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SECRETARY LEONOR BRIONES:COVID-19 is not a death sentence!

Leonor Magtolis Briones is the Secretary of the Department of Education.

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I was travelling from Abra to Manila when the President announced the first in a series of lockdowns due to the onslaught of coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19). The Department of Education (DepEd) had just concluded an expanded Management Committee meeting. We were planning for our pivot towards quality education.

DepEd was also gearing up for two national events: the National Festival of Talents in Tuguegarao and the National Schools Press Conference in Isabela. Nine thousand learners, teachers, coaches, and staff would be involved. Many of them were either on the way to the venues or had already arrived.

It was like being hit by a bolt of lightning — totally unexpected and completely devastating. For the DepEd Secretary, the news was horrifying. Any of our 27 million learners and 900,000 teachers could be destroyed by this fierce but unknown virus!

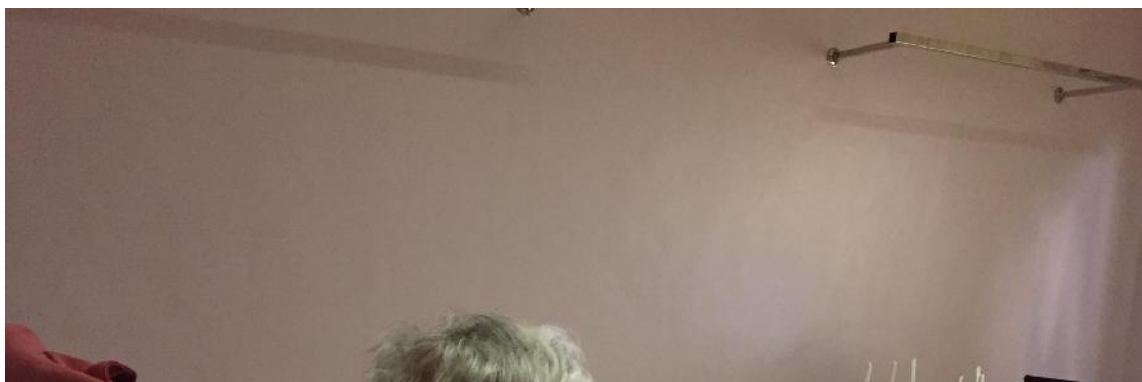
In the midst of the wave of panic, which swept the country, the leadership of DepEd immediately launched a series of planning and operations meetings.

Every day, tough decisions had to be made on a daily, nay, hourly basis. After deciding to proceed with the two festivals, we had to coordinate the travel back home of more than 9,000 learners back to their hometowns after passing through the gauntlet of cancelled flights and lockdowns imposed by local governments. And we brought every single one of our children home — by air, land, and sea.

Decisions. Decisions. We decided to end the academic school year and cancel graduation exercises. After a nationwide consultation process, we announced the opening of classes on Aug. 24, with the approval of the President and the Inter-Agency Task Force on the Management of Emerging Infectious Diseases (IATF). The President likewise approved the Learning Continuity Program upon the recommendation of the IATF.

Each decision, major or minor, was received with curses or praise. Every day, we received rotten tomatoes or fragrant flowers. Fortunately for DepEd, there were more flowers than rotten fruit. More words of encouragement and inspiration than derision and scorn. And yes, more prayers than “P.I.s!”

The President promised financial support for the program even if it meant “scraping the bottom of the barrel.” Members of the cabinet, civil society, education experts, the business sector and local government units offered support and cooperation. More importantly, more learners, parents, and teachers are now coming out to support DepEd’s programs.





The darkness of isolation: Close call with COVID-19

Psalm 91 talks about the “pestilence that stalks in the darkness.” The most terrible experience that a COVID-19 patient undergoes is isolation. In pandemics, isolation is supposed to be part of the cure. The patient is kept away from human contact to protect other humans from catching the virus. However, it is the cruelest form of treatment for any patient.

When I was diagnosed with the dreaded COVID-19, I underwent two weeks of isolation. Upon being declared negative, I was advised to undergo two more weeks of isolation, just to make sure that I was completely healed.



It is terrible to be wrenched apart from family and loved ones, as well as colleagues. However, I had assistance from technology.

I was able to attend IATF meetings, hold DepEd consultations and yes, press conferences even, while I was in physical isolation. Nonetheless, physical separation from my family was an unbearable experience I would not want anyone else to undergo.

“ Our battle cry is “Learning must continue!” Education cannot wait. ”

I emerged from my battle with the COVID-19 pestilence not only healed in body but also renewed in my faith, with the knowledge that those who care about their fellow human beings are more than those who are using this pandemic to destroy and disrupt.

Moving on: Learning must continue

Someone claiming expertise has said dismissively that, “DepEd can’t do it.” A few screamed, “*Mamatay kang mag-isa, P.I. ka!*” But when I publicly announced that I was diagnosed with COVID-19, more than three million people responded with well-wishes and prayers in different languages and rituals.

“ Closing schools is not an option. Delay by one year or even six months will mean incalculable loss in learning for our children who will be left behind. ”

How do I see myself and the DepEd moving forward? First, from my personal viewpoint, COVID-19 is not a death sentence. One can recover from this vile affliction. Many more patients are recovering from COVID-19 than those who are dying from it.

Second, our battle cry is “Learning must continue!” Education cannot wait. I said this during the Marawi crisis. I said this through rebellions, typhoons, earthquakes, fires, and floods.

Closing schools is not an option. Delay by one year or even six months will mean an incalculable loss in learning for our children

who will be left behind. Most of our Southeast Asian neighbors are opening schools in July. One country started classes in June. Their Junior High School students are already frenziedly reviewing for their national assessment tests this coming November even as we are still debating on when schools should be opened!

Once more with feeling on blended education: It is not only about online learning, which is only one of the options. It is also about offline learning. If online learning is not possible, there is television. If television is not possible, there is radio. If radios are not available, then there are our ever-reliable self-learning printed modules which can be delivered to learners by barangay officials and teachers, or picked up by parents.

Third, under COVID-19 conditions, there is no “one size fits all” formula. The mix of learning approaches will be contextualized according to the actual situation in the different regions and different schools.

Finally, will the country be ready by Aug. 24? There are those who are afraid. Others are panicking. Still others are skeptical. A few see the controversy as an opportunity to tear down and destroy the department and its leadership. But others hope. Many more give support. Still others pray.

I do not fear the terror of night. In the words of a great reformer, “Here I stand; I cannot do otherwise!”

Edited by Charmie Joy Pagulong

