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World Day for Safety and Health at Work– 28 April 2026

“Let’s Ensure a Healthy Psychosocial Working Environment”

World Occupational Day for Safety and Health follows just as we reflected on Freedom Day and days before, all workers celebrate Workers' Day. These three days are celebrated at a time when worker health and safety are at an all-time low, when job opportunities are almost non-existent for our youth, and the promises of the New South Africa seem elusive to most citizens. NAPTOSA calls on all members, the Department of Basic Education (DBE), the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET), all Provincial Education Departments (PEDs), as well as the Department of Public Service and Administration, to confront worker mental wellbeing. The International Labour Organisation (ILO) highlights the challenges faced by our educators and education workers daily: ***a psychosocial working environment that is broken, and a mental health crisis that is no longer deniable.***

We take a moment to honour the workers who have lost their lives while on the job, as well as those who have endured life-altering injuries and continue to suffer from occupational diseases because of their jobs. We reaffirm our strong commitment to the principle that no worker should ever have to choose between earning a living and protecting their health.

A landmark study by the University of Stellenbosch (2025), based on a nationwide survey of over 1 500 teachers, revealed:

- 🕒 50% of teachers want to leave the profession within 10 years, primarily citing excessive workloads and administrative burdens.
- 🕒 70% identified administrative duties as their primary source of stress.
- 🕒 Burnout is leading to depression, anxiety, and, in severe cases, substance abuse among educators.
- 🕒 The psychosocial environment in schools is shaped by workload, job security, safety, dignity, power relations and the physical environment. When these are misaligned as they systemically are in South African schools, they produce chronic stress, burnout, compassion fatigue, and diminished professional identity. These are not personal failures; they are occupational injuries.

The mental health crisis in education is inseparable from systemic funding failures. School infrastructure funding has declined by 28% in real terms between 2017 and 2025. The national government’s failure to fully fund the 2023 wage agreement has created a fiscal crisis across all provinces, forcing departments into impossible trade-offs between salaries, infrastructure, and LTSM.

More than 70% of schools face staff shortages, with some classrooms operating at a ratio ranging between 1:50-1:80 or even higher. South Africa currently produces approximately 28,000 teachers annually; if this is not increased, the system will

face a shortfall of 50,000 teachers by 2030. The ILO clearly states that a workplace cannot be considered truly safe if it is psychologically unsafe. For educators in South Africa, this is not just a theory; it is a reality they experience every day.

The Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) Act clearly states that employers must, where reasonably practicable, provide and maintain a safe and healthy work environment that does not pose risks to employees. However, the Inspectorate Directorate within the Department of Employment and Labour, which is responsible for monitoring, enforcing, and ensuring compliance with national labour legislation, including the OHS Act, is inadequately resourced. This lack of resources affects their ability to monitor and enforce compliance effectively, and they often have limited presence in many provinces.

Inspectors should be equipped not only with technical knowledge but also with empathy, effective communication skills, and psychological awareness. They need the tools to identify and address issues that may not be reflected on a standard safety checklist.

NAPTOSA calls on DBE, DHET, and all PEDs to take immediate and measurable action:

- 🇷🇷 Implement educator mental health programmes with access to professional counselling and psychological support for all education personnel.
- 🇷🇷 Reduce workloads and administrative burdens that are the primary driver of teacher burnout, as evidenced by the Stellenbosch University study.
- 🇷🇷 Fill vacant posts urgently and reverse post-provisioning norms that are strangling schools.
- 🇷🇷 Allocate resources for the Inspectorate to visit schools and ensure compliance with Occupational Health and Safety (OHS) regulations.
- 🇷🇷 Eradicate remaining pit toilets and resolve the water contamination crises. The March 2025 DBE deadline has passed – Eastern Cape and Limpopo backlogs must be eliminated without further delay.

As NAPTOSA, we reaffirm our commitment to the **#SafeSchoolsEqualSafeNation campaign**. We call on all members to remain vigilant, report unsafe conditions, and stand united in demanding accountability. A workplace that is physically unsafe is a violation of the Constitution. A workplace that is psychologically unsafe is no different. The safety of our educators' physical and mental health is the foundation on which quality education is built, and on which the future of our nation depends.

Mr BL Manuel
Executive Director