

MEDIA RELEASE COVID-19: PSA calls on Minister of Basic Education to consider the

lives of workers and future workers

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), which represents thousands of educators and administrative staff in schools across the country, regards the decision by the Minister of Basic Education to delay the phased-in return to school for most grades is still a grave risk whilst a spike in COVID-19 infections continues unabated.

Although the PSA welcomes the decision to stop the return of grades that were set to return to schools on 6 July 2020, this surely will not ensure the safety of the rest learners and educators who are due to return to school in July. The Department decided to continue with Grades R, 6 and 11 from 6 July 2020 amidst a huge spike in the infection rate. The PSA has also noted that many schools have decided to defy the Minister's instruction and informed parents that other grades also still return to school on 6 July 2020. The Minister must realise that the lives of teachers and learners also matter. The Minister's immediate intervention is required to ensure that all schools adhere to the recent decision.

The Department is risking reversing the gains made during the initial lockdown period by ordering a return to school before the pandemic has peaked. South Africans have sacrificed greatly during the lockdown and this premature opening of schools could result in a further surge of infections, which may lead to another hard lockdown - something that South Africa cannot afford. The PSA maintains that illness associated with winter months will fuel the spread of the virus. Scientists are warning that South Africa's reported figures are between 4 and ten-fold under reported. The Western Cape, Eastern Cape and Gauteng already have a shortage of hospital beds, personal protective equipment and quarantine sites. These lessons should have been learned from countries such as Brazil, Italy, America and Mexico, where once the virus nears its peak the demand for hospital beds and ICU treatment far outweigh the available resources. The South African health system is already facing collapse owing to poor infrastructure, lack of maintenance at public hospitals, staff shortages and faulty medical equipment. South Africa, by opening schools during the winter months, will follow the same tragic path as these countries.

The PSA furthermore doubts that the Minister paid thought to single parents and what would happen should they be infected and needs to be quarantined. Such learners will find it difficult to get to school and will ultimately be left behind. The Department is yet to indicate how learners who were infected or quarantined will be assisted to catch up since their peers continued to attend school. Potential numerous positive cases will result in a disrupted stop-start academic year and will not support quality education. With potentially numerous teacher infected and a great number of teachers already not allowed to return to face-to-face teaching due to age and pre-existing medical conditions, schools run the risk of not having teachers available to teach or hire substitute teachers at a huge cost for school and the Department.

Social media posts are rampant with posts by worried parents who dread their children's return to school. If the Minister was in touch with her constituency, she would have realised that not only parents but, unions, pollical parties and communities at large have been calling desperately for schools to remain closed.

With more learners attending school and parents who need to commute to transport children, the spread of the virus will flare up. In addition, the taxi industry is functioning as normal with full occupancy. Countless school employees, teachers, leaners and parents make use of taxis with overcrowding posing a real danger of infection. It would be easy to lay the blame with taxis, but government has done little to assist them during the hard lockdown period – this while government is still prepared to bailout doomed state-owned enterprises. The continued corruption at ESKOM with no consequence management resulted in billions being lost that could have been diverted to assist taxis that commute workers daily. It is the working class that reports to duty to clean hospitals, cares for patients, pays out social grants, offers security services, teachers and others who render a public service at their own peril.

The Minister of Basic Education is once again urged to stop and listen to society. Schools should be closed until the winter months have passed and only open in October 2020 to reduce the spread of the virus and save the lives of workers and future workers.

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