

Principals Upfront Dialogue 14

Unlocking technology to deliver education during the COVID-19 pandemic

22 July 2020

01 Setting the Scene

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The Covid-19 pandemic has brought into sharp focus the need for educational solutions that are safe, equitable, accessible to all learners.

Dialogue 14, held on 22 July 2020 as a webinar hosted by the Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) and its Principals Upfront partners, explored how the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) is using technology to enhance and manage education, and how school leaders can use technology to promote and support remote learning, communicate with stakeholders (teachers, parents, system leaders and learners), and to upskill themselves on issues relating to education during Covid-19.

This overview highlights the key themes and issues discussed by the key speaker, the panellists and the participants.

Principals Upfront Dialogue Series

Public dialogues addressing the leadership role of school principals

Presented by Matthew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance, Catholic Institute of Education, Sasol Foundation and BRIDGE

Principals Upfront gives principals a platform to share working practice and information about different facets of school leadership. The dialogues also enable those involved in supporting school leadership to develop a deeper understanding of the roles that principals play.



02 Framing the Dialogue

The COVID-19 pandemic is challenging school and system leaders to respond to the crisis of school closures and disruptions with education solutions that are equitable, accessible to all learners regardless of their socio-economic circumstances, and safe for educators and learners. This crisis also comes at a time when rapid advances in technology and changes in the world-of-work are prompting new thinking on how we educate, what we teach, and what we are preparing our learners for.

As many schools are discovering, the transition to remote instruction and learning is complex. It requires new methodologies, content and tools, support for teachers and learners, and coordination with their parents (or care givers). It also requires a willingness to learn and to accept change.

This Principals Upfront webinar explored how technology is enabling the GDE and school management teams (SMTs) to manage the system and provide sustainable remote learning to mitigate the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on education and schooling – and to develop the competencies needed to move education forward into the 21st century.

The programme comprised:

- A keynote address on the ***GDE's efforts to recovery from the Covid-19 Pandemic***, presented by Ms Mmule Madonsela, Director for Public Ordinary Schools, Gauteng Department of Education
- Contributions by invited panelists on:
 - practical tips – using technology for remote learning and effective communication with stakeholders
 - using technology and online resources to ensure that learning continues during Covid-19
 - how school leaders can upskill themselves through an online course on Covid-19.

To view the slide presentations used during this webinar, please [click on this link](#).

03 Keynote Address

GDE's efforts to recovery from the Covid-19 Pandemic – Ms Mmule Madonsela, Director for Public Ordinary Schools, Gauteng Department of Education

A key message from Ms Madonsela's presentation was that the integration of technology into education should not be seen as merely a temporary, short-term measure to deal with Covid-19 restrictions.

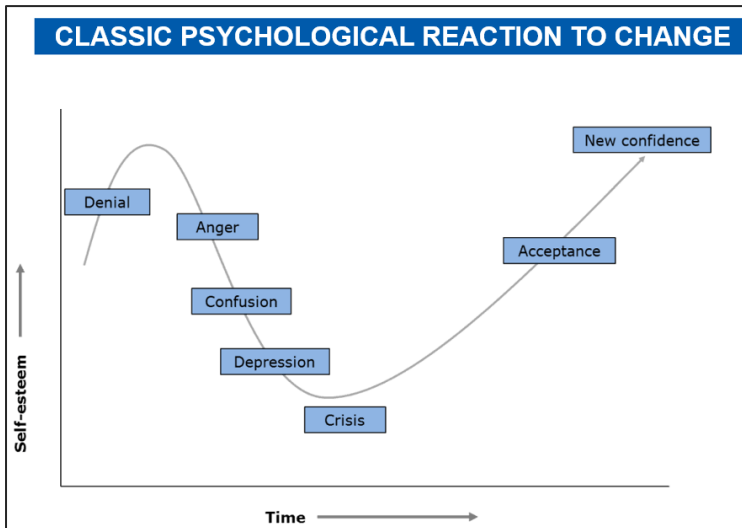
Instead, the effective use of technology has to be understood as an essential part of the GDE's long-term effort to provide equitable, quality education throughout the province. This intention is embedded in the GDE's vision and mission statements, in the words *an innovative education system* and *modern schools that enable quality teaching and learning*.

The forward-looking declaration in the vision and mission statement met with negative comment when it was first formulated; however, with the advent of the pandemic and associated school closures, the truth and value of these words have been realised.



Ms Mmule Madonsela

Psychological reactions to change




When we (as individuals and society) are suddenly confronted by change, we typically go through a cycle of emotions. Starting with denial, we pass through successive feelings of anger, confusion and depression, which creates a state of crisis – after which we gradually recover to reach a level of acceptance, which leads to new feelings of confidence. We have seen this happening in schooling as the pandemic has forced us to change our thinking and use new platforms for teaching and learning.

It is also important to acknowledge that people’s emotional connections to the old ways are not trivial. It is natural to want to hold on to what we are comfortable with, but our comfortable spaces are dangerous because they hold us in place. Change in organizations always necessitates changes in skills. If people find it difficult to upskill themselves this can cause anger, frustration and fear, and creates resistance to change

“Change brings with it fear of the unknown, but there are also risks in standing still – and these are greater than the risks of moving forward. When we stand still nothing happens, but when we accept change and move forward, things can work for the better. We need to deal with our fear of the unknown, accept the change, and move on.” (Mmule Madonsela)

Benefits of change

The GDE has benefitted from accepting the value of change. Over the years it has been steadily developing, introducing, and evolving a range of platforms, programmes and other technology-based innovations – “long before this storm of change was forced on us”. Although the GDE has been working towards these changes for some time, there is no denying that the pandemic has created an impetus (and a platform) to fast-track transformative change.

 **GAUTENG**
DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Growing Gauteng Together

GDE PROGRAMMES TO DATE

- The use of SA-SAMS as a data resource hub that is used for planning and budgeting
- Principals Vodacom platform achieved through a partnership with Vodacom
- Contracts with Microsoft for the use of the platform in designing online systems
- The Admissions Online App which has been evolving over the years and now includes electronic uploading of documents and auto verification
- Development of applications for Whole School Improvement, School Readiness and SGB elections

Some important consequences of these programmes have been more efficient processes, easier access to information, and increased availability of reliable data for informed decision-making.

CURRICULUM FOCUS

- The GDE has adopted various strategies in the curriculum recovery process focusing on the following:
 - Recovery of teaching time which focuses on the length of the teaching day and the length of the school term
 - Curriculum interventions, which include a review of the curriculum, so that the core content that needs to be covered in the time available is not compromised
 - Review of the assessment and examinations requirements in light of the reviewed / re-organised curriculum
 - The Recovery Plan focuses on curriculum and assessment recovery from Grades R to Grade 12

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Activities to mitigate the negative impact of the Covid-19 school closures and intermittent reopening on curriculum delivery. A key focus has been to avoid compromising core content and the quality of deliverables.

LEADERSHIP and MANAGEMENT FOCUS

- Programmes are being developed using approaches which are online, correspondence and remote
 - Training of school principals on the readiness for re-opening schools was concluded using MS Teams
- All programs include awareness of Covid 19 safety and health measures
 - Meetings have shifted to online platforms
 - Surveys and questionnaires are being done via links on email and/or [whatsapp](#)
- Program targets have been revised to adhere to COVID-19 protocols and where this was not possible the program has been postponed

Programmes have been designed to raise awareness on Covid-19 safety and health measures and support principals, officials and SGBs to continue their work.

TRAINING INTERVENTION

- Various training initiatives have been designed and implemented
 - Capacitate GDE community on COVID-19 containment and prevention measures
 - Prepare GDE institutions for an approach in line with the National Command Council Strategy
 - Inculcate a culture of OHS compliance and adapting to the new normal
 - Ensuring that all role-players understand and adopt the use of technology in teaching and learning

While the first three items relate closely to Covid-19 and its effects, Ms Madonsela reminded participants of the need to locate the last item (ensuring the use of technology in teaching and learning) in the context of the GDE's vision and mission.

“As schools move toward online, digital and remote teaching as a result of Covid-19, it is time for a mindset shift regarding the future of learning. The world has changed forever and will never go back to what it used to be. We need to understand that traditional forms will no longer dominate teaching and learning; technology is increasingly taking the front seat, and we now have a perfect opportunity to develop and entrench those global competencies which otherwise might not have received sufficient focus during normal school time. It is therefore inevitably important for schools, parents and learners to embrace this progressive way of teaching and learning – the ‘new normal’.” (Mmule Madonsela)

Practical tips for using technology to promote learning beyond the classroom and communicate with stakeholders – Mr Thomas Hlongwane, Principal, Pretoria Central High School

Generation Z and the changing role of the teacher

Schools are working with a generation of young people who have an affinity with technology. With Covid-19, the change for them has been from using technology for social and entertainment purposes, to positively channeling that skill towards their academic learning.

Many schools will need to continue working with learners remotely, to catch up on learning missed, and in the event of further school closures. Schools need teachers who can work with those learners, to direct and develop their skills. With learners being able to use technology to gain access to knowledge, the role of the teacher is changing from knowledge-holder to facilitator of young people's development (for e.g. by teaching them to do their own research).

Schools have a valuable resource in young teachers who have just joined the system, who can help the older teachers to connect effectively with their 'Generation Z' learners. This generation of learners also has an expectation of instant communication and feedback, and sees the power of working collaboratively. Both these elements can be amplified in remote learning (for e.g. by using WhatsApp for feedback or group assignments).

User-friendly resources

In Gauteng, many schools have already been using tablets and smartboards, but this was largely classroom based – the issue now is using technology to enable teaching and learning to continue outside the classroom. Turning to resources that schools might use, Mr Hlongwane noted that there were many resources available online, and he had chosen a few examples he hoped participants would find user-friendly in their contexts.

- Google classroom – enables teachers to communicate with their classes, provide materials, set up assignments to be done on tablets, organize and keep track of work done, and provide feedback. Google Meet has recently been integrated within Google Classroom, making real-time interaction with class groups possible.
- Facebook can be used to update the school community on school activities.
- WhatsApp is the most frequently used and 'best' tool for intra-school communication.
 - For keeping in touch with staff, it is user friendly, received immediately, multipurpose, and enables both group and private communication.
 - For remote teaching and learning, it can be used for class interactions (set up per grade and subject) – with teachers posting material, posing questions and giving feedback.
 - For SGBs, it enables efficient decision making. Decisions taken on WhatsApp are legally binding, provided that (i) notice of the engagement is given so SGB members log on at the agreed time, and (ii) notice is given of the particular matter to be discussed, so all are able to engage. The WhatsApp conversation then acts as minutes to confirm decisions taken.



Mr Thomas Hlongwane

- Microsoft Teams is useful for meetings.
- D6 Communicator enables schools to communicate with parents (free to download for parents of the school).

Code of conduct

It is essential for schools to amend their codes of conduct to cover any eventualities arising from the use (or misuse) of devices for remote learning and teaching – and to ensure all members of the school community, including parents, are informed of the rules and the consequences for contravening them. Schools (and parents) are also advised to actively monitor learners’ device and social media usage.

Costs and barriers

Innovative thinking is needed to minimize the costs involved and overcome some of the barriers.

- WhatsApp passes help to reduce data costs. Cellphones that support WhatsApp can be bought from outlets such as PEP Stores for approximately R300.
- Zero rated sites allow connection without data. Zero rating is done by the service provider (e.g. Vodacom e-school).
- Some areas have access to free municipal wifi.
- In areas where the network is very poor, community members can be asked to identify where the ‘best’ reception is, and schools can arrange for learners to go to that particular area in order to have access.

“Some schools are able to provide their teachers with a data allowance – but it is also important for teachers to invest in themselves, i.e. in their own growth and development as educators, by making optimal use of their own resources to reach out to their learners. In times such as these we need to be willing to help the system to work better.” (Thomas Hlongwane)

How school leaders can use technology to ensure that learning never stops during Covid-19 – Mr Andrew Mentor, Deputy Director for e-Learning, Gauteng Department of Education

The Covid-19 school closure and intermittent reopening has created challenges for teachers, learners and parents. This presentation spoke to issues around remote learning, and some of the resources available.

Definition: *Remote learning is essentially an approach to learning that an educator can use to ensure the enhancement and continuation of learning inside and outside the school environment, using technology as a tool and an enabler.*

This section summarises the key ideas thematically.



Mr Andrew Mentor

New teaching practices

Remote teaching calls for changes in teaching practice to support the changes in format. New technologies also create new opportunities to engage with content and make it easier to use more dynamic teaching methodologies (for e.g. including audio, video and images). This is an opportunity for schools to explore new approaches to learning and teaching (rather than trying to replicate their familiar methodologies remotely).

SMTs and teachers are encouraged to learn how to use the available resources and platforms optimally (e.g. by learning from peers, colleagues, or institutions such as MGSLG).

“There is no certainty in the educational space, regarding sustaining the current traditional models of teaching and learning. With ongoing innovations taking place in the remote learning space, we need to continually improve our skills set; plan and keep to a routine that makes things happen for us and our schools; and work to maintain a learning culture within our schools.” (Andrew Mentor)

Developing, finding and evaluating content

New technologies and practices call for SMTs and teachers to be both innovative and selective when using learning materials and activities for remote learning, to ensure they serve learner needs. Open educational resources are readily available but differ widely in quality and contextual relevance. Teachers may need to modify generic materials so that they speak to the requirements of their learners. The presentation (see link below) provides information and access details for a wide variety of useful resources.

Supporting diverse needs

Remote learning can be used flexibly to support differentiated and individualized learning, e.g. to personalize learning in terms of an individual learner’s profile and curriculum requirements, or to enable learners who fall behind to catch up by replaying recordings of lessons. Technology can also help to overcome some barriers to learning (such as visual or hearing challenges). Remote learning also encourages the development of digital skills and other 4IR skills such as collaborative learning.

Communication with learners

Many teachers fear that remote learning will limit (or delay) interaction with learners. In fact, ICT makes it possible for teachers and their learners to communicate more directly and interactively than might be possible in a crowded classroom (e.g. WhatsApp can be used to pose questions and give immediate feedback).

Maintaining control of the learning programme

This can be a challenge – the process must be carefully managed to prevent the technology becoming a distraction within the teaching and learning environment.

Involving parents

Parents need to be informed as to what is possible within the digital environment and to monitor what learners do in a remote learning situation. Parents should be aware of what the devices are capable of, what is loaded on them and what access learners have in terms of the content. Digital technology has also enhanced the process of giving parents feedback on learner progress and performance – and is making it easier for parents to communicate with schools and teachers and vice versa.

Online resources to consider

The presentation lists and supplies access to information for a wide variety of platforms and resources including:

- Communication platforms and applications
- DBE and GDE content platforms (digital lessons, multi-media content, questions paper and memos)
- Service providers supporting education
- Additional websites for downloading content (videos, digital lessons, both online and offline resources)
- Lessons broadcast on TV and radio.

SMT Continuous Professional Development: How school leaders can upskill themselves about Covid 19 – Dr Abe Seakamela of the Foundation for Professional Development

Dr Seakamela reflected on the impact of Covid-19 on the schooling system, sketched out how the education sector might respond, and offered an analysis of the effects of these different ways of responding.

The pandemic has exposed many frailties in our education system, including poor infrastructure and low penetration of ICT in schools, and the resulting inequalities in the provision of teaching and learning. Dr Seakamela warned of serious challenges in our assumptions about education provisioning and cautioned that unless we change from 'thinking in a straight line' to thinking flexibly, we will not be able to answer the fundamental questions about how to provide quality education for all.



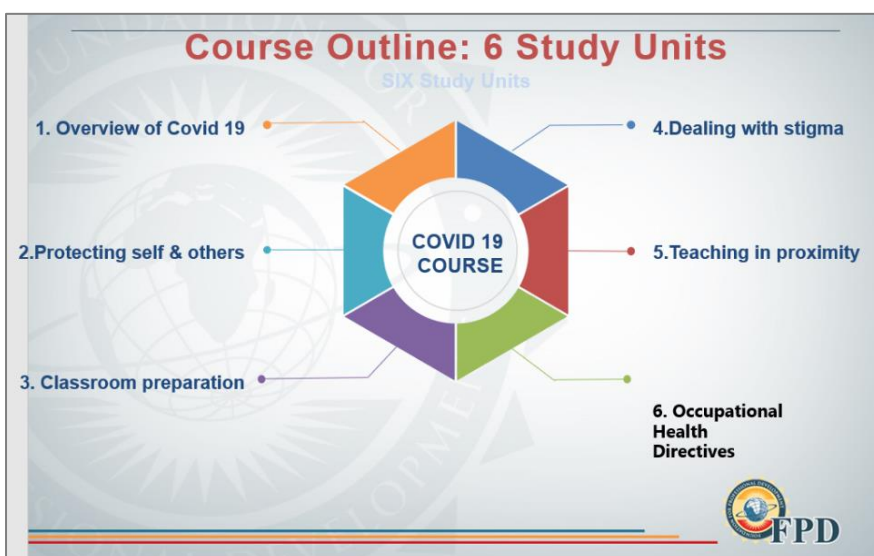
Dr Abe Seakamela

The webinar has shown that education can take place anytime and anywhere – provided we apply our minds in terms of what needs to be done to make this possible for all. Dr Seakamela contends that this would mean:

- Looking deeper to uncover and properly address the complex underlying problems in the system
- Reinventing our schooling system, from physical infrastructure to teacher and curriculum quality (including digital literacy)
- Ensuring curriculum relevance for preparing young people to participate effectively in recovering South Africa's economy
- Embracing the opportunity to imagine a new schooling order that calls for innovative and agile responses, supported by relevant technologies.

We now have an opportunity to pause, reflect, and find lasting solutions to the challenges we are facing, by thinking in new ways and tapping into the expertise that is widely available – and then being resolute in sticking with what we need to do to implement these solutions.

Introducing the FDP COVID-19 Course



This course was developed jointly by the FPD School of Education, the Mathew Goniwe School of Leadership and Governance (MGSLG) and the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE).

It aims to provide school leadership with the necessary tools and capacities to deal with the challenge of Covid-19 in the school context.

About the course:

- Fully sponsored by MGSLG and GDE
- E-learning part-time course (10-12 hours)
- Also offered off-line
- Open to all provinces
- FPD will issue a certificate of completion
- Consists of six study units
- Multiple choice assessment – 70% to pass
- Data will be provided upon registration
- Will be endorsed for SACE points

For more information, contact:

FPD School of Education
Contact Details: 087 821 1109
Email: education@foundation.co.za

“Principals are in the frontline and bear the brunt of running schools during these trying times. Whatever happens in the education sector, it is at the school level that decisions must be actualized. It is our principals who have to lead the way and make them happen – and they must be given the tools to do this.” (Abe Seakamela)

05 Questions and Comments

Many comments and questions (posed to speakers or shared on the chat box) related to problems of access to devices, connectivity and data. Participants also drew attention to the disparities between schools and the difficulties many schools experience in trying to give learners access to lessons and materials at home.

Comments

- There seems to be an assumption that learners and teachers across the country have similar access to those in perhaps the majority of schools in Gauteng. Data, tools and connectivity are not easily available to learners and parents in many rural schools.
- Remote learning brings excitement and presents new opportunities for our learners to look forward to for the next lesson and they learn differently. However, the challenge remains affordability. Most parents share their smartphones with learners which reduces contact time for learners to access lessons at home.
- We appreciate the ICT in our education and times. This is the way to go but let us work towards bringing all learners on board with smartphones or tablets.
- Remote learning depends on issues such as smart phones, data, and electricity. In some townships there are forever challenges around electricity. Teachers get discouraged by poor attendance, e.g. having only 12 out of a class of 45 attend at a time.
- I agree, we really need to stop plastering over cracks in the system. A total overhaul of the system is necessary to enter into the new normal. Issues of internet connections, technical skills and tools of trade will pose a challenge in embracing the new normal.
- Surely, we must be looking for solutions for all South African learners?
- Low tech options like radio and TV are good options.
- In addition to the ICT roll out what plans are being made to secure our schools, especially after school hours? Burglaries rob us of development.
- It is hard to compete in terms of innovation and the use of technology in the classroom when there are no devices in the school – and the only person with a laptop is the principal.

Question and responses

How can teachers be protected against cyber-bullying?

- Schools need clear ICT and social media policies. Cyber-bullying must be addressed in the school's Code of Conduct, and the conduct rules and consequences of non-adherence must be clearly communicated to learners and parents.
- The DBE has issued a document that speaks to cyber-bullying, which schools may find helpful.

What can the GDE do to assist schools to follow children home, in terms of devices, connectivity and data? The lack of access to e-learning is worsening the inequality in education.

- Inadequate infrastructure, technology and human capacity currently make it impossible to provide remote schooling to all learners.
- The GDE has provided schools with pre-printed packages to give to learners. Schools are encouraged to use cellphones as this technology is available in almost every household within the province. Some lessons are being broadcast on community radio stations.
- The high cost of data is a definite challenge – it is essential that as a country we engage with government and the telecommunications companies to reduce the cost of data.

Is there a roll out plan by the GDE to resource all schools so that the presentations we heard in today's webinar can be made a reality?

- Gauteng currently has 56 full ICT schools. A further 375 no-fee and fee-paying schools have been targeted with regard to Grades 10, 11 and 12. The programme is expected to be extended to Grades 8 and 9 within the next two years. These plans are subject to budget availability. The ICT rollout includes renovation of classrooms and schools to house the ICT, prior to the installation.

Comments and questions relating to the FPD Covid-19 Course

Several participants suggested that the course would be beneficial for SMT members and district officials as well as principals, and recommended that schools be sent an official communication advising them about the course.

- Dr Seakamela invited anyone experiencing course-related problems (e.g. difficulty enrolling) to contact him, and undertook to follow up on these issues.

Closing Remarks

The CIE's Mduduzi Qwabe summarised key points discussed, relating them to the realities being experienced in many areas of education, and pointed the way forward.

In addition to threatening lives and livelihoods, Covid-19 had highlighted some important truths within our basic education system. These included the extreme and continuing inequality of provision; our persistence in using outdated methods of teaching; and our failure as educators to continuously upskill and reskill ourselves.

The pandemic and resultant school closures were forcing us to change our thinking and to implement new ways of providing education. The webinar highlighted the many platforms and abundance of tools and resources for remote teaching and learning. It also noted that the current generation of children was already using

technology, which should make it easier to use technology as an enabler in the remote learning space. Other essential enablers would be the upskilling of educators to use the available technology, and the adoption or development of new methodologies to facilitate and support remote learning.

The webinar's key message was that this was a time of both challenge and opportunity to re-imagine schooling, and to use the many ways open to us, within a system of mutual learning, of upskilling ourselves.

"This is an unprecedented time and requires an unprecedented response. None of us could have imagined that we would be teaching in this way this year, and it is now an opportune time to redefine the role of educators and of schooling. We should not downplay the gravity of this moment and the challenges we are facing, yet we also should not despair." (Mduduzi Qwabe)

The next Principals Upfront dialogue is due to be held on 14 October 2020.

Dialogue participants are reminded of BRIDGE's knowledge management role. All meetings, presentations and discussions are captured and shared on BRIDGE's Knowledge Hub. To access the Knowledge Hub, click [here](#).

Principals Upfront welcomes your input for planning future seminars. If there are any burning issues you would like to have addressed, or if you would like more information on this dialogue series, contact Patience Voller at patience@BRIDGE.org.za

