

# Opinion

## Education in COVID-19 times

**W**ITH the shutdown of our schools in March as one of the measures to contain the spread of the virus, the education sector has been severely impacted. Academic work has been interrupted and our school campuses stand silent.

Final year students at all levels have a cloud of uncertainty hanging over their heads, unsure when, or if, they will be able to write their final examinations.

Parents now have their children with them all day and this creates considerable difficulty with respect to child care arrangements, especially for working parents.

The Minister of Education, Dr Matthew Opoku Prempeh, has on several platforms remarked that one of the realities of the pandemic is the huge role that teachers play in our lives, managing large classes of our young, active and sometimes restless children during the day, while we get on with our lives.

Having taught Class Five in a primary school at Tarkwa during my post-secondary National Service days, I can fully identify with the pressures and challenges teachers have to deal with when managing young pupils.

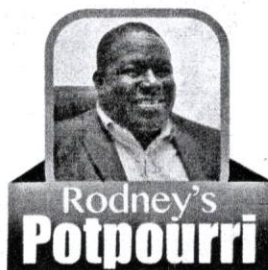
### Opportunities, technology

With every challenge comes an opportunity and I believe that our current circumstances, with the challenges of face-to-face teaching, have offered us an even stronger opportunity to leapfrog our teaching and learning process through the power of technology.

Learning materials today have greatly expanded because of the various technological advances.

Newer materials such as the computer, various software applications, LCD projectors, camcorders, digital cameras, scanners, the Internet, satellite, interactive TV, audio and video conferencing, artificial intelligence and so on are pervasive in other parts of the world with regard to teaching and learning.

In the 21st century global knowledge economy, we cannot afford to be left behind in the use of digitisation and technology to harness the human capital for the improvement of education and education management as a whole.



### Tech journey so far

Under the Centre for National Distance Learning and Open Schooling (CENDLOS), one of the agencies under the Ministry of Education (MOE), some considerable work has been done with respect to education technology.

Currently, our 1.2 million students in our Senior High Schools (SHS) and Technical & Vocational Education and Training (TVET) sector are on the icampus system ([www.icampus.com](http://www.icampus.com)), with access to resources such as 810 notes with exercises, 20,800 interactive quizzes, 600 audio-visual lessons, over 540 units of interactive lessons among others.

In the immediate to medium-term, Ghana is collaborating with the Open University, UK, to deploy distance learning programmes for all our universities.

This involves licensing content, technical assistance, capacity building and advice from Open University, UK.

The university has created a dedicated online portal for this based on their learning management system and technology.

In the medium to long-term, the ministry is working on a National Digital Literacy Project for both

teachers and learners, as well as localisation of the technology and equipment for the deployment of the Open University in Ghana.

Of course, in promoting education technology as a learning tool, we have to be careful not to

further widen the digital divide in this country, occasioned by differing financial circumstances and limited digital penetration across the country.

It is important to engage the ICT industry further to ensure that the backbone for equitable digital access is strengthened in order to provide opportunities for learners wherever they may be in this country.

### Reopening schools

In recent times, a lot of queries from

students, in particular have been over when schools will reopen for academic work to resume. Understandably, the long period during which students have been home, with no certainty of reopening dates, has led to some inertia and makes it difficult for families to plan. There are also social, behavioural, psychological and economic consequences to prolonged stay at home by children without significant academic work and schooling, which in turn impacts on learning outcomes.

The reality, according to the experts, is that this virus will be with us for quite some time and that the race to successfully develop a vaccine is not going to end anytime soon.

In the meantime, our lives have to regain a certain sense of normalcy. We cannot shut down schools for as long as it takes to develop a vaccine.

During his last address to the nation, President Akufo-Addo extended the ban on public gathering and the shutdown of schools, churches and the country's borders among others, until May 31, 2020.

While we cannot predict the President's decision, the education sector must plan and develop strategies for reopening our schools in the event that these restrictions are lifted. This will ensure that we are not caught napping, if the need arises.

### Input on strategy

This is what has informed an invitation by the Ghana Education Service (GES) to various stakeholders for suggestions on strategies to put in place in the event that the President orders the reopening of schools in his next address to the nation.

It is to afford the buy-in of all to ensure the successful implementation of strategies to be agreed upon. In developing such strategies, there are several pertinent questions that must be fully addressed.

What processes and protocols should we put in place for our students and teachers to ensure that the environment is safe for all users?

What investments do we have to make to meet the hygiene protocols?

How do we ensure social distancing among boisterous young children, especially in kindergarten and lower primary?

How do we manage our considerable class sizes and dormitory populations in the face of the virus and the manner in which it spreads?

Would we need a gradualist approach to reopening the schools, with

final year students being given priority to write their final examinations?

If so, how do we manage day students who have to commute daily to and from school by public transport and with that, the attendant risks of picking up infections and spreading them among their colleagues?

What are other countries doing right in reopening schools and what are the challenges faced?

What lessons can we learn to fit into our own specific circumstances?

It is unfortunate that the invitation to stakeholders for suggestions and views has been interpreted in certain quarters to mean that in all certainty, we are about to reopen schools.

It is important to stress that this is not the case. No

decision has been taken by the Ministry of Education (MoE) to reopen schools on any particular date.

### Preparation, planning

We all hope that this crisis will be over as soon as possible so that we can return to our normal lives. But hope is not a strategy nor does it cook yam.

We have to prepare, plan and be realistic, and that requires strategic leadership underpinned by innovative thinking.

The future of nine million pre-tertiary learners, alongside that of our teachers and other stakeholders cannot be put on ice forever. We have to find a way out.

In the three years I have been working at the MoE as press secretary to the minister, I have been left in no doubt that the management teams at the ministry, the GES and other sector agencies are fully competent and are able to provide the necessary direction under Dr Prempeh's dynamic and strong leadership in these trying times.

We cannot just cower in fear and panic and then throw our hands up in the air in exasperation.

With the support and active support of all education stakeholders, including teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, faith missions, traditional leaders, the media and the general public, I am left in no doubt that we will confront the challenges that the pandemic poses to us, while ensuring that our schools remain safe and secure for effective teaching and learning, and ultimately improve our fortunes as a nation.

We will beat these challenges together.

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