



**basic education**

Department:  
Basic Education  
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

## **Address by Minister Angie Motshekga at the AU Commission and UNICEF's Partnership to Reimagine Education in Africa within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic**

**20 September 2021**

Programme Director

African Union Commission Chairperson

UNICEF Global and Local Leadership

Ministers and fellow leaders from around the world.

We thank you, African Union Commission Chairperson, and UNICEF regional and global leadership for affording us as the Member States this rare opportunity to dialogue on matters of basic education at a global level.

Our theme, "reimagine Education in Africa within the context of the Covid-19 pandemic," is particularly apt to our continent and much of

the developing world because, before the Covid-19, we already faced insurmountable challenges.

According to data from the UNESCO Institute for Statistics (UIS), we were already in the midst of a global learning crisis before the Covid-19 pandemic: 617 million children and adolescents are not proficient in reading or mathematics.

It shows that two-thirds of children not learning are actually in school or were in school but dropped out.

These dire numbers have jolted many global institutions to rethink measures to mitigate the crisis at both theoretical and practical levels.

The advent of Covid-19 has injected urgency into these multinational institutions, including our engagement today.

Chairperson, you will be pleased to know that our country continues to participate at all high-level international engagements to advance the interest of all children to proper schooling for economic growth, freedom and peace.

Chairperson, we do not participate in multilateral engagements because of some twisted logic or need to punch above our weight, but to fulfil a global mandate as quality education is one of 17 Global Goals that make up the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Thus, it is crucial to have a global integrated approach that we believe is crucial for multiple UN goals.

As we know, basic education is foundational to all other UN Sustainable Goals.

For instance, Genevan philosopher, writer and composer Jean Jacques Rousseau once argued that “Plants are shaped by cultivation and men by education.”

As present mandarins in the public schooling sector, we have to do everything humanly possible to avoid a generational catastrophe that may be occasioned by learning losses resulting from the Covid-19 global pandemic.

As a country, South Africa pledges its support behind the AU Commission and UNICEF partnership that will culminate into convening a High-Level meeting of Education Stakeholders at the margins of the 76th UN General Assembly.

Chairperson, as a country, the Republic of South Africa, we are slowly exiting out of the third wave of the Covid-19 pandemic that was more severe than the first and second waves combined.

As a mitigating factor, Chairperson, I am happy to report that all our teachers and key personnel in the education sector are fully vaccinated against Covid-19.

Our country has enough vaccine doses to fully vaccinate over two-thirds of the adult population.

At present, we are vaccinating approximately 1 million adults every four days.

As our vaccination roll-out gains momentum, we hope to be ready for the fourth wave, and hopefully, there won't be any need to tinker with the school calendar again.

Although we have had fewer lost curriculum days in 2021 compared to 2020, as a sector, we are smarting from the stop and start nature of schooling amidst the health pandemic.

Since we reopened after the extended mid-year recess, there's been a steady improvement in the recovery of lost curriculum time.

Chairperson, our researchers, have thankfully begun to measure Covid-19 related learning losses in our local contexts by comparing how much children learnt in 2020 with how much they learned in an average school year before that.

These measures indicate that between 50% and 75% of a typical year's worth of learning was lost during 2020.

The delay in the start of the academic year in 2021 and the extended absence of learners from school would have a long-lasting negative impact on society in general, not only on the entire education sector.

The sector lost a week in the extended 2021 winter school holiday, resulting in fewer school days initially scheduled in the amended School Calendar.

It is, therefore, likely that these learning losses would have been more significant in poorer communities, where children have less access to adequate remote learning opportunities and home support.

Chairperson, there is new evidence from the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on South Africa.

It reveals that more school-aged children are not attending school than usual.

It is unclear whether this is a temporary non-attendance or may become permanent (dropout) from schooling.

In the long run, the learning losses in primary school may lead to an increase in dropout when these children reach the Further Education and Training (FET) Band at Grades 10, 11 and 12.

Although we only have information for specific Grades and learning areas – such as reading; learners across Grades and subjects would likely have been similarly affected.

The first step towards addressing the crisis of lost learning is to prevent further disruptions to school time and prevent other learning losses, of which the faster roll-out of Covid-19 would yield the required outcome.

The second step is to introduce measures to catch up on the time and the teaching and learning lost through the Covid-19 pandemic.

We urge parents and all of our stakeholders in the sector to support our efforts to ensure that education continues without further delays and/or disruptions.

Chairperson, since the beginning of the Covid-19 induced school closures, we adopted and applied the novel 4 Cs, namely Consultation, Communication, Collaboration and Curriculum.

We constantly consulted with teacher unions, amongst others, communicated broadly and consistently to society, collaborated with key stakeholders and designed joint plans to recover lost curriculum time.

In summary, here are the challenges we faced as a country since the pandemic hit our shores.

These include in no particular order:

- Loss of teaching time due to school closures and rotational timetabling;
- Increased number of positive cases of officials, educators and learners;
- Inadequate water and sanitation in some schools;

- Non-attendance of teachers and officials with existing comorbidities;
- Frequent closing and opening of schools due to Covid-19 positive cases;
- Unavailability of adequate quantity and quality of Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs) and allied protective resources, on some occasions;
- Increase in incidents of school vandalism during Covid-19 induced closures.
- Lack of devices to access online learning resources;
- Poor connectivity, particularly in rural schools, as well as the high cost of data;
- Inadequate knowledge and skills amongst teachers and learners to participate in online learning; and
- Increased need for psychological and mental health services.

Chairperson and fellow Ministers, we believe that our schools offer a new frontier in scaling up non-pharmaceutical interventions in combatting the spread of the coronavirus and beyond.

Our schools are more than educational facilities but centres of health, hygiene, nutrition and psychosocial support.



All learners in qualifying schools are provided with nutritious meals every school day through the much-vaunted National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP).

There's a National Hygiene Programme in lower grades to teach the basics of health-related hygiene protocols, especially in times of Covid-19.

We have a variety of health-related services available for all learners, including the successful National Deworming Programme.

All district offices support schools within their locale through the provision of social workers and psychologists.

Chairperson, and fellow Ministers, in our all-out endeavour to rescue the 2021 academic year while protecting lives, required ingenuity.

Research conducted indicates that the 2020 learning losses range between 40 – 60%.

Thus, we have developed a Three-Year Curriculum Recovery Plan in response to the learning losses of 2020.

The current remedial actions include:

- We have implemented curriculum adjustment to recover the loss of teaching time.
- Development and provision of Recovery Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) per subject and grade for 2021 - 2023.
- The 2021 ATPs contained trimmed content, knowledge and skills and focused on the content, concepts and skills required in each subject and grade.
- The Annual Teaching Plans include multi-year content to ensure important content from the previous grade is incorporated into the next grade.
- Recovery plans are located at the school level to ensure it meets the specific context of schools. Each teacher to develop a handover report to the next teacher outlining the content that could not be covered or adequately covered in the preceding years.
- Baseline surveys are conducted at intervals to determine learners' pre-knowledge and assist in planning and delivering lessons and additional support. Schools are required to develop school-based recovery plans based on baseline surveys.

- Reduction of the number and/or type of formal Assessment tasks to create more time for teaching and learning. For example, the June examinations have been removed as a compulsory component in Grade 4 – 12.

In Grades 4 – 11, the examination has been replaced by a test to focus on teaching and learning.

- We have launched the Adoption of Assessment for Learning (AfL) as a pedagogical approach to recover the learning losses.
- A formal programme to build teachers' capacity in applying this approach is at an advanced stage. This will ensure that our teachers focus on learning and not on assessment for the sake of the assessment or malicious policy compliance.
- While still in infancy, we have adopted the hybrid teaching models using our national broadcaster, including its radio stations, to ensure learning continues whilst applying rotational attendance models.
- Schools are also experimenting and innovating using social media platforms such as WhatsApp to continue teaching and learning, even if learners are not physically at school.

According to the Statistics South Africa (Stats SA), Chairperson, their results from a survey on digital divide during Covid-19 times shows that - 75,9% of learners indicated that they had smartphones that could be used for home learning; 36,1% had access to tablets and 61,2% to laptops.

As part of the post-Covid-19 basic education social compact, we created 320,000 work opportunities for young people to be engaged as education and school assistants throughout the country.

The education and school assistants help teachers with basic and routine work to spend more time teaching and enable learners to catch up from time lost due to Covid-19.

As part of Covid-19 relief efforts, financial support is being provided to more than 100,000 early childhood development practitioners.

More than 40,000 vulnerable teaching posts in the fee-paying schools are being secured through financial support because they recorded lower income from school fees than expected.

Chairperson and fellow Ministers, we took extraordinary measures to combat and manage the spread of the pandemic in the schooling

sector, including deploying technology for the COVID-19 screening, learning and teaching.

Our tech solution is TeacherConnect, which integrates with HealthCheck – a National Department of Health self-screening initiative.

The HealthCheck is a Covid-19 Digital Risk Assessment and mapping tool.

It allows for early detection, mapping, management and pre-screening of Covid-19 cases.

It also allows users to connect, be a helpdesk, provide learning, mentoring and tracking through real-time dashboards.

Chairperson, I have also been asked to address the challenges we face as a developing economy in the basic education space.

Our greatest challenge is about closing the digital divide between the poor and middle classes.

Despite South Africa being the third-largest economy in our continent with modern telecommunications, banking, and natural resources, the situation obtains.

We are toddlers in the real world of digital innovation in education. The successes we have registered in digital learning and the roll-out of the ICTs are not in keeping with our stated ambitions and policy imperatives.

Despite the challenges of snail pace roll-out, as per our policy of prioritising special schools, we have successfully implemented a plan for delivering ICT solutions to over 80 percent of special schools.

We are rolling out ICTs in special schools with the help of our private sector telecommunications partners, including giants such as MTN, Liquid Telkom and Vodacom.

Since then, we have provided 191 special schools with ICT devices, assistive technologies, and appropriate software for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, as part of the ICT roll-out plan, all special schools have provided connectivity, though not broadband connectivity.

In 2019, we finalised the plan to deploy digital Learning and Teaching Support Material (LTSM) through ICTs at all basic education sectors.

The policy says we must focus on Multi-grade, Special, and Farm Schools. Special Schools & no-fee schools.

In the mainstream schools, such as Eastern Cape Province, 64 000 Laptops have been provided to all teachers and 55 000 tablets for learners with connectivity in phase one.

There are 7 778 Smart Classrooms in the Western Cape Province in 600 schools and 28 871 mobile devices for learners, and 1 160 ICT Suites.

In the Gauteng Province, there are 7700 Smart classrooms in 487 schools and 16 000 teachers have been provided with laptops.

Chairperson, due to time constraints, I won't tabulate ICT progress in all nine provinces.

Clearly, the enormous investment in education since the dawn of freedom in 1994 has merely been used to plug the gaps of the apartheid divide, leaving gaping holes in funding new digital education innovation.

Nonetheless, the South African education system is in better shape than it was 27 years ago.

For instance, we have renewed focus on literacy and numeracy.

We are acutely aware that our learners haven't fared well despite notable improvements in the recent rounds of international testing systems as a country.

Be it the Southern and East African Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) or The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS).

Although not yet to celebrate, we have also noticed an upswing in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) assessments.

We have committed ourselves to improve South Africa's average in SACMEQ results for Grade six Languages and Mathematics from 495 to 600 points by 2022.

We intend to improve the average Grade eight scores in the Trends in Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) from 264 to 420 points by 2023.



By 2030, we hope to reach the desirable 500 centre points in TIMSS for the Grade eight scores.

All international testing system points to a system in the upward trajectory even in mathematics and science education.

To achieve these lofty goals, South Africa and Africa generally require a package of digital technologies investment to take our basic education to the next level.

I thank you.