

Aloe High School

Good Afternoon

Learners back at schools is not working!

My name is Envil Wertheim. I am the principal of Aloe High School, a school in Mitchell's Plain. We are considered to be a big school as we have in excess of 1000 learners. I have 31 educators. Yes, that's not that many for the size of our school, but we are NOT going to talk about that now.

Neither are we going to talk about the vast inequalities in education where poor kids in poor areas still get a terrible deal while the rich and affluent schools continue being able to expose their kids to so many more and better opportunities.

We are NOT even going to talk about the loathed quintile system which entrenches poverty in our schools to such an extent that it makes an absolute mockery of the vision of the WCED "Providing quality education for every child in every classroom in every school in the province". These words have a very nice ring to them and an undeniably beautiful symmetry.

How absurd though is that notion when at any given time, I can get into my car and drive for 20 minutes in either direction whether it's to the Northern or Southern suburbs, pull up at these affluent public schools where I am confronted with rolling lawns, manicured sport fields, conference facilities, tennis courts, cricket ovals and swimming pools.

And here, I can't even get an outer perimeter fence to ensure the safety of my learners and staff. And when something happens at my school, do you know what the first question by the powers that be, is? Where is your Safety policy? As if a safety policy would stop a would-be assailant from assaulting or robbing a learner or staff member.

And yet not too long ago the Minister of Education in this province, said the gap between the have's and the have not's is getting smaller. How do you say something like that and believe it?

Simple math tells you that a school that works on an annual budget of less than R1 million like ours and many others do, versus one of these affluent schools who easily has a budget of R40 million per annum, that in just over a 3-year period, my kids would have had R3 million worth of educational exposure versus R120 million worth of exposure and opportunity to kids at affluent schools. Not only is the gap not shrinking, it is an exponential chasm that keeps growing and growing.

But I did say we are NOT going to speak about this. Not today.

What I do want to speak about is the following: Today is 1 July, exactly a month since we welcomed back our matrics. Remember the fiasco of the 1st vs the 8th and how the Western Cape was “ready”? And prior to that how they were “ready” to welcome back principals and support staff, then SMT’s and subsequently entire staffs. The truth is, we were never ready; we are still not ready as we are about to phase in the next grades, next week.

Let me explain why it is that I am of this opinion:

Late yesterday afternoon one of my teachers who has been in isolation because she had taken a test (she had presented with symptoms), informed me that she is Covid positive. This is our third positive case among educators in as many weeks. We have a Covid file: Guidelines A-E, further guidelines F-G and one or two others. Not badly written, one could even say, well thought out. But here’s the thing – these guidelines are theoretical scenarios written far away from the coalface of this drama, behind desks in plush offices.

This is what really happens at the coalface that we as teachers have to deal with and principals have to manage: I have 31 educators. Last week, from Wednesday until yesterday, I had an average of 11 teachers absent every day - two are ill (Covid unrelated), 2 were Covid positive and 3 are on comorbidity concession where they are supposed to work from home. The others were in varying phases of self-isolation either because they had been in close contact with a Covid positive person or they themselves are isolating because they had gone for tests.

Now, as the manager, one is placed in the unenviable position of trying to still someone’s anxiety while trying to convince them that what they had actually experienced was “casual” contact as opposed to “close” contact. This you do while you have this ever- present nagging voice in the back of your head saying “what if?”

Still further at the back of my head I have another nagging voice which drowns out the first one and that voice is saying “You can’t lose too many teachers because a matric curriculum has to be covered.”

The teacher whom I tried to convince is still anxious and now phones the hotline which is manned by a 4th year medical student who errs on the side of caution and rightfully so, tells the educator to self-isolate. I can’t argue with that but there goes another teacher and this is how you arrive at 11 teachers absent every day.

Soon my Matric English Department is decimated and I'm down to "subbing" the "sub". I can't throw a grade 10 English teacher into the fray because she has never read Life of Pi, the English novel the matrics are studying. So there goes the idea that at this time all teachers should be involved in teaching the matrics.

Both my matric history teachers are in insolation. What now? I'm sure that some district official will provide me with some theoretical solution to my problem...But practically it doesn't work!!

Is it co-incidence that with the return of learners, I am suddenly having a spike in Covid positive cases among my educators?

Another guideline: Learner Transport. Do I even have to go there when you and I know the public transport system, that our learners/the poor have to endure, the cross pollination and potential infection that takes place even before they get to school.

Let's speak about attendance: I have 223 matriculants. My average attendance has been at 58% which is about 130 learners. The day after learners got wind that two of the educators had tested positive, 24 showed up. Today we are up to 110 again but what do you think is going to happen when learners find out that another one of my educators has tested positive? They are not stupid. They can see when teachers are

absent. What should I do? Keep it quiet, Hush-hush? And how do I respond to matric learners when they say: "Sir you want us to come to school but your teachers are scared to be here"?

And guess who is going to be blamed at the end of the year when our matric results are poor?

Yet another guideline – Managing psycho – social support...doesn't work...too few psychologists and social workers. And while I speak to anxious teachers, parents and learners about disproportionate anxiety and how reason and intelligence should always trump fear and emotion, the truth of the matter is that when the organism is threatened, it is always going to respond emotionally. Examples of this you will find all around, in nature. When a mother's young is threatened, she responds instinctively. So, people have the right to be fearful and anxious.

So here are the guidelines as I said wonderfully written but they do NOT work!!

Here is a guideline for you Mr Schreuder, one that I have written: It is called "Guideline Z" and it reads: "IT

IS NOT WORKING!!".

Meanwhile on the other side of the tracks, at these affluent schools, the ones with the tennis courts and swimming pools, it is business as usual. Attendance is at 90%, if not 100%. Why is that, do you think? Could the reason possibly be found in the fact that for the same number of learners, you have double my staff because you can afford it and so can mitigate staff absence better?

Or could it be that your learners are generally dropped at school by their rich parents in their luxury sedans and don't have to contend with the dangers of public transport which my learners are exposed to?

Or could it be that during level 5 and 4 lockdown your learners and their families could really hunker down in their spacious homes, in their leafy suburbs and practise social distancing the way it was meant to be practised because the grocery cupboards and the deep freezer was stocked up, while my learners could not do this because they live in their shacks and indigent homes where social distancing is but a pipe dream?

But at the end of this year you will be held up as "institutions of excellence", while mine will be an "underperforming" school.

Mrs Debbie Schafer, the Minister for Education in the province, who if her press release as recent as Monday is anything to go by, will dismiss me as a "social media attention seeker". By way of a response let me say this: If that is how you wish to label me, by all means do that. And perhaps yes I do seek attention. I seek to bring attention to this: Learners returning to school is not working!

Let me also say this ma'am: You cannot corner the market on the media narrative (via your press releases through mainstream media) and then cry foul when others use social media to counter what you propagate to be fact and truth. We do not have the clout that your office and title affords you and with it the ready access to print and audio – visual media. Because you disregard us and our voices so readily we have to resort to this form of media when we wish to speak truth to power.

You are power, after all ma'am and this is me attempting to speak truth to you.

I am currently reading Brene Brown's Dare to Lead, a gift from my manager. This is what she says: "It is not the critic who counts; not the man who points out how the strong man stumbles or the doer of deeds could have done them better. The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena So ma'am, stop criticizing these school leaders and teachers who dare to disagree with you. We are in the "arena"; we deal with this, while you sit in your plush office, writing policies.

In my foyer, I am pictured with Mr Schreuder and Mrs Schafer, receiving an award for 'the most improved school in the province'. This accolade was received for our excellent 2017 matric results and was conferred at a function at the premiere's residence, Leeuwenhof. My staff was lauded for its hard work, and I was lauded for being an inspirational leader.

Now, I am pretty sure I will be vilified for being an attention-seeking, irresponsible, poor leader by these very same people who a few years earlier, praised me. And the progressive disciplinary book will probably be thrown at me and I will probably be charged for bringing the department into disrepute because that is how they are inclined to deal with dissenting voices. It is a good thing then that at this pivotal point in history, that their opinions of me don't really matter and they must feel free to discipline me

By all accounts the MEC and the HOD are good, hard working folk. I have also listened to them enough times to know that they are highly intelligent people. But here's the thing: They do not get it!! They cannot begin to, no matter how hard they try to understand the difficulties and plethora of challenges attached to teaching in and managing wholly under-resourced schools. They cannot hope to understand because all their lives they've experienced privilege...grew up privileged....attended privileged schools. And now still live privileged, protected lives. It is not their fault. It is... what it is.

The problem though is, that these people are policy makers and they make policy for our schools whose learner reality they do not understand; whose parents' reality they do not understand; whose struggle and poverty they can never hope to understand!

My fellow Principals I am now going on record that from tomorrow, I am no longer submitting information to the district office via the Google docs forms that are so ridiculously skewed and perverted in their design so as to give the impression that things are okay at our schools when clearly they are not. The latest being TREPS (Temporary Revised Education Plan). So this is what happens in the google Docs form: Has TREPS been signed off by the Principal? Has it been submitted to the circuit manager?

And when you answer 'yes' to these questions the impression is created that we are ready to receive the next lot of learners, next week, when in fact, for all the reasons I have already referenced, WE ARE NOT! The same perversion happens with all the other documents that we as principals have to complete every day. This is immoral.

District directors, district personnel along with head office personnel, you are all complicit in the perversion of information and what's more you cannot really identify with what is happening because you are not in the "arena"; you are not at the coalface in dealing with this. And Principals if we continue submitting this rubbish we are complicit too.

Principals obviously during this time we cannot all meet in one place. I'm hoping though that you do meet because we have to take a stance against this craziness. I would like to suggest to my fellow Mitchell's Plain

Principals that we meet Friday 3 June at 10am at Aloe Junior school. Not under the banner of any union or organization but as a group of school leaders who need to lead wisely and responsibly.

To every one reading this, Dr Tedros of WHO says that the only way to fight this pandemic is to make it everyone's business. This is me making it your business. Please stay safe.

Envil Wertheim