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COVID-19: THE PERSONNEL ADMINISTRATIVE MEASURES (PAM) STILL APPLY

Now that most schools have re-opened for Grade 7 and 12 learners, the enthusiasm and commitment of Principals, SMT's and Teachers to get on with the job is commendable, but in some instances also concerning. Enthusiasm must never allow us to ignore or dilute the all-important safety protocols and psychological impact that this stressful time has on all personnel at school. Currently all provinces are facing daily reports of infections of staffs, shutdowns and the resultant panic and anxiety.

On 6 July, a cohort of six additional grades, plus ECD pupils, will be returning to schools, whilst a revised 2020 School Calendar has just been published by the DBE. All this, with the continued requirements of providing a healthy and safe working environment and maintaining social distancing, can place an understandable amount of pressure on Principals to manage an extremely difficult situation.

The "Guidelines for the development of school timetables" issued by the DBE present schools with different timetable models to minimize the risks of learners and personnel in schools contracting and spreading the infection. It is left to individual schools to decide the model that will best suit their circumstances. It is accepted that schools might even have to adopt different models, or a combination of models, at different stages, as circumstances change (e.g. when greater numbers of learners return to school). Of importance is that schools must adhere to a maximum of 50% of learners at school at any given time.

We have studied the guidelines and are comforted by the fact that it confirms that the proposed time-tabling models do not affect the rules and policies that govern the working conditions of educators. The provisions of the PAM relating to the working hours of educators are still in force, namely that educators should be at school during the formal school day, which should not be less than 7 hours per day. The seven-hour day includes the breaks and the period(s) in which the learners are not at school.

NAPTOSA wishes to remind Principals that the COVID-19 situation cannot be regarded as circumstances that will allow for a discretionary change to the number of working hours of educators. This remains the subject of the collective bargaining process. Reports of Principals extending the working hours per day and/or requiring educators to teach on weekends, is therefore extremely worrying. NAPTOSA will not tolerate such actions by Principals. This is especially true for primary schools, where, we believe, no "catch-up" is required.

Deviation by Principals from the working hours established by the PAM, is only possible if it is **in consultation** with the relevant educators. **In the absence of such consultation, members are informed not to abide with such deviations and to approach their relevant NAPTOSA provincial office for assistance.**

An important aspect of the guidelines is mindfulness to prevent educator burn-out. In this regard the guidelines *inter alia* propose that-

- Free periods and breaks must be created to avoid both teacher and learner fatigue and burnout; and
- Free periods must be provided for teachers and support staff to increase their efficiency and also to provide time for their correction work and other administrative tasks.

We call on Principals to ensure that these proposals are adhered to and to also consider the psycho-social impact that the pandemic is having on educators. To add additional pressures on educators, be it regarding working hours, through unrealistic output. Schools must be a caring, nurturing environment for all.

As NAPTOSA we believe that many of the pressures facing schools in this COVID-19 era can be alleviated by proper and timeous planning. The next hurdle to be crossed is the return of the next group of learners on 6 July 2020. Schools should dedicate the following few weeks preparing to receive these learners so that we do not find ourselves in a situation where these learners have to be turned away from schools that have re-opened , because the health and safety equipment and materials are deficient. In addition, we need to be timeously informed if such learners cannot return due to PPE's not being delivered or being of insufficient quantity.

The Revised School Calendar.

The Calendar represents the clearest picture to date of a poorly conceived document completely out of touch with the realities of COVID-19 and real school situations.

The fact that thousands of teachers were engaged in online teaching and other work during lockdown and that learners receiving schooling at home, be it via online teaching or by parents, have equally had no break, have not been factored by the Department.

The fixation with making up the 200 days is disturbing as it ignores the psychological impact of the lock-down on both staff and learners. Closing on 15 December demonstrates that little thought has gone into this. Schools need to be cleaned thoroughly before closure to enable a smooth reopening in 2021. Can this happen in the Christmas week?

These and other concerns were directed to the Director-General, imploring him to intervene and delay the promulgation of this calendar, but clearly to no avail, leaving us with a product of no consultation.

Be safe, be careful and do not let your guard down.

BASIL MANUEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR