



*Monday, 01 June 2020*

Today is the International Day for Protection of Children, which is commemorated around the world to draw attention to children's rights and welfare. Fittingly, it is also the UN Global Day of Parents, honouring the commitment of parents and caregivers to the wellbeing of children.

On this day I want to thank the millions of parents, grandparents and caregivers around South Africa who continue to play an important role in the formative years in the lives of our youngest citizens. The encouragement, support and protection children receive from their parents and caregivers is essential for their future happiness and success.

After 65 days of a nation-wide lockdown, the country is today starting a new phase in its fight against the coronavirus. Many economic and social activities are restarting, including a phased resumption of schooling.

We have said that we are taking a gradual approach, guided by the advice of our scientists and led by the realities on the ground and consultations with stakeholders.

In the last few weeks, as we have prepared to return to school, we have had extensive and detailed discussions with all role-players in the education sphere. These have guided our approach to this complex and challenging task.

Now, in the last few days, several of these stakeholders – including teachers and parents – have expressed concern about the state of readiness in many schools. We have heard them, we welcome their contributions and are taking steps to address their concerns as well as proposals.

It is understandable that many parents and caregivers have mixed emotions at this time about the reopening of schools. There is relief that children will be able to resume their education after a prolonged absence from classrooms and lecture halls. Young people are eager to be in school again and to see friends and teachers.

But there is also apprehension on the part of parents, educators and learners themselves.

Parents want reassurance that the necessary precautions should be in place to adequately protect learners. The safety of our youngest citizens from a health and physical perspective is not negotiable. It is our foremost priority.

As we prepare for the gradual re-opening of our schools and places of higher learning, education authorities have been hard at work putting the necessary health and safety

measures in place. That documentation regarding standard operating procedures have been provided to all schools. These standard operating procedures cover issues like training and orientation of screeners, timetable realignment and configuring classrooms to meet social distancing requirements.

We are continuing with the process of delivering personal protective equipment and ensuring the availability of water and sanitation services. Learning, once it commences, will take place under strict conditions with a correctly limited number of learners and students.

As parents, teachers, governing bodies and government, we are in agreement that no school should re-open until all the necessary precautions are in place. There needs to be transparency about the level of preparedness of each of the schools. Everyone who is a key role player, be they a parent, a school governing body member, a teacher or a government official should be able to have the correct information about the state of preparedness of each school. It is our collective responsibility to ensure that the learning environment is safe.

I want to salute parents and caregivers, in particular, for the role they have played over the last two months. With schools closed, they have had to take greater daily responsibility for the education and development of their children. Many parents and caregivers have had to assist learners with their schoolwork at home, no doubt gaining a keen appreciation of the hard work being done by our teachers every day.

Once the lockdown is lifted and more learners return to school, we parents should continue to play a more active role in the education of our children, whether it is through joining school governing bodies, volunteering our services at schools or other forms of assistance. Parents can join in volunteering to clean schools, establishing vegetable gardens or being part of neighbourhood school safety committees. This can turn the schools into real, meaningful "community schools".

Though we may feel anxious and fearful as our sons and daughters leave our care, we must draw courage from the fact that every effort is being made to protect them.

As parents, you have entrusted us with the welfare and safety of your children. It is a responsibility we do not take lightly. In the days and weeks to come, we will be closely monitoring the return to school.

If we follow the protocols and maintain all precautions – as parents, educators, communities and learners – we will effectively minimise the risk posed by the coronavirus.

Ultimately it is both our personal actions and our collective efforts that will keep our children safe. Whatever we do next, we need to do together.

With best wishes,

A handwritten signature in black ink, reading "Cyril Ramaphosa". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.