



**Commissioner
for Children**

15 January 2020

Press release: Delayed reopening of schools

The Western Cape Commissioner for Children welcomes the commitment of the Department of Basic Education to fulfill children's rights to education while they remain cognizant of concerns for children's health and well-being during the COVID pandemic. The Commissioner encourages the Department to listen to the voices of children when making important decisions about schooling as children have the right to be involved in all decisions affecting their lives. Alessio Marcus, the current Chairperson of the Representative Council of Learners in the Western Cape, notes *'government needed to practice child participation and should have included learner leaders, within their structures of representative councils of learners, when making this decision. I hope the government will think of the importance of child participation in the future and include children in decision making processes that will directly affect them.'* Children report to the Commissioner, they are eager to go back to school safely. Schools are sometimes the only protected environment children have where they can be safe, be fed and learn.

Delaying the reopening of schools for everyone goes against the advice of Professor Mignon McCulloch, the President of the South African Pediatric Association, who has pointed out that primary school learners can go back to school on time. However, the Department notes it will allow for schools to prepare adequately for children's safe return. In the Commissioner's current consultation process with children, named *#learninginCOVIDtimes*, children emphasize they want adults to protect them at schools from being infected by the virus. Children say they need schools to be fully prepared with PPE and to follow all health protocols to keep them safe. Children want educators, for example, to strictly model good behavior and adhere to health protocols and not to pull down their masks when teaching in class. School management should also consider how to make learning easier if distance learning is implemented.



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The full range of costs of distance learning is not always considered. Many children live in home contexts which are not conducive for learning, having to contend with cramped physical space and distress about domestic violence. Other issues affecting the mental health of children are not seeing friends and having to contend with enormous workloads. Many children report the need for technology and data to do their schoolwork, which is unaffordable for many parents. Children say their parents are their main source of learning support at home during distance learning. This puts an additional stress on parents who may need to work simultaneously or focus on the struggle for survival. If parents are not home, they will need to arrange for childcare. The Department did not adequately address any of these concerns or the concern about curriculum coverage.

One of the Child Government Monitors (working with the Office of the Commissioner for Children), Robin Lewin starting Grade 10 this year at Lavender Hill High, expressed her anxiety about the 2021 school year. She says: *'now that there's another delay in schools reopening I feel that we as learners will have tons of work to do and to catch up on and again in a short amount of time, and teachers might feel pressured to go over the work quicker than they usually have to.'*

Therefore, the Western Cape Commissioner for Children recommends that the Department of Education always engages children directly to fully understand their realities, needs and interests. There is an urgent need to develop a clear plan, for the South African context, for successful ways of learning in COVID times.

ENDS

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