

Lives put at risk to ‘save the academic year’

DURBAN - In childhood, being at a Catholic school, I was taught that the single most important thing on Earth was life and the preservation of it should be a priority in anyone’s quest to reach heaven.

However, I am now being indoctrinated by my employer into believing that education and saving the academic year – to make governance look good and efficient – surpasses all that.

As an educator and mother, I believe that my story should be told. I returned to school with fear, anxiety and uncertainty.

The country believes that schools are open, pupils and teachers are doing fine, curriculum delivery is being successfully carried out, and we are on the road to writing the National Senior Certificate exams.

It has been said that the eyes are the windows of the soul.

Amid masked faces, I see only eyes... eyes that look at me with fear, eyes that are filled with panic and anxiety, and sad eyes that question why now, in 2020, did this have to happen, when this is what I have waited for all my life at school? Will I even be alive to write my final exam?

I see eyes that are searching for comfort and reassurance that no one can give.

We expect pupils to concentrate and excel in their exams in this state of mind?

The Grade 12 academic year is filled with many emotions for both teachers and pupils. Add to this the environment surrounding a pandemic.

From being in the midst of the reality, I believe there are many loopholes at schools that contribute to the uncontrolled spread of Covid-19.

Pupils leave home hungry and carry no lunch, as their parents are now unemployed.

They have told me that they board taxis that contain 16 or more passengers despite the Covid-19 regulations. Some of the passengers do not wear masks.

Yet the minister of basic education promised that 7 000 employees would monitor the taxis that pupils travel in.

On some days, the pupils cannot attend school as there is no money for taxi fare. They are screened at the school gate and their temperatures are checked.
Is this a true reflection of whether they have contracted the virus?

In the classroom, I sanitise their hands, not their desks or chairs, because my school claims it’s not feasible.

This is only done at the end of the school day, for the next day.

The textbooks and worksheets that are distributed and used by the pupils cannot be sanitised.

The toilets at the school are not functional since the children returned. Officials from the Department of Education and the Department of Health visited the school recently, and they were not informed about this. The pupils are, therefore, unable to wash their hands, a basic condition to help stop the spread of the virus.

During recess, I have watched the pupils. They are not wearing their masks or practising social distancing.

They are children and being irresponsible is expected.

If adults are not able to practise social distancing, how do we expect the children to? I have also observed some teachers doing the same thing.

I am now in the front line and was instructed to perform my duties. Do I put my own family at risk? Do I choose my job over them?

The Grade 12 curriculum has not been trimmed and exam papers – already set – will not be revised.

This begs many questions: what happens to pupils who were unable to engage in my lessons done over social media during the lockdown?

What happens to pupils who are not currently in school because they cannot afford transport – either due to their parents or care-givers being unemployed, or because they were not sent to school out of fear?

What happens to the pupils who have lost loved ones due to Covid-19 and are traumatised? What about pupils with co-morbidities, who have to remain at home? And what happens to those pupils who are not in school because they are in quarantine?

Do I just go ahead and deliver the curriculum to the ones in front of me and forget about those who are not in school?

I would like to ask the minister of basic education: do you sleep well at night knowing that thousands of lives are being lost as a result of a decision you have taken? Are you comfortable knowing that the education sector has contributed to the spread of the virus?

You remind me of the Belsen commandant in the poem *Vultures* by Chinua Achebe, contained in the Grade 12 syllabus this year, who can stop on his way home and buy chocolates for his children after having given the command to persecute millions of people during the day... all in a day's work to earn a salary.

- THE POST

This article was first published on 17 June 2020 on IOL (URL: <https://www.iol.co.za>)