

## **MEDIA RELEASE BY THE CHILDREN'S COMMISSIONER**

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### **Commencement of the Commissioner for Children in the Western Cape**

1 June is an auspicious day to take up the Office of Commissioner for Children, since today is International Children's Day and we have commenced National Child Protection Week. The Western Cape Government has demonstrated their commitment to child rights by pioneering an Office of the Commissioner for Children. It is a privilege to be entrusted to set the bar for the first ever Commissioner for Children in South Africa, as legislated by the Western Cape Constitution.

I am aware that I take up this office at a very trying time, as our world is besieged by the global COVID-19 pandemic. Today, schools re-open after the lockdown. The emphasis has been on ensuring that schools have measures in place to ensure the physical safety of teachers and learners. As the Commissioner for Children, I will support government to consider learners' physical wellbeing as well as their emotional welfare. In recent research that I conducted with children during lockdown, I found that children miss their friends at school and are keen to complete their education. A six-year-old from Lavender Hill said: "I feel sad because I can't go to school and play", and a thirteen-year-old from Langa agreed: "It's sad not going to school". They want to be reunited with their friends but do they know enough about the new normal of physical distancing? How will we get especially younger children to understand this?

However, children are also anxious about returning to school — particularly matriculants who will be the first to return to school. The Representative Council of Learners from Elsie's River High School shared with me their anxieties about going to school by sending me the letters they wrote to the President. Their view was that school should restart afresh in 2021 because our infection rate is very high in the province; not all learners have been able to benefit from online learning; some learners with health challenges will not be able to return to school for fear of being infected; and they are concerned for the health of their educators and families when they return to their homes. Elsie's River High School 17-year-old matriculant, Malika Swail's letter to the President was shared more than 6 500 times on Facebook and reprinted in two newspapers so far. She shared her feelings of anxiety: "I always thought the biggest stress I would endure during my matric year would be exams and the heavy workload, but I was wrong. Now the biggest stress I am facing is the fact that I need to return to school — DURING A PANDEMIC". I will be reaching out to more children to hear about their experiences of returning to school and then feeding their sentiments into decision making structures within government.

It is also an opportune time to remind ourselves that every day should be a day we strive towards the realization of children's rights. Not only on designated calendar days. Not only in trying times. As the Commissioner, I will work tirelessly to ensure that the whole of government and society understand and fulfill their responsibilities to children, starting with listening to children and families about their priorities. In the next few weeks, I will meet with Parliament, the Executive, and government officials to emphasize the important role of the Commissioner for Children.

In my first 100 days as Commissioner, I will focus on the following five strategic initiatives guided by my core values:

- Credibility:** The Commissioner for Children will be **set up** as an independent institution to promote and protect the rights of children.
- Holistic:** The Commissioner will **make referrals** to the appropriate government departments when concerns are raised about children in need of support.
- Inclusive:** The Commissioner for Children will **engage all stakeholders** to shape the mission of the office.
- Listening:** The Commissioner will **enable child government monitors** to act as a reference group and to connect with the realities of children.
- Developmental:** The Commissioner will **foster relationships within government** to promote a child-rights approach to governance.

When this period of consultation has been concluded, the Office of the Commissioner for Children will be able to set out more clearly its mission and plan of action.

ENDS

1 June 2020

**The Commissioner for Children: Christina Nomdo**