

Please don't reopen schools

Dear Mr President, I write this appeal to you in response to the joint briefing by higher education minister Dr Blade Nzimande and the address by basic education minister Angie Motshekga on April 30.

Nzimande spoke eloquently of the measures taken by the higher education sector.

It was stirring rhetoric, replete with balanced, compassionate messaging such as “putting lives first” and “No child shall be left behind!”

He opined, given the difficult path ahead, that students would only return to formal lectures when it was deemed that the risk of the pandemic had been sufficiently ameliorated.

His words evoked a poignant emotional response.

Here was a leader who intuitively understood that although there was a real urgency to saving the academic year, putting lives first was the paramount, more exalted need.

And then, minister Motshekga delivered her address on the proposed road-map of the return to schooling.

She appeared to be on the defensive attempting to justify that it was a collective decision despite the overwhelming number of unions voicing their disapproval just a day before.

Gradually, as the speech unfolded, the optimism engendered by Nzimande's address turned to:

- Disbelief — university students stay home to be safe yet younger school pupils return to school;
- Confusion — how will they travel safely through every stage of their often multiple journeys?
- Fear — how do you control the natural, spontaneous ways in which pupils interact with



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each other, how do you socially distance in small classrooms with 40 or more pupils?

- Panic — what is the reality of student behaviour in a classroom during the winter flu season?
- Sheer incredulity — will these measures aligned neatly on paper keep ALL 100% safe in reality?

It was unsettling to hear decisions of such great magnitude been taken with such casual diffidence.

At the heart of the matter is the cognitive dissonance between Nzimande and Motshekga regarding the right to life versus the right to education.

It would appear that Nzimande correctly grasps how these rights weigh against each other,

I humbly submit that Motshekga erroneously conflates the right to life and the right to education as two equivalent rights in equal juxtaposition to each other.

The right to life is the dominant right in the Bill of Rights and supersedes all other rights.

The right to life in the context of a global pandemic wreaking havoc across the globe trumps the right to education.

In her address, Motshekga put a disproportionate emphasis on saving the academic year. However, pupils' rights to education will not be denied to them indefinitely.

Unlike the right to life, it is not a final, ultimately definitive right, rather it is continuous in its nature.

It amounts to the mere suspension of the right to education until the pandemic is less deadly.

On May 1, on the SABC Agenda programme at 9am, Professor Salim Abdool Karim made the following statements:

1. It would be foolish to think that there is no risk of the virus spreading in schools, however measures and protocols are in place to mitigate and contain the spread (putting out the fires);

2. That young children have generally a mild experience of the virus and it is inevitable that there is a risk of them contracting the virus at schools;

3. The real danger lies in the spread of the virus from children to parents, grandparents and other adults (teachers);

4. That under the relaxing of the lockdown from stage 5 to stage 4 and the subsequent stages the rate of spread is expected to rise significantly until an inflexion point is reached.

In response, I submit:

1. In mitigating and containing the “fires that will be put out”, how many lives will be extinguished?

2. While the overwhelming majority of children present with a mild clinical experience of the virus, what of those with compromised immune systems? What of the teachers with co-morbid health conditions and those

over the age of 60?

3. If it is conceded that there is a risk of the spread of the virus in schools, what measures are in place to mitigate against the transfer of that risk to parents, grandparents and teachers.

If the spread of the virus is inevitable until an inflexion point is reached why thrust vulnerable learners, teachers and their families as well as cleaners into a risk-laden environment?

Mr President, the minister's proposals are fraught with danger and risk.

It is a calculated gamble, only the currency is not chips or tokens but human lives.

All the relevant parties need to know whether the set of measures that the minister has proposed will keep everyone 100% safe.

Certainly, there is a reasonable inference that some lives will be placed at risk in “saving the academic year”.

Worse still, there seems to be a utilitarian aspect of sacrificing a few in order to save the academic year as long as the number is statistically insignificant.

The latter thought is a painful and abhorrent one to express.

Mr President, as we enter into the winter months in which the pandemic has been most virulent in the northern hemisphere, I submit that the wise, compassionate and judicious choice is to preserve life over saving the academic year. “In the depth of winter, I finally learned in me that there was an invincible summer” — Albert Camus.

Preserve life and delay the reopening of schools so that we all have a chance of emerging into the summer of our lives.

P Moodley, Port Elizabeth