

**MEDIA RELEASE**                            **COVID-19: PSA voices deep concern about educators and learners**

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**EMBARGO**                                      None

**ENQUIRIES**                                  communication@psa.co.za

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The Public Servants Association (PSA), which represents thousands of educators and administrative staff in schools across the country, calls on the Department of Basic Education to exercise extreme caution in plans for the return to school of 1.8 million educators and learners during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The PSA noted during the presentation to the Parliamentary Portfolio Committee today and the ensuing debate, that the public and members of the Portfolio Committee are extremely concerned about the premature re-opening of schools following the nation-wide lockdown to curb the spread of the virus. Schools, at the best of times, are fertile breeding grounds for a range of diseases. Any parent who cares for a sick child in winter after being infected at school, can testify to this. With the increasing COVID-19 infection rate, it will only be a matter of time before educators, learners and their families will be exposed to the deadly virus.

Despite the Department in its presentation addressing aspects such as sanitisation and water supply, the PSA believes that these measures will not be enough to prevent the virus from spreading. The PSA understands the need to save the academic year but cautions the Department not to endanger educators, learners and their families. The Department must prioritise proper sanitation, scholar transport and the repair of classrooms to ensure that educators and learners can return to a safe and healthy environment. The Department should also involve Labour Inspectors to conduct assessment of schools, where necessary, to ensure compliance with the *National Norms and Standards relating to Environmental Health*.

Most South African schools faced enormous challenges even before the COVID-19 pandemic. The Department's presentations indicate that classes that should not exceed 40 learners. This is, however, "business as usual" and will not allow for social distancing. With some 400 schools having been vandalised during the current lockdown, there will be further strain on schools to maintain to the prescribed number of learners per classroom. The PSA in the past already repeatedly raised concerns about unsafe schools across provinces. Most rural and township schools have water problems and lacking sanitation. Insufficient and storm-damaged classrooms with resulting congestion render social distancing impossible.

Transport of learners give rise to further concern. Most vehicles are only allowed a 70% occupancy rate, but this limit is increased for public transport, including taxis. This increase does not support social distancing. In addition, sanitisation of transport cannot be guaranteed by the Department. The presentation fails to indicate how the well-being of learners, educators and other staff will be addressed when using public transport. In addition, in Limpopo there is a scholar transport fiasco that ended in court. This further complicates matters as learners are without transport, thus exposing them to other dangers.

The PSA also believes that daily screening of learners is not workable owing to a lack of capacity by health workers to render this service. Time-consuming record keeping and gathering of screening data test will amount to



nothing if data is not interpreted. With the procurement of personal protective equipment being a major challenge in most public service departments, the number of masks and sanitisers needed every day to protect learners and educators against infection is not attainable under present circumstances.

The PSA therefore questions the Department's preparedness to re-open schools as most rural schools do not even have the required educational material. The PSA values the importance of education, but 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 infection will place the entire country at risk and will wipe out the costly gains achieved to date.

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