



Departmental implementation of measures to combat the impact of COVID-19 in South Africa

1. Introduction

This brief report is meant to provide measures implemented by the Limpopo department of Education to prevent the spread of Covid-19. The report therefore provide a storyline and critical reflection on the measures that were put in place by the Department and other social partners in an effort to manage the pandemic so as to enable future leaders to have a point of reference in responding to similar occurrences in the future. More specially, these measures were and are still taken to protect both employees of the department, over 1.6 million learners and the general schools' communities.

2. Background

According to the World Health Organisation (WHO), on 31 December 2019, a pneumonia of unknown cause was detected in Wuhan, China and reported to the WHO country office in China. At this period, many South Africans did not think the pandemic was coming to the country and would affect the education sector. Following an outbreak, WHO declared a Public Health Emergency of international concern on 30 January 2020. The WHO on February 11 declared COVID-19 a new coronavirus disease and declared it a pandemic when more than 118,000 cases were reported in over 110 countries and territories around the world, with the sustained risk of further global spread.

On 5 March 2020, the first case of a COVID-19 positive person was reported in South Africa in Kwa-Zulu Natal province and confirmed by the National Institute for Communicable Diseases (NICD). On 15 March 2020, South Africa's Cabinet declared a State of National Disaster and a number of structures were put in place in different spheres of government to coordinate South Africa's response to the COVID-19 crisis.

A number of measures were put in place by Provincial and Local Government Departments to minimise the impact of Covid-19 by various departments. The education sector was not immune to the measures as Department of Basic Education and others also got down to plan to protect the sector. Limpopo Department of Education also joined the rest in the fight.

3. Measures taken to control impact of Covid-19 pandemic.

3.1. Pre-Covid 19

The increased numbers of cases of covid-19 in KZN and Gauteng Provinces sent a clear message to other areas that were not yet experiencing the emergence of the pandemic that it is expanding its scope and at a fast rate. After the declaration of State of National Disaster, it was followed by the lockdown declared from the 27th of March 2020.

On the 18th March 2020, the Senior Management Team of the Department (SMT) of the Department met and it was decided that all the schools should be closed on the **18th March 2020** to avoid any risk of the spread of Covid-19. Members of management Team were then dispatched to all the schools particularly schools of learners with disabilities to offer support.

The Department started the process of appointing structures such as the **Covid-19 Health and Safety Committee**. The Committee is led by a member of the Executive Management Committee (EMC) who reports the recommendations of the committee to the EMC and the Head of Department. Other structures were established in districts and this includes appointment of the districts compliance officers in all ten districts to coordinate meetings and assist circuit offices and schools to also come up with structures to deal with the spread of the pandemic.

Through the use of the guidelines provided by the national sphere of government the Department also developed its own tools and guidelines to be implemented in all its schools. At this stage covid19 cases were starting to be announced sporadically in the Province.

3.2. During Covid-19

The Province and the sector is still experiencing the impact of Covid-19 but there are different steps that were implemented at various alert levels and the level of new cases, recoveries and deaths to be shared.

3.2.1. Level 5 Lockdown

All schools country-wide were closed with learners staying at home.

3.2.2. From Level 4 of Lockdown: Top office based official, SMT's and Grade 12's called to go back to schools

During this period, the following were put in place before the return of employees and the learners:

- Disinfectors/floor sanitisers and hand sanitisers were purchased for all officials and learners.
- All schools were disinfected by experts to ensure that the work environment and classrooms were safe before officials and learners could return.
- School committees were established and volunteers appointed to assist with the sanitisation process.
- To assist with contact tracing contact registers are used in all offices and at school levels.
- Standard Operation Procedure manual from DBE was customised to the Provincial level and Compliance monitoring tools were developed for FSD points and other levels.

3.2.3. At Level 2 -1 of the Lockdown

- During these levels the return-to-work plan of the Department was adjusted to ensure increased capacity of the Department to offer services in line with the increased economic activity as per the alert level 2 and 1.
- The plan was to ensure that where social distancing was being observed then all officials were to return to work. The rotational reporting for work is only maintained where officials are sharing offices and it is impossible to enforce social distancing. However where social distancing can still be observed for officials sharing offices these are reporting to work daily.

- To ensure social distancing in schools differentiated time tabling was adopted by most schools that could not accommodate all learners at the same time while complying to the 1,5 m social distancing provision. This meant that, while Grade 7 and 12 learners were attending on a daily basis the other learners attended school on a rotational basis. This meant that they were either attending on a platooning basis, where some learners attended classes in the morning and another group of learners attended in the afternoon or the different grades were attending on alternate days or weeks.
- The health and safety committee monitors compliance to the health protocols through its bi-weekly meetings while day to day compliance is monitored by the Compliance Officer.

4. Persons with disabilities

The Department of Education in Limpopo has 35 schools catering for learners with disabilities and also 25 schools providing full service education which cater for all learners including those with disabilities. A number of learners, educators and officials were found to be having comorbidities and special attention had to be given to them. This was done by granting them concessions to work from home. For learners this meant that their parents had to collect daily work from the school and assist the learners to get through it at home. The completed work was then returned to schools for the educators to mark and offer feedback. Those educators who were granted concessions to work from home were provided with work that they could perform from home. A challenge that was experienced during the alert levels up to 2 was that some of these educators that were granted concession were offering subjects that could not be offered remotely and thus needed to be replaced with substitute educators. This was however not possible due to the budget challenges of the department and thus resulted in a work overload on the remaining educators.

To cater for the learners with special needs the Department developed a Covid-19 Special Guideline for Public Special and Full Service Schools. This was developed to strengthen compliance of covid-19 preventative measures. The main deliverable of the guideline is to:

- Orientate the Senior Management teams, SGB's parents and learners in special and full service schools on the Covid-19 pandemic.
- Familiarise these schools with safety knowledge, values and skills to minimise the spread and infections of covid-19 while maximising efforts to improve teaching and learning.

Other measures taken on top of normal practices of masks, sanitising and social distance include the following:

- Provisioning of differentiated curriculum.
- Provisioning of relevant LTSM in line with learners needs.
- Strengthening of accommodation of these learners.

5. Communication and community mobilisation

- Different committees serve well as one communication platform connecting the Head Office, Districts, Circuits and Schools communities.
- Beside the national Government effort, the department developed posters indicating the do's and don'ts which are shared from Head Office to schools.

- Other communication material developed by sister departments such as Health are also provided through schools to communities
- Key discussions of prevention of Covid-19 are also published on the Departmental website on regular basis (e.g. Weekly on departmental electronic Newsletter).
- These are also shared through the different social media platforms of the Department.
- The Schools' Governing Bodies (SGB's) are made to be part of the school covid-19 compliance initiatives to also pass the messages to the communities.

6. Enforcement of all *supra* mentioned measures

The Department uses circulars to give direction and has strengthened the monitoring systems. Most of the monitoring is done by both members of management and those compliance offices based across all the ten districts.

Although there are some community members who are seen to be relaxing adherence for compliance the following are enforced in all premises:

- Wearing a mask that covers both mouth and the nose.
- Sanitising when entering departmental premises.
- Adherence to social distance and control of numbers of visitors.
- Washing of hands is still advocated at all levels.
- Enforcing signing of the Contact register at entrances to departmental premises.
- Screening of all people entering premises.

7. Social partners in the fight of covid-19 spreading

- The Department works with all sister departments in different ways and participate in the Provincial Command Council meetings.
- The partnership with Department of Health assists mostly in dealing with positive cases of covid-19 while the department of Social Development assists with the provision of counselling services.
- The NECT has also come on board to assist the Department with the provision of Psycho-social support to infected and affected learners and educators.

8. Experiences shared by citizens in education sector

The following have been observed with regards to compliance with the measures that have been put in place since the declaration of the state of disaster:

- Employees including educators have largely complied with the social distancing protocols as set out for the work place.
- All the social partners, including parents are supportive of the measures implemented to ensure the safe reopening of schools.
- Many parents are of the view that their children are much safer in schools due to the health and safety protocols in place than if they were left on their own outside of the controlled school environment.

9. Challenges

- Inappropriate infrastructure in schools and Circuit Offices militate against the adequate implementation of Covid-19 safety protocols. The major challenge is with regards to inappropriate sanitation facilities and shortage of water.
- The high number of learners in some schools, even those with good infrastructure result in learners continuing to attend on alternate schools in a staggered fashion.
- The relaxation of adherence to COVID-19 health protocols by some community members since the move to alert level 1 is putting many learners at risk. This results in some learners also adopting the same attitude.
- There is shortage of experts in the fields of provisioning of counselling work in the Department.

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