

# **THE PROPOSED 2021 SCHOOLS** **CALENDAR: AN OUTRAGEOUS PLAN**

**A** leaked document dated 12 October 2020 by the Ministry of Education and Training [MoET], entitled '**Progress Update on the Re-opening of Schools amid COVID-19,**' as presented to the Parliament Portfolio Committee, paints a gloomy picture for educators and learners with regards to the 2021 Academic Calendar.

Page 19 of the 21-page presentation addresses the haunting question of a tentative framework for the 2021 schools' calendar in the country. It is public information, at this juncture, that schools were shut down March 17, 2020 following the declaration of a State of National Disaster by the PM ensued by a partial lockdown as a stratagem to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

## **Extended**

A close scrutiny of the projected 2021 academic calendar, one realises that it imposes a Three Term Prolonged Schools' Calendar. That Grade 0 to 6, Form 1, 2 and 4 will open on the 5<sup>th</sup> of January 2021 [as if these learners have different teachers] and use the whole of the First Term to conclude the 2020 syllabus since they have been home from March 17, 2020. Passed Grade 7 and Form 3 learners [who opened 1 September and 24 August, respectively] after the release of their results, will be given the two [2] weeks to enrol in their respective schools and thereafter open. That all learners in Grade 0 to Grade 6 will transit to the next Grade and that instructional time for the 2021 syllabus will start from the second term to the third term. How hilarious! Thing is: where is the epidemiological report that has informed the MoET of 2021 being a COVID-19 free year with no need for social distancing in the overcrowded classrooms and other precautionary measures in schools? With all the brains at the MoET, is this the best they could propose as a contingency plan to catch-up the lost time? One question that begs for a tasteful response, not emotional ranting is: are we the only country in the region/world that has lost 2020 academic year which could be an impetus enough to put so much pressure on teachers and learners?

South Africa, our neighbour right next to us, released their 2021 Academic Calendar way back in September. According to the new calendar, teachers would return to school on 25 January 2021, while learners return on 27 January. The first term is expected to end on 31 March 2021. Second term will commence from 13 April to 25 June 2021, third term from 13 July to 23 September 2021 and the fourth term would be between 5 October and 8 December 2021, while teachers would close two days later on 10 December 2021. Talk of an organised system of education that appreciates the stakeholders in the system unlike Swazi teachers whom the Minister labelled as reliable machines. Our first term shall be 72 days; second term 78 days and third term 74 days, closing December 17, 2021. For what good reason? One would cordially ask: why not trim the curriculum to squeeze into our normal days than suffocating learners and educators with extensively long syllabus for no apparent reason. Curriculum compression is not a utopian concept for reasoning education systems that add value to the consumers of same.

### **Resilient**

On the 5<sup>th</sup> of October this year, David Edwards, General Secretary of Education International [EI], Guy Ryder, Director General at ILO, Audrey Azoulay, Director General at the UNESCO, Henrietta Fore, Director General at the UNICEF issued a joint statement on World Teachers Day 2020. It is in this statement that the four [4] reputable leaders posited that for governments to build a more resilient teacher workforce in times of crisis, all teachers should be equipped with digital and pedagogical skills to teach remotely, online, and through blended or hybrid learning, whether in high, low or no-tech environments. Governments should ensure the availability of digital infrastructure and connectivity everywhere, including in rural and remote areas.

That in the context of COVID-19, governments, social partners and other key actors have an even greater responsibility regarding teachers. They then called on governments to protect teachers' safety, health, and wellbeing, as well as their employment, to continue improving teachers' working conditions, and to involve teachers and their representative organizations in the COVID-19 educational response and recovery. They then summed-up by saying that now is the time to reimagine education and achieve our vision of equal access to quality learning for every child

and young person. One may not be certain if the MoET does comprehend all this.

### **Cancer**

As I read their statement, I steered my brain on the material conditions in our sector, education. One thing that popped-in my mind is the cancer we have turned a blind eye on for a protracted period as education stakeholders: the reality of the digital divide [lack of access to radios, television, computers, internet, and data] in the country. COVID-19 has stretched the country's education system and exposed its unreadiness to deliver the dictates of SDG 4 in 2030, as anticipated. Wanderport Africa has become the Messiah to many a school in the country in connecting educators and learners to the Web 2.0.

### **Devastating**

One does not need to a Harvard Graduate to opine that the proposed 2021 Calendar by the MoET will have devastating cognitive consequences not only to the educators; learners themselves. There is no cerebral study or research backing the stance by the MoET concerning the upsetting proposed calendar. The likely aftermath of the recommended calendar is teacher burn-out and an increase in attrition rates [turn over]. We know the MoET cares less teacher retention as there is mass production of teachers in mushrooming teacher colleges and the window opportunity for the corrupt TSC to manipulate the new entrants.

In a 2016 dissertation with the title ***Causes and Effects of Teacher Burnout***, Donna Ault Jacobson reveals that teachers who experience burnout are inclined to arrive on the job unprepared and more concerned with making it through the day than with the quality of education students are receiving. Some teachers who experience burnout have an increased rate of absenteeism. Inconsistencies in staffing and instruction make it difficult for school administrators to maintain high standards, make necessary improvements, and implement new policies that increase student achievement when their staff is constantly changing.

### **Differences**

We cannot act oblivious of the fact that some schools are war zones with personality differences rearing ugly heads creating discord in schools. It is common cause that there are school Administrators who think schools

are their personal possessions thus work towards choking the little life out of vulnerable teachers, especially those in precarious employment [contract teachers]. Those educators will surely not have it easy with the new calendar as they won't breathe in schools. For the record, the SNAT champions for harmonious industrial relations where schools are professional learning communities. The Russian scholar, Vygotsky's espouses an acceptable *modus operandi* that should be the adopted in schools in his social development theory: focusing on scaffolding and collaboration than the impressionist culture established in most education centres. Ordinarily, this is based on the premise that educational Administrators have it within their power to develop a culture that provides staff with opportunities to build communication and cognitive skills through social learning and reflection.

### Heart

In a paper entitled, '***Teachers shoulder the burden: improving support in crisis contexts***,' Yasmine Sherif [Director of Education Cannot Wait], Dean Brooks and Mary Mendenhall, in unison, posit that teachers are at the heart of children and young peoples' educational experiences. Teachers play multiple roles in their students' lives by supporting their learning, providing them with inclusive and safe environments to grow and develop, and helping them become more confident as they make their way in the world. They then enlist five additional ways that national governments [such as that of Swaziland], donors, and all relevant global, regional, national, and local stakeholders can work together to improve teacher policies and practices:

- **Prioritize teachers** from the very onset of an emergency, through to recovery and development, with increased financial investments, better data, and effective planning so that adequate numbers of teachers, including female and minority teachers, are teaching where and when they are needed most.
- **Respect teachers**, including volunteers and facilitators, as individuals and professionals with appropriate and equitable recruitment policies, pay and employment terms, and working conditions.
- **Enable teachers** to support all learners by continuously investing in and dramatically improving the nature and quality of teacher

preparation, continuous professional development, and sustained support.

- **Support teachers' well-being**, recognizing the impact of crises on teachers in their own lives and in their ability to do their work, and providing comprehensive support to teachers at the individual, school, community, and national levels.
- **Listen to teachers' experiences and opinions**, by including them in decision-making bodies and coordination mechanisms, program design and implementation, and research efforts.

### **Code of Good Practice**

It is deplorable that in our case here in Swaziland, we have industrial relations devoid of the tenets captured in Section 109 of the Industrial Relations Act of 2000 [as amended], the Code of Good Practice, with meaningful consultation as the pillar of same. The SNAT was never consulted in the proposed 2021 calendar and we are yet to be invited in a round-table to present our case as a recognised collective bargaining unit in the sector with an 18 March 1992 Recognition Agreement. In most countries, the compounding impact of COVID-19 has heightened their awareness of the fundamental role that teachers play. Now, more than ever, this was a perfect opportune moment for the MoET to roll-up its sleeve, expressively transform the entire education system that is currently in the woods through the support provided to teachers. We submit.