Colleges in 2023. This kind of bunching up is educationally very damaging.

Learners also need schools to remain open because many of them come from extremely poor households, and depend on school feeding schemes to provide them with nutritious food daily. With the exception of the Western Cape, which kept some school feeding going during the lockdown, the majority of schools discontinued school feeding during that time, and many children suffered as a result.

And finally, learners need open schools as they provide them with a place to spend a productive day, to socialize and to build their social networks. The alternative to school is often, particularly in poor communities, simply sitting at home with no stimulation, or spending the day in the streets, where young people are vulnerable in many different ways.

The teachers: Teachers are employed to teach and so without schools they cannot work and earn an income. But unlike learners, teachers are subject to the normal statistical chances of getting the virus. An atmosphere of fear and anxiety has emerged amongst some of them since the June opening because of this fact.

In fact, teachers are no different to thousands of other employees who have gone back to work during the pandemic – doctors, nurses, hospital, municipal and company employees and many others. Each day they go to work, they have to face the possibility of infection, deal with all the health safety requirements in their workplaces, deal with their fellow workers anxieties, and manage the fact that every now and then their workplace will close down for deep cleaning.

If teachers are to continue working, they need all the support possible in managing this difficult situation. They should not be taken for granted, or made to work in situations where safety measures are not firmly in place. But teachers need to realise that thousands of other South Africans are back at work and that coping with the day to day difficulties of

the virus is going to be part of our reality for months, if not years, to come. Waiting a few months will not really change things.

Teachers who are motivated by a vocational commitment to education will get great satisfaction from contributing to the needs of children and society. And to a teacher the school is a place where he or she earns a living. But there is no doubt that there are difficult aspects to the job of teaching in times of a pandemic.

Parents: While parents may be concerned about the well-being of their children at school, and worried about sending them back to school, the overwhelming majority of them need schools to remain open. The first reason for this is educational – all parents have an interest in their children being educated, in such education continuing seamlessly, and in their children advancing from Grade to Grade without hindrance.

Some parents concerned about the virus may opt to teach their children themselves, through home schooling, which has been taken up by hundreds of parents across the country.

Secondly, parents need schools to stay open because many of them work, and have undertaken to work on the understanding that schools will be available to educate and take care of their children while they do so. Home schooling is impossible for working parents. This is a vital economic and societal reality. Schooling frees parents to be productive contributors to their families, economy and society without risking the well-being of their children by leaving them unsupervised at home. Because learners from the poorest of homes are fed at school, this is also of benefit to parents.

Employers: Employers have an interest in schools remaining open for two reasons. First – they have an overall interest in the education of the population. As the employers of future school-leavers, they have a clear interest in the quality and quantity of education those school leavers have received. No employer desires a poorly-educated workforce and most are very concerned that our education system is already weak and not producing the kinds of skills they need. Keeping schools closed, on top of months of closure during lockdown, is only going to exacerbate their concerns. In the case of the US, the Brookings Institute has estimated that a four month school closure would cost the US economy 2.5 trillion USD. Whilst lives certainly cannot be measured in economic terms, when balancing the risks and benefits of keeping schools open or closing them it is an important factor to consider, especially given the dire state of our economy.

Employers of the parents of school-going children also have an interest in keeping schools open in that their employees will come to work confident that their children are safe, stimulated and supported.

Society as a whole: South African society as a whole needs schools to be open. The reasons for this are economic and social – economic, because functional schooling produces the skills the society needs; and social because proper schooling socializes young people, teaching them how to properly engage with the world.

In sum, it appears that all these groups have a need to keep schools open. However the need of teachers is weaker than that of the other groups. It is no wonder that teachers' Unions have taken the lead in demanding that they close again. However, the Minister and Cabinet need to pay careful attention to the interests of all the other stakeholders in schooling before he simply caves in to Union demands and grants teachers' Unions their wish.

Putting the needs of teachers before those of learners and parents, for example, would be grossly unfair and quite possibly unconstitutional.

Teachers do have concerns, some born of fear and rumour (some of which SADTU spreads in its public announcements), and some soundly based. If schools are to remain open, we recommend that the concerns of teachers be taken seriously where they are valid, and clarified where they are based on rumour. We recommend that both national and provincial governments pursue the following:

- Mount a widespread public education campaign, addressing schools, teachers, learners and parents, as to the risks to which learners, teachers and those at home are exposed when schools are open. This will need to end the prevalence of rumour by addressing the issue of rates of infection by age group, rates of infection when proper PPE is in place, rates of mild, severe and fatal infection by age group, rates of transmission by age group, actual numbers of infected learners and teachers in our system and similar matters.
- Create a helpline offering helpful psychological support and advice to individual teachers, parents and learners concerned about their situation
- Create a whistleblower outlet for reporting of schools which are not conforming to safety requirements
- Ensure that there is a more supportive public approach to those who are working in this difficult time (not only teachers), along the lines of the "thankyou" campaigns in the UK and Europe

2) Are schools "ready to close"

Our answer to this question is: NO.

There are two possibilities for the closure of schools. **First** is that schools close and NO TEACHING takes place for the rest of the year. This has been hinted at as a possibility both by SADTU and the President, and in general public discourse. We believe that this will be disastrous and possibly unconstitutional. It will mean that almost an entire year of potential learning will have been wasted as a result of Covid, and will have numerous knock-on effects on learners, on Universities and Colleges and on the economy in future.

And if teachers neither go back to work, nor undertake remote teaching duties while at home, we believe that the taxpayer should not continue to pay them for staying at home. Millions of Rands of taxpayer money have already been spent on supporting civil servants during the lockdown. But now that the lockdown is partially lifted, those civil servants who can go back to work should indeed do so, whether remotely or in person. Their medical risk

is the same whatever profession they are in, and there should be no special dispensation for teachers.

The **second** option is for schools to close, but TEACHING TO CONTINUE through various remote means. In an earlier document the DA submitted to the Ministers of Basic and Higher Education we addressed this issue and made a series of proposals about ways in which teaching could continue in the complex and difficult environment in which we live. These include various forms of online and remote teaching.

- As mentioned above, in a country such as ours, online teaching is not straightforward and needs to be adapted in numerous ways.
 - a) It cannot be universal and the resulting inequality between rich and poor people and institutions needs to be addressed;
 - b) Full-on online teaching is educationally not as sound as “blended” learning, which includes elements of the online and the face-to-face. We are strong advocates of this over the long term
 - c) The Gazetted requirement that all educational content should be zero rated has not yet been implemented. This needs to be urgently addressed.

The following are the practical suggestions that we have made at all levels of the educational system for enhancing access to online teaching.

- The use of libraries and community halls as points of access to IT facilities for the “electronically disadvantaged”
- The development and use of Provincial e-learning portals along the lines already developed in the Western Cape
- The establishment of “banks” of computers for loan to students, using their fee account as the surety
- The development of systematic partnerships with other Departments of Government to ensure a “whole of society” approach to online teaching
- Recommending to learners the use of phone sim-cards for access to the Vodacom e-school
- The possible use of ‘wi-fi trucks’ to act as hotspots for particular areas
- Where online teaching cannot be organized, course content may need to be printed or put on data-sticks and delivered to learners – again here the Western Cape provides a model for other Provinces
- Teaching through radio and television are of course other options, which have barely been explored.

However, although these recommendations were made in April, and while the National and Provincial Departments have done an immense amount of work preparing for the opening of schools, providing PPEs, and many other things, **there has been very little done to prepare for situations in which schools are closed but teaching is to continue.**

This has become important even without the full closure of schools as it has become clear that not all schools have opened effectively - often because of lack of water, sanitation, PPE and so on; that many learners have been kept at home and not home schooled; and that

many schools have had to close periodically and their children and staff quarantined in cases of infection. And of course, it will become of central importance if schools close again.

If schools close and teaching is to continue, we believe that the system is totally unready to manage the situation. Not enough preparatory work has been done, teachers are not prepared for online teaching, and of the detailed proposals suggested above only a few have been put into place.

Conclusion

It would, in our view, be wholly irrational for a government that has just permitted taxis to operate at 100% capacity, allowing people to sit right next to each other for up to 200 kilometres at a time, to close schools, where teachers stand in front of a class, with the learners a metre and a half away from each other. The right to basic education is a fundamental and immediately realisable right, which cannot be said of the right of businesses to be protected.

A significant factor also is the actual statistics, rather than unsubstantiated generalisations by unions whose interest it is to sow fear in the minds of parents so that they will support the closures of schools.

Since schools re-opened, it must be ascertained whether the infection rate in schools is showing that the virus is spreading at schools, faster than in the community surrounding it. The only evidence we have is the Western Cape, which has stated that, even though about a third of their schools have been affected by Covid-19, the vast majority have only had one or two cases, and in those where there have been more cases, there has not been a corresponding increase in infections at the same school within the next few weeks. Also, the percentage of teachers and learners who have been infected is very small, and does not appear to be any higher than any other sector.

Given the extraordinary logistical effort that went into the re-opening of schools, to close them and have to start all over again makes no sense. The anxiety levels of teachers and learners will be heightened, as they will have to go through the whole process again, while the children are now settling in again.

The argument that we should wait until “after the peak” does not assist. Firstly, we do not know when that will be. Secondly, it appears that the peak may well be different in different provinces. Thirdly, it also appears that it may be longer than initially thought, which will then mean that schools will be closed even longer. Fourthly, there may be more than one peak. It is untenable to keep schools closed across the country for longer and on such an uncertain basis, given how much time has already been lost.

The World Health organisation has said that countries must take into account their circumstances. On 16 July, the head of the SA Paediatric Association, Prof Mignon McCulloch, said in an eNCA interview that, to the extent that the WHO may have said that schools should open after the peak, she would argue that our circumstances warrant a different approach.

In addition, we must always keep in mind that the purpose of a lockdown is for the health system to prepare, and that the intention of any further restrictions is fundamentally to avoid the healthcare system being overwhelmed. In the event that the health system is so overwhelmed in some provinces, or parts of those provinces, we would advocate for them to be able to close schools as part of an area-specific restriction, but not across the whole country.

And it is important to remember that parents have been given the right to keep their children at home for the foreseeable future, if they wish.

We do not support the closure of schools with the ending of all teaching as well.

We foresee considerable problems emerging because of underpreparedness if schools are closed and teaching has to continue by remote means.

Our final recommendation to the President is that schools that are safely prepared to protect against the virus, in areas where the health system is not overwhelmed, should remain open, that teachers should be given more support, and that in situations where schools cannot open other teaching methods should be urgently brought to bear.

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