



Education Digest 3 **June 23rd 2020**

Reopening Schools During the Pandemic

South Africa took a further step in the process of easing lockdown restrictions on 1st June. With Level 3 in full swing and certain business sectors going back into operation, schools have also started gradually reopening their doors through a phased-in approach. It is intended that this will allow resumption of the academic year in a way that will not hinder efforts to contain the spread of COVID-19.

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-05-19/south-africa-to-begin-phased-reopening-of-schools-from-june-1>

Reopening of schools

The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU), the Educators Union of South Africa (EUSA) and the National School Governing Body Association have all argued that, while the teaching year has suffered due to the lockdown, government needs to exercise extreme caution in reopening schools. This is because schools are considered high-risk environments, with a number of pupils in close proximity to one another, especially in schools that have overcrowded classrooms. Proposed guidelines by the Department of Basic Education on social distancing at schools include: physical distancing in classrooms; no more than two learners sharing a desk; no hugging or hand shaking; cloth face-masks to be worn by all students and teachers at all times. Teachers' trade unions have argued that these guidelines are only possible in schools that have adequately maintained infrastructure, such as private schools, former model C schools, and a handful of other government schools in urban areas and cities.

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/latest-update-when-will-schools-reopen-after-lockdown-grade-7-and-12/>

Challenges

Concerns surrounding the schooling system's state of readiness continue to raise red flags. The start of the new term highlighted serious challenges faced by many schools with poor infrastructure or few if any ablution facilities. This resulted in many schools reportedly not being ready to welcome learners back. The government promised to add additional mobile classrooms and infrastructure, such as sanitisation facilities and water tankers where needed, to prepare schools to reopen. However, basic COVID-19 safety materials for learners are yet to be delivered in certain schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo, despite earlier assurances that they were available in warehouses in the provinces.

<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/sgb-association-calls-for-postponement-in-reopening-schools/>

<https://peoplesdispatch.org/2020/06/03/continued-resistance-to-school-reopening-in-south-africa/>

Concerns

A school in Mthatha, Eastern Cape, Madonisi Primary School, could not welcome back its 24 Grade 7 learners due to the school not receiving sufficient Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) for teachers and learners. The school is also yet to get mobile toilets and water tanks; it has been without proper toilets for nearly two years. At Vuyiseka High School in Lower Crossroads, Cape Town, learners were sent back home by SGB members. They believed that Vuyiseka was not thoroughly sanitised after a teacher tested positive for COVID-19, putting the learners and staff at risk of contracting the virus. In Sweetwaters, Pietermaritzburg, Insika High matriculants did not resume classes as expected on June 15th. Those who arrived were sent back home after concerns raised by the SGB members over the lack of adequate infrastructure at the school. The members believed that it would be impossible for both teachers and learners to safely maintain hygienic practices as required by regulation. These are just three examples of the uneven experience of school reopening around the country, and of the communities' concerns around the state of readiness of their schools.

<https://www.thesouthafrican.com/news/back-to-school-level-3-lockdown-education-covid-19-8-june-2020/>

<https://www.iol.co.za/mercury/news/7-kzn-schools-closed-for-covid-19-29-in-eastern-cape-49298123>

<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/three-kzn-schools-closed-due-to-positive-covid-19-cases/>

Inequalities magnified

The COVID-19 pandemic has once again brought to light the extreme inequalities within the education sector. The measures taken to slow down the spread of the virus have unearthed a range of systematic problems across the education landscape ranging from water shortages, overcrowded classrooms, and bad sanitation, to infrastructure that has not been maintained for years. The pandemic has further magnified existing struggles faced by South Africans over the past two and half decades concerning schools that were built for black children in urban and rural areas under apartheid still having extreme infrastructure shortages, operating without water and sanitation, and with overburdened staff.

The home schooling initiative again showed the chronic inequalities within the sector, with children attending former model C, private and urban city schools being ahead of their peers, as they either had access to internet connectivity in their homes or smart phones allowing them to stay connected, thus making the transition back into school less burdensome. Schools that had the capacity to maintain their infrastructure managed to commence their academic year with few hiccups while, the rest were not so fortunate. These gross inadequacies have made the headlines from time to time, yet little substantial change has come of it.

<https://theconversation.com/covid-19-exposes-the-underbelly-of-south-africas-education-system-138563>

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