

Covid-19 exposes the inequality of the South African education system

By Nomsa Marchesi MP – DA Shadow Minister of Basic Education

If you had any doubt about inequality in South Africa, Covid-19 just unmasked them for all to see. This outbreak could have been a catalyst for this Government to bridge the gaps and narrow the inequality divide but instead the decisions and priorities taken by this Government widened the inequality divide even further.

The pandemic gave us few options on how to react. The first option was to close schools, following in the footsteps taken by the countries first hit by the Covid-19 pandemic and the advice from the World Health Organization, our schools were closed on the 26 March, and the second step was how do we continue teaching and learning during the lockdown. And right there, the widespread historical problems which engulf this sector, from water, sanitation, overcrowded classrooms and shortage of teachers were just some of the reasons pointed out as hindrance in re-opening schools in a safe manner. Very few schools embarked on *e-learning*, leaving millions of learners behind with no means of learning whatsoever.

Whilst countries who decided to close school quickly opted for e-learning. Our country has no resources to provide e-learning. While we are a developing country, countries such as Kenya have recently offered free e-learning for their learners as school remain closed, because they would not compromise on teaching and learning. To them, this is non-negotiable!

In South Africa, however, the entire sector went into a slumber during the hard lockdown, to an extent, that there was a movement to stop the Western Cape Education Department from feeding learners who desperately rely on nutrition programmes at school. This was supported by a ruling by the North Gauteng High Court which found all provinces to be in breach of the Constitution for not re-implementing the schools feeding scheme.

In addition, with Basic Education having no interest or ability to explore options or improve on our IT infrastructure and no talks of learners receiving tablets which the President promised during his SONA speech a year ago, the idea of learning from home was quickly abandoned and we were left with no option but to open school very much aware of the shortcomings of our infrastructure.

The option to re-open schools and looking at the low rate of infections and transmission among young people gave many the assurance that we could open schools on condition that Covid-19 protocols are being followed and those schools that are non-complaint must not re-open.

Unfortunately, promises were made to provide Covid-19 essentials such as sanitizers and masks but none of these commitments were met with additional budget. Instead the sector was dealt with budget cuts and re-prioritization, which meant provinces were to use 20% of their Education Infrastructure Grant to meet their Covid-19 priorities, this is a shame! It is a shame because efforts to address sanitation, inadequate and poor infrastructure, IT infrastructure backlog were now put on the back burner and therefore, will not be addressed in the foreseeable future.

With masks and sanitizers arriving and schools becoming social distance complaint, millions were spent on water tanks and transportation of water to schools.

It soon became apparent that not all schools were ready and in the Eastern Cape in particular, many of its schools could not comply with the regulations and therefore learners in Grades 11, 6 and R could not return to school as the majority of schools were not ready to receive learners.

The 16 168 teachers with comorbidities are still yet to be replaced.

With now a definite direction with re-phasing, and with millions spent on PPEs in order to protect teachers and learners at school, the Government decided to ease the taxi industry relations by allowing 100% capacity load which mean learners can travel in a taxi that is not complying with social distancing regulations and end up at a school that has worked hard to control the infections but could now put all at risks because of this decision.

And now we learn that unions are up in arms calling for school closure. Unions have been adamant and fighting against re-opening and yet, they have not providing any innovative ways of continuing teaching and learning outside of the school environment, this is disappointing to say the least. This is because only when faced with the sharp rise in Covid-19 cases and teachers' salaries being threatened, are the union now coming up with ways of teaching outside the ambit of the classroom. Why didn't they give these innovative ideas way back in April. It is not as if they didn't know what was coming. They knew! Which begs the question, whose interests are the unions looking after?

They knew how many lives will be at stake if precautionary measures are not taken and instead there was a political football between stakeholders forgetting that the fight for the lives is paramount!

We need to strike a balance on how we save lives and yet continue with teaching and learning, even if it means using unconventional methods that the DA listed in our *Blue Book* to the President at the beginning of the lockdown. They were ideas to be considered but unfortunately, were ignored.