

OPINION & ANALYSIS 

Get children back in school full time or we will create a lost generation

The science has changed but the rules haven't, denying learners the right to education

16 January 2022 - 00:02



Pupils at the start of a pandemic-plagued new school year at the Tlhatlogang Junior Secondary School in Mofolo Central, Soweto.

Image: Alon Skuy

This open letter to the ministers of basic education, health, and co-operative governance and traditional affairs is co-written by members of Equal Education, Equal Education Law Centre, The Learning Trust, Legal Resources Centre, NASCEE and academics.

Dear ministers Angie Motshekga, Joe Phaahla and Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma,

As schools reopen for 2022, we write to you as a collective of concerned civil society organisations. Over the past two years, learners have been harmed by the amount of time they have been forced to spend at home instead of in the classroom.

This continued time away from school has hurt their access to school meals and to psychosocial support and resulted in increased dropout rates.

This has particularly affected those in under-resourced public schools (mainly quintile 1 – 3) that are, through no fault of their own, unable to adhere to the guidelines in response to the Covid pandemic. This is because of the dire state of infrastructure in many schools, overcrowding and lack of access to water and toilets.

Each additional day of lost learning has a lasting and lifelong impact on the interests of children and their right to a quality basic education. We urge you not to allow this state of affairs to continue into a third year.

We were greatly disappointed by minister Motshekga's announcement, during a school readiness briefing this week, that learners would continue with rotational school attendance. The hope had been that schools would return to full-time attendance in 2022.

Schools reopened in June 2020 after more than two months of hard lockdown across the country. To ensure that learners and teachers were safe in schools, and to allow for social distancing, rotational timetabling was introduced. This meant that learners attended school on alternate days or weeks.

Rotational attendance was meant to be a temporary intervention aimed at bringing learners back into the classroom while minimising the risk posed by the virus.

However, it has remained the norm for the past 18 months, despite new medical evidence around transmission and the availability of vaccines for teachers, parents and older children.



Social distancing in action for grade R at Setlabotjha Primary School in Sebokeng, Gauteng - but not all schools have the space.

Image: *Alaister Russell*

We have already seen that the continued use of rotational timetabling will have serious consequences for the quality of education.

In a presentation to parliament in June last year the department of basic education (DBE) said that 75% of learning time in 2020 was lost.

The National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (Nids-Cram) Wave 5 found that learners across the country lost between 70% and 100% of schooling between March 2020 and June 2021.

In May last year, the DBE announced the full return to daily attendance and traditional timetables for all primary school learners (grades R to 7) and schools for learners with special education needs (grades R to 12) from August 2.

All schools unable to return to traditional timetabling were required to inform the head of the provincial education department that they would continue with rotational attendance.

Provincial MECs are now required to submit monthly reports to you, minister Motshekga, which should include reasons why schools are unable to return to pre-Covid traditional attendance.



Despite the MAC's advice, it is alarming that schools are set to continue with rotational timetabling in 2022

These reports require a plan with the proposed dates for the return of all primary schools to a traditional model, as well as detailed steps that will be taken to ensure that they are safe.

There is no indication whether MECs have submitted these reports. There is also no indication of support being put in place to ensure that all primary schools are able to return to full capacity. An additional worry is whether the continuation of rotational schooling has simply been rubber-stamped.

The ministerial advisory committee (MAC) in July last year advised that the harm done to learners attending school on a rotational basis – specifically the cognitive, nutritional, and psychosocial costs – exceeds the benefits of reduced Covid infections from smaller class sizes.

Despite the MAC's advice, it is alarming that schools are set to continue with rotational timetabling in 2022.

Preliminary research findings from an evaluation of early grade reading and mathematics interventions by Nic Spaull, associate professor of economics at Stellenbosch University and the co-principal investigator of Nids-Cram, show that just 14% of learners attended school daily in term three of last year in the Western Cape.

Alarmingly, 869 out of 1,010 primary schools in the province have been approved for continued rotational attendance this year because of their limited capacity to adhere to all health and safety regulations – particularly the 1m physical distancing rule.

This means only 14% of schools in the province will be operating at full capacity

In Limpopo only 10% of learners attended school every day in terms one and two last year, and only 48% of children in no-fee schools attended every day in term three.

Anecdotal reports suggest that as many as 70% of schools in some provinces have applied to remain on rotational attendance this year.

This is highly problematic. Coupled with increased cases of learner pregnancy and dropout rates, the continued use of rotational attendance

erodes learners' right to quality basic education.

Since the 1m distancing requirement at primary schools was imposed, the country has moved from Covid alert level 3 to alert level 1 and the vaccine is readily available to all adults and to children from the age of 12.

All teachers have been given the opportunity to be vaccinated and, according to the DBE, uptake has been positive.

Therefore, taking into account all the steps taken to mitigate against rising infections, we urge the department of co-operative governance and traditional affairs to do away with physical distancing requirements in schools.

If the country experiences other Covid waves, as we have seen with the Omicron variant, the DBE must use the risk-adjusted strategy as long promised, which allows for context-specific responses.

In addition, the government, through the National Coronavirus Command Council and MAC, must develop a long-term plan that outlines the education sector's response to new variants and increases in infections.

Honourable ministers, it has been more than 18 months since the onset of the pandemic and while the science has changed, the response to schools has remained the same.

We cannot continue to allow our children to suffer by having inflexible and detrimental approaches in response to Covid.

We implore you to work co-operatively and act swiftly to protect the best interests of our children and their right to education. With every day lost we move closer to the creation of a lost generation.

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