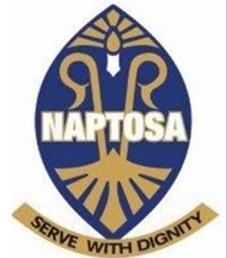


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RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS

Confusion reigns in education after the Department of Basic Education's report to the Portfolio Committee yesterday, exacerbated by the fact that the Deputy Minister had to attempt to correct the Director-General's presentation. This was totally unnecessary.

Up to yesterday the Minister and Department, but for leaked documents, had handled the situation correctly by having the Minister making official statements. To have the DG make a presentation to the Portfolio Committee a day before the Minister was to make an official announcement, is incomprehensible and has left the public completely confused.

The Department listed a number of non-negotiables which were raised by unions in consultation with the Department. NAPTOSA's take on non-negotiables that must be in place before schools are re-opened are the following:

- COVID-19 Essentials must have been delivered to all schools before re-opening, including, face masks, sanitation supplies, PPE's for frontline staff and teachers, hand washing facilities
- Screening equipment and the identification and training of dedicated persons
- The urgent need for school health protocols
- All Primary school feeding schemes must have supplies delivered
- Water supplies to the almost 7000 schools that have water challenges
- A coherent plan for social distancing, which additionally requires that outstanding furniture (desks) be delivered to schools where learners are currently three and four to a desk
- The provision of mobile classes to the chronically over-crowded schools
- Clear guidelines on the filling of posts of those teachers with underlying health issues as well as the over 60-year olds
- The provision of additional substitute posts in all provinces
- Clear guidelines on the additional support to all our special schools
- Transport- social distancing in DBE supplied transport and Special School transport. Transport by parents, vans, taxi's etc. implications for social distancing
- Psycho-social support for teachers and learners who may be traumatised by the loss of loved ones or even the trauma of contracting the virus.

The time frame for the re-opening of schools proposed in the presentation leaves little or no time for all the measures to timeously be in place, leaving NAPTOSA with little choice but to withhold our support for such a proposal. With Gr 12 and 7 learners to return to school, it means that, barring a few exceptions, **all the approximately 26 000 schools** must be fully equipped to ensure the health and safety of our teachers, education support staff and learners amid the COVID crisis. This is clearly not achievable.

According to the Department PPEs will be delivered to schools before re-opening. These orders have only been placed now. How could they possibly be ready in time?

The proposal on the issuing of masks to learners leaves a lot to be desired. S.28(2) of the Constitution states that "A child's best interests are of paramount importance in every matter concerning the child". There are no exceptions. Therefore, if masks are to be issued it must be to all children irrespective of the quintile school they attend. Many children in quintile 4 and 5 schools come from non-affluent homes.

The Department also has to be very specific as to whose responsibility it will be, should children come to school without the necessary masks - will it be the parents, the principal or the school? As for school transport, will the Department be able to ensure screening of learners before they are transported, because it will make little sense for them to be in vehicles where there will be close contact, only to be screened once they get to school?

The President has repeatedly indicated that all the lockdown measures have been necessary to protect lives. This principle cannot only apply in as far as citizenship is concerned, but when it comes to being an education worker or a learner it becomes less important. NAPTOSA says "Saving the academic year can never trump the lives of our members and of learners".

In fact, as a responsible employer, the health and safety of employees should be the Department's highest priority, especially in the current climate of fear and uncertainty.

In discussions with the Minister, NAPTOSA called for a proper risk assessment, with the involvement of the unions, to be done in every province. There is no indication that this has been done. We therefore demand that the Minister postpones the date proposed by the Department for the re-opening of schools until such an assessment has been completed or that she makes a public declaration that every school to be re-opened is fully COVID-19 equipped.

In the absence of such a postponement or declaration, and based on the employer's responsibility to provide a safe working environment to employees, NAPTOSA will seek legal advice on whether members could be compelled to return to work.

Let's trust that sanity will prevail when the Minister makes an official announcement later today.k

BASIL MANUEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR