

DBE RESPONDS TO PROFESSOR JONATHAN JANSEN'S OPEN LETTER TO THE MINISTER – 'TIME TO ADMIT SCHOOL YEAR OVER'

BY ELIJAH MHLANGA

In his open letter to addressed to the Minister of Basic Education; Mrs Angie Motshekga, published in the *TimesLive newspaper of 09 July 2020*, Professor Jonathan Jansen argues passionately for the School Year to be abandoned. He appears firstly to strike an encouraging tone with the Minister before he admonishes her with the words; **"Unfortunately, minister you cannot dictate academic terms to a novel coronavirus"**.

The choice of words is not lost on the reader; the eminent Professor employs his skillful language punch to characterize the minister as a dictator in the eyes of those whose sympathies lie with the Professor's argument. These sympathies are bought by fear-mongering tactics that he so cunningly deploys. To drive his point into the trembling hearts of a public seized with uncertainty over a virus that morphs daily and evades medical science, he throws in a salvo; **"Teachers have died, Principals have been on ventilators. Children have been infected. Non-teaching staff have become seriously ill"**. These are words employed by a crafty wordsmith to drive home a point that seeks to turn public sentiment against a hard-working minister committed to finding effective and all-encompassing solutions to not only salvage the academic year, which is not a crime by the way, but to also keep access open for the poorest of the poor in far-flung communities of the Republic who needs an open classroom if they are to take aim at a possible future free of ignorance and poverty.

We are not convinced of the argument to roll up and close the school year, we are neither certain that this would be a desirable and responsible option for the many marginalized children, who rely on our schools. We will never tire from explaining that our approach to School reopening is a result of a carefully considered process listening to many different views from our stakeholders and respectfully paying attention to the fears and anxieties of parents and learners themselves. We have also listened to science and medical experts who pay careful attention to the evolution of COVID-19 and its implications on education policy and practice. At the same time an impression must not be created that we are trying to save the academic year at the expense of lives. The South African government is allowing various sectors to gradually resume activities to maintain the balance between saving lives and livelihood, needless to say that the provision of basic education is part of livelihood.

Now that we clarified this point, it is time to refer Professor Jansen respectfully to visit his colleague at the same university Professor Martin Gustafsson; *(an associate professor in the Economics Department of Stellenbosch University and senior researcher at RESEP, specialising in education policy and comparative education)* and listen carefully to some of the findings the Professor has shared in trying to consider implications of the DBE School reopening program in the context of available data on COVID-19 and children of school-going age.

We also would encourage Professor Jansen to listen to the findings of UNESCO, on the negative impact an extended school lockdown potentially has on the prospects of learners in poor communities. In their recent report on *Adverse Consequences of*

School Closures, UNESCO explains that school closures carry high social and economic costs for people across communities. Their impact however is particularly severe for the most vulnerable and marginalized boys and girls and their families. The resulting disruptions exacerbate already existing disparities within the education system but also in other aspects of their lives.

We have invested time in explaining that back to school doesn't mean back to normal. Schools reopening does not mean a return to education as it was before. Other measures may also be put in place, like staggering lunch breaks, limiting face to face contact between staff and parents and regular hand-washing breaks.

Kids with a cold or other symptoms must stay home from school. And older teachers or those with underlying health conditions (comorbidities) that put them at greater risk of complications if infected with COVID-19 will have altered responsibilities.

It is important parents and the public differentiate between schools reopening from all the other important strategies used to reduce transmission still in place. These include social distancing, travel restrictions, case isolation and quarantine, and banning of large gatherings.

Now returning to some of Professor Jansen's thoughts, it is surprising that the open letter and many other articles the Professor has penned in the recent times criticizing the DBE's effort to reopen schools suggest we must accept that affluent schools on their own will save the academic year and children of the working class and the poor should accept that their academic year is over. It would also seem clear that government is counselled in these letters and articles to fold their arms and to roll over to the magical 2021 to only return to its mandate then. Repeatedly the Minister has said that the main reason for reopening was to make sure that poor children who don't have resources such as ICTs should benefit in school which is where they are better serviced. It is particularly the poor who are at risk if schools don't open so those are the principles that have been guiding us.

We have not followed the example of Kenya. An example the Professor refers to as '**courageous**' in a hidden attempt to impugn the efforts of Minister Motshekga. We have instead crafted our path informed first by our conditions on the ground, guided by our medical scientists who have encouraged the country to brace itself to co-exist with COVID-19 for the next foreseeable future. Those who think that 2021 will bring much needed relief are relying unfortunately on data we have not seen, we recognize that we must find workable solutions that will allow us to continue with educating our children in the midst of an unfolding crisis; a new reality even through 2021.

Dr. Nic Spaul and Professor Martin Gustafsson, among others, spend time studying the potential impact of the pandemic on our school system, and they have reached different conclusions to those espoused by Professor Jansen, who by the way, we are not aware of any work produced by him on the impact of COVID-19 on schooling, except for his tabloid snippets.

The obligations of **White Paper 1** on education create an obligation on the state to acknowledge and respect education. This translates also into an obligation on the state to acknowledge and respect the constitutional provision of equality. It is as a result of these constitutional obligations that the Department of Basic Education

pursues the ideal of equal access to basic education as an inalienable right not only to those who can access online learning platforms with all the gadgetry required because of their access to resources and associated luxuries but also those who continue to battle the frontiers of poverty and marginalization. Witness to this is borne by the efforts we have made to keep education provision ongoing; we have through our partnerships with the Department of Communications and Digital Technologies identified free online sites where learners can access learning materials, we have partnered with the SABC to stream lessons and revision content and we have also provided the Home-Education option to parents who wish not to return their children to school. We are resolute in our endeavour to return schools to functioning capacity in the current academic year and mitigate the negative impacts COVID-19 poses to the learning development of our children.

Ends.