

**To: Ms Angie Motshekga**  
Minister for Basic Education  
National Department of Basic Education  
**By email: Mabua.S@dbe.gov.za**

**And: Mr Mathanzima Mveli**  
Director General  
National Department of Basic Education  
**By email: Mveli.M@dbe.gov.za; Tom.N@dbe.gov.za**

**JOINT LETTER REGARDING THE EFFICACY OF CURRICULUM RESOURCES DURING THE COVID-19  
SCHOOL CLOSURES**

14 April 2020

Dear Minister Motshekga and Mr Mveli

1. We as education organisations and activists recognise that the COVID-19 virus has created an unprecedented set of challenges for our education system in ensuring curriculum coverage and the continuation of teaching and learning.
2. We therefore wish to acknowledge that the Department of Basic Education (“DBE”) has instituted swift measures to mitigate some of the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the resulting school closures, on learning.
3. We note in particular, the availability of curriculum resources through a number of digital platforms and television and radio broadcasts (“online and broadcast curriculum resources”). We also note the DBE’s *2020 Draft Framework for Curriculum Recovery Post COVID-19*

("Curriculum Recovery Plan"), which begins to set out the potential education responses to various COVID-19 scenarios in the coming months. Your leadership in this regard is appreciated and commended.

4. Our understanding from the Curriculum Recovery Plan, together with the recent statements made by Minister Motshekga in the media, is that curriculum recovery will be focussed primarily on the following: (1) Recovery of in-school learning and teaching time; (2) Review of the curriculum to focus on the core curriculum where feasible and (3) Review of examinations based on the curriculum review. The online and broadcast curriculum resources that have been made available will, we understand, serve to supplement and enhance the Curriculum Recovery Plan.
5. Pursuant to each of our organisational mandates to ensure the fulfilment of the right to basic education in the Constitution, we have been monitoring the rollout of the DBE's measures to ensure that meaningful learning opportunities continue during this period of necessary school closures. We will endeavour to support the DBE to the extent that the measures taken are consistent with the fulfilment of the right to basic education.
6. We welcome Minister Motshekga's position that learners will not be assessed on content that has not been taught during contact lessons.<sup>1</sup> The reality is that the vast majority of learners will have an extremely difficult time learning at home and cannot be expected to keep up with the formal curriculum during school closures. The Curriculum Recovery Plan seems to be informed by this understanding.
7. Nonetheless, there remains considerable uncertainty in South Africa, and indeed across the globe, regarding when it will be deemed safe for schools to re-open and for learners and teachers to return to the schooling environment.
8. Therefore, while learning from home remains the only option for learning at this time, we would like to draw your attention to some key issues that have we have noted in our

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<sup>1</sup> Motshekga, A. "Minister of Basic Education briefs the media ahead of National lockdown." 26 March 2020. YouTube, GovernmentZA. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz270axzJPA>

monitoring of existing responses, as well as through the complaints that have been received by some of our organisations from the public.

9. As is noted in the Curriculum Recovery Plan, the biggest challenge for many is the availability of technology and “inequalities in access [to technology] can further inflame inequalities in education”.
10. The United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (“CESCR”) unanimously adopted an inter-sessional statement on COVID-19 on 6 April 2020. This statement notes that where schools have been closed, and efforts are being made to continue teaching online, there is a risk of “deepening educational inequalities between rich and poor learners due to unequal access to affordable Internet services and equipment such as computers, smart phones and tablets.”<sup>2</sup> The CESCR recommends that states ensure affordable and equitable access to internet services by all for educational purposes.<sup>3</sup>
11. We therefore write to you in the spirit of collaboration and hope that this information will assist the DBE in continuing to improve the ways in which it supports learners, parents and teachers during this time.
12. We have noted the following key concerns:
  - 12.1. Disparities in access to internet connections, laptops, smartphones and affordable data;
  - 12.2. Access to printed materials;
  - 12.3. Issues with the television and radio content;
  - 12.4. Challenges with available online resources;
    - 12.4.1. A lack of centralisation of online resources;
    - 12.4.2. Difficulty in navigation through online content;

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<sup>2</sup> Paragraph 7.

<sup>3</sup> Paragraphs 15, 18.

- 12.4.3. Slow download speeds and error screens;
  - 12.4.4. Inconsistency in the provision of online resources between provinces;
  - 12.4.5. Accessibility of online resources; and
- 12.5. A need for support for caregivers and for teachers.

### **13. Disparities in access to internet connections, laptops, smartphones and affordable data**

- 13.1. It is essential that the DBE's current and future interventions focus on learners who are most at risk and who were already experiencing barriers to education before school closures, providing practical and realistic learning opportunities that recognise the realities of their circumstances.
- 13.2. As acknowledged in the Curriculum Recovery Plan, one of the biggest challenges to online learning is lack of access to an internet connection, required resources such as laptops and smartphones, and access to free data content. In some instances, there is a lack of access to electricity to charge those required resources even where they are present (there are fewer charging stations available in the rural areas now due to the lockdown).
- 13.3. According to the General Household Survey, around 10.4% of South African households have access to the internet at home, and in rural areas the number is as low as 1.7%.<sup>4</sup> These figures change to 60% and 45% respectively when access to mobile internet is considered, but it is not clear that this translates to sufficient internet access for learning, and not all mobile devices support access to learning materials.

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<sup>4</sup> Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2018*. Pg. 57. Available at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182018.pdf>

13.4. In contrast, 82.2% of South African households own a television, with 73.4% of households in rural areas having one.<sup>5</sup> There has been a decline in households owning a radio, from 67.5% in 2011<sup>6</sup> to 55.8% in 2016.<sup>7</sup>

#### 14. Access to printed materials

14.1. Access to printed materials is critical for learners who are either entirely unable to access online material or can only do so at intervals.

14.2. While materials such as workbooks and worksheets were intended to be provided to learners prior to the closure of school, there is some uncertainty about whether this took place effectively.<sup>8</sup>

14.3. Further, the DBE website notes that “Grade R learners will receive four books per year, one for each term.”<sup>9</sup> It is unclear whether Grade R learners have their second term workbooks in their possession, and if not, whether there exists a plan for them to receive these workbooks.

14.4. Now that the lockdown has been extended, we recommend that individual schools ensure that learners have access to both workbooks and textbooks. There are a number of ways in which distribution could take place. In the US for example, some districts in Washington are handing out printed learning material at meal distribution sites for learners,<sup>10</sup> while in others there are designated times for picking up the materials at school.<sup>12</sup> South Carolina on the other hand, is

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<sup>5</sup> Statistics South Africa. *General Household Survey 2018*. Pg. 63. Available at: <http://www.statssa.gov.za/publications/P0318/P03182018.pdf>

<sup>6</sup> Statistics South Africa, 2012. *Census 2011: Provinces at a glance*. Available at: [http://www.statssa.gov.za/census/census\\_2011/census\\_products/Provinces%20at%20a%20glance%2016%20Nov%202012%20corrected.pdf](http://www.statssa.gov.za/census/census_2011/census_products/Provinces%20at%20a%20glance%2016%20Nov%202012%20corrected.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> Statistics South Africa, Twitter. Available at: <https://twitter.com/StatsSA/status/963414975187423232/photo/1>

<sup>8</sup> Minister Angie Motshekga. “Minister of Basic Education briefs the media ahead of National lockdown.” 26 March 2020. YouTube, GovernmentZA. Available at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Xz270axzJPA>

<sup>9</sup> [https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/LearningandTeachingSupportMaterials\(LTSM\)/Workbooks.aspx](https://www.education.gov.za/Curriculum/LearningandTeachingSupportMaterials(LTSM)/Workbooks.aspx)

<sup>10</sup> Cheney Public Schools. “\*Coronavirus (COVID-19).” 25 March 2020. Available at: [https://www.cheneyisd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC\\_ID=519063&type=d&pREC\\_ID=1844662](https://www.cheneyisd.org/apps/pages/index.jsp?uREC_ID=519063&type=d&pREC_ID=1844662)

<sup>11</sup> Seattle Public Schools, 2020. “Seattle Public Schools Coronavirus Response FAQ.” Available at: [https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what\\_s\\_new/coronavirus\\_update/faq](https://www.seattleschools.org/district/calendars/news/what_s_new/coronavirus_update/faq)

<sup>12</sup> District of Columbia Public Schools, 2020. “Coronavirus (COVID-19) Updates.” Available at: <https://dcps.dc.gov/coronavirus>

repurposing school buses to distribute learning materials and meals, and to provide mobile, parked WiFi spots to locations with no internet access.<sup>13</sup>

14.5. In the case of South Africa, learners could collect workbooks and textbooks from the school they attend. In the case of younger learners, caregivers and older siblings could assist with the collection of materials. In order to facilitate social distancing, the collection of these materials should be staggered over a number of days, in order to limit the number of collections per day. Parents, caregivers and learners would need to be informed about collection dates and times. In rural areas, where learners travel long distances to and from school, the South Carolina model could be utilised. This could be an important opportunity to communicate information about COVID-19, about broadcasting schedules, plans going forward, and any additional resources such as guides for caregivers.

14.6. We welcome the prioritisation of support to learners with disabilities in the recovery plan. This support should include the provision of accessible learning materials; adapted curriculum learning material, in particular, material to support the adapted curriculum for learners with intellectual disability; sign language interpretation on TV channels (as discussed below); and assistive devices to support with communication and learning (for example, braille writers and low vision aids such as audio files to which the Curriculum Recovery Plan has made reference).

## **15. Issues with the television and radio content**

15.1. Available information on television and radio broadcast schedules has been uncoordinated and ad hoc.

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<sup>13</sup> Darling-Hammond, L. "Learning In The Time Of COVID-19." *Forbes*. 19 March 2020. Available at: [https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2020/03/19/learning-in-the-time-of-covid-19/?utm\\_source=LPI+Master+List&utm\\_campaign=5efefb01f7-LPIMC\\_COVID-19-Resources\\_20200319&utm\\_medium=email&utm\\_term=0\\_7e60dfa1d8-5efefb01f7-42297087#4a5486e87203](https://www.forbes.com/sites/lindadarlinghammond/2020/03/19/learning-in-the-time-of-covid-19/?utm_source=LPI+Master+List&utm_campaign=5efefb01f7-LPIMC_COVID-19-Resources_20200319&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_7e60dfa1d8-5efefb01f7-42297087#4a5486e87203)

- 15.2. Lesson schedules related to which subjects will be taught, for which grades, on what station/channels, at what time are not located in a centralised place, to ensure ease of access for the public.
- 15.3. We therefore recommend that a schedule of all television and radio broadcasts be located in a centralised place and that these schedules be adequately publicised.
- 15.4. Further, we have noted some specific omissions in some of the content that is being broadcast on DSTV channels.
- 15.4.1. Learners are assumed to have their workbooks at home with them, when this is not necessarily the case in fact and across all provinces.
- 15.4.2. There appears to be no provision made for sign language interpretation for deaf learners. We recommend that sign language interpreters be included across all television programmes to accommodate deaf learners.
- 15.5. We recommend further that television stations that are *free to access* and radio stations that broadcast to rural communities be prioritised. Content should be available in different languages and broadcast lessons should be as interactive as possible.
- 15.6. In countries such as Pakistan, interactive radio instruction has been used to improve access to education both for children out of school, as well as children in school. The ‘radio teacher’ delivers content on air and encourages learners to participate by pausing at specific moments to give learners time to come up with answers on their own.<sup>14</sup> It has also been suggested that radio can be used as reading practice, where learners are provided with reading and writing materials to use for following along with a radio broadcast which aligns with the content of the reading and writing material.<sup>15</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Mundy, K. and Hares, S. “Managing Education Systems During COVID-19: An Open Letter to A Minister of Education.” *Center for Global Development*. 23 March 2020. Available at: <https://www.cgdev.org/blog/managing-education-systems-during-covid-19-open-letter-minister-education>

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

## 16. Challenges with available online resources

16.1. While we have noted the limitations of online resources, where such resources are made available, government should ensure that such resources are of high quality, well-organised and that access is as far-reaching as possible.

### 16.2. *A lack of centralisation of online resources*

16.2.1. The DBE appears to be managing and uploading content onto various websites. To date, we have been able to find four different sites from the DBE, namely (1) the DBE main website (<https://www.education.gov.za/>); (2) the DBE Cloud (<https://dbecloud.org.za/login/welcome.php>) (3) the DBE Bhelela portal (<http://dbecontent.bhelela.com/GETContent.php>) and (4) the Thutong portal (<https://www.thutong.doe.gov.za/>).

16.2.2. This creates confusion regarding which of these is the official DBE portal for obtaining resources. Provincial Departments of Education have been inconsistent as to which of these they have referred learners to.

16.2.3. We recommend that the DBE select the most appropriate one of these, and centralise all curriculum resources there. There should then be a clear communication strategy to direct all interested parties to this one centralised database. The DBE Cloud and Bhelela Portal are more systemically arranged and clearly structured than the DBE main website, but are not well-known.

### 16.3. *Difficulty in navigation through online content*

16.3.1. The DBE main website is difficult to navigate. Confusion is created when searching for a particular resource, and links often take users to third-party websites, rather than providing resources directly, which creates further confusion.

16.3.2. Resources are not organised systemically by grade and subject.

- 16.3.3. We recommend that the DBE follow the example of the Gauteng Department of Education in organising online resources by breaking down the resources per grade and per subject and providing guidance on topics that are most important.
- 16.3.4. We further recommend that the DBE strongly recommend that every Provincial Education Department (“PED”) does the same, perhaps by providing a template or suggested standardised website structure.
- 16.3.5. The DBE Cloud appears to have comprehensive resources for all subjects for Grade R to 6. However, Grades 7 – 9 have very few language resources (other than past ANA question papers and memoranda for home and first additional languages). Further, the only non-language subject tabs with a good amount of resource material are mathematics and technology. Resources across the board for grades 10 -12 are similarly scant and the resources available here are mainly question papers and memoranda from previous years. We recommend that the DBE’s centralised portal should have appropriate curriculum resources such as workbooks and textbooks, for all grades.

16.4. *Slow download speeds and error screens*

- 16.4.1. The DBE main website is generally very slow. Before being allowed to download resources, hyperlinks often lead to an error screen. A user must refresh and persist repeatedly before a resource begins to download. To avoid losing valuable learning time, we recommend that the DBE and PEDs obtain adequate IT services to cope with the high traffic to the main website.
- 16.4.2. The DBE main website is often unavailable due to ongoing maintenance. We recommend that website maintenance occurs at night to avoid stifling the efforts of learners trying to access content during the day.

16.5. *Inconsistency in the provision of online resources between provinces*

16.5.1. We have noted that there exists substantial inconsistency in the available online materials for different provinces. An annexure containing commentary on the websites for each PED is attached to this letter.

16.5.2. As mentioned, we recommend the DBE to provide guidance and frameworks to provincial education departments on what they are required to provide on their websites, as well as how these websites should be structured in order to ensure consistency.

16.6. *Accessibility of online resources*

16.6.1. We have noted that a number of the resources for downloading on the DBE main website are large in file size which has implications for data costs.

16.6.2. Furthermore, some cellular companies have partnered with the DBE to provide zero-rated online learning resources. Vodacom for example, provides learners across all grades with access to learning resources, in line with South Africa's curriculum.<sup>16</sup> However, these resources are only zero-rated for Vodacom subscribers.<sup>17</sup> We have further noted MTN appears to be providing access to a number of zero-rated resources. It is imperative that telecommunications service providers support efforts to ensure that as many learners as possible are able to access content, without having to worry about the cost of data. In this regard, it is important to note that there is a legal directive requiring network licensees to provide zero-rated access to local educational content websites and to make connectivity available to

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<sup>16</sup> Vodacom. "Vodacom e-School." Available at: <https://www.vodacom.co.za/vodacom/services/vodacom-e-school>

<sup>17</sup> The Department should be alert to some of the dangers of leaving the provision of learning materials over to private companies such as Vodacom. Vodacom's Terms and Conditions explicitly states that the cost of access to the service may be reviewed by Vodacom at any time, creating the possibility this might happen once learners have become dependent on the platform for learning. Additionally, privacy concerns have been raised around how private companies may be using this moment to collect personal data of learners who use these platforms. See, for instance, <https://codeactsineducation.wordpress.com/2020/04/01/new-pandemic-edtech-power-networks/>

152 district virtual classroom platforms to support virtual teaching during the COVID-19 national disaster.<sup>18</sup>

16.6.3. We therefore recommend that government ensure that access is as far-reaching as possible. Websites should be zero-rated across all networks and content should be data lite, allowing for easy access and downloads. Content design should also consider that where learners do have access to phones, these are often feature phones, not smart phones.

16.6.4. Finally, it bears noting that while a number of websites, and their resources, are accessible at a zero-rating, resources cannot be downloaded to be used offline. This is disadvantageous because it prevents learners from sharing resources, such as textbooks, via memory sticks and other storage devices. It also prejudices those learners who do not have a stable network connection.

## **17. A need for support for caregivers and for teachers**

17.1. It must be noted that access to materials is only one aspect of learning. Whether learners are able to engage with online content, and whether there are interactions with peers and teachers, are important aspects of learning. When learners are at home, additional factors such as whether there is an adult or older person to support their learning, whether the home environment is conducive to learning, and whether learners are expected to fulfil other duties in the home, all affect the extent to which they are able to learn. These are all factors that disproportionately affect learners from poor and working class families.

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<sup>18</sup> In terms of the Electronic Communications, Postal and Broadcasting Directions (26 March 2020, as amended), Electronic Communications Service Licensees must: (para. 9.1) provide zero-rated access to local educational content websites; (para. 9.2) audio visual services especially the broadcasting services licensees must increase their educational programmes to support awareness of COVID-19; and (para 9.3) the Electronic Communications Service Licensees and Electronic Communications Network Service Licensees with access to high demand spectrum must make available connectivity to 152 district virtual classroom platforms with minimum speeds of 10Mbps to support virtual teaching during the COVID-19 national disaster.

- 17.2. We therefore recommend that caregivers be supported with simple guides on how to best utilise the time learners are spending at home. These guides should focus on work that can realistically be done at home, outline core skills that should be prioritised and provide schedules that consider the time per day or week that learners are likely to spend on learning. Guides can also emphasise the importance of developing a routine by scheduling time for storytelling and reading, fun physical activities, sharing meals and discussing broader societal issues such as the effects of COVID-19.
- 17.3. We welcome Minister Motshekga's focus on the importance of reading during this period. Especially because reading and storytelling draw on practices that are already familiar in many homes. However, the DBE has not communicated any plan to distribute reading materials, beyond online materials and readers. Measures need to be put in place to ensure that caregivers and learners have access to age appropriate reading material. The DBE must support the production of reading materials in all of South Africa's official languages and should support the expansion of existing interventions to distribute printed reading material to families.
- 17.4. We further strongly recommend that the DBE encourage and support teachers to stay in contact with learners and caregivers during school closures.
- 17.5. This could entail providing teachers with sim cards containing data and airtime, potentially through an agreement with cellular companies. Digital learning and the use of workbooks and textbooks needs to be accompanied by support from educators and interaction from peers, through more widely used platforms such as WhatsApp, where learners can ask questions if they experience challenges. Teachers should also be provided with guides on online or public broadcast material so that they can direct and support learners on online content.
18. We hope that the DBE will continue to expand access to support and resources and improve the navigability and accessibility of such resources during the school closures, including the issues raised in this letter so that forms of learning can continue for as long as schools must

remain closed. We would be happy to discuss any of the issues raised in this letter further if required.

19. Kindly provide us with a response to this letter by Friday 24 April 2020.

Yours sincerely,



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