

MEDIA RELEASE **Education Minister's lack of vision is enriching PPE thieves masquerading as tenderpreneurs**

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), which represents thousands of educators and administrative staff in schools across the country believes the Minister of Basic Education is being irresponsible by continuing with her plans to open schools at any cost, despite the overwhelming evidence that schools will not be ready on 8 June 2020. Daily monitoring conducted by PSA Provincial offices shows an overwhelming amount of schools still do not meet the safety requirements and will likely not be able to meet the requirements in the month of June. The supply of water is a major concern and being one of the most important aspect to prevent infections the lack of water supply to schools poses a huge risk for educators and learners if schools are to open before all safety requirements can be implemented.

The Ministers plans to open schools is testament to the fact that the Minister is out of touch with the state of schools and the lack of required infrastructure in schools specifically those in poorer communities. The arrival of the COVID-19 pandemic has emphasised the difference and created further division between parents, educators, learners, and communities. We have seen that the department is not able to safeguard schools against criminals, with more than 1500 schools that were vandalised or broken into during the lockdown period. A number of these schools are still to be repaired, which will delay the preparation of schools even further. These criminal activities have now also affected the supply of Personal Protective Equipment (PPE). The PSA calls for an investigation into the supply and theft of PPE's. Reports by PSA Provincial offices showing that PPE 's, that were destined to be delivered to schools, are delivered only to be stolen two days later. These stolen PPE's are then possibly sold in other provinces or schools, that does not link the theft to the current supply. Similar criminal activities were observed with the delivery of water tanks, which are stolen within a day or two of being delivered to a school.

The PSA believes that Minster was ill-advised on the preparedness of schools to open and is being misled during her consultation process with various stakeholders. Despite the PSA's repeated request to be consulted on the opening of schools and amendments to the school calendar, the Minister continued to exclude the PSA during these stakeholders' consultation sessions. With the PSA nearing its centenary celebrations in July, the Minster failed to recognise the PSA's vast experience in the education and public sector and missed an opportunity to gain valuable information that could have assisted her in the decision-making process. The PSA is of the opinion that the Minister and Department of Basic Education did not foresee all the stumbling blocks that were revealed in the recent days and weeks during their planning stages. The Minister is only human, and it is within us all to make mistakes. The Minister should take responsibility for these mistakes and postpone the opening of schools till October. This will provide enough time for all schools and not just those situated in richer communities to be ready to take on learners and educators without risking their lives and futures.

The PSA values the importance of education, but any failure to exercise due caution in schools is set to fuel the COVID-19 infection rate at great expense to the schooling system. Exposing educators and learners to COVID-19 will place the entire country at risk and will wipe out the costly gains achieved to date.

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