

## **STATEMENT BY MINISTER DEBBIE SCHÄFER**

### **WESTERN CAPE MINISTER OF EDUCATION**

**Date: 13 January 2022**

**Release: immediate**

### **WESTERN CAPE GOVERNMENT CALLS FOR SCRAPPING OF THE 1M RULE AT SCHOOLS AND A FULL RETURN TO SCHOOL**

On Tuesday, the Minister of Basic Education confirmed in a statement issued that no plans are currently in place to change the current Directions issued by the Department of Basic Education in terms of the Disaster Management Regulations, except as they relate to the number of spectators at school sport venues. Nor have there been any other changes to the Disaster Management Regulations that affect schools.

This means that, despite the fact that the Minister of Education has stated, in Directions issued in July last year, that all primary schools should revert to full attendance and follow a risk-adjusted approach depending on the direction the pandemic is taking, this has not happened. Part of the reason is that the Minister for Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs, Minister Dlamini Zuma, promulgated a regulation on 30 July 2021 stating that the social distancing measure in primary schools is “reduced to one metre”. By specifying one metre, schools may not legally ignore that.

At this stage, approximately only 12% of our primary schools can comply with these directions. That means that approximately 88% of our primary schools are attending school on a rotational basis, despite efforts to revert to full attendance.

There is strong and mounting evidence to suggest that the learning losses our young people are suffering are devastating and will have long term negative consequences.

According to the National Income Dynamics Study (NIDS) – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM) published in May 2021, in 2020, South African primary school children in no-fee schools have learnt 50-75% less than what they normally learn. In 2021, there continued to be significant teaching time losses, as a result of rotational timetables.

Various education experts, like Nic Spaull from Stellenbosch University, have repeatedly called for the end of the rotational model as its continued implementation could

potentially result in a “lost generation” of learners. Spaul has indicated that, based on projections, the average grade 3 child in June 2021 knows about the same as the average grade 2 child of 2019!

Other areas of concern are the fact that many learners are not able to access the feeding programme as often as they should, and that the on-off attendance at school is contributing to a higher dropout rate.

In addition, there has also been a huge psychosocial impact on our learners, teachers and even parents. Implementing a rotational model in schools is not easy. It requires dedicated planning and continued pressure to keep up with the curriculum while teaching different cohorts of learners on different days.

It also creates a lot of stress on parents, who need to ensure their children are supervised, and that they are maintaining their @home education programmes. The WCED has been inundated with complaints from parents wanting rotation to end.

The Minister said that they are exploring possibilities to return schooling to normal, “but we need to do so responsibly”.

We agree and are of the view that the responsible time to do so is now.

The Western Cape Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been evidence-based and data-led from the very beginning.

As early as July last year, there was a strongly worded Medical Advisory Committee (MAC) recommendation setting out the devastating impact of rotational schooling and urging that at least primary schools should go back full time, regardless of the distancing requirement.

Since then, there appears to be broad agreement in the health fraternity that the most important preventative measures are vaccination, masks and avoiding unventilated spaces. In addition, according to the most recent data supplied by the Western Cape's Health Department, the Western Cape has passed its peak of the fourth wave, which was significantly less severe than the second and third wave. So has the rest of the country.

Our data analysis has also shown that vaccinations continue to be highly effective in preventing severe illness, and together with mask wearing, and ensuring good ventilation, will be sufficient steps as we normalize our response to the virus. All teachers have had access to the vaccine, and the number of hospitalisations has been much lower than in previous waves, and the number of deaths even lower. The vaccine has also been made available to all children above the ages of 12 years old, since the July MAC advisory to relax the one metre rule.

On an analysis of all these factors, it is clear that the risks to the future of our youth are far greater than the risks posed by COVID-19. The pandemic has changed over the last two years, and we must now return to a state of normality.

Depriving our children of the opportunity to attend school full-time in the current circumstances is no longer justified, and in order to avoid a generational catastrophe, we call on the DBE and Department of Cooperative Governance and Traditional Affairs to make the necessary changes to the Regulations and Directions to ensure that we can start to make up the devastating losses that have already been incurred, and which will take years to remedy.

We will follow all necessary processes to take this forward in the interests of all in the Western Cape.