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**INTERNAL QUESTION PAPER: 17/2021**

**1824.  Mr S L Ngcobo (IFP) to ask the Minister of Basic Education: to ask the Minister of Basic Education:**

(1)       Whether her department has investigated the fact that overcrowding in schools is one of the factors contributing to the increasing number of COVID-19 infections; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details;

(2)       whether her department has made similar findings; if not, what is the position in this regard; if so, what are the relevant details;

(3)       whether her department is conducting the required research on ventilation and health protocols in schools in line with the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention’s building recommendations in both (a) private and (b) public schools; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details?

**Response**

(1)       **Whether her department has investigated the fact that overcrowding in schools is one of the factors contributing to the increasing number of COVID-19 infections; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details;**

**RESPONSE:**

The closeness of learners to each other in the classroom, and overcrowding, are clearly factors that can increase the risk of COVID-19 infection. This is clear from the World Health Organization (WHO) guidance and the guidance provided by South African experts, which is captured in the various guides and directives produced by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and aimed at schools. There is no clear scientific evidence from anywhere in the world on the exact effects of the proximity of learners to each other in the classroom on transmission of the virus. Thus, rules and guidelines around classroom distancing strategies and optimal distances between learners are based on expert opinion, and differ from place to place. For instance, the WHO has advocated a distance of one metre in classrooms, while South African experts have in the past advocated one and a half metres. The reason there is no clear evidence is that the required experiments would be unethical. They would require, for instance, imposing a one metre rule in some classes, and a one and a half metre rule in other classes, in the same schooling system, and then seeing the extent to which transmission differed across the two groups. The reason one cannot make simple comparisons across different schooling systems, is that the epidemiology in each schooling system is influenced by a great variety of factors, and not just one factor such as the stipulated distance.

**(2)       whether her department has made similar findings; if not, what is the position in this regard; if so, what are the relevant details;**

**RESPONSE:**

As explained in the response to the previous question, this type of research has not been conducted in South Africa for ethical reasons. What the Department is currently working on is analysis of Department of Health microdata on reported cases since the start of the pandemic, to detect whether correlations between schools being open and cases point to any clear benefits to either closures or re-openings. It should be kept in mind that learners are exposed to infection both inside and outside school, and that it is possible that learners may be safer in the more controlled environment of the school than outside the school. Initial findings from the DBE’s work does not point strongly in either direction, meaning whether schools have been open or closed has not made any significant difference to transmission patterns among children or the population as a whole.

(3)       **whether her department is conducting the required research on ventilation and health protocols in schools in line with the Centre for Disease Control and Prevention’s building recommendations in both (a) private and (b) public schools; if not, why not; if so, what are the relevant details?**

**RESPONSE:**

The DBE has gone to great lengths to gather expert opinion, from South Africa and abroad, on optimal ventilation and other strategies in classrooms, and this informs government’s policy on these matters. Again, neither in the United States nor in South Africa are scientific experiments that directly assess the relationship between ventilation and transmission levels possible, for ethical reasons.