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REACTION TO THE 2026/27 BASIC EDUCATION BUDGET VOTE SPEECH

NAPTOSA has noted the Budget Vote speech delivered by Minister of Basic Education, Ms Siviwe Gwarube. While we acknowledge several welcome commitments, we must also place concerns firmly on behalf of our members and the learners they serve.

ECD and Foundational Learning

NAPTOSA welcomes the significant progress in ECD registration, with more than 13 300 centres registered, exceeding the target by 33%. The launch of the ECD Nutrition Pilot in the Eastern Cape is a positive step, but it raises an important question that demands an honest answer: why are we still piloting nutrition interventions for young learners when the National School Nutrition Programme has operated successfully in primary and secondary schools for years? The evidence is already in our hands. The lessons have already been learned. What new insights does this pilot seek to uncover that decades of implementation have not already taught us?

We support the Minister's commitment to directing Funza Lushaka bursaries toward Foundation Phase education in 2026. Investing in teachers at the earliest grades is exactly where the system leverage is greatest. We, however, question if this move is sufficient and if an approach should not be to NSFAS as well as to foreground ECD teacher training.

NAPTOSA welcomes the Minister's honesty regarding the R10 billion funding shortfall for Grade R professionalisation, but cautions that redirecting R800 million from the ECD Grant merely shifts the crisis rather than resolving it. The alignment of Grade R practitioner salaries with Foundation Phase educators is a long-overdue equity matter that demands dedicated, sustainable funding from National Treasury, not reallocation from other critical early learning programmes. NAPTOSA calls on both the Department and Treasury to urgently secure a standalone budget commitment that protects the entire early childhood development value chain.

Teacher Development and Bureaucracy Reduction

NAPTOSA strongly welcomes the Minister's acknowledgement that excessive bureaucracy is stealing teaching time from classrooms. The directive to provinces to drastically reduce reporting tools is long overdue, and we will hold the Department accountable for meaningful, measurable implementation. The teacher unions have yet to be consulted on how this will happen. This we remind the minister is imperative.

The commitment to provide 10 000 Foundation Phase teachers with targeted literacy and numeracy training this year is welcomed. Quality teaching, not policy documents, is what improves learning outcomes. NAPTOSA will engage closely with the proposed review of the teacher allocation formula to ensure that it genuinely benefits Foundation Phase staffing levels and does not simply redistribute existing vacancies.

We welcome the intention to conduct the second South African Systemic Evaluation to measure Grade 3 literacy and numeracy competencies. We, however, do not support the stated intention to move toward annual rollout of such assessments. We must focus on appropriate interventions for learners as well as work sections that were assessed and had not met the minimum standards.

Infrastructure and School Safety

Progress on eradicating the 2018 SAFE Initiative pit toilet backlog to 99.9% completion is noted. NAPTOSA nonetheless echoes the Minister's own frustration: it has taken far too long. The R16.3 billion allocation to the Education Infrastructure Grant for safety, sanitation and overcrowding relief is welcomed, and we expect transparent, timely reporting on delivery against that allocation.

Violence and intimidation in and around schools remain a serious concern for our members. We support strengthened learner wellness and anti-violence interventions and call on all stakeholders, including government departments beyond Basic Education, to treat school safety as a shared, urgent priority. 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.

Procurement Integrity

NAPTOSA welcomes the Minister's decision to launch an independent external investigation into the Foundation Phase National Catalogue process. Concerns about deviations from competitive bidding procedures for learning materials affecting Grades 1 to 3 learners are extremely serious, and the public interest demands a credible, transparent outcome. Teacher unions have been an integral part of the finalisation of the National Catalogue process at DBE; however, recently, we have been kept out.

We remind all parties that procurement failures in education are never administrative matters alone. Every irregular process risks placing substandard or delayed materials in the hands of our youngest and most vulnerable learners. NAPTOSA will monitor this investigation closely and expects its findings to be made public.

Conclusion

NAPTOSA recognises that this Budget is tabled under significant fiscal pressure, and we acknowledge the reform commitments the Minister has outlined. However, commitments must translate into classroom reality. NAPTOSA will continue to engage constructively with the Department while holding it accountable on behalf of our members, and on behalf of every child who deserves a strong foundation.

Mr BL Manuel
Executive Director