



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

**Recorded Message by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs
Angie Motshekga, MP, at the SADTU Free State
Principals' Forum held in Woodlands Lodge, Parys**

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SADTU Free State Provincial Leadership Collective

All Members of SADTU and Principals

Comrades and Compatriots,

My name is Angie Motshekga. I am the Minister of Basic Education in South Africa.

Today marks a momentous occasion, namely the SADTU Free State Principals' Forum.

Today's Theme interrogates the Role of a Principal in Decolonising Public Education.

My message of support focuses on the role of a principal in Schools that Work.

Let me thank the leadership of the SADTU collective here in the province in particular and nationally for the invitation to join and address you in this critical Principal's Forum.

I shudder to imagine what it means to be a principal in 2022 amidst the learning losses of the past two years occasioned by the Covid-19 pandemic.

Despite the unfavourable environment under which the principals in the ordinary public schools' function, I urge all of you to focus on the core, not the peripherals.

All principals must focus on the fundamentals, not sideshows.

Every school must have a teacher in front of every class.

Every learner must have access to books and workbooks of high quality.

Every learner must be taught how to read for meaning by their tenth birthday.

Every learner and teacher must have his/her dignity protected by providing adequate and safe sanitation facilities.

All teachers must report to school on time and teach for the required number of hours.

All principals must advance the professional development of their staff.

Principals must ensure the full functioning of School Governing Bodies and the local Quality Learning and Teaching Campaign (PQLTC).

All principals must be accountable to the schooling community.

All principals must be life-long learners.

All these non-negotiables are vital pillars of schools that work.

In other words, the central role of the principal is to take charge of issues focusing on curriculum, instruction and assessment so that learner performance and learner achievement are improved.

Our ideal prize is improved learning outcomes, resulting in a high-performing basic education system.

Our principals are like the infantry battalion, on the ground defending the gains of our freedom since 1994.

Despite the challenges, the current cohort of principals, especially here in the Free State province of the top matric pass rate, continues to hold the fort remarkable well.

We are proud of the calibre of principals in this part of the country, a primarily rural province with wide horizons and blue skies, with farmland, mountains, goldfields and widely dispersed towns.

This tranquil land of the windmill is famous for its warm South African hospitality and a mix of cultures, clearly evident in street names, public buildings, monuments and museums.

It is here where the future leaders of our homeland are made into matric academic champions.

It is here where the true potential of our young people is cultivated.

Programme director; on behalf of the basic education sector, we welcome the cabinet's decision to end in its entirety the Covid-19 restrictions.

As a sector, we agree with the cabinet that the Covid-19 measures were necessary in the wake of the giant killer of dreams, lives and livelihoods.

Sadly, our Persal data analysis showed that we had lost around 3,300 teachers to Covid-19 by the end of December last year.

We pay tribute to the fallen teachers and principals who lost the battle against the pandemic.

These are brave soldiers who died with their boots on. Gone too soon but not forgotten. Forever in our hearts.

We thank you for your selfless service to our homeland.

By repealing the last three main Covid-19 restrictions “in their entirety,” Health Minister Joe Phaahla has brought to an end a chapter of the state-led management of the global pandemic.

The dropped restrictions included the removal of the mask-wearing mandates indoors and limits on gatherings and border checks for Covid-19 – and the need to be vaccinated to enter South Africa.

The government announcement through the Health ministry is a game-changer for the entire basic education sector as it will ease the overcrowding and release personnel dedicated to enforcing all Covid-19 protocols.

Programme director, our basic education system has remained stable despite the malevolent influence of Covid-19 on our system.

Our ordinary public schools are functional despite the concerning drop-out rate and learning losses of recent times.

There is evidence from the NIDS-CRAM survey that more school-aged children are not attending school than usual; it is not yet clear whether this is temporary non-attendance or will become permanent (drop-out).

In the long run, primary school learning losses may increase drop-outs when these children reach grades 10, 11 and 12.

At this point, learners with weak learning foundations begin to drop out significantly.

This creates an urgent need to recover learning that has been lost. Our hope lies with our principals to innovate and lead the way forward.

“We have now begun to measure Covid-19-related learning losses in South Africa by comparing how much children learned in 2020 with how much they learned in a typical school year before that.

These measures indicate that between 50% and 75% of an average year’s worth of learning was lost during 2020,” according to Dr Stephen Taylor, Director for Research at the Department of Basic Education.

The delay in the start of the academic year in 2022 and the extended absence of learners from school would have a long-lasting negative impact on society in general and not only on the education sector.

However, it is pleasing to note that the trajectory of the pandemic has eased, and SA has exited a mild fifth infection wave.

According to Dr Phaahla, the latest epidemiological analysis indicated that as of mid-June, there was a decline in the critical indicators monitored by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases.

These include the number of cases, hospital admissions and deaths, a decline in the effective reproductive rate to below 0.7% and a drop in the test positivity rate.

The good news is that more than half of South Africa's adults – aged 18 and above – have now had at least one Covid-19 vaccine dose, according to the latest (June 2022) data from the National Department of Health.

60-80% of the South African population have some form of immunity against Covid-19, either from having had the virus or having had at least one dose of vaccination

A total of 36.7 million vaccine doses have been administered as of 22 June 2022.

A total of 19 million South Africans are fully vaccinated; that's 32% of the entire population.

Vaccination remains the last line of defence as we have emerged from the pandemic into the "living with the virus" future.

I urge all principals to lead the campaign for vaccination amongst their staff.

I urge SADTU Free State principals to push for vaccinations against the virus that has already claimed the lives of some of your own.

As the post-Covid-19 future begins, our efforts must be focused on building a resilient basic education system for our learners and future generations.

Sadly, the recent intermittent functioning of schools and the disruptions to teaching and learning regimes have resulted in the reversal of developmental gains made in the last 25 years.

Lost school days lead to foregone learning (learning losses) – recent from around the world, even before the pandemic, have clearly demonstrated this.

International experiences of these kinds of losses in learning due to disruptions caused by natural disasters show us that the affected children often obtain lower overall educational outcomes.

And ultimately lower lifetime earnings as a result.

“Although we only have this information for certain grades and learning areas (such as reading), learners across grades and subjects would likely have been similarly affected,” Dr Taylor said.

Yet, as a sector, we remain steadfast in believing that we will revive and conquer in the end.

The first step towards addressing the crisis of lost learning is to prevent further disruptions to school time due to service delivery protests and arterial route blockages and prevent other learning losses.

The second step, which will take some time, will be to introduce measures to catch up with what was lost.

I have repeatedly said that as the Ministry and Department of Basic Education, we value the strong ties between your union and us.

In my previous address, I have spoken at length about digitalisation in the basic education sector and also expounded on the “system on the rise” narrative.

The global pandemic has taught us that digitalisation of learning materials, blended learning and teaching are required now, not in the future.

It is all about being faster (Kwauleza Phase) and smarter (Digital Innovation) to be built into the service delivery ecosystem for better quality and best value in our basic education sector.

It is incumbent upon every principal to be digitally savvy and lead from the front.

I have faith in all of you.

I thank you.