

OP-ED

Opening schools during Covid-19 is a pyrrhic victory – and teachers are the cannon fodder

By Sara Black and Ashley Visagie • 11 August 2020



 The Metro Central Education District in the Western Cape is acknowledging the near-impossibility of students recovering from...

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The Herculean efforts being demanded of teachers under Covid-19 are framed as ‘going the extra mile’ for colleagues. Even if the proposed plans were feasible (which they are not), the request itself smacks of field generals five miles behind the frontline egging on foot soldiers in the trenches to ‘be brave’.

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A few weeks ago, concerns were raised about the state of exposed schools’ staffing and rooming requirements and how these were inadequate for teaching and learning in normal times, never mind under Covid-19 conditions.

Subsequently, stories have emerged across the country of low attendance rates and schools struggling to cope with even the few grades that have returned. The confusing “closure” of public schools (more like ‘Schrödinger’s schools’: half open, half closed), along with concessions for private and fortified schools, have further entrenched divisions between decision-makers and unions, bureaucrats and school staff, and polarised opinion in general across society.

As these short term concerns play out, stark warnings of budget cuts (<https://www.sabcnews.com/sabcnews/activists-unhappy-with-budget-cuts-for-basic-education/>) and inadequate provision threaten students, teachers and the future of public schooling (<https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2020-07-15-public-schools-are-under-siege-its-time-to-drastically-revise-their-funding-model/#gsc.tab=0>) long term, as schools are placed in an increasingly precarious position of depending on user fees from cash-strapped parents and/or charitable contributions to fund daily operating costs.

Now, a recent letter to schools, drafted by the Metro Central Education District (MCED) director in the Western Cape, illustrates how managerial staff *within* provincial departments of education are tacitly acknowledging that the situation in schools is untenable, even for just the Grade 12s, given attendance rates, staffing provision and teaching spaces. Sadly, while the letter recognises the doubtful feasibility of students and schools recovering from academic losses during the pandemic, it also fails to present a workable plan within given constraints, or even a critique of the inadequacies of funding for public schools in South Africa. Instead, schools have been presented with impossible suggestions, along with a last (somewhat pitiful) attempt to rescue the national senior certificate by making appeals to “caring hearts”.

Such appeals for martyrdom to plug fiscal wounds aren’t unique to South Africa or to education; the hollowing out of public services in the neoliberal era has left many frontline staff posts under-resourced and short of hands during Covid-19. Empty platitudes to “clap at 8pm” for frontline health workers, for example, have prompted the riposte (<https://www.theguardian.com/society/2020/may/21/nhs-doctor-enough-people-clapping>) that hollow adulation and heroism are not the remedy for under-funded public services.

A letter to ‘rally’

So it is in Cape Town where schools are now urged to stretch what little they have even further to support each other, while the department washes its hands of its own provisioning responsibilities. Suggestions include sharing teachers across schools, lumping (under-attended) matric classes into cold school halls in winter to bundle lessons across sites... even extending lessons to three hours to cut down on churn and inter-lesson transfer time so as to cover more curriculum (all this while curriculum advisers won’t visit schools to advise on trimmed curriculum plans, or act as stand-in teachers where needed; neither will substitute teachers be paid a living wage: the current offer is R5,000 a month for a qualified stand-in).

These Herculean efforts are framed as “going the extra mile” for colleagues. Even if the proposed plans were feasible (which they are not), the request itself smacks of field generals five miles behind the frontline egging on foot soldiers in the trenches to “be brave”.

Teachers’ and principals’ repeated concerns about safety, Covid-19 transmission and stress have been repeatedly rejected as “unscientific” ([despite evidence to the contrary](#)).

(<https://www.forbes.com/sites/williamhaseltine/2020/07/31/new-evidence-suggests-young-children-spread-covid-19-more-efficiently-than-adults/#b5c288d19fdc>) and based on “[not wanting to work](https://nicspaull.com/2020/07/22/six-reasons-why-schools-must-be-open-if-we-are-to-fight-covid-19-my-dm-op-ed/) (<https://nicspaull.com/2020/07/22/six-reasons-why-schools-must-be-open-if-we-are-to-fight-covid-19-my-dm-op-ed/>)” (again, a more ideological than empirical observation). The contradictions are obvious: somehow, the “irrational” and “indolent” teachers denigrated daily in armchair commentaries are simultaneously the saviours who will break their backs to keep the school system afloat.

School time

And break their backs they will, if these suggestions are implemented. Timetables are already even more unstable than usual at the school level, with teachers coming and going for isolation and illness and spaces constantly being closed for cleaning and then reopened; the kind of stability required for inter-school synchronisation is just not possible. The administrative task of accomplishing such alignment will consume the attention and time of senior management and principals in a way that schools cannot afford, given all the other challenges they face right now.

In order to accomplish such synchronisation, the letter suggests that periods be extended to two hours or even half a day. While having longer periods may be attractive to some teachers because of time lost to logistics such as moving between classes (or in this case, students making their way to another school), there is a point at which diminishing returns applies; having long school periods does not mean more teaching and learning, as student concentration wanes and restlessness will begin to manifest.

Such suggestions belie ignorance at the district level regarding the complexity of time and space arrangements in schools, and how specific these are to local institutional contexts. Rooms, teachers, curriculum and learners all come together in the timetable, and hence are unique to each school. They also serve to further drive a wedge of disbelief between administrators and teachers/principals, who read such a suggestion aghast that management could even think such a plan viable or possible with the given constraints and challenges, thus adding to an existing crisis of legitimacy: teachers and principals (quite rightly) do not believe that district managers and office bureaucrats know (or remember) how schools actually work.

Inter-school spaces

The proposed spatial distribution of students between schools is also not feasible and underestimates the complexity of logistics (nevermind the safety concerns of transporting learners while adhering to physical distancing). Cape Town, as an urban centre, is spatially fraught – getting around without private transport is already incredibly difficult.

Student safety is a massive concern, particularly in urban townships and ghetto schools where the clustering together of students would be inevitable, and travelling to school on foot risks unwittingly crossing over the invisible, yet tangible, borders between rival gang territories.

Whatever transport is “provided” would require significant logistical planning and coordination, which is unlikely to be delivered or to reach all students who would require it. That the logistical difficulties of moving students is thrown in as an afterthought (“the district can provide transport for learners if needed”) is indicative of how such fundamental aspects of everyday life in schools are again invisible to planners and bureaucrats.

Spatial qualities

Another suggestion is that larger groups of students from multiple schools be taught in school halls.

Teaching in halls is incredibly challenging: halls are barren, clinical spaces that do not produce a conducive environment, are often extremely cold (especially in winter), and getting large groups of students to settle down in a hall is a time-consuming and onerous task (often only made possible by the gravitas of a formal exam).

Teachers in exposed schools who already teach in halls because of school overcrowding will testify how unconducive they are as a pedagogic environment.

Charitable benevolence

Perhaps most insidiously, however, the plan depends on the availability and willingness of teachers in more fortified schools to support their exposed counterparts.

While this is a nice gesture and resource sharing should be encouraged, public school provision in working-class communities should not be dependent on the benevolence of the middle class, or, as the letter puts it, on “*the caring hearts of our teachers and principals*”.

The plan is unfair to working-class schools which have frequently raised concerns about inadequate teacher provisioning, and which should be given additional permanently employed teachers and support staff. It is also unfair to qualified teachers who will be employed as “tutors” and be underpaid for professional work.

High stress levels

An aspect which is often neglected in discussions about end-of-year exams, and which is again disregarded in the MCED letter, is student mental health and wellbeing.

In the past, the high stakes of the matric (NSC) exams have even at times resulted in students taking their lives. Now, the economic shocks of Covid-19 have exacerbated existing poverty and inequality, with many facing hunger and food insecurity and others unable to pay rent or monthly living expenses due to un- or under-employment. Many students are in survival mode from their situation at home, or from having lost loved ones to the virus.

Students have also been out of school for an extended period of time and have missed a significant amount of work required to prepare for the exam.

According to the [DBE Action Plan 2019: Towards the Realisation of Schooling 2030](https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/o/Documents/Publications/Action%20Plan%202019.pdf) (https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/o/Documents/Publications/Action%20Plan%202019.pdf) fact sheet, in an *ordinary* year, **only 53% of schools nationally manage to cover the entire curriculum**. However, 2020 is certainly *not* an ordinary year: it would be reasonable to suspect that the percentage of schools who will manage to complete the entire curriculum will be significantly lower.

Some teachers are reporting that, having reordered topics in Term 1 to their students' needs, they now find areas that have already been covered are "trimmed" from the curriculum, as the department assumes a lock-step, fixed sequencing and progression through learning across vastly differentiated contexts and students (a wholly unprofessional or pedagogically responsive approach to teaching and learning).

In summary, for this situation, there seems no good reason at this moment to further burden students with the pressures of an exam that carries so much importance (or hope) for social mobility.

By its own admission, the Metro Central Education District in the Western Cape is acknowledging the near-impossibility of students recovering from the disruptions to the school year, which includes time loss during lockdown, time loss due to the intermittent opening and closing of schools as per Covid-19 regulations, and weak pedagogical rhythms. The district director says in this same letter that, "*one struggles to see how we will recover from all of this*".

How is it possible then, that they want to forge ahead and thrust students into a high-stakes exam under impossible conditions?

Should the MCED not instead be writing a letter to the provincial department of education and to the DBE explaining that they are struggling to see how students will recover from the disruption to the school year, and suggest that the exam be deferred?

In essence, this letter reflects exactly the unappreciated complexity of school organisation on the ground: that office bureaucrats just don't see how rooming, teachers, students and curriculum come together to produce a viable rhythm of teaching and learning.

If this is unappreciated during "normal" circumstances, unsurprisingly it remains invisible during Covid-19. School staff will in all likelihood reject these proposals, asking, as they do, for the foot soldiers to step into the breach where the commanders will not. **DM**

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