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Equal Education media statement: Government must not allow COVID-19 to widen inequality in our education system!

"I feel excited to go back to school but at the same time I'm scared because of this deadly virus. I am worried because of the increase in numbers of people who get infected and the death rate of this virus. The government has to provide schools with proper and safe PPEs." - Nqobile Nxumalo, Grade 11 Equaliser (learner member of Equal Education), KwaZulu-Natal

"COVID-19 has affected the education system very badly because of the delay of opening schools which is causing serious problems for learners who are in high school and institutions of higher learning by denying them access to resources that they can use in doing their school work." - Likho Mendisi, Grade 12 Equaliser, Western Cape

"I feel bad [about the delay in reopening schools] because we will fall behind with our school work. I'm worried that they will give us less lessons eg. attending once a week. They should prepare the school classrooms and timetables that are flexible. School wasn't good to me last year as we attended once a week, so I didn't make it at the end of the year." - Betty Mothapo, Grade 10 Equaliser, Limpopo

"I feel us learners are not being prioritised here especially in government schools. We are told to shut down but no one realises the pressure that's being put on us. School last year was very horrible and stressful. This is because private schools were operating and we couldn't really. It didn't sit well with me." - Roy Johane, Grade 12 Equaliser, Gauteng

"Part of me is excited that finally I am going to school [next month] ... another part of me is scared that I may find my school in the condition I left it in. Last year wasn't great because there were times we didn't attend school, which meant one thing, that we are left behind with our school work. I am hoping that we get rid of this virus so that I can get the education that I long for." - Promise Lindokuhle Maruga, Grade 11 Equaliser, Gauteng

"I don't feel very well about schools being delayed. It makes me feel under pressure as I'm going to do Grade 11. I believe there's a lot of work to do in Grade 11 so I won't be able to cover all the work. The positive thing about the delays is that [what] the Department can do in the meantime is to fix classrooms, give more textbooks, [and] build a library and computer labs in other schools." - Mhlahi Snyman, Grade 11 Equaliser, Eastern Cape

With most school gates closed until 15 February 2021, it is critical that the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the provincial education departments (PEDs) use this time to ensure that the non-negotiables are in place so that schools can safely reopen as soon as possible. We understand the need to ease the pressure on our health system, but we also worry about the negative impact of extended school closures on learning, and on the mental and physical wellbeing of learners.

That some independent schools are currently operating, and that some public schools may offer remote learning for the first two weeks of February, means that learners from poorly resourced schools will get left behind. The right to learning for all children must be protected.

Right now, the DBE and PEDs owe the public a detailed briefing on school readiness. Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga and the Education MECs must also provide regular updates to the public on how schools are coping and are being supported by government, once teachers and learners have returned to classrooms. Learners, teachers and parents/guardians should not again, like last year, be left anxiously wondering what is going on until the day before school gates reopen. While the DBE's briefing to Parliament last night provided important information on the reasoning behind the delayed reopening, it is unacceptable that the DBE did not provide members of Parliament (MPs) with updated information on school readiness and plans to address challenges between now and 15 February. The last time that the DBE presented on school readiness to MPs was November 2020!

Non-negotiables: Access to personal protective equipment (PPE), reliable water supply, safe and clean toilets, and classroom space #FixOurSchools

Government must ensure that all schools have enough personal protective equipment (PPE), such as hand sanitiser and masks for learners and teachers. Worryingly, it was recently [reported](#) that the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) does not have funds to buy PPE for over 5000 schools in the province. In addition, DBE Director General Mathanzima Mweli yesterday told MPs that the ECDoE is unable to take over the work that Rand Water has been doing in providing water.

Most learners will be returning to schools that face the same inequalities that existed before the pandemic - schools with plain pit latrines, without reliable water supply, and with overcrowded classrooms. Government will likely provide mobile toilets and water tankers as emergency, temporary solutions. The public must be given detailed information on the number of schools that are in need of these basics, and the progress of the education departments in providing them. The DBE cannot assume that information presented to MPs last year is enough to give the public confidence that schools are ready to reopen in February - especially since the DBE's last infrastructure presentation showed the [infrastructure backlogs](#) that must be fixed. It is because of the government's failure to properly comply with the [Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure since 2013](#), that learners and teachers at thousands of schools now during this pandemic do not have enough water, safe and dignified toilets or classroom space.

#SchoolMealsNow for all learners who qualify for the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP)

Government must do all it can to reduce child hunger. In line with our [victory in court](#) last year, and a written commitment that we secured from the DBE, we expect that the education departments will be providing meals to all learners who qualify for the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), from **27 January** - the date that school gates were originally going to open this year.

- Transport should be provided to and from school for learners to collect food;
- Provinces must consider giving out weekly food parcels as an alternative to daily cooked meals;
- Learners should be able to collect food at the school closest to their homes;
- Schools, district officials and provincial officials must use all available communications channels, including the media, to alert learners and parents/guardians to the restarting of the NSNP and it must be made clear to learners and parents/guardians how and where meals will be provided and what transport arrangements have been made.

Learning resources such as textbooks and worksheets for learners to use for the days that they are at home

It is highly likely that the rotating timetable system will continue this year, which means that not all learners will be in classrooms everyday. While the Deputy Minister of Basic Education, Reginah Mhaule, has [said](#) that access to online learning will be improved, we are skeptical about how fast this will happen and how effective it will be. Many learners do not have devices to support learning from home. The focus on online learning as a way to support remote learning, can widen inequalities between learners. Our Equaliser [survey](#) from last year confirmed this.

While it is unreasonable to expect that traditional learning can happen at home, it is necessary for the DBE to provide different options to support learners to learn from home. There needs to be assurance that textbooks and worksheets will be made available to learners, as well as materials to support parents/guardians to help the learning process.

Counselling and other psychosocial support for learners and teachers

More than once, the DBE last year acknowledged that it had not been prepared for the increasing psychosocial needs of school communities. It emphasised the need to mobilise all its resources, to equip education district offices and to work with the Department of Social Development (DSD) to provide counselling and other psychosocial support. The public must be given a detailed update on the progress in implementing the plans to support learners and teachers.

According to a [newspaper article](#), 17 Western Cape learners died by suicide last year, and in response to this the Education standing committee chairperson in the Western Cape Legislature, Lorraine Botha, said learner mental health should “top this year’s schooling agenda” because of the impact of COVID-19. Over the past four years, we have consistently demanded that psychosocial support be a key priority for the Western Cape Education Department (WCED). The Western Cape’s 2020 Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) says that online psychosocial support will be provided to learners, and a school-based children protection social worker system will be implemented.

Dropout rates

The longer learners remain out of school, the higher the likelihood of them [dropping out](#). This is especially true for learners who were already at risk of dropping out before the COVID-19 pandemic. Learning losses can be hugely demotivating to learners - especially where peers were able to continue learning during school closures - and the increase in stress levels put learners at greater risk of dropping out. Where families are faced with increased economic pressures, they may need learners, especially those in higher grades, to work to support their families.

It is crucial that the government makes a strong effort to contact learners who are at risk of dropping out or did not return to school last year, and encourages them to return to school or continue learning from home with the support of the school. Late last year, 30% of schools [surveyed](#) by major teacher unions, said that they had lost all contact with some learners and families while schools were closed. It’s important that schools and provincial education departments work together to stay in touch with learners - not only to support learning, but also to keep some connection to the school community.

More money must be given to the basic education sector #TitoHandsOffOurEducation

Finance Minister Tito Mboweni’s Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS), delivered last October, says that government will reduce basic education funding every year for the next three years. Minister Mboweni did not reverse the R2.2 billion cuts he made to the provincial education infrastructure grant (EIG) in the June 2020 special COVID-19 budget or provide any relief for the R4.4 billion that was reprioritised to provide COVID essentials in schools. Those cuts have resulted in 1 938 essential school construction projects - paid for through the EIG - being stopped or delayed! And while the pandemic increases food insecurity, no new money was given to the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP).

We will keep fighting for:

- Basic education funding to grow (in line with education inflation);
- National Treasury to increase funding for school infrastructure;
- The NSNP to have the money needed to feed every learner at every school that qualifies for it;
- The DBE to be categorised as a frontline department in the fight against COVID-19.

Finally, we will continue to agitate for our longstanding demands on school infrastructure, scholar transport and school safety to be met, to ensure that the right to basic education is realised for all learners. Schools must not just be COVID-19 compliant, they must be environments that protect the dignity and safety of learners and school staff, and that are conducive to quality teaching and learning.

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Note to editors: If quoting directly from this statement, please quote Equal Education.

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