



KWAZULU-NATAL CHRISTIAN COUNCIL

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29 May 2020

ATT: The Honourable Kwazi Mshengu, KZN MEC for Education
Mr. Sandile Phakathi, KZN Head of Ministry for Education
Dr Ngogi Mahaye, Director, KZN Department of Education
Thirona Moodley, Provincial Chief Executive Officer, NAPTOSA
Nomarashiya Caluza, Provincial Secretary, SADTU
C.S. Barnes, General Secretary, NATU
Innes Kritzinger, Provincial Chair, SAOU
Sithembiso Sithole, Provincial Chair, PEU

Dear Colleagues,

We, leaders representing ecumenical churches in KZN, write to you at this time when many are fatigued of lockdown and yet concerned about the risks of allowing our children back to school. We affirm the support and leadership that our government is continuously providing during this challenging time. We equally understand that it is in the interest of government and parents to ensure that the future of our children is not jeopardized by them being out of school for longer than necessary. We also affirm your concern for the safety of every child and educator to be a priority before they can resume their normal activities.

We applaud the announcement made by the Department of Basic Education Minister, Angie Motshekga, that some learners will be able to start returning to school. The truth is that school is where learners spend most of their time not only for education but also for access to food, a safer space than their homes and a space to socialize with their peers.

However, safety in schools during this time of the COVID 19 pandemic is a priority, not only to the learners but also teachers, administration and other support staff. People at risk include those involved in the transportation of the learners to and from school. As a result, parents and guardians need assurance that they are making the right decision *when they* let their children return to school. With this is also the agreement between the teacher trade unions and the department of basic education on the safety pre-conditions which must be adhered to by government before learning can take place. This agreement is in line with the protocols that have been put in place and the same procedures that are used everywhere else where screening and testing needs to take place.

We note with concern some of the challenges currently faced by schools:

- Slow or non-delivery of PPE
- provision of water tanks
- provision of additional classrooms
- refurbishment of vandalized classes
- cleaning and disinfecting of schools

We also note the Statement put out by the SAHRC Urging the Minister of Basic Education to reconsider the date for reopening schools for Grade 7 and 12 learners because the above challenges have not yet been adequately addressed.

We therefore, call on our Provincial government and Teachers' Unions to support the educators and learners by ensuring that the following issues are prioritized and implemented as a matter of urgency:

- Speed up the supply and delivery (using local service providers where possible) of PPE.
- Cleaning and disinfecting of schools
- A clear plan on teachers and learners with co-morbidities or existing illnesses, including teachers older than 60 years. For learners this needs to include ensuring they have access to age- and grade-appropriate high-quality online and telephonic educational support together with an uncomplicated procedure to register for an online stream.
- Appointment of people who will administer sanitizing and screening of learners and teachers during school hours
- Employment of replacement teachers
- Provision of water tanks where these are not yet in place to ensure hand-washing is possible
- Additional classrooms to support physical and social distancing
- Provision of security of the PPE when delivered in schools in light of the burglaries and break-ins that schools have experienced over this time
- Provision and safety of scholar transport
- Provision of adequate funding for implementing these measures

We also request that the opening up creches is urgently discussed by the department. As the economy opens, this places care-givers (particularly mothers) in an impossible situation. Additionally, young children are also extremely vulnerable to sexual and other exploitation if they are left alone at home or in the care of an inappropriate family member. We have heard some horrendous reports. Hence our concern that a suitable way forward be found, which safeguards our young children.

We would also like to highlight that there are churches within our coalition who have offered their buildings to be used at this time, as additional classrooms to make physical distancing easier. We are open to discussion on how this could be done.

Finally, we fear that failure to meet these important suggested safety measures will cause a disastrous loss of confidence by parents in government systems thereby eroding all the good work that has been achieved thus far. We offer our prayers for wisdom for you all in this important time.

In faith,

+ **Cardinal Wilfrid Napier**, OFM, Chairperson of the KwaZulu Natal Church Leaders Group and Chairperson of the KZN Inter Religious Council.

Dean Nkosinathi Myaka, Chairperson of the KwaZulu Natal Christian Council

Bishop Nathi Zondi, on behalf of the Steering Committee of the KZN: Covid 19 Churches Respond project.

