

Safety brings first aid to the uninjured

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#### UNSAFE WORKING CONDITIONS EXPOSED

THE Gugulethu Sassa office has shut its doors for the second time following staff complaints about the lack of safety measures at the facility. Earlier this week, a second case of Covid-19 was confirmed at the office.

### THE BIG DEBATE

# Motshekga's back to school bind



CHILDREN being screened as they queue for food provided by Living Through Learning at the Delft South Primary. Living through Learning is an NGO/NPO that assists disadvantaged schools by implementing literacy programs and training teachers. Since the closure of schools they have however been putting efforts elsewhere because the communities they work in are going hungry. They did a feeding scheme today at one of the schools, Delft South Primary. They also handed out literacy activities booklets to keep some learning continuing at home, as well as pencils. Also handed out 800 sandwiches, 400 loaves of bread and 800 oranges and 800 apples. All in all they fed 800 people. | PHANDO JIKELO African News Agency(ANA)

## Reopening vital for pupils who rely on meals, where homeschooling is impossible

DR SOLLY Motlanthe, a general practitioner in Kagiso, west of Joburg, says: "The reopening of school will be a challenge to all of us."

There are economic and health-care constraints to juggle.

On the education side the challenges will be teacher: learner ratio.

Elsewhere, 10 per class for pre-school and 15 in primary school have been suggested. These might be difficult to achieve in our country.

Children must sit about 2m apart in class and wear a cloth mask.

This will need massive infrastructure rearrangements that is at present not adequate as there has been school vandalism. There must be enough sanitation at the gate and screening. An app might help where parents can answer questions relating to Covid-19 symptoms.

These can be colour-coded where green result will mean that the child can come to school, yellow will be a warning for the child to be isolated, and red will advise consultation with a health-care provider. These will also track the movements of children and can be applied to adults to help trace contacts and potential spreaders.

The school must have enough health-care providers to scan the children for fever and other symptoms of Covid-19. Reliable clean water is necessary for hand washing, sanitation and ablution. Rural schools will have a challenge especially those still using pit latrines.

Children are continuously bombarded with new viruses like the other flu coronaviruses. This might have some cross-protection against Covid-19 although studies are needed to confirm this. There are also postulations about the number of ACE2 receptors in children's lungs compared to adults.

Remember, the virus uses these receptors as a door to infect a living cell like lung cells that transfer oxygen from air into the lungs and carbon dioxide out. The problem will be children with comorbidities like obesity, cancer, lung disease, heart, kidney, etc.

These children, if they get infected, may get serious infection that can lead to hospitalisation. These children will need some kind of homeschooling supported by special teachers and trained nurses. Temporary mobile classes sep-



SOLLY MOTLANTHE

arated from the main school for these children might be one of the solutions where classes of six are maintained. Some classrooms may be converted into temporary medical units where a doctor, especially GPs, can work there in the morning before going to their practices just to co-ordinate things.

They will be complimented by nurses. Most GPs are not busy as patients are not comfortable in visiting medical facilities for fear of being infected. This will give the government an opportunity to beef up the fight against this virus. Doctors need to screen these children on a regular basis and advise parents appropriately.

Children can get frightened and fear to return to school as they see Covid-19 news on TV. A lot of counselling is needed to reassure children and educate them about the virus in schematic forms. We have ignored this important aspect. Although there is no treatment for Covid-19, parents must be informed of supportive treatment.

Children from poor settings are at a disadvantage as they use public transport from informal taxis which are always overloaded. This will compromise social distancing practices.

Opening schools for these poor children is vital as homeschooling might not be possible as they will need electronic gadgets and possibly reliable connectivity for virtual learning.

The school is not only a learning place as some children rely on school for adequate nutrition. A balanced meal is critical for growth and ability to concentrate in class. Some parents might be struggling to feed their children due to financial difficulties.

So, school nutrition is vital for these children. The lockdown might have the potential to bring malnutrition illnesses that can affect immunity leading to susceptibility to infections like Covid-19.

### FACT BOX ARGUMENTS

BASIC Education Minister Angie Motshekga says "school is good for children", but many parents are in two minds about this, not sure if they should allow their children to catch up with the year or lose it altogether.

Motshekga says with the proposed phasing-in return, beginning with grade 7 and 12 learners from June 1, the new school calendar will be gazetted.

There are interesting arguments for both sides, to go back to class or not amid the Covid-19 pandemic, which is set to thrive in cold weather.

Former Gauteng education MEC Mary Metcalfe, now a senior research associate at the University of Johannesburg, says: "The science suggests that the virus will be with us until at least the end of 2021. All of us have to make decisions about how to proceed with our lives managing the risks, and taking the necessary steps to protect self and others. For parents considering the safety of their children returning to school, their decision will be made easier if they are confident that the plans in place at the school attended by their children are adequate."

"Parents can be proactive and assist the leadership of the school by offering to assist – working through the school governing body."

"We all need to step up to assist safety as our children try to return to normality and to learning."

"Planning around what is taught and what is assessed for Grades R to 11 will be led by schools within the national and provincial frameworks."

"We cannot expect all the 'content' will be taught as planned before Covid-19."

These are professional decisions that must be taken in the best interests of the learners, understanding that 'catch up' will be over time and may not be 'squeezed' into the remaining months of 2020."

Her peer, Professor Jonathan Jansen, has already advocated the scrapping of the school year, a view received with ambivalence.

But the truth is that the educational aspect of the catch-22 is not so much an issue as its health component. Some parents see home schooling their children as a panacea while they suffer angst at the thought of their young being exposed to the dangers of Covid-19. | Don Makatle

## Sending children back to school is a gamble, they are susceptible in winter

DR NORMAN Mabasa, is a former Health MEC in Limpopo, he says: "Covid-19 cases are increasing exponentially as our children are expected at school on June 1. There is a narrative that says children are not affected as severely as adults with Covid-19. This is a myth."

We must be frank with ourselves and accept that this disease is not even a year old for anyone to make serious conclusions and convert them into a scientific finding. Covid-19 has given birth to a lot of debate with analysts negating their earlier pronouncements the world over.

I also wish that children do not lose the school year. This is a conundrum. It's like your wallet with thousands of dollars falling into a pool full of crocodiles and you have to make a choice to jump in and be swallowed by crocodiles, or lose your money and have another opportunity to start afresh to make more money.

Our children are sent to school when coronavirus infections have increased astronomically. This will test the myth about whether children can get sick or die from Covid-19. This is the same as gambling with the hope to win.

Children, as adults do, get infected and become sick as well. Like adults, it may be fewer children who get symptoms but whose children must those be?

Children with co-morbidities like asthma, TB and malnutrition and HIV can be as vulnerable. We are sending our children at the beginning of winter where they are susceptible to influenza and pneumonia.

It is worse when one thinks that children tend to need strict supervision. You give your child a mask from home and the child returns with someone else's mask. The problems arise when you cannot tell if your child's classmates are exposed to corona at home.

It is known that when children are infected they may develop toxic shock, low blood pressure, generalised body rash, restlessness, multi-system inflammatory



NORMAN MABASA

syndrome and many other symptoms. By the time these symptoms develop, it will be too late.

I wish the experiment we are conducting does not yield shocking findings. Unfortunately, the disease is too new for anyone to predict the outcome. As we send our children back to school we should take cognisance of the fact that it is also not impossible to take them out again as the infections rise. Various lockdown rules will be difficult to adhere to with children, knowing how children interact.

I also wish the children go back to school although with some level of trepidation.

We cannot emulate the errors of some other countries – chapter and verse. Some reports have emerged that in Mulhouse, in eastern France, schools were reclosed a week after reopening.

One would expect France to be the last one to commit an error of that magnitude. We appear to wish to mimic them.

Educators are completely unhappy as well to go back to work uncertain of the preparedness of many schools especially in disadvantaged areas. One senior academic said a child will go to school with a black mask and come home with a pink mask. This goes to demonstrate how unrealistic we are to expect children to exercise self-control to an extent of handling their affairs like adults.

In Brazil, it is reported the majority of infections and fatalities are those aged 60 and below. This is reportedly ascribed to the fact there are more younger citizens as opposed to Italy.

The fact that in Italy the majority were elderly simply reflects the composition of the population."

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### COMMENT



## PARENTS HAVE NO REASON TO FEAR COVID-19

BENJAMIN SMART

ON JUNE 1, some of South Africa's brightest young stars will head back to school after a long, unplanned, and very unwelcome break.

The Grade 12s will be desperate to learn as much as they can to properly prepare for their final matric exams, as many aim to become the first in their families to head to varsity and, ultimately, to make strong contributions to a transformed South African economy.

That the government's NCCC (National Covid-19 Command Council) has decided to get classrooms active again should come as a huge relief to pupils and parents alike – but to many, it has not.

According to former DA leader Mmusi Maimane's Twitter poll, 76% of voters are against schools reopening on June 1.

News channel eNCA conducted a similar poll. Only 23% were in favour of sending their children back to school, with the rest unsure (25%) or a hard "no, worried about safety".

This is a reflection of two things: first, the admirable and natural desire to protect one's family. Second, the media and government's failure to adequately explain the exceptionally low risk Covid-19 poses to children, and the necessity of getting the education ball rolling as soon as possible.

On May 18, the government reported 286 coronavirus deaths. Only one of these occurred in someone under the age of 30, and there were no deaths at all under 20. This very low fatality rate in the youth is a global phenomenon: as of May 13, in New York, US, of 15230 deaths, only nine were under 18, and of these nine it is highly likely (although I don't have the facts) that most if not all of them had pre-existing conditions.

Simply put, Covid-19 is not deadly for children unless they have a serious underlying condition.

One elderly citizen asked Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga whether she could guarantee that her grandchild won't bring the virus into the household. Similarly, some of the teaching unions, such as the SA Democratic Teachers Union, want guarantees for the safety of their teachers. Of course, the minister could not provide such guarantees, but nor should she be expected to. She cannot guarantee teachers won't get influenza or tuberculosis, either.

Munro and Faust show in The British Medical Journal that children are not super spreaders of the disease, citing a number of studies in which infected children have been exposed to hundreds of others and not infected anyone. At a school in New South Wales, Australia, none of 735 children were infected by nine child and nine adult cases.

South Africans must get used to Covid-19 being around. Until an effective vaccine is rolled out, which could be years, or until there is herd immunity, South Africans will continue to catch Covid-19. We quite clearly cannot keep schools closed for two years. The effects both on education, and on the economy, would be vast and devastating.

In sending our grade 12s and 7s back to school, the government is acting both in accordance with a good scientific evidence-base, and in the best interests of South Africans.

Many parents won't see their children back at school for months as it is (foundation phase learners are only set to return in August), and any further delay could have long-lasting effects on their education. As easy as it is to do, parents should not panic.

If you weren't keeping your child back for fear of TB before lockdown, you shouldn't now fear Covid-19.

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