

17 July 2020**Attn: His Excellency President MC Ramaphosa****President of the Republic of South Africa****AND****The Honourable Minister Angie Motshekga, Basic Education**

Dear all,

RE: The necessity of continued healthy learning in schools

Solidarity and the Solidarity School Support Centre (SSC) has noted, with concern, the renewed calls amongst various stakeholders to once again close school within our country. Whilst we acknowledge the great deal of pressure government is facing both from the perspective of labour relations, but also with regard to the health of our teachers, administrators and pupils we must implore government to resist this pressure and to act decisively in favour of continued healthy learning in schools.

As a trade union which represents members throughout the South African economy we recognise the extreme pressure placed on our members, many of whom are parents, when schools cannot open. The fact is that unless schools operate on a similar basis as prior to the crisis, our economy cannot function effectively.

Economic considerations are, however, merely one aspect of the decision with regard to the continuation of classes in school. By far the most important factor is and should always be the best interests of our children. Here, once again, we are faced with several interrelated matters which must be weighed against one another.

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Of course, the health of our children is sacrosanct and paramount, but it should be noted that there are no simple answers in this regard. We should vehemently oppose any forms of so-called “single-factor analysis” which only considers one particular aspect of an issue when making a decision. We must evaluate the “seen, as well as the unseen” consequences of policy, as argued by the French economist, Frederic Bastiat. A simplistic “lives versus school” paradigm does not fully account for the various nuances under discussion.

As noted by Judge Fabricius in the *One SA Movement & Another v The President of The Republic of South Africa & 3 Others* “ The virus may well be contained (but not defeated until a vaccine is found) but what is the point if the result of harsh enforcement measures is a famine, and economic wasteland and the total loss of freedom, the right to dignity and the security of the person and overall, the maintenance of the rule of law. The answer in my view is: there is no point.”

As noted by the United Nations International Children's Fund (UNICEF), Global school closures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic present an unprecedented risk to children’s education, protection and wellbeing. Moreover, interrupting education services also has serious, long-term consequences for economies and societies such as increased inequality, poorer health outcomes, and reduced social cohesion.

Disruptions to instructional time in the classroom can have a severe impact on a child’s ability to learn. The longer marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. Children from the poorest households are already almost five times more likely to be out of primary school than those from the richest. Being out of school also increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence and other threats. Further, prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, and mental health and psychosocial support, and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and



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disrupted routines.

When researching the literature on the topic, it becomes clear that this perspective is consistently championed by various institutions throughout the world. Younger children in particular are ill-served by remote learning, according to a report issued by the National Academies of Science, Engineering and Medicine. Guidelines from the American Academy of Paediatrics also encourage “having students physically present in school.”

Of course government, and in particular the Department of Basic Education, are well aware of this fact as they marshalled this evidence in support of the initial opening of schools in their court papers for the *One South Africa Movement v Department of Education* case (OSAM-case), which I have quoted (Para. 146) below:

The decision to re-open schools also accords with the position adopted by UNESCO who articulated the rationale that supported the responsible reopening of schools in the following terms:

“... the adverse effects of school closures on children' safety well-being and learning are well documented, interruption in education services also has serious long-term consequences for economies and societies such as increased in inequality, poorer health outcomes and reduced social cohesion National governments and partners must simultaneously work to promote and safeguard every child's right to education, health and safety, as set out in the Convention on the Rights of the Child. The best interest of the child must be paramount. Across countries leaders are grappling with difficult and uncertain trade-offs as they consider easing lockdowns. This framework serves to inform the decision-making process on when to reopen schools, support national preparations and guide the implementation process, as part of the overall public health and education planning processes. Contextualisation and continuous adaptation are necessary in order to respond to local conditions and meet each child's learning,



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health and safety needs."

"Disruptions to instructional time in the classroom can have a severe impact on a child's ability to learn. The longer marginalized children are out of school, the less likely they are to return. Children from the poorest households are already almost five times more likely to be out of primary school than those from the richest. Being out of school also increases the risk of teenage pregnancy, sexual exploitation, child marriage, violence and other threats. Further, prolonged closures disrupt essential school-based services such as immunization, school feeding, and mental health and psychosocial support, and can cause stress and anxiety due to the loss of peer interaction and disrupted routines. These negative impacts will be significantly higher for marginalized children, such as those living in countries affected by conflict and other protracted crises, migrants, the forcibly displaced, minorities, children living with disabilities, and children in institutions. School re-openings must be safe and consistent with each country's overall Covid-19 health response, with all reasonable measures taken to protect students, staff teachers and their families."

South African specialists and experts in the fields of childhood development have echoed these very sentiments. With the South Africa Paediatric Association (SAPA), the South African Childcare Association and distinguished academics such as Professor Peter Cooper, an Emeritus Professor in the Department of Paediatrics and Child Health of the University of the Witwatersrand have all supported the following statement:

"Children biologically contain SARS-CoV-2 better than adults, are less likely to get sick if infected, have milder disease, are unlikely to die from COVID-19, and are probably less infectious than adults. Although children are at higher risk of being infected once at school, this additional risk to themselves and others is outweighed by the benefits of them returning to school."

The aforementioned benefits of returning to school, as noted by SAPA, particularly for



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poorer children, include the positive impact on their learning, access to the School Nutrition Programme (one meal per day), and mental health and well-being gains. Another point of emphasis the fact that distance learning prejudices poorer pupils and favours the more affluent, thereby exacerbating inequalities. Only about 20% of school children are currently benefiting from online schooling according to the DBE. School reopening will increase parents' and caregivers' ability to return to work.

Quoting once again from the OSAM-case (Para 137-137)

Mr Mveli then describes the developments that led to a change in stance on school closures in the third phase of the process. He says research data was now more decisive in showing that children rarely demonstrated symptoms of Covid-19; that they seldom contracted the virus; and that they were regarded as exceptionally low transmitters of Covid-19. This, he says, significantly influenced the rationale for the re-opening of schools coupled, as it was, with the ongoing adverse effects that school closures brought.

In this regard Mr Mveli relies on the opinion of Mr Martin Gustafsson, an education economist at the University of Stellenbosch. Mr Gustafsson says that even though in early February 2020 the evidence of children contracting Covid-19 showed very low infection rates, by mid-April the research was more conclusive to that effect. He goes on to add that there is virtually consensus across the research spectrum around Covid-19 that not only do children demonstrate low infection rates but also that they are exceptionally low transmitters of the virus.

The broad scientific consensus can, therefore, be summarised as follows:

Acquiring Covid-19:

- Children are less likely to acquire SARS-CoV-2 than adults.
- Children have less severe disease, accounting for less than 1% of severe cases
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and deaths.

- Children are more likely to have an asymptomatic infection than adults.

Transmission of Covid-19

- The ability of children to transmit SARS-CoV-2 is dependent on their susceptibility, symptoms, viral load, social contact patterns and behaviour.
- At a population level, children may be less likely to transmit and have a minor role in transmission
- Teachers are not at high risk of being infected by children. Teachers are at a higher risk of contracting the virus from other adults (e.g. colleagues), at home or in the community (outside school).

School opening

- There are no data on the relative contribution of school closures to transmission control.
- School opening in many so-called highly-resourced countries has not resulted in any major COVID-19 outbreaks.

On the other hand, the South African Human Rights Commission have, in a recent media statement, dated 15 July 2020 done an excellent job in synthesising the various negative consequences of school closures:

The social, economic and health costs associated with lockdown and school closures. Researchers including Van Der Berg & Spaul (University of Stellenbosch); Fall (Unicef), Ndong-Jatta (Unesco), Moeti (WHO) and Taylor (JET) present evidence of the following:

- Increases in hunger and malnutrition. For many poor children the meal they get at school constitutes a high percentage of total food they receive daily.
- Increases in acute malnutrition significantly raise the risk of children dying from



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pneumonia, diarrhea and HIV/AIDS.

- Poor children are not being screened for diseases which kill thousands of South Africans annually and severely compromise many more, notably TB and HIV.
- Increased risk of child abuse, mental health breakdowns with rising rates of depression and anxiety.
- Children are at high risk of being left home alone when their caregivers go to work.

Education outcomes associated with school closures. Researchers including Reddy, Soudien, Winnaar (HSRC); Hoadley (UCT); and Taylor (JET) predict the following:

- Learning losses for almost all children
- Increases in inequality since poorer learners and schools are least able to continue learning
- Poorer children regress significantly in terms of reading and maths skills during extended absence from school.

Whilst we do not wish to delve into the requirements and procedures involved in opening schools, as we have already dealt with that topic in previous correspondence we must urge a new approach and set of criteria as suggested by UNESCO. These include the evaluation of particular schools on their own merit, as opposed to merely treating all schools as a single national policy matter. The following may be taken into account according to the UN body:

- What is the capacity of the school to maintain safe school operations to mitigate risks, such as social distancing (i.e. size of classroom compared to number of students); and water, sanitation and hygiene facilities and practices?
- What is the level of exposure between the school population and higher-risk groups, such as the elderly and those with underlying medical conditions? If exposure is high, can sufficient mitigation efforts be taken?



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- How does the school population travel to and from school?
- What are the community-related risk factors considering epidemiological factors, public health and healthcare capacities, population density and adherence to social distancing and good hygiene practices?

We must stress, once again, that for the sake – not only of our economic prosperity, but especially in the interests of our children: (1) that schools as a matter of national policy remain open; and, (2) that schools and governing bodies be empowered to make decisions regarding their own preparedness to fight the virus whilst continuing which child development and education.

We trust that you will considerably favour the position set out the above letter as it not only represents the best scientific evidence, but also the best interests of our children. We simply cannot afford to have our children's lives and futures disrupted by political matters.

Just as we have seen that an economy cannot simply be paused and un-paused at will, so also we have noted that extended absence from school would have significant negative impacts on our children for decades to come.

Yours sincerely,



Dr. Dirk Hermann

CEO: Trade Union Solidarity & Chairperson of the Solidarity School Support Centre



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