



NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS – CONCERNS, CONCERNS

NAPTOSA is being inundated with queries pertaining to the COVID-19 situation and the re-opening of schools.

The queries broadly fall into the following categories:

- What is NAPTOSA doing to protect members?
- What is the position of education staff faced with circumstances that make it difficult to return to school, e.g.-
 - ✓ Staff who are older than 60 years
 - ✓ Staff with co-morbidities
 - ✓ Staff who are pregnant
 - ✓ Staff who have children that will still have to remain at home when they start working at school?
 - ✓ Fears about health and safety
 - ✓ Concerns that some provinces, and even schools, may act outside the ambit of the accepted protocols.

The first that needs to be understood is that we are dealing with not only an unprecedented, but also an extremely fluid situation. Decisions today, might not apply tomorrow. There is an abundance of information that is available, and becomes available daily, but sometimes it evolves as quickly as it arrives.

Amid this scenario, NAPTOSA has continually engaged the Minister and Department of Basic Education (DBE) and consistently pushed the health and safety issues of our members as the top priority. We have not wavered in our position that the lives of teachers and learners are paramount.

Together with other education unions, we have presented a set of non-negotiables to the Minister that must be met before schools are to re-open. These have been taken on board by the Minister when she announced the measures for the re-opening of schools.

We are thus at a point where the focus has shifted to the monitoring of delivery by the National and Provincial Departments of Education. We are aware that provinces are at various stages of readiness and remain firm that we will not accept anything less than full compliance with the announced pre-conditions for the re-opening of schools. Whilst we have demanded to be involved

in the monitoring process at all levels, it is clear that unions will be reliant on the official declaration by a Provincial Education Department that the schools in its sphere of responsibility are fully compliant with the required measures. This is where you, our member, will play a critical role by completing our questionnaire on the readiness of your school to re-open.

Whilst the general and standard health and safety measures to prevent infections are reasonably imbedded in society and will be enforced in schools, there remain several issues and areas that still need addressing and which NAPTOSA will monitor closely. These include-

- Overcrowding in schools – we are awaiting reports on how this will be addressed. NAPTOSA demands that sufficient classrooms be provided to ensure the enforcement of reasonable social distancing.
- Appointment of screeners and testers – every province must contract persons to perform these functions – these are not functions to be fulfilled by education staff.
- PPEs – unions have been assured that schools will have a full complement of PPEs (face masks, sanitizers, cleaning products, etc.) before schools re-open. We will need specific sign-off, per school, by officials that this has been done.
- Appointment of cleaning staff – current staff appointed for this function are not adequate to daily, and more than once a day, clean classrooms and other school facilities. More cleaning staff will have to be contracted, especially in areas where there are no cleaning staff
- Transport of learners – this is a critical area. Official transport of learners could relatively easily be monitored, but not the private transport of learners. NAPTOSA calls on all persons involved in the private transport of learners to adhere to the prescribed guidelines in this regard.
- Provisioning of water to schools – regular washing of hands is one of the basic preventative measures. If a school does not have water the department must provide it, and in sufficient quantities.
- Special schools and hostels – these schools have unique dispensations that require additional measures. Because there are varied types of special schools, a “one size fits all” approach will not be adequate for these schools.

Once there has been an official declaration by the Minister and Education MECs that the non-negotiables have been met, it will be difficult to argue why education staff and learners should not return to school. As trade unions we need to be mindful not to be seen to be shifting the goal posts on the re-opening of schools.

Having said this, NAPTOSA fully understands the health concerns of members who fall into the category of vulnerable persons and we have raised these concerns with the DBE. We expect the Department to clarify the position of education staff in this category before they are expected to return to school, based on sound medical advice. As NAPTOSA we are also regularly in contact with expert health professionals to guide our responses to the Department. As for education staff who will be saddled with children who must remain home when they return to school, the Department has been requested to investigate the possibility of accommodating such children.

It is encouraging to hear that there is scientific evidence that children generally only contract the virus in an extremely mild form and are asymptomatic. If this is so, it could make the re-opening of schools more agreeable. Until this evidence is supported by the body of health scientists, we will remain cautious. As a responsible union we are, however, still listening and evaluating the body of evidence presented by the health professionals.

NAPTOSA continues to be engaged with the DBE in the following committees and will keep members informed when information is forthcoming from such committees:

- Institutional Development and Management
- Orientation, Training and HR Provisioning
- Management and governance
- Curriculum and Examinations
- COVID-19-Essentials and Resourcing
- Health and Safety
- Infrastructure
- E-Learning and E-Governance

Opening of the Sector:

The sector was set for re-opening to start on 4 May 2020. NAPTOSA is aware that many district offices and provincial offices have not opened as they were not ready for re-opening. No staff are to return until they are summoned and then only if the offices are ready with all the essentials in place as described above.

The same applies to SMT's on 11 May 2020. Only return once called and all is in place.

This applies evenly to teaching staff on 18 May 2020. You may only return when called and if all the conditions are met.

These conditions are for your own safety.

In summary, NAPTOSA is not opposed to the re-opening of school, **provided all the non-negotiables are in place in all schools.** As indicated, your assistance will be crucial to monitor this.

Please be assured that our position on the health and safety of our members remain unchanged.

**BASIL MANUEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**