



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

STATEMENT BY THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MRS ANGIE MOTSHEKGA MP, ON THE RETURN OF SCHOOLS TO DAILY ATTENDANCE

06 February 2022

Good morning, and thank you for joining us.

You will recall that on 31st January 2022, the Cabinet decided to make changes to the adjusted Alert Level 1 with immediate effect. In terms of the decision primary, secondary and special schools are allowed to return to full daily attendance; and the regulatory provision for social distancing of one (1) metre for learners in schools, was removed.

Since the decision was taken, as a Sector, we have been engaged in a series of meetings, starting with the Council of Education Ministers (CEM), followed consultations with the Heads of Education Departments Committee (HEDCOM), and our social partners – including teacher unions, school governing body associations, civil society, and the school principals' association as well as associations for learners with special education needs.

I must say from the onset that during our engagement with stakeholders, some concerns were raised regarding the state of school infrastructure and the feasibility of accommodating all the learners under the current circumstances. The matter of late delivery of stationery and textbooks in the Eastern Cape in particular, was raised sharply in the meetings with stakeholders. Overcrowding was also a common concern, identified as one needing special attention.

We assured our social partners that we are presently in talks with National Treasury to resolve these matters taking into consideration

that these challenges preceded the COVID-19 pandemic. At the right time we will provide feedback on the progress of the discussions with the Minister of Finance. We are exploring all possibilities to resolve all the identified areas of priority.

In all the engagements, however, there was an overwhelming support for the full return of learners to daily attendance. This means, the rotational time-tabling we have been applying since June 2020, has now come to an end.

We have today – (Sunday, 06 February, 2022 published a Gazette, which officially ushers in the new environment as per the Cabinet decision. The CEM met twice this week, and agreed that full-time attendance starts tomorrow, Monday 07 February 2022.

As a Sector, we remain mindful of the fact that COVID-19 is still with us. All of us have a direct responsibility to ensure that we prevent the spread of this virus and its variants. Medical science has informed the decisions that have been made; and as a Sector, we will follow the advice from our public health experts.

On Friday, 04 February 2022, CEM convened to consider the state of readiness for the full return of learners. We are confident that schools are ready for the new normal.

In preparation for the return of all schools to daily attendance, provinces have made preparation around the following important areas –

- ✓ Communicating with parents and other stakeholders about the “big return”;
- ✓ Adjustment of the school timetables and duty-loads;
- ✓ Adjustment of the school assessment programmes;
- ✓ Safety from COVID-19 infections;
- ✓ Non-pharmaceutical preventions;
- ✓ Accelerated delivery of Infrastructure / Water / Sanitation;

- ✓ Continued provision of Learner Transportation;
- ✓ Continued provision of School nutrition; and
- ✓ Intensified Monitoring and Evaluation oversight.
- ✓ Curriculum Recovery Plans

The return to normal time-tabling, will assist the Sector to intensify its implementation of the curriculum recovery plan. The learning losses incurred in the past two years, are indisputably devastating. At the Basic Education Lekgotla held last week, it was resolved that the Sector would need to be rebooted, recalibrated and repositioned to withstand the debilitating impact of COVID-19, and any other pandemic and/or life threatening challenges schooling may face.

The first step towards addressing the crisis of lost learning, is to prevent further disruptions to school time, and prevent other learning losses, while ensuring the health and safety of our school communities.

The second step is to introduce measures to catch-up on the time, as well as the teaching and learning that was lost through the COVID-19 pandemic, in particular. We urge parents and all of our stakeholders in the Sector, to support efforts, to ensure that education continues without any further delays or disruptions.

Strengthening the Non-pharmaceutical interventions

The Ministerial Advisory Committee on COVID-19 has advised us that the non-pharmaceutical interventions work as a package. It is critical that we not only continue to implement these measures, but we must strengthen them even more. In this regard, I wish to highlight the vital importance of good ventilation in schools and offices. This is as easy as opening all doors and windows to allow for circulation of fresh air in classrooms, offices and scholar transport. As far as is possible, outdoor activities remain safer. In addition, we must continue the correct wearing of masks and good hand hygiene.

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Booster Vaccines for Educators, Support Staff and Officials

The new normal can and will be sustainable if we get vaccinated as one of the strategies of fighting the Corona Virus.

Last year, the Departments of Basic Education and Health ran a successful vaccination campaign for Basic Education Sector personnel. We are grateful to the support received from our social partners, who advocated for the vaccination of educators and staff.

The vaccination programme has contributed to the relative stability that we enjoyed in the second half of 2021. Fewer schools, if any, were closed and reopened due to COVID-19 infections; and the management of cases also improved as a result. Now we make a clarion call to all educators and school support staff, who were vaccinated using the Johnson & Johnson vaccines, that they are now eligible for a booster vaccination.

Booster vaccinations are helpful, to improve protection from infection that is as a result of different variants of SARS-CoV-2. Booster vaccinations are also available in a variety of designated healthcare facilities, pharmacies and vaccination sites. Various schools, may also be used as vaccination sites; but this should be done in consultation with the Department of Health. The DBE is working with the Department of Health to bring the vaccines closer to educators, support staff and eligible

On the recommendations of the 7th Basic Education Sector Lekgotla

Last week, we convened the 7th Basic Education Sector Lekgotla, under the theme – “*Equipping learners with knowledge and skills for a changing world in the context of COVID-19*”; and anchored our presentations, deliberations, and debates on ten main objectives. We were particularly inspired by the national and international experiences, and innovative practices shared by many speakers on elucidating the importance of the Lekgotla theme and the ten objectives of the Lekgotla, including the monitoring of learner performance during the pandemic.

Some of the topics discussed at the Lekgotla, – just to mention a few, included “*the impact and cost of COVID-19 in education and health; monitoring learning in the COVID-19 contexts; perspectives on learning recovery in the African contexts; learner assessment under COVID-19 contexts; teachers leading change in building a resilient education system – an African perspective; importance of ECD for future life outcomes; measuring progress on the implementation of inclusive education; as well as the knowledge, skills and competencies of a changing world*”, amongst others, are critical elements for successfully mitigating against learning losses.

We had set up five Commissions to further zoom into the critical focus areas we had identified. These Commissions focused on the following topics – *Curriculum and assessment – transition from school to work: Developing and implementing a modernised curriculum for the 21st century (Commission 1); Teacher preparation,*

Professionalism and well-being (Commission 2); ICTs, digitisation, e-education management, distance learning and online schools (Commission 3); Care and support for teaching and learning – CSTL (Commission 4); and Foundations for learning (Commission 5).

Here are some of the critical recommendations made at the Lekgotla:

Commission 1 on Curriculum and Assessment recommended that –

- ✓ In order to equip learners with the 21st century skills, and facilitate a more efficient transition from school to work, the Department must embark on a curriculum strengthening process. The strengthened curriculum must explicitly state the knowledge, skills and competencies to be achieved.
- ✓ In addition, to realising the vision of equipping learners with the 21st century knowledge, skills and competencies, the DBE must set the minimum standards for teacher competencies, and ensure that Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) adopt and comply with the standards

Commission 2 on Teacher preparation, professionalism and well-being recommended that –

- ✓ The Department, in consultation with its stakeholders and partners, should strengthen measures for the recruitment of new entrants into the teaching profession. A national induction programme should be launched in 2022 to strengthen support for new teachers. Furthermore, a national protocol to guide schools in pursuit of providing quality psycho-social support for teachers should be put in place.
- ✓ A national guideline to increase school-based professional development, including Professional Learning Communities (PLCs) must be developed. The Department should also recognise the need for a systematic prioritisation of Foundation Phase and grades with the least learning time during the 2020, 2021 academic years. Therefore, a dedicated support plan should be developed to address learning losses.

- ✓ The DBE should lobby our entities, such as the ETDP-SETA, the SACE, and the Department of Higher Education and Training to commit in taking forward our respective mandates pertaining to Teacher Development Summit resolutions, and engagements with relevant Committees on initial teacher education and development issues that have also come up from this Lekgotla.

Commission 3 on ICT, digitization, e-education management, distance learning and online schools –

- ✓ noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has dictated a review on how we conducted our business. Indeed, we cannot go back to methods of teaching that we used before COVID-19; we cannot develop educators on skills that we prioritized before COVID-19. Therefore, it is critical to strengthen coordination of Teacher Development Programmes, including working with Higher Education Institutions to develop both in-service professional development programmes and initial teacher development programmes, that would address the new needs. This should include ICT skills, vocational skills, technical skills, engineering skills, etc.
- ✓ also noted that we cannot afford to replace the current workforce, but what we can redirect their skills and competencies. Indeed, teacher development should be a priority moving forward, to equip learners with the skills of the 21st century. Clear action plans, with timeframes, should be put in place, to indicate how this will be achieved in the next three years; and the number of teachers that will be developed in various priority areas, per province, district and circuit.
- ✓ The Department should strive to put a laptop in every teacher's hands in the next five years. In order to broaden access to learning and development, online programmes should also be availed in the South African Sign Language. To ensure sustainability of e-Education delivery, dedicated ICT support should be available to all schools. All future infrastructure plans should have in-built ICT requirements. Schools should be guided on how to use norms and standards to procure ICT resources.

- ✓ Together with ICT companies, we must increase connectivity in schools. However, as a Department, we cannot do this alone. Partnership with relevant Government departments is crucial. Broadband must be strengthened to accommodate all schools to benefit from ICT connectivity. We also should finalise the framework on online schooling.

COMMISSION 4 on Care and Support for Teaching and Learning (CSTL) recommends that –

- ✓ The Department should recognise that the CSTL Conceptual Framework, is becoming outdated, and unfairly focuses only on learners. To address this, we must commit that the CSTL Conceptual Framework should be revised to incorporate contemporary realities, and situate the care and support needs of educators. A final revised conceptual framework should be in place by July 2022.
- ✓ Secondly, the HIV and AIDS Lifeskills Conditional Grant Framework should be revised to maximise its benefit for a broader care and support agenda, by including structural interventions that support learner health and wellbeing – such as learner social support programmes, including safety and sport. To address institutional funding mechanism for CSTL, we should make sure that this is done by November 2022.
- ✓ Thirdly, it is widely known that many intervention and support programmes are biased towards the girl child, and more and more, we are realising the vulnerability of adolescent boys and young men. In acknowledging this, we should produce a dedicated programme for adolescent boys and young men, and coordinate custodians and stakeholders in the men’s and boys’ sector to support the Basic Education Sector in determining focus areas or approaches for adolescent boys and young men by July 2022.

COMMISSION 5 on Foundations for Learning recommends that –

- ✓ The migration of ECD, which is set to happen from 01 April this year, provides us an opportunity to craft and implement

innovative strategies to strengthen **foundational learning**, looking at the continuum from birth to early grades. In order to achieve this-

- we need a **national plan** on strengthening Foundations for Learning. An **inclusive reference group will be set up in this regard**. The reference group will be tasked with developing a plan that will look at all the cross-cutting issues in foundational learning, with a focus on the provision of **access to quality learning opportunities in early years and early grades**, including strengthening family support for early literacy and numeracy;
- we need to implement **a systems approach to strengthening foundational learning**, by determining quality indicators at all levels, building capacity, and strengthening governance structures and funding arrangements.

As I said earlier, as a Sector, we are reenergized to ensure that the recommendations of the 7th Basic Education Sector Lekgotla, are implemented, and monitoring as well as evaluation oversight provided at all levels of the system.

On Booster Vaccines for Educators, Support Staff and Officials

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The vaccination programme has contributed to the relative stability that we enjoyed in 2021. Fewer schools, if any, were closed and reopened due to COVID-19 infections; and the management of cases also improved as a result. Now we make a clarion call to all educators and school support staff, who were vaccinated using the Johnson & Johnson vaccines, that they are now eligible for a booster vaccination.

Booster vaccinations are helpful, to improve protection from infection that is as a result of different variants of SARS-CoV-2. Booster vaccinations are also available in a variety of designated healthcare facilities and pharmacies. Various schools, may also be used as vaccination sites; but this should be done in consultation with the Department of Health. The DBE is working with the Department of Health to bring the vaccines closer to educators, support staff and learners, through pop-up sites in and around schools.

Provinces are requested to encourage our educators, support staff and learners to access these services. Vaccination, is the only intervention that will enable schools to remain in functioning normally.

On the vaccination of Learners

We call upon school communities to collaborate, and ensure that all eligible young people get their vaccines. Here, I am referring to the 12 to 17 year-olds, who are mainly children of school-going age. According to the Department of Health, more than **1.2 million learners**, have already received their jabs; with only **15 000 learners** having gone to vaccinate **in the last 24 hours**. We need to work together to increase this number. Out of a total of **13.5 million learners** in our system, an estimated **7.7 million learners** in our public school, qualify to be vaccinated. Clearly, we still have a long way to go.

COVID-19 vaccines have impacted positively, in decreasing the burden of COVID-19 infections in South Africa. Currently, children 12-17 years old, are vaccinated with the Pfizer vaccine. In addition, individuals over the age of 18 years, who have received two doses of the Pfizer vaccine, are eligible to receive a booster dose of the same vaccine, after an interval of six months or 180 days. The Department, will heed the directive of the Department of Health, regarding the number of doses and eligibility criteria for booster doses.

On School Nutrition

One of the advantages of returning to normal school programming, is the availability of learners regularly to receive their meals through the school feeding programme.

The National School Nutrition Programme will continue to provide daily nutritious meals to learners as they start full attendance. This Programme is critical, as it meets the Constitutional rights to basic nutrition in terms of Section 28(1)(c) of the Constitution. It is one of the key support programmes that seeks to improve the ability of children to learn, by reducing hunger, and improving school attendance. It is worth noting the success of the Programme, as it continues to reach over 9 million learners, in about 21 000 schools during the COVID-19 pandemic, targeting the most vulnerable learners nationwide.

On school sport and enrichment programmes

The COVID-19 pandemic, has had a devastating blow in the implementation of sport and enrichment programmes in our schools. The Department, after consultation with all key stakeholders, published the Directions on 22 October 2021, allowing sport and extracurricular programmes to resume, following all COVID-19 safety measures. On 14 January 2022, amended Directions, allowing spectators at school events, were published, following Regulations that were published by the COGTA.

We encourage all schools to resume with their sport and extracurricular programmes; but must still comply with hygiene and safety measures. Choir rehearsals and other indoor activities, must happen in well-ventilated spaces. The Department has placed the Sport and Enrichment Assistants (SEA) in schools, to reboot and support the resumption of sport and extracurricular activities in schools under the Presidential Youth Employment Intervention (PYEI). We urge all participating schools, to take advantage of the extra help that is provided through the PYEI.

On the Second Chance Matric Support Programme

Let me take this opportunity, to remind those who did not meet the pass requirements of the 2021 National Senior Certificate

examinations and prior years, that registration for the Second Chance Matric Support Programme, is still open. The Second Chance Matric Support Programme is also an opportunity for those who could not write the exams for a variety of reasons. The deadline for registration is the 15 February 2022. The rewrite exams, will take place in May and June this year.

On the NSC examinations Irregularities

I wish to stress to all our candidates, to stop the habit of cheating in the examinations. The high stakes National Senior Certificates examinations, have revealed various forms of cheating and malpractice. Unfortunately, examination cheating, in the form of group copying, has reared its ugly head again in various provinces.

In the Eastern Cape for instance, it has negatively affected **6 schools** and **864 candidates** in the 2021 NSC exams. The results of these candidates, have been withheld, following the discovery of cheating in the form of group copying. What is troubling with this matter, is that **57 educators** are implicated in the cheating. Investigations have revealed that learners were assisted, and reports indicate that some of the educators have already confessed to helping the learners during examinations. The teachers have been referred for disciplinary action in terms of the Labour Relations processes.

The Department shall deal decisively with these alleged cases, with an intention of eradicating these tendencies of the unethical examination behavior, displayed by a few educators and learners. The credibility and integrity of the NSC examination and qualification, shall be defended against this attack, with all the weaponry the Department has at its disposal. The ethical behavior demonstrated by most teachers and candidates during the examination period, shall be protected with intensity and the vigour it deserves.

As a Sector, we will run a nation-wide awareness campaign, to educate school communities about the implications of cheating during examinations. Any form of cheating and malpractice during the NSC exams, is unacceptable; and we will continue to adopt a zero-tolerance to these tendencies during the exams.

On the ECD function shift

Ladies and Gentlemen, we know from international evidence, that education systems will contribute to development only when they function optimally, and their component parts are focused on quality improvement, and aligned to ensure accountability for learning outcomes from early childhood and foundations to the more senior Grades.

It is for this reason that one of the key priority areas for the Sector is to improve the Early Childhood Development service delivery, after the function shift from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education from 01 April 2022.

The migration of ECD provides us an opportunity to craft and implement innovative strategies to strengthen foundational learning, looking at the continuum from birth to early grades.

Access and retention of learners from Grade 1 in 2010 to Grade 12 in 2021

It is also important to note that we have heeded the call His Excellency, President Cyril Ramaphosa made at the 2021 National Teaching Awards, that we find ways to address learner drop-outs in our schooling system. We must report that our EMIS database, show a steady retention rate of learners in ordinary public schools, by gender and grade. In the main, we seem to be seeing decreasing learner attendance by grade in the FET Band – that is Grades 10, 11 and 12.

We are aware that some of our learner exit school to enroll in FET Colleges; while we acknowledge that learners of drop-out for a variety of reasons, regrettably including death. We must however note the improve retention rate in the 2021 calendar year. Out of about **1.1 million learners** who entered Grade 1 in 2010, **more than seven hundred and thirty three thousand** (733 178) candidates enrolled for the 2021 NSC examinations. This is remarkable, as 66.7% of the learners who accessed Grade 1 in 2010, survive through the Basic Education system, to write their 2021 NSC exams in 2021.

It is also noteworthy that there were more than **five hundred and seventy nine thousand** (579 384) Grade 12 learners in 2010, a number which progressively increased to more than **seven hundred and thirty three thousand** (733 198) Grade 12 learners in 2021. This is a clear indication that, we are **improving the retention or “survival” rates**, thus we are **reducing the dropout and failure rates** in the Basic Education system.

Also, of importance only **4.0%** of the full-time Grade 12 learners, who did not write the 2021 NSC exams. A remarkable **96.0%** of the 2021 full-time Grade 12 cohort, wrote the 2021 NSC examinations. Steady but surely, the Basic Education system is addressing the concerns related to dropout, amplified in the NDP.

Conclusion

Let me take this opportunity to thank Cabinet, the Department of Health, the Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC), the National COVID-19 Command Council (NCCC) for their ongoing guidance.

I also wish to thank the Deputy Minister, MECs for Education, Director-General, Heads of Provincial Education Departments and their officials, our social partners and stakeholders – the teacher unions, national SGB associations, Principals’ association, the national association for ELSEN, as well as all colleagues in the Sector, for the work done thus far. I wish to particularly acknowledge the NECT for coordinating consultations with civil society.

It was through these well-coordinated consultations from which we receive invaluable support, guidance and counselling, that we were able to weather the raging storms of COVID-19 and its variants. For all its challenges, COVID-19 cemented us together, and made us engage more frequently and honestly, and work together even more – thus strengthening our partnerships as a Sector. We have agreed with our partners and stakeholders to provide monitoring and evaluation oversight on the full return to school on a fortnightly basis. We will pay a particular attention on infrastructure provisioning as a Sector, with support and assistance from our sister Departments.

I wish to inform the public that the NECT has shared with its their research Report on learning losses. We have scrutinized the findings of the research, and developed intervention programmes to mitigate such learning losses. I must inform the public that UNICEF has applauded the Sector about it interventions against the COVID-19 pandemic, as well as our interventions to mitigate learning losses. We will continue to do this work, so that we can continue to minimize, and ultimate eliminate the learning losses our learners faced because of COVID-19.

We are living under difficult times, that require commitment, dedication, sacrifice, and selflessness. We need to ensure that in all that we do, we put health and safety as an apex priority.

We convey our condolences to the families of the learners, who were involved in vehicle accident on last Friday in KwaZulu-Natal. The minibus they were travelling in from school, got involved in a crash, in which two learners lost their lives, and six others were injured. We hope that the police will get to the bottom of the matter, as it is alleged that alcohol played a role in the accident.

We also commiserate with the family of the 50-year-old Deputy Principal of Phomolong Secondary School in Tembisa, who was shot dead while leaving her school. We understand that the perpetrators on heinous crime are still at large. We trust that the police will hunt these criminals, and lock them up in jail, where they belong.

I thank you