

MEDIA RELEASE **COVID-19: PSA condemns premature return to daily attendance of primary school learners**

DATE 1 June 2021

EMBARGO None

ENQUIRIES communication@psa.co.za

The Public Servants Association (PSA), which represents thousands of educators and administrative staff in schools nationwide, is disturbed by the Department of Basic Education's new direction on the nationwide return to daily attendance of primary school learners from 26 July 2021.

The PSA is especially concerned about the danger associated with a premature return of learners to daily attendance as this can have far-reaching consequences for schools, parents, and communities. Surprisingly, the call for full return came after the Department of Basic Education (DBE) correctly suspended contact sports in schools owing to an increase in COVID-19 infections. The fact that four provinces are already experiencing in a third wave of infections should alert the DBE about the seriousness of the situation. This call is premature and illogical as it disregards scientific knowledge that the virus is more active during the winter period. The return is set to happen directly after the school-holiday period whilst history has shown that the country experienced a spike in infections holiday periods. A return all learners after the holiday period is destined to turn schools into super spreaders of COVID-19.

The challenges faced by the country's education system are well documented and range from inadequate sanitation, intermittent water supply, and crowded classrooms. These issues cannot be solved in the two months before learners return to daily attendance. It is public knowledge that the Department attempted to provide mobile classrooms to address overcrowding owing to classroom shortages. This intervention was hampered by the fact that some schools received mobile classroom without furniture. The PSA is further extremely concerned about the status of special schools where there is a need for infrastructure overhaul as most hostels, kitchens and classrooms do not allow for observation of social distancing as required by COVID-19 protocols.

The DBE further drastically reduced the number of teacher assistants in schools, adding to a shortage of staff and increased pressure on educators to perform their daily activities as well as additional functions as required by COVID-19 protocols. The PSA values the importance of education and understands the need for learners to attend classes more regularly. The health and safety of educators, support staff, learners and their families are, however, of paramount importance. The vaccination of educators has furthermore been delayed with no assurance that this process will be completed before 26 July 2021.

It is deeply concerning that despite the prevailing circumstances, the DBE is prepared to implement measures without considering the impact on learners, communities, parents, and teachers. The PSA calls upon the Minister of Basic Education to revise the decision and take a preventative approach by only returning all learners to school once the impact of the third wave of infections has been fully determined.

END