

Learners' education should be the top priority for all stakeholders

By Desiree van der Walt MP – DA Shadow Deputy Minister of Basic Education

Dit is dag 152 van die nasionale staat van inperking.

152 dae van uiterste onsekerheid vir ons kinders, ouers, en onderwysers.

152 dae waarin kommunikasie met Suid-Afrikaanse ouers en leerders óf ontbreek het, óf nie gereeld plaasgevind het nie en selfs ook foutiewelik afgekondig was.

U moet leer om ons ouers en leerders in u vertrou te neem met sake wat hul lewens en hul toekoms raak.

Ons moet nooit die bekommernis van 'n ouer oor die welstand van hul kinders onderskat nie. Veral rakend die heropening van skole tydens 'n pandemie.

It is only on day 158 of the national Covid-19 lockdown that will see our last learners, Grades 5 and 8, back at school.

The Democratic Alliance supported the phased reopening of schools.

As the economy gradually reopened, we believed schools should follow. Parents were going back to work, and they needed their children back in school and in Early Childhood Development Centres.

What we did not support was Minister Angie Motshekga's wavering on the topic and the repeated changing of dates for the reopening of schools.

The health and safety of our children, teachers and school staff is paramount for the reopening of schools if and when it happens.

It is therefore unacceptable and worrying that in preparing for the reopening in several provinces, there was ignorance of the Department's standard operating procedures.

What are the lessons learnt?

1. There were not enough discussions about the negative impact on the well-being of our learners of keeping schools closed, as extended school closures do not affect all learners equally.
2. Learners in poorer communities are reliant on in-class teaching to receive their education, and the longer schools were closed, the more they were disadvantaged. The gap between learners who cannot access education via digital alternatives at home and those that can and do, will only grow wider.

Practical proposals to contribute in saving the academic year:

1. Ensure that libraries at schools, where they exist, and community halls are changed into IT facilities;
2. Learners should be encouraged to use phone SIM cards to access to the Vodacom e-school;
3. Possible use of "Wi-Fi trucks" to act as hotspots in areas where needed; and

4. Ensuring that unions know that they are stakeholders in basic education and not in charge of the Department.

Yesterday, SADTU called that the date of the matric exam must be postponed again. This will increase already prevalent anxiety in learners and must not be allowed.

Learners cannot be allowed to continue suffering on premises that lack of proper sanitation and water. The Covid-19 lockdown period should have given the Department enough time to access the problem areas. There should be no more delays in fixing these problems through well-planned programmes and by awarding contracts through proper processes.

The Auditor-General should also audit that the “value for money” principle is adhered to.

More than 1 800 schools were vandalized during the lockdown period. Funds must be allocated to protect our infrastructure. Treasury and Public Works must get involved to ensure the protection of these assets.

We have to change our attitude. The education of our children must be a priority for every teacher, the unions and all officials in the Department of Basic Education.