



1 February 2021

"I feel as 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 (learner member of Equal Education), Gauteng

OPEN LETTER TO THE PRESIDENT, MINISTER OF BASIC EDUCATION, MINISTER OF FINANCE, MINISTER OF HEALTH, AND MINISTER OF COOPERATIVE GOVERNANCE

FIX AND FUND PUBLIC SCHOOLS, CLOSE THE WIDENING EQUALITY GAP! EDUCATION IS A RIGHT, NOT A PRIVILEGE!

Dear President Ramaphosa, Minister Motshekga, Minister Mboweni, Minister Mkhize, and Minister Dlamini-Zuma

We fear that government is not doing all that it can to prevent the inequality in our education system from widening in the face of COVID-19, as public schools remain closed until 15 February while the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is unbothered with private schools reopening their gates or teaching remotely right now. The ongoing difference between the support learners in public schools and those in private schools have received during the pandemic, highlights a bigger problem that has been developing over years: the massive education inequality in our country. Education should be a right, but in our country it's a privilege!

Members of Equal Education (EE) - learners, teachers and parents - and public school communities at large are being left behind, and will be expected to somehow play catch up. There has been dead silence from the DBE about how it will support learning while learners are at home, for the two extra weeks that public schools are closed this month. Since last year - in our engagements with the government, with our school communities and through the media - members of EE have been expressing deep concern about the negative impact extended school closures have on them. They have already lost learning time last year, while learners in private schools continued to learn from home and went back to school earlier. Being cut off from peers (from social interaction and peer-mediated learning), supportive teachers, school counsellors and school meals also negatively affected learners' mental and emotional wellbeing.

Years of not providing public schools with enough money and other resources has made being hit by COVID-19 even more devastating. Over the years, we have seen government place less importance on education when deciding how to spend its money, and last year, education funding started decreasing year on year. In the Eastern Cape, the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDOE) has paused

almost all building projects because there isn't enough money. These budget cuts have devastating consequences for learners and teachers.

Government has neglected public schools, with many becoming unsafe and undignified. In many public schools with overcrowded classrooms and unsafe toilets, and where taps run dry, learners and teachers fight against the odds to achieve excellence. This is an unfair burden to carry. Many people now think that private schools are the better option, and this has made some learners and teachers in public schools feel that they are being left behind in a failing system. Government is setting the public school system up to fail if it doesn't give it the resources it needs. In countries where public schools are properly supported, learning outcomes are good and the private sector stays small.

We are also very worried about [attempts](#) during this time to suggest that you have no authority over private schools, Minister Motshekga. The DBE recently unashamedly [told Parliament it has limited control](#) over private schools. While we understand that they are independent, private schools cannot be a law unto their own. They must be held accountable by you. Without accountability, the private sector can grow in a way that is not properly planned and makes inequality worse. The DBE is currently reviewing the South African Schools Act (SASA), which is a great opportunity to strengthen oversight over private schools.

Public school learners want their schools to reopen at the same time as private schools, but the DBE has prevented them from doing so, arguing that schools need to remain closed to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus. At the same time, private schools have been allowed to open, without government explaining this distinction. The right to education for public school learners must not be limited randomly in the name of COVID-19 responses and any limitation of that right needs to be reasonable and clearly justified. There cannot simply be a blind differentiation between public and private schools.

COVID-19 is a health crisis but it affects all aspects of our lives including education. All government departments must recognise that, and work together to develop COVID-19 responses that are fair and just. Responses to COVID-19 can't be random or unjustified, and their impact on existing inequalities have to be considered when **all** of the role players are making decisions.

Government must fix the inequality between schools, and must use all of its resources to provide the public school system with what learners and teachers need for a quality education.

Sincerely,

Equal Education members

