

## **Why we need to close schools until Covid 19 infections begin to fall significantly**

*An Open Letter from Gauteng Concerned Parents Forum*

Dear Parents and Guardians

The COVID-19 pandemic has caused many deaths internationally. In South Africa 168 061 people have been infected, and 2 844 people have died from coronavirus. Despite calls from communities, Government didn't consult parents and opened schools on 8 June, in a rising pandemic. Since then 10 teachers have died, 523 learners and 1 169 teachers have been infected, and 775 schools affected. The pandemic is spreading and causing concern for parents, School Governing Bodies (SGBs), teachers, principals and communities. As parents we believe that we can beat COVID-19 but, we must act now, with urgency. We cannot give up.

Countries like China and New Zealand managed the pandemic best by implementing a lockdown, that included closing down schools and public spaces; and supporting communities with essentials like food and medicine, and PPEs (sanitisers, masks etc.) where necessary. Closing schools helped to curb outbreaks and the spread of the virus.

*The government has no capacity to implement its own regulations*

Despite the government's extensive Regulations to reorganise schools during COVID-19, including physical distancing, screening and supplying PPEs, it is doomed to fail. Schools have no space to implement the new regulations and government knows this. Hence government wants learners to school for half a day, or half a week. Teachers now teach the same lesson many times to smaller classes; and teach grades they were not trained for. Government doesn't want to hire the additional teachers it desperately needs. Many schools have broken infrastructure, no water and sanitation and are not compliant.

*2020 academic year is lost*

Minister Motshekga is aware that matriculants have already lost many teaching days, and will lose more, so she postponed the matric June and November exams to November-December 2020. Matrics must now prepare two major exams by October, reducing teaching time more. The constant closing and opening to decontaminate schools impacts negatively on learning and creates fear in learners (and teachers). Matrics have to learn in conditions that disadvantage the working class.

Government predicts that between 30 000 to 60 000 people will die from the pandemic in July and September; so how can learners be expected to learn in this traumatic environment? The academic year is lost and Government is setting matrics up to fail. Learners (and teachers) will blame themselves for not working hard enough; and will see themselves as 'failures'. Why then are schools reopening for matrics (and other learners), in a rising pandemic?

*The decision to open schools while infections are rising*

Government reopened schools on 8 June but the Regulations to combat COVID-19 in

schools was only finalised on 23 June. The Regulations accommodate the demands of private schools to open because the education economy will lose huge profits for shareholders. While they consist of only 3% of learners, private schools belonging to companies like Curro Holdings and ADvTECH, are listed on the Johannesburg Stock Exchange, with a joint turnover of over R7 billion. The Regulations stipulate that only schools that comply with minimum health and safety and social distancing measures will be allowed to open. The government's main reason to open public schools is to assist the profiteers and shareholders in private education, even if it puts the lives of working class children at risk.

#### *Some scientists support schools opening*

Even though they admit that the evidence is "scant and weak", some scientists actively support opening schools, and don't follow international scientific advice. In South Africa, many children have pre-existing health conditions and scientists do not know how COVID-19 will react to these conditions. For instance, 250 000 children have HIV/AIDS. 10 children have died from coronavirus, and evidence indicates that children will infect parents and others at home. The government does not test children/learners, so it does not know how the virus is spreading among them. In countries that have contained COVID-19, like South Korea, any evidence that infections are rising immediately leads to the closure of schools. Even if learners don't get very sick from COVID-19, they can infect and spread the disease.

#### *Can opening the economy justify opening the schools?*

The government and the scientists admit that it's not possible to open the economy without opening schools but this reason is not good enough. This defeats opening the economy, because schools contribute to rising infections and workers will get sick much faster and the economy will be forced to close again anyway. Therefore, to open the economy in a lasting manner, we should close schools and find ways to continue education. The academic year is already lost so why expose learners and communities to increased COVID-19 infections?

#### *Why schools need to be closed in order to fight the pandemic*

Not one country has succeeded in fighting COVID-19 while schools are open. As citizens we cannot let the government repeat the HIV/AIDS catastrophe of the 1990s. We call on all parents and guardians to boycott and stay away from schools until they are safe. Let us as parents join hands and lead the struggle to save the lives of our children and the working class throughout the country. We have to close all schools.

#### *Meals for all children at home during the pandemic*

As parents we demand that government subsidise meals for all children at home, (regardless of nationality or status), throughout the COVID-19 pandemic to replace school feeding schemes and ensure that families do not starve during the pandemic.

As parents and guardians, responsible for our children's health, safety, wellbeing and education, we have the right to decide what happens to their future, not government.

We call on all parents, teachers and SGBs to take a stand and shut down all schools. For the lives and education of our children!

Yours in solidarity,  
Gauteng Concerned Parents Forum