

Does the cost of closing of schools outweigh the benefits?

By Nomsa Marchesi MP – DA Shadow Minister of Basic Education

Speaker, I would like to express my gratitude to all our front-line workers and to those we have lost their loved ones: ***lalani nge nxeba kwaye intsapho zenu zi lale ngoxolo. Jwalo ka rikitika kgwedi yaba sadi.***

Let us reflect on this. 67% of the Basic Income Grant has been paid out to men despite the fact that out of 3 million people who lost jobs due to the pandemic, 2 million were women – yet, this Government claim to empower women. This is a Constitutional infringement!

The Covid--19 pandemic was a chance for this Government to bridge the divide. They have failed in the past 26 years and they are failing now.

The closing of schools after the hard lockdown was not based on prioritising the future of our learners. It was purely political with no scientific evidence. It blatantly ignored advise from the World Health Organisation endorsing medical evidence that the transmission of the virus by children is low and that this fact should influence specific decisions in relation to schools re-opening.

We all agree that life is vital, and we must do everything we can to protect all lives.

Equally so, we cannot stand-by and watch as the future of our children are trampled upon and discarded by unions, the indecisiveness of this Government and lack of implementation.

When the Government decided to close schools the:

- The Minister said, *“learners will collect food from schools”*. Is it happening? No!
- She further said, *“Schools must send books to learners”*. Is it happening? No!
- She then said, *“all elderly teachers with severe comorbidities are going to be replaced”*. Has it happened? A big no!

Was there any funding for schools to fight Covid-19? None! Instead Provinces had to stretch their already limited budgets to implement plans and procedures to ensure a continuation of the school year and the safety of staff and learners. Is it any wonder that there are resistance from a majority of teachers and learners who are reluctant to return to school because the years of lack of planning and implementation by this Department has led to mistrust and lack of confidence in it?

And yet, this Government want you to believe that they have learners’ priorities in mind.

If they had our children’s future in mind, they would have realized that there is no time in the post-apartheid era that is more urgent to address inequalities related to basic water and sanitation infrastructure than the present moment. They would have considered children like Michael Komape who died in a pit latrine at his school. They would have included Basic Education amongst the entities to benefit from the R500 billion rescue plan. Did they? No.

If they had our children’s future in mind when making decision’s they would have remembered the 1 million stunted learners who depend on the National School Nutrition Programme for healthy meals. Instead, they starved 9 million children during the Covid-19 lockdown. In fact, millions of children continue to starve hampering the goal of eradicating the 27% stunting amongst children.

Fortunately, the DA recognized the importance of the National School Nutrition Programme – especially during lockdown as many households' struggled to put food on the table. The Coronavirus Rapid Mobile survey shows that child hunger has more than doubled since the start of the lockdown with 1 in 7 children going hungry.

South Africa already has a crisis in education; 48% of learners drop out of the education system yearly and the deliberate closing of schools will exacerbate this as many learners will not be going back to school. We cannot ignore that 78% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. The start of drop-out starts at foundation phase.

This Government chooses to only focus on Matric. And that is being myopic.

Furthermore, madam Speaker, there are 10 to 20% of schools which remain closed and there are no set timelines to prepare these schools for the return of teachers and learners because of lack of PPE and water.

The shameful manner in which the education of our children was treated during the pandemic will affect these learners for the rest of their lives.

This Government should resist the pressures from those with narrow agendas. Learners continue to sit at home unsupervised and not receiving any learning. Instead they are regressing as we speak.

The DA is of the view that school closures should not be implemented again. The price would be too great for our learners. We should reopen our schools while still making every effort to limit infections.