



health

Department:
Health
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



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INTERNAL MEMO

Date:	16 December 2020		
To:	The Honorable Dr ZL Mkhize, Minister of Health	From:	Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on Covid-19

RETURN OF ALL LEARNERS 2021

Problem/Concern

- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) has requested guidance on their proposal for return to school of all learners in 2021. (See proposal letter)

Evidence review

- The long term costs to children in term so schooling lost cannot be overstated. Some indications are that we may have lost a decade's worth of learning gains in 2020 due to Covid-19 school closures. ^{1, 2, 3}
- Children and adolescents are less likely to become infected with SARS CoV-2.⁴
- It is important for these costs to be balanced with the health costs of the pandemic.
- The long term costs to children in term so schooling lost cannot be overstated. Some indications are that we may have lost a decade's worth of learning gains in 2020 due to Covid-19 school closures. ^{5, 6, 7}
- Children and adolescents are less likely to become infected with SARS CoV-2.⁸
- It is important for these costs to be balanced with the health costs of the pandemic.

¹ van der Berg S, Spaul N. Counting the Cost: COVID-19 school closures in South Africa and its impact on children. RESEP, 2020. <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Van-der-Berg-Spaul-2020-Counting-the-Cost-COVID-19-Children-and-Schooling-15-June-2020-1.pdf>

² Mohohlwane N, Taylor S, Shepherd D. COVID-19 and basic education: Evaluating the initial impact of the return to schooling. NIDS/CRAM, 2020. <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/11.-Mohohlwane-N.-Taylor-S-Shepherd-D.-2020-COVID-19-and-basic-education-Evaluating-the-initial-impact-of-the-return-to-schooling.pdf>

³ Nuga C, Gustafsson M. How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting educational quality in South Africa? Evidence to date and future risks. Policy Brief, 2020. https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Nuga.-Gustafsson_policy-brief.pdf

⁴ Zimmermann P, Curtis N. Coronavirus Infections in Children Including COVID-19: An Overview of the Epidemiology, Clinical Features, Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention Options in Children. *Pediatr Infect Dis J.* 2020 May;39(5):355-368. doi: 10.1097/INF.0000000000002660.

⁵ van der Berg S, Spaul N. Counting the Cost: COVID-19 school closures in South Africa and its impact on children. RESEP, 2020. <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Van-der-Berg-Spaul-2020-Counting-the-Cost-COVID-19-Children-and-Schooling-15-June-2020-1.pdf>

⁶ Mohohlwane N, Taylor S, Shepherd D. COVID-19 and basic education: Evaluating the initial impact of the return to schooling. NIDS/CRAM, 2020. <https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/11.-Mohohlwane-N.-Taylor-S-Shepherd-D.-2020-COVID-19-and-basic-education-Evaluating-the-initial-impact-of-the-return-to-schooling.pdf>

⁷ Nuga C, Gustafsson M. How is the COVID-19 pandemic affecting educational quality in South Africa? Evidence to date and future risks. Policy Brief, 2020. https://cramsurvey.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/Nuga.-Gustafsson_policy-brief.pdf

⁸ Zimmermann P, Curtis N. Coronavirus Infections in Children Including COVID-19: An Overview of the Epidemiology, Clinical Features, Diagnosis, Treatment and Prevention Options in Children. *Pediatr Infect Dis J.* 2020 May;39(5):355-368. doi: 10.1097/INF.0000000000002660.

- Younger children are less likely to transmit the virus to each other and staff.^{9, 10, 11}
- When children and adolescents are infected, they are more likely to have a very mild disease.^{12, 13, 14, 15, 16, 17, 18}
- Emerging evidence suggests lower infection attack rate and SARS-CoV-2 positivity rate in student compared to school staff.¹⁹
- Previous MAC on Covid-19 Advisories: Getting Children back to school safely, 26 May 2020²⁰ AND Keeping schools safe and managing Covid-19 infections in schools, 20 July 2020²¹; outline important measures to following in keeping children and educators safe, as well as meures to take in case of infections.
- Though the national recommendation on class sizes is that a class should accommodate 40 learners with sitting space of 1.2 to 1.5 square meters (SA Government), the reality is that 63% of primary school children are in classes of 40 or more learners per class and 16% in classes of 60 or more per class.^{Error! Bookmark not defined.} This makes it impossible to maintain a distance of at least one meter between learners.
- As part of their well-being students might need to continue with extra-mural activities including sporting activities.

Recommendations

- The MAC on Covid-19 supports the proposal by DBE, and strongly recommends that all learners return to school at the start of the 2021 school year, and that schools attempt to keep class sizes to allow for the recommended one meter physical distancing between learners (by using other available spaces like halls, staff rooms, outside teaching, putting up new additional structures like pre-fabs, where feasible).
- The adherence to Covid-19 prevention measures: physical distancing, adequate ventilation (keep windows and doors open), regular hand washing or sanitization and manditory mask use, will be fundamental in ensuring safety for learners and educators.
- Frequent breaks from classrooms to go outside are encouraged particularly in full capacity classrooms.

⁹ Danis K, Epaulard O, Bénét T, et al. Cluster of coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) in the French Alps, 2020 [published online ahead of print, 2020 Apr 11]. *Clin Infect Dis*. 2020;ciaa424. doi:10.1093/cid/ciaa424.

¹⁰ Heavey L, Casey G, Kelly C, Kelly D, McDarby G. No evidence of secondary transmission of COVID-19 from children attending school in Ireland, 2020. *Euro Surveill*. 2020 May;25(21):2000903. doi: 10.2807/1560-7917.ES.2020.25.21.2000903.

¹¹ Somekh E, Gleyzer A, Heller E, Lopian M, Kashani-Ligumski L, Czeiger S, et al. The Role of Children in the Dynamics of Intra Family Coronavirus 2019 Spread in Densely Populated Area. *Pediatr Infect Dis J*. 2020 Aug;39(8):e202-e204. doi: 10.1097/INF.0000000000002783.

¹² Qiu H, Wu J, Hong L, Lou Y, Song Q, Chen D. Clinical and epidemiological features of 36 children with coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Zhejiang, China: an observational cohort study. *The Lancet Infectious Diseases*. 2020. Available from: [www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099\(20\)30198-5/fulltext](http://www.thelancet.com/journals/laninf/article/PIIS1473-3099(20)30198-5/fulltext) (Accessed on 20 July 2020).

¹³ Yu N, Li W, Kang Q, Xiong Z, Wang S, Lin X, et al. Clinical features and obstetric and neonatal outcomes of pregnant patients with COVID-19 in Wuhan, China: a retrospective, single-centre, descriptive study. *Lancet Infect Dis*. 2020 May;20(5):559-564. doi: 10.1016/S1473-3099(20)30176-6.

¹⁴ Zeng L, Xia S, Yuan W, Yan K, Xiao F, Shao J, et al. Neonatal Early-Onset Infection With SARS-CoV-2 in 33 Neonates Born to Mothers With COVID-19 in Wuhan, China. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2020 Mar 26;174(7):722–5. doi: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.0878.

¹⁵ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. COVID-19 National Emergency Response Team. Coronavirus Disease-19: The First 7,755 Cases in the Republic of Korea. *Osong Public Health Res Perspect*. 2020 Apr;11(2):85-90. doi: 10.24171/j.phrp.2020.11.2.05. Erratum in: *Osong Public Health Res Perspect*. 2020 Jun;11(3):146.

¹⁶ Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. CDC COVID-19 Response Team. Coronavirus Disease 2019 in Children - United States, February 12-April 2, 2020. *MMWR Morbidity and mortality weekly report*. 2020. Available from: www.cdc.gov/mmwr/volumes/69/wr/mm6914e4.htm (Accessed on 20 July 2020).

¹⁷ Tagarro A, Epalza C, Santos M, Sanz-Santaufemia FJ, Otheo E, Moraleda C, Calvo C. Screening and Severity of Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Children in Madrid, Spain. *JAMA Pediatr*. 2020 Apr 8:e201346. doi: 10.1001/jamapediatrics.2020.1346.

¹⁸ Livingston E, Bucher K. Coronavirus Disease 2019 (COVID-19) in Italy. *JAMA*. 2020 Mar 17. doi: 10.1001/jama.2020.4344. Epub ahead of print. PMID: 32181795.

¹⁹ Xu W, Li X, Dozier M, et.al. What is the evidence for transmission of COVID-19 by children in school? A Living Systematic Review. *J Glob Health*. 2020; 10:021104. http://www.jogh.org/documents/issue202002/jogh-10-021104_AU.pdf

²⁰ MAC on Covid-19: Getting Children Back to School Safely, 26 May 2020. <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2020/05/26/getting-children-back-to-school-safely/>

²¹ MAC on Covid-19: Keeping Schools Safe and managing Covid-19 Infections in Schools, 26 May 2020. <https://sacoronavirus.co.za/2020/07/20/keeping-schools-safe-and-managing-covid-19-infections-in-schools/>

- Risk mitigation measures of daily symptoms screening of staff and students; as well as routine daily cleaning of high use areas, like handrails, is also recommended.
- Outdoor non-contact sports such as tennis, cricket and watersports are relatively safe. Contact sports like football and rugby are currently being played in many countries. Since they involve minimal risk when played in open space, these types of sport can be resumed in open air. Note that compliance with the Covid-19 prevention measures in the locker rooms will be important. There should be no socializing before or after the games are over.

Thank you for consideration of this request.

Kind regards,



PROFESSOR SALIM S. ABDOOL KARIM

PROF MARIAN JACOBS

CO-CHAIRPERSONS: MINISTERIAL ADVISORY COMMITTEE ON COVID-19

DATE: 16 December 2020

CC:

- » **Dr S Buthelezi (Director-General: Health)**
- » **Dr T Pillay (Deputy Director-General)**
- » **Incident Management Team**