



10 APRIL 2020

**OPEN LETTER TO THE MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION
PLANNING IN A TIME OF CRISIS – SCHOOL FEEDING SCHEMES CAN AND MUST
CONTINUE**

Dear Minister Motshekga

As education and children's rights organisations and activists, we recognise the exceptionally difficult task that confronts government at this time. South Africa faces an unprecedented national crisis with every sector of society profoundly impacted by the Coronavirus pandemic.

Given the rapid pace of developments since President Cyril Ramaphosa declared a national state of disaster, we acknowledge that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has sought to introduce interventions aimed at mitigating the effects of school closure on learners, teachers and caregivers.

As we enter the third week of a national lockdown, and with the President [announcing](#) the extension of the lockdown until the end of April, a pressing need is ensuring that learners have continued access to critical nutrition provisioning. Nine million children ordinarily benefit from the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). For many of these learners, the meal received at schools is often the only meal received for the day.

In light of the crucial role school meals play in the wellbeing and development of children, your initial response to concerns around access to meals was disappointing. Commenting on the capacity of the DBE to run feeding programmes, you have been [quoted as saying](#) that:

“...we [the DBE] are not going to do anything different outside of what we normally do; we are not going to have special programmes; we are not going to run feeding schemes. We have accessed our capacity and we will not be able to do it.”

Respectfully, this is not a tenable position. Hunger and malnutrition are serious concerns, particularly during the COVID-19 pandemic, as both result in compromised levels of immunity.

It is therefore necessary to put in place clear and coordinated interventions which ensure that children continue to receive the benefit of school meals. The DBE must play a central role in this and cannot defer its responsibilities to other departments indefinitely.

Lack of clarity regarding current interventions

We understand that, currently, the Food and Nutrition Security Coordination Committee (FNSSCC) is leading efforts to coordinate various departments, including the Department of Social Development (DSD), the Department of Health (DoH) and DBE.

The FNSSCC has sought to introduce a hunger mitigation strategy for children, including children benefiting from the NSNP. Interventions are reported to include the distribution of food parcels to beneficiaries through local and provincial distribution centres with implementing agents having been appointed for each province. However, the criteria of selection of distribution points, as well as safety and accessibility of distribution points is not clear.

We are concerned that distribution centres may not be adequately accessible to those in need, particularly in rural areas. It is also unclear what safety measures are being put in place to protect children who may be in a position of having to collect food parcels themselves. The proposal of using SA Social Security Agency (SASSA) pay points as collection points is particularly worrying given the reported difficulties of overcrowding and long queues. It is also uncertain whether these distribution centres are as comprehensive and provide food to the same number of learners as the NSNP does. As caregivers lose their livelihood, it is likely that even more learners will be dependent on a reliable food distribution source.

We have noted that these current interventions are being funded through DSD’s Disaster Relief fund and Social Relief fund, at R900 million and R500 million, respectively. While we welcome the utilisation of DSD funds, we are baffled as to why the DBE is not contributing funds from the NSNP towards these efforts.

Your department has indicated that NSNP funds have already been disbursed to the nine provinces, and has suggested that these funds cannot be utilised for food distribution during school closures. However, the DBE has yet to fully explain how the committed funds, which are already dedicated to school nutrition provision, will be utilised during this period.

These are important issues to clarify and address, not only for the remainder of the current lockdown period, which has already been extended to the end of April, but also if the lockdown is reinstated in the coming months.

Recommendations

In light of the concerns we have raised, we encourage the DBE to urgently reconsider its approach to the provisioning of school nutrition programmes during school closures. To allow for the safe and accessible distribution of food, schools should be able to serve as collection points for food packages or pick-up-and-go meals specifically tailored for beneficiaries of the NSNP. In circumstances where learners and parents are seeking familiar, accessible and dedicated points of contact for learner nutrition programmes, school facilities are well-placed to serve this function.

The following measures are recommended:

- Schools should be deemed as essential service facilities for purposes of serving as collection points.
- Social distancing measures must be put in place at school collection points, including for example, staggering collection dates and times and limiting numbers of collections per day.
- District-level coordination is implemented to enable learners who may not live in the same area as their closest schools to be able to access food packages or meals.
- Scholar transport buses that would otherwise not be in use during a school closure, can be used to facilitate mobile collection / delivery for increased access.
- In circumstances where school-based feeding programmes are not possible, the use of food voucher systems should be considered, provided that vouchers are redeemable at all local outlets (including spaza shops).
- The DBE clarifies its communications to ensure clear, coherent messaging is reaching school communities so that they are aware of what they must do at this difficult time in ensuring that learners are being fed.

The proposal that food packages could be distributed to learners through schools was put forward by the Gauteng Provincial Government last month when it was stated that: “[s]chool principals will be called in to issue out food parcels to individual learners on Monday at a

particular school.” This position has since [recently been implemented](#) by the Western Cape Education Department.

We urge the national DBE and provincial education departments to implement this recommendation at a national level, utilising existing NSNP funding and coordinating with DSD’s food parcel and social relief of distress programmes to ensure all NSNP beneficiaries are fed.

Minister Motshekga, these are exceptional times that call for compassion, clear and decisive leadership. The continuation of school nutrition provisioning for learners is critical and urgent and we urge you to ensure that children’s needs are prioritised and protected in government’s plans.

Sincerely,



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