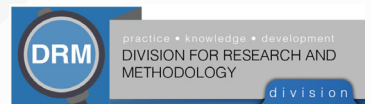
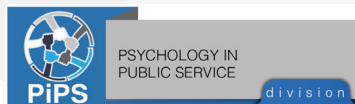
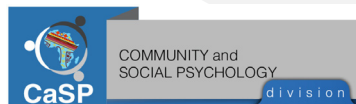




## Re: PsySSA Response to the SAHRC Media Statement Stating Concern with the Readiness of Schools for the Resumption of Learning during COVID-19 Pandemic, 28 May 2020:

05 June 2020



PsySSA is the professional body representing psychology professionals in South Africa. PsySSA has, since its inception, been dedicated to making a significant contribution to solving the pressing human development problems in South Africa. PsySSA is committed to the transformation and development of South African Psychology to serve the needs and interests of all South Africa's people. PsySSA advances psychology as a science, profession and as a means of promoting human well-being (<https://www.psyssa.com>).

## Statement

With the lessening of the lockdown restrictions from Stage four to Stage three on 1 June 2020, the Minister of Education, Angie Motshekga, has begun the processes of reopening schools nationwide. The initial proposed date of opening, 01 June 2020, was met with concerns from the South African Human Rights Commission. These concerns were outlined in a media statement released on 28 May 2020. In the statement the following was stated:

*"Whilst the (SAHRC) Commission supports the opening of schools as soon as possible in order to give effect to the rights of learners to education - a matter of great national importance to our country in many aspects - it believes that this should be done in tandem with reasonable and adequate measures and efforts to safeguard the right to health of learners and educators."*

The Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA), as the largest representative body of psychology professionals in South Africa, would like to contribute to this planning by supporting the Department of Education on how to safeguard the learners' and educators' right to health, as well as the well-being and safety of the wider community as schools and educational centres around the country gradually reopen.

It is clear from education bodies, civil society committees, and from the experience of our own members, that the education system is still severely burdened by the inequalities of our past. The COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent nationwide lockdown has simply highlighted the extent of the systemic and structural challenges that continue to prevent many schools from delivering adequate education. A lack of infrastructure, poor access to basic human rights (such as running water and ablution facilities), overcrowded classrooms, and a lack of safe transport to and from schools are just some of the concerns that make school compliance to the guidelines for minimum conditions to prevent the spread of COVID-19, in many South African communities, nearly impossible. With more than 1,500 schools affected by incidents of vandalism, theft and break-ins during the lockdown period, and the rise in reported cases of domestic violence, there is a deep concern regarding the psychological readiness of learners, educators and principals to resume teaching and learning activities.

While attention has primarily focused on assessing and building school capacity for compliance with physical safety measures to mitigate medical risk (social distancing, wearing of masks and hand & face hygiene, PPEs for staff and training of staff in these measures) the accompanying psychological and social impacts on the teachers and pupils due to the pandemic has received less attention. This includes bereavement of those who have lost loved ones due to the pandemic, adjustment due to lockdown conditions, to name a few.

Policies and protocols, which were developed for adults, need to be made compliant for the specific developmental stages that the different age groups will require. Each childhood developmental stage has

unique developmental demands and capacities. A developmental capabilities lens needs to replace a “one size fits all” approach. Assessment of schools procedural readiness for re-opening must be accompanied by an assessment of children’s readiness to comply with these conditions, and adaptations that may be required to ensure that they are safe and adapting to the demands of the pandemic.

It is evident that schools are more than places of learning but are also tasked with providing care and support to learners to ensure optimal growth and development. We support the idea that teachers and staff at schools will become frontline caregivers who require the psychological and social support and training that have been afforded to medical frontline staff. While significant progress has been made to provide protective equipment to schools as well as orientation and training for teachers on health and safety protocols, the importance of psychological and social health needs cannot be overlooked.

PsySSA would like to add its support to the South African Human Rights Commission’s (SAHRC) urge to define and plan the “reasonable and adequate measures”. We advocate for more careful consideration and broader stakeholder consultations to be given to the phased re-opening of schools and education centres. It is our view that more expertise, support and counselling should be made available to teachers, learners and associated education stakeholders to assist them to carry out procedures in a developmentally appropriate manner.

Psychology professionals working in the school sector, such as Educational Psychologists, Registered Counsellors and guidance counsellors licenced by the HPCSA, should be mobilised to provide teachers and school management teams with the support to ensure psychosocial support within schools. In line with keeping all initiatives scientific and expert driven, representation of the appropriate psychology professionals is critical within the consultation processes, the refinement of policy guidelines, and the drafting of implementation guidelines for use in the basic education sector.

As the Minister herself noted in a press statement, education in the country needs to be re-engineered not just re-aligned. We therefore add our voice and support to the call for further education stakeholder consultations aimed at not only developing adequate plans for the phasing-in of the current school year, but also to take this opportunity to re-envision and rebuild a more capable and equitable education system that delivers on the right of all citizens in this country to have access to quality education and health in order to live a meaningful and contributing life.

**Psychological Society of South Africa (PsySSA)**  
**Johannesburg, South Africa**