

Bay schools on the chopping block

‘If you have fewer but bigger schools, then resources will be focused’
Fundile Gade
EDUCATION MEC

More than 50 face closure in provincial restructuring plan

Lynn Spence

More than 50 Nelson Mandela Bay schools face being completely shut down by the Eastern Cape education department as part of its realignment process.

That number is only a part of the plan to close more than 1,000 schools in the province.

According to the department, the process is necessary to provide sufficient resources and support to pupils across the province and ensure as many pupils as possible receive a quality education by having a teacher in front of each classroom.

Education MEC Fundile Gade is moving quickly to gazette it before the end of June, listing a total of 1,142 schools in the province earmarked to close or be realigned.

Gade said to achieve the department's intended goals, unpopular decisions like the restructuring and rationalisation process had to be done, and no further time could be wasted in doing so.

While the department remained firm that finalising the process was long overdue, teacher unions, parents and teachers have voiced fears over the timing, especially in light of the Covid-19 pandemic.

In Nelson Mandela Bay, 55 schools will be shut. Of these, 35 are primary schools.

The education department has not yet released the names of the schools that will be affected.

The three districts in the province with the most school closures are Amathole West (209), Chris Hani West (179)

and Joe Gqabi (161).

Speaking during a virtual media briefing recently, Gade said once you had more than 1,800 “unviable small schools” the output quality could not be met.

Referring to the department's analysis of first term grade 12 results within all learning areas, which indicates a decline of 1.6% compared to the first term in 2020 provincially, Gade said those matrices were a product of these dysfunctional schools.

“If you have dysfunctional schools, how are you going to get a qualitative output?

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“If you have fewer but bigger schools, then resources will be focused,” he said.

“You cannot have a school that has 70 pupils because you will not be able to get teachers for that school.

“If left as is, you will sit with learners that are not intellectually ready for their grades.

“They will have gaps in their development.

“This is not a question of closing schools, but restructuring them so that we can fulfil our constitutional obligation of providing quality learning.”

South African Teachers Union executive director Chris Kloppe said it was not the right time to be closing

schools, especially in light of the pandemic.

“Teachers and parents have expressed fears and grave concerns about overcrowding.”

National Professional Teachers' Association of SA executive director Basil Manuel said though they were not against the move in principle, he would have to agree that it was not the right time.

“With Covid, it is simply not the right timing.

“Covid is not just about distancing and washing hands, you have to keep every part of a person safe.

“Here the safety aspects were not considered properly,” he said.

Manuel said many pupils who relied on regular scholar transport to schools were getting infected in provinces like Gauteng.

DA MPL Yusuf Cassim said the department's timing was ridiculous and that the process had not been properly budgeted for.

“It comes at a time when pupils should be social distancing and not be put into smaller and more confined spaces.

“These closures are very problematic,” he said.

Education expert Prof Susan van Rensburg said it was strange timing to announce the gazetting in June, on top of the Covid-19 pandemic.

“This is going to make everyone jittery,” she said.

“It coincides with the mass vaccination of teachers as well as the announcement that teachers with comorbidities will have to return to

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