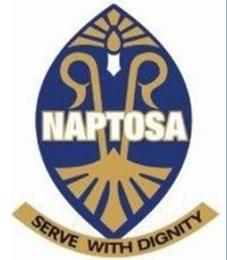


NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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ISSUES RELATED TO RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS 2021

In National News Flash 2 of 2021 it was indicated that NAPTOSA would be seeking urgent engagement with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on all the areas of uncertainty and those that defy logic, emanating from the Deputy Minister's announcement on 15 January 2021 on the re-opening of schools 2021.

Several meetings have since been held with the DBE, the outcome of which can be reported on as follows:

Amended Directions regarding the re-opening of schools 2021

The Minister of Basic Education will be publishing a set of amended Directions to address, prevent and combat the spread of the COVID-19 virus in the DBE, all Provincial Departments of Education, all education district offices and all schools in compliance with Government's Regulations on (adjusted) COVID-19 Alert Level 3.

NAPTOSA and the other recognised education trade unions were afforded an opportunity to comment on the amended Directions, several of which we still do not agree with, e.g. the proposed dates for return to school of SMTs and teachers and education support personnel.

On recommendation of the unions, the Department agreed to issue a consolidated set of Directions to facilitate ease of reference and to avoid a situation where a number of previously issued Directions need to be read in conjunction with the intended amended Directions to gain a full understanding of all the applicable measures.

Dates for return to school

As indicated previously, we welcome the postponement until 15 February 2021 for the return to school of learners. We, however, remain opposed to the announced dates for staff members to return to school. In our discussions with the DBE, we tabled our arguments as to why it would be irrational to proceed with the announced dates, inter alia-

- It would bring together approximately one million persons (remember 300 000 Teacher Assistants have been appointed as part of the economic stimulus package) across the approximately 23 000 schools in the country at the time when the re-opening of schools is specifically delayed to minimize infections during the expected peak of the second wave of the virus.
- Schools are likely to become the new super spreader environments for COVID19 when they are actually expected to be closed.

- Schools were required to provide pre-closure reports to district officials, meaning that plans for 2021 and preparations had already been completed in 2020, begging the question what SMTs and teachers are expected to be doing when they have to return to school on respectively 25 January and 1 February 2021. Similarly, once education support personnel, involved in the cleaning of schools, have done this work, it makes no sense to repeat the process without learners attending school.
- Preparing for the return to school of teachers and learners are being advanced as the reasons for the early return to school of SMTs and teachers, respectively. If these preparations have not yet been completed (which is highly unlikely as indicated in the bullet above), they can be performed from home.
- Traditionally school staff return to work two (2) working days before learners. The fact that the re-opening of schools has been delayed does not create an extraordinary situation – it remains a normal school opening scenario to which the traditional return to school date for school staff should apply.

Regrettably, the Department appears to be reluctant to consider the collective input of the trade unions in this regard – even a compromise position put forward by the unions, namely for SMTs to return on 8 February and teachers and support staff to return on 10 February. We trust that the Department will reconsider and for reason to prevail, otherwise they could find themselves undermining the very objective they purport to want to achieve with the delayed re-opening of schools.

Primary schools

In terms of the proposed amended Directions, primary schools **may** allow **all** learners to return to school daily, provided all the health and safety measures are adhered to.

While noting the lower impact of COVID-19 on primary school learners, it does not mean that these learners are less susceptible to being infected, especially since the second strain is said to be more contagious than the first. NAPTOSA therefore recommended to the DBE that primary schools should be compelled to follow the previous requirement of not exceeding a daily capacity of 50% of learners, if they are unable to show that they can maintain social distancing and adhere to all the other health protocols.

Most classes in our primary schools are overcrowded which makes social distancing impossible. In addition, many learners are returning from the holiday and have encountered numerous people during this time. We believe that in proposing that all primary school learners may return to school at the same time, the DBE is being wilfully negligent in endangering the lives of both learners and staff.

Again, we can only trust that the Department will give positive consideration to our recommendation.

School readiness

NAPTOSA remains concerned whether the required PPEs and cleaning materials, in the appropriate quantities, have been supplied to all schools.

As in the past, we demand that the DBE and the Provincial Education Departments confirm that all the safety and cleaning supplies are in place, not only for purposes of the re-opening of schools but also before any teachers and support staff members are expected to report at schools.

We call on all our members to monitor the situation at their respective schools once they return there.

Health and safety

It remains a fact that the situation we find ourselves in is stressful and produces a lot of fear and anxiety. Once school starts, the situation becomes exacerbated. It falls to teachers to ensure that social distancing is maintained and other safety protocols are adhered to. Teacher burn-out is therefore very real and the lack of psycho-social support makes matters worse.

NAPTOSA will continue fighting for an improvement in these services, but it is also important for everyone involved in school to understand the health and safety requirements and strictly adhere to them.

Other school related issues

In the discussions with the DBE it was confirmed that the previous Alert Level 3 Directions pertaining to school sports would prevail. In other words, only non-contact sports will be allowed.

As far as trimming the curriculum is concerned, the DBE, at the end of 2020 (a copy only recently received), issued a circular to Education Departments on “The Curriculum Recovery Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) for 2021”. The link to the ATPs is the following: <https://www.education.gov.za/2021ATPs.aspx>. Please note that for the Foundation Phase, the ATPs only pertain to the first term.

School Governing Body elections are supposed to be held this year. While not always well attended, the elections have the potential to bring a large number of persons to school premises, which, under the current circumstances is not advisable. We are therefore of the opinion that Education Departments and schools should treat this matter with circumspection and not forge ahead with the elections at this stage. We are currently in consultation with the Department on this matter.

On all the matters reflected on in this News Flash, we will continue updating members.

BASIL MANUEL

EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR