



basic education

Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Address by the Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga at the WEF Sustainable Development Impact Summit held via Zoom

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We are indebted to the World Economic Forum (WEF) leadership for convening these Leadership Dialogues focused on closing the education gap created during the Covid-19 pandemic.

My address today focuses on the modalities for global collaboration in the space of basic education to close the gap, as it were.

For us as South Africa, like the rest of the developing world, the Covid-19 pandemic has destroyed lives and livelihoods in scale and pace never seen in recent memory.

Our basic education in particular and education, in general, wasn't spared these costly disruptions.

Intermittent school attendance has long been blamed for future poor education outcomes.

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

Aside from school closures in the early days and during the peaks of waves of Covid-19 infections, most schools have had to adopt rotational timetables to accommodate social distancing amongst learners.

This means that children may attend every second day or every second week instead of every day.

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

Moderator, as a country, we have begun measuring the lost curriculum time since the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our new research indicates that between 50% and 75% of a typical year's worth of learning was lost during 2020 alone.

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

The delay in the start of the academic year in 2021 and the extended absence of learners from school in 2020 would have a long-lasting negative impact on society in general, not only on the entire education sector.

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

Moderator, 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's education.

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 vaccines would yield the required outcome.

I am happy to report that South Africa has administered the Covid-19 vaccines to all teachers and key personnel in the sector to mitigate the curriculum losses.

As a country, we have enough vaccine doses to vaccinate at least 2/3 of the adult population.

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

There lies the rub, how do we prepare for the new world beyond the paralysis of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The convenors of this leadership dialogue point to the need for collaboration between governments and the private sector at a global level.

On behalf of the South African Government, we endorse the action plan to close the education gaps beyond the pandemic.

We have a reason to believe that we have a gold standard in the space of government and corporate sector collaboration as a country.

In 2013, South Africa launched a trailblazing initiative known as National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT).

The NECT is the official interface between the Government and private sector with a common objective to improve learning outcomes throughout the education system.

Corporate SA agreed to contribute 0.004% of their market capitalisation per annum to the NECT to plug the gaps (human capital and resources) in the basic education sector.

The board of the NECT comprises nominees from Corporate SA, teacher unions and the Director-General of the Basic Education Department.

It is a compact trust that offers intellectual muscle and an agile implementation model to our quest to improve learning outcomes.

Thus, Moderator, I propose that we study the SA model on collaboration and adopt certain principles to nip the new Covid-19 fault lines in the bud.

The NECT has been working since 2013 and often shooting beyond its weight in supporting the Basic Education Department's key priorities such as literacy and numeracy.

Moderator; all indications are that Covid-19 hasn't introduced new socio-economic challenges but simply illuminated the pre-Covid-19 issues of inequality between the West and South, black and white, rich and poor.

As mandarins of basic education in this epoch, we have to get our hands dirty and understand the interconnectedness nature of our world today.

In other words, less glamour, more grit.

For instance, there's no political/moral sense in hoarding Covid-19 vaccines in the West while Africa and Asia are left behind because it means the global tourism value chains remain disrupted.

Moderator; in 2019, His Excellency President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that Government would provide every school child in South Africa with digital workbooks and textbooks on a tablet device within six years.

Due to the pandemic, we are behind the key milestones required to achieve this excellent policy imperative.

In other words, South Africa requires investments and collaboration in digital learning and teaching space as part of the WEF Closing the Gap Education Accelerator.

Another critical area of public-private collaborations is to focus on early learning.

If we get the learning foundations right, the rest will follow.

I am happy to report that South Africa, in line with UNESCO recommendation, is shifting early childhood learning away from Social Development to Basic Education by 2022.

Moderator; our NECT collaboration since 2013 has taught us that partnerships must aim to have a systemic impact rather than merely impacting specific schools.

Instead of aiming to turn around or resource individual schools, public, private collaborations could help the Government improve the effectiveness of its own investment in schooling, most possibly through the NECT.

In this way, collaborations have the potential to have wide-scale and sustainable impacts.

For instance, three types of interventions could deliver sustained system-wide impact, including developing and maintaining real-time monitoring systems; this will be like a magic wand for a system as large as ours.

Secondly, using new technologies to improve the efficiency of the Government's support functions to schools (e.g. monitoring and support from district officials);

Thirdly, research and innovation to inform evidence-based programs with the potential for Government to implement on a broader scale.

Although I have expressed a desire for public-private collaborations to have a systemic impact, some partners may also be interested in making the change from below - at the school level.

I am happy to report that we are rolling out Focus Schools or schools of specialisation to plug the gaps or diversify our curriculum offering as a country.

These focus schools require 21st century resources such as smart classrooms and digital gadgets for learning and teaching.

Thus, we would welcome school level investments as long as such projects empower all members of that school's community, including the school management teams, teaching staff, and school governing body members, amongst others.

In this way, healthy mutual forms of accountability at the local level can be fostered.

I thank you.