**The Western Cape Parliament: Have your say**

**Public Submission by Professor Eric Atmore**

The government national department of Social Development has failed our children and parents across the country during the Covid-19 lockdown by not setting a date for when ECD centres could open until forced to do so by the Gauteng High Court. This despite numerous calls, letters and requests to the department from ECD centres and ECD non-profit service providers, and a petition signed by 4,500 ECD activists submitted to the national Department of Social Development by the Centre for Early Childhood Development, in Cape Town. Nothing was forthcoming except a harsh instruction to ECD centres not to open under any circumstances.

This all changed when the Gauteng High Court ruled on 6th July 2020 that ECD centres may open provided that these ECD centres comply with health and safety protocols in combating Covid-19.

The consequences of the lockdown on children, parents and ECD workers across all provinces is significant. Children were required to stay at home, often in dangerous environments where they were and still are at considerable risk. In the Western Cape some 270,000 vulnerable children depend on attendance at an ECD centre for their main meal each day. This is not been available for 4 months now and has resulted in an increase in child hunger and malnutrition, as indicated by leading medical doctors.

A rapid survey was conducted in April under the auspices of BRIDGE to understand the possible severe and detrimental impact that the COVID-19 pandemic might have on ECD providers. Responses were received from 8,500 ECD centres nationally and it was found that:

* 99% of ECD centre heads reported that parents had stopped paying fees owing to the lockdown,
* 83% of ECD centres have not been able to pay the full salaries of staff over the lockdown period,
* 96% of ECD centres reported that the ECD centre income was not sufficient to pay for operating costs, and
* 68% of ECD centres were concerned that they would not be able to reopen after the lockdown

There are some 4,500 ECD centres across the Western Cape province, employing about 22,500 ECD teachers and providing early education and care for about 270,000 children each day. These ECD centres, children and staff have been adversely affected. Teachers are not getting paid and working parents need a secure and safe environment for their children now that about 95% of the workforce can go to work under advanced level 3 of the lockdown. The impact in our professional opinion is that about 500 to 800 ECD centres in the province will close, some 4,000 to 6,000 jobs in the provincial ECD sector will be lost, and 50,000 vulnerable young children will not get the important early learning opportunities and a nutritious meal, each day.

The ECD sector contributes about R 3 billion to the Western Cape economy this year. The results of national DSD delaying opening ECD centres will be felt for years to come as children get miss out on early learning opportunities, on a nutritious main meal, are placed in circumstances of possible neglect and abuse, and are not ready for Grade R and formal schooling.

With this as background, we suggest that the Provincial Treasury make an allocation to the provincial Department of Social Development to support 2,000 ECD centres as they open. This will ensure that Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) is available for staff at ECD centres and for children through a once-off grant of R 20,000 to every ECD centre across the Western Cape. This will enable ECD centres to be “ready” to receive children. This should be paid directly to the ECD centre, which centre would be required to procure the PPE and show evidence of having done so. The present allocation for PPE to ECD centres of R 10,2 million is unacceptable and totally inadequate. This is not even new funding but is a transfer from the infrastructure budget provision.

In addition, the provincial Treasury should support 2,000 of the poorest ECD centres to function optimally by making the current ECD subsidy of R 17 per qualifying child available to these ECD centres for an initial period of six months.

The cost of this proposal will be R 40 million for the once-off grant and R 450 million for the ECD subsidy, making a total of about R 490 million. This is a small cost to ensure the jobs of 6,000 ECD teachers, and to ensure meals and early learning to 270,000 vulnerable children. It is also less than one tenth of one percent of the national government Covid-19 recovery package announced by the President.

The late Mr Oliver Tambo said that a country that does not value its children does not deserve its future. The Western Cape government and officials must, at this time ask the question: “Do we deserve our future?”

**Professor Eric Atmore submits this in his capacity as Director of the Centre for Early Childhood Development in Cape Town.**

**He is also Extraordinary Associate Professor in the Department of Education Policy Studies, University of Stellenbosch, and Adjunct Associate Professor of Social Development at the University of Cape Town.**

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