

2021 SCHOOLS: SHIFT SYSTEM IS THE ONLY VIABLE OPTION

As John Bailey opined in his July 14, 2020 article, ‘**Reopening Resilient Schools,**’ hosted by ‘*Education Next,*’ that ‘in planning to reopen, schools will be forced to question long-standing assumptions and develop strategies that can lead to building a better education system. The process can help to distinguish between the superfluous and the essential and build from those fundamentals.’

There is a consensus amongst educationists that the transformational changes brought forth by COVID-19 does not allow us to return to previous, largely ineffective academic methodologies that have not allowed us to accomplish the goals we have for our students, nor do they call on us to believe that the best we can do is to merely cope through a temporary, hybrid system. Rather, they require us to rethink the future of education and radically improve our current system. There is no denying that COVID-19 has provided a unique opportunity to reimagine the education system for the future. One is coerced to question the existence of any political and administrative will from education authorities in the country to steer the ship to the right direction, considering a myriad of precedents.

As I perused through the Times of Swaziland on Friday, December 18, 2020, I came across an article by Thokozani Mamba headlined ‘Uncertainty over schools opening due to COVID-19.’ In his article, Mamba interviewed the Controlling Officer at the Ministry of Education and Training [MoET], Bertram Stewart, on the preparedness or lack thereof of the MoET to re-open schools in 2021. To say I was disappointed in the response by the PS would be an understatement. The question was lucid: is there a Contingency Plan by the MoET to ensure that all schools [933 in public] and those in private, open in a safe and secure manner, considering the fact that the second wave is inevitable. As if entirely oblivious of reality, the PS averred that the decision of the government lies with the impulsive behaviour of the virus with Cabinet giving the last shot on the thoroughfare to be adhered to by the MoET.

MoET Minister, Lady Howard-Mabuza echoed the words of the PS, stating clearly that with the recent resurgence in COVID-19 confirmed cases and deaths, there was panic at the MoET’s plan to re-open schools next month.

It is not eerie that today, December 20, 2020, the MoET has not finalised the school's calendar for the subsequent academic year [2021].

On the 14th of September 2020, the WHO, UNESCO and UNICEF publicised a paper titled '**Considerations for school-related public health measures in the context of COVID-19,**' where the three [3] postulated that from a public health perspective, deciding to close or re-open schools should be guided by a risk-based approach, taking into consideration the epidemiology of COVID-19 at the local level, the capacity of educational institutions to adapt their system to operate safely; the impact of school closures on educational loss, equity, general health and wellbeing of children and educators; and the range of other public health measures being implemented outside school. That the decisions on full or partial closure or reopening should be taken at a local administrative level, based on the local level of transmission of SARS-CoV-2 and the local risk assessment, as well as how much the reopening of educational settings might increase transmission in the community.

In the same paper, there is an attached research on COVID-19 in children and in schools with the conclusion that the risk of an outbreak in schools and other settings where young people congregate is determined in large part by the background community transmission and settings-linked risk amplifiers. No wonder the Minister was on her knees in the article, praying that statistics of confirmed cases do not rise between now and January 2021, getting to the point of appealing to pupils and the general public to continue to adhere to the health regulations to prevent the transmission of COVID-19. The question that lingers on is: do we have any risk assessment carried by the MoET to inform future course of action with regard to the pandemic in schools? Instead of praying the Minister should be mobilising sufficient resources to ensure schools have the necessary materials to operate amidst COVID-19.

Suzanne Grant Lewis, IIEP Director and keynote speaker at UNESCO's recent webinar on preparing for and managing the reopening of schools notes that 'Despite the uncertainty about the end of the pandemic, we must start planning the reopening of schools now.' True, education cannot wait any longer. While acknowledging that the outbreak could have a serious impact on education in the longer term, Ms Grant Lewis urged countries to focus on the short-term perspective. In her speech, she set

out three [3] critical and immediate questions that governments and other stakeholders need to ask.

1. Timing: when can schools reopen?
2. Conditions: what pre-conditions must be met before schools reopen?
3. A third condition is the capacity of local administrations and institutions to make the required changes. Can subnational education actors, including school principals, implement double-shift schooling? Or can they continue distance learning practices for some students while welcoming others back to the classroom

When it comes to reopening schools, the consult, coordinate, and communicate approach is key. The most critical trait to embrace is to build trust among all stakeholders such as the SNAT.

It is an open secret that government has done little or nothing to ameliorate infrastructural challenges in schools which will ensure that social distancing becomes a reality in classrooms. In view of that, the shift system is the only feasible alternative in schools. This system is called as double session schools, bi-sessional schools, and half day schools in other countries. Double shift schools have been in use throughout the world since early 20th century. It's a type of school that operates in two [2] shifts, the am and pm shifts. This idea came up because of the lack of facilities, school and to increase the number of students that can be taught without having to build another school.

MacWillaim Henry Ormiston in his 1964 book '**The Development of Education in Ghana**' explains the school shift system as a system of schooling whereby there is a way of increasing the supply of school places by using existing resources efficiently.

Mark Bray [then Director of UNESCO's International Institute for Educational Planning (IIEP) in Paris], writing in his book [2008] '**Double-shift schooling: design and operation for cost-effectiveness,**' opines that policy-makers and planners should look for the model which best meets priority needs within the constraints of financial stringency. That double-shift systems can be highly cost-effective. They can permit substantial financial savings, and do not necessarily cause a decline in quality. Moreover, even when the introduction of double-shift schooling

does cause some loss of quality, the benefits of reduced unit costs and of larger enrolments may outweigh the cost implied by the loss of quality. I concur.

On the flip side, the MoET cannot simply assume that double-shift system will operate cost-effectively. It is anticipated that the MoET must take specific steps to achieve the goal. Such steps should include the following:

1. Choice of an efficient model
2. Establish competent management structures
3. Determine hours of schooling
4. Ascertain the use of teachers [the decision will depend on (i) the supply of competent teachers, (ii) the views of the teachers' union, (iii) estimates of the impact of teacher tiredness on the quality of teaching, and (iv) the extent to which extra work is remunerated by extra pay]
5. Champion out-of-school learning
6. Solicit extra rooms

There is no iota of doubt that school closure is likely to have worsened educational inequalities, jeopardizing the attainment of Sustainable Development Goal [SDG] 4, and all countries, including Swaziland, have a duty to ensure that a temporary break in schooling does not become a permanent one for vulnerable children. Now is the time to plan and prepare for the immediate future of education, consider adopting a flexible learning approach by:

- Adjusting the school and exam calendar to take into account the teaching time.
- Considering shortening the academic year and following an accelerated syllabus that focuses on core subjects.
- Start planning for accelerated learning strategies (e.g. condensed curricula focusing on core subjects), developing policies and programmes, making funding available for them, and guaranteeing that human and technical resources are available.
- Prepare special after-school study classes (either mandatory or for selected groups) so that students can catch up on core subjects.

The goal of every educational system in any country is to obtain and maintain high academic standards. Even though the realization of this achievement should not be dependent on the type of school system being operated in the various schools, whether the shift system or the mainstream, there seem to be some effects of the shift system on academic activities in the basic school. As the SNAT, we remain in a firm resolve that the shift system, as proposed way back in June 2020, remains the only viable and secure option in reopening schools safely. We submit.

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