

# **SUPPORT FOR EDUCATION ECONOMY THREATENS LIVES**

*By Maria Van Driel*

scientists, the pandemic is expected to be at its most severe right up to November. All this notwithstanding, the government seems determined to. The crisis in public schools in the midst of a rising coronavirus pandemic compelled President Ramaphosa to close all public schools “for a break from 27 July to 24 August”. Matriculant learners (matrics) will return on 3 August, Grade 7s will return on 10 August and all other grades will return on 24 August. He also announced “the extension of the academic year for public schools beyond 2020” and that the National School Nutrition Programme will operate so that learners or parents can collect food from school.

The President has not met any of the demands raised by many parent groups, learners, teachers and some teacher organisations, and communities. The step to close schools for a short while, however, is a sign of the failure of the government’s public schools strategy. Indeed, there is a growing realisation that the whole strategy of the state is directed at keeping private schools open, rather than ensuring that working class children ‘finish the school year’.

## **The COVID-19 pandemic escalates**

The President is fully aware of the dire current situation and that the country is moving rapidly into the coronavirus pandemic. South Africa now has the fifth largest number of infections in the world and half the infections in Africa, with deaths increasing to over 7 000 and infections now over 453 000. The Western Cape infections have gone down, but the province is not over the worst, while the epicentre of the pandemic has shifted to Gauteng.

In this context, the World Health Organisation (WHO) advises schools not to open ‘until community transmission is low’. Yet, in the face of all the signposts of the unfolding pandemic the President and the ANC government refuse to close all schools until it is safe and the virus has been contained. Public schools have therefore only been closed ‘for a break’, to give parents, learners and educators the time ‘to breathe’ from the stress, trauma, and possible infections at school.

Schools are planned to reopen on 3 August for matrics, with Grade 7s opening a week later on 10 August and the rest of the grades on 24 August. This is notwithstanding the Ministerial Advisory Committee’s projection that the peak of the virus will be between July and September. In other projections by government open schools and send learners and communities into a severe storm.

## **Government’s strategy fails**

The government’s strategy to keep public schools open has failed. This is linked to the objective conditions at public schools created by government’s neoliberal neglect and the emerging grassroots resistance.

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has forced public schools to reopen despite major structural barriers that mitigate against COVID-19 compliance. Basically, many schools do not have adequate water and sanitation, or Personal Protective Equipment (PPEs); and public schools don’t have the number of classrooms needed for physical distancing. Public schools battled to accommodate Grades 12 and 7 from 8 June with

physical distancing. There were not enough teachers to lower the teacher to learner ratios demanded by physical distancing. Despite these conditions and calls to government to reconsider, Grades R, 6 and 11 returned to school on 6 July. The general poor conditions at schools, including consistent lack of PPEs, and the closure of schools when infections arose, deepened the pre-existing atmosphere of fear and trauma associated with pandemics. It is therefore no surprise that in Gauteng alone, according to Health MEC Bandile Masuku, 12 teachers and 3 learners have died since the schools reopened on 8 June. Almost a thousand schools have closed due to non-compliance. Schools are vectors of infection into homes and communities and hence countries that have successfully managed the coronavirus, closed schools to contain the spread of infection.

The government's privatised approach to the delivery and maintenance of infrastructure, provision of water tanks, water, PPEs and so forth, has also contributed to the crisis in schools, non-compliance, delays in provisions and large-scale corruption with PPEs 'disappearing'. Schools complained that tanks delivered were cracked; others complained of waiting for water tanks to be filled; in others, PPEs were not enough for everyone. The corruption in South Africa is systemic, and the ANC government cannot deal with this corruption. The interests of white monopoly capital, its defence of private health and private education, has meant that the COVID-19 campaign in the country is being dealt in a piece-meal manner.

### **A partial victory for resistance**

The second reason for the failure of the state's public schools strategy, is the emerging grassroots movement to close schools. The temporary closure of schools or 'break' is a partial victory won by these movements. The protests started in Cape Town initiated by teachers and coincided with the spike in infections in the province. This led to regular placard demonstrations by teachers outside their schools, on main roads (Klipfontein Road in Athlone), before school started on 8 June and continued on weekly basis. The protest spread to townships like Mitchell's Plain and Khayelitsha. In the Eastern Cape, at one boarding school parents fetched their children as 180 learners were infected with coronavirus. The memorials of teachers in Kensington and Mitchell's Plain, amongst others, has raised awareness about COVID-19 and the need to close schools.

Parents have responded by keeping learners at home, and there are reports that numbers at school have dropped significantly. Communities have participated in the placard demonstrations in Cape Town, and similarly in Durban and Johannesburg. When the principal of Heathfield High was singled out for disciplinary action by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED), the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and the community united in his defence and support.

Parents have also taken to social media and the two Facebook groups, *#SaveTheChildren* and *Parents Against the Opening of Schools* are active with about 160 000 members between them. While social media has limits, these have been important platforms to educate, debate and enlist the views of parents. The groups have tried to engage the DBE, but with no success.

Principals, usually reluctant leaders of struggles, have had to motivate and maintain the trust of teachers and learners, in unacceptable conditions in a pandemic. The letter to President Ramaphosa from four principals in the Western Cape (Steenberg High, Floreat

Primary, Athlone High and Heathfield High), calling for the closure of schools until the pandemic is under control, is indicative of the depth of the crisis in schools. Although the Presidency acknowledged receipt of the letter, there has been no dialogue with the principals; and the group of four has grown to 126 principals, and garnered the respect of teachers, learners and the public.

School Governing Bodies have also been active and successful in advising parents to keep learners at home. For example, in the Merebank and Wentworth areas of Durban, about 40 SGBs have led struggle to protect learners and communities against infections.

### **Government's support of the education economy**

Countries like South Korea, China and New Zealand successfully contained the spread of the pandemic through the immediate closure of schools. Why then is the ANC government so adamant about keeping schools open and contributing to infections, when government has already extended the academic year; and amidst growing resistance and mounting calls from parents, teachers and the public to close schools?

While the President was silent about the 'independent' private schools, the implications of his announcement was not lost on parents and educators of public school learners and the public. Basically, private schools will continue their routine school calendar and curriculum, unabated and uninterrupted. Unlike the public schools, learning at private schools has been unbroken from before, during and after the lockdown, using remote, e-learning and online platforms. Unlike public schools, the academic year for private schools is unscathed, and they plan to write their matric exams (and all other grade exams), unimpeded.

In my June paper titled *Deepening Class Inequalities: Minister Motshekga's Hidden Agenda To Open Public Schools!* (<https://karibu.org.za/deepening-class-inequalities-minister-motshekgas-hidden-agenda-to-open-public-schools/>), we demonstrated that the reason government is forcing public schools to open is to open the education economy; made up largely of private schools and companies active in the education sector. Private companies like Curro Holdings and ADvTECH are listed on the JSE, and have a combined turnover of more than R7.5 billion. Shareholders' profits will shrink if private schools and the education economy is closed. The education economy caters for the children of the ruling capitalist class, and the children of the ANC elites, and constitutes just 3% of all learners in the country. In contrast, public schools provide education to the majority (97% or 12.4 million learners). The ANC government's support for the education economy is support for capitalist accumulation, at the expense of millions of learners in public schools. This is just another way in which the ANC serves monopoly capitalist interests at the expense of the majority of poor working class people.

### **Matrics and extending the academic year**

In a sleight of hand, the President announced the "extension of the academic year beyond 2020" but without providing any details to the parents of the 12.4 million public school learners and educators. While the President's 'extension of the academic year' provides grounds to close public schools later, the government still puts learners, including matrics, and educators at risk of contracting COVID-19.

The government's 'extension' effectively postpones the academic year for public schools. This decision was already gazetted on 29 May 2020, as I discussed in the paper on

Motshega's agenda in June (link above). The government's decision to postpone the academic year became clear when, in the gazette, the June exam for matrics was postponed to December 2020. Later, in a followup gazette on 29 June, which replaced the 29 May one, the government decided that both matric exams, June and November would be held in December 2020. This was an impossible task to meet given that matrics had lost many learning days during the lockdown, and with the uncertainty of learning and "unforeseen circumstances" (Motshekga) in a pandemic, like the closing and opening of schools, which government correctly acknowledged in the May gazette.

But all along the government's strategy has been to pretend to maintain the integrity of the academic year for public schools, especially for matrics. Hence the DBE's flurry of attempts to make public schools that have been neglected and dysfunctional for decades compliant for COVID-19 in weeks. However, the government's strategy to keep public schools open has disintegrated, and the President's 'break' - in the context of mounting popular pressure on government to close schools – is to give government the time to regroup and seek an alternative strategy.

Now that the government has formally postponed the academic year, they need to take into account progressive options that will not disadvantage matrics in public schools. This must include ensuring that any solution is equitable for all matrics, in both public and private schools.

### **Food for learners**

Mindful of the North Gauteng High Court ruling obliging the government to feed the country's children, the National Nutritional Programme will provide food during the month-long break, for learners and parents to collect food at school. The food programme is needed for all learners in the context of widespread food insecurity and poor nutrition. The problem is government making schools the centre of the food programme for learners during a 'break' in the schooling. Also, what about learners who are not designated to return to school yet? The government is forcing learners to attend school to access food. Yet, many learners do not live close to schools and use public transport and/or organised school lift clubs, or so-called scholar transport. Besides additional costs for transport expenses for parents, when unemployment is high and employers are retrenching more workers, this means attending schools and/or using overcrowded public transport potentially places parents and learners at risk of contracting the virus just in order to collect food.

There are more efficient options to provide food to learners directly to family-households through food vouchers or cash remittances sent directly to parents on cell phones and platforms like WhatsApp. Research indicates that methods that promote direct support into households maximise effective use in households, ensure receipt by intended recipients and reduce corruption associated with food schemes considerably. Family-households, and the women that head these households, are acutely aware of their needs and maximise resources thriftily. Hence, transferring the costs of food per child in the nutritional programme directly to the family, will assist households in dire need. This approach will also ensure that all children, and not just those currently designated to attend school, will benefit from food distribution. This will of course reduce the 'third parties', the tenders, the hangers-on, and challenges again the commitment of the President to an anti-corruption option that prioritises learners, their families and those in need. In a country with the 'best Constitution in the world', people queuing for food

parcels is humiliating, and indicates a lack of trust in poor working class people. This is despite the fact that corruption stems from within government and extends to its elites, and includes big corporates and white monopoly capital in general.

## **Conclusion**

The public outcry against the government's support for the two-tiered education system in South Africa is well-founded. The public education system that caters for 12.4 million learners, or 97% of all learners, has been neglected for decades, is under-resourced and under-funded, and provides substandard education that maintains the cycle of social inequality. In contrast, private education privileges the rich elites and deepens social inequality in the country. After 25 years of democracy and the demise of apartheid there has been no significant social change and redistribution of wealth and our two-tiered education system perpetuates this.

There are indicators of progressive developments within the emerging movement. The teachers have had to respond to the schools' crisis on their own as their unions, including the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) and the National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa (NAPTOSA), agreed to government reopening the schools. As infections spread, increasingly members were at logger-heads with their unions. After many years of acquiescence, teachers challenged their union leadership's co-option by government and organised demonstrations. The pressure 'from below' forced the union leaderships to appeal to government to 'close schools'. The struggle to democratise the unions will be influenced by the broader struggle to organise communities and to democratise and create equity in the education system. This will require a transformative shift away from neoliberalism.

The current schools crisis has reawakened the political consciousness amongst educators about the nature of the education system, the curriculum, and memories of the anti-apartheid education demands. "We need to go back to the teaching of Paulo Freire and liberation theology. This education system is unequal, and is not what we fought for," one educator said. "The social inequality and the quintile system oppresses working class schools, we need to radically restructure the education system", he continued. The deepening schools crisis and government's inability to reasonably protect learners and educators is having a radicalising impact on educators and parents. There is also a growing awareness of government's neoliberal policies that maintain the two-tiered education system.

COVID-19 increasingly reveals the social inequality, social relationships of domination and the sources of that inequality. The COVID-19 crisis therefore is an opportunity to organise and change the way society has been structured. On the education front there is a need to close all schools immediately as part of combating the coronavirus; and the closure of schools is also an opportunity to set in motion a transformative path towards a single egalitarian and quality public education system for all.

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