



# NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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## RE-OPENING OF SCHOOLS: THE NEXT PHASE TIME TO RECONSIDER

The next phase in the re-opening of schools, when the largest portion of learners are to return to school, is upon us. Our recent joint union survey on Readiness leaves us concerned and unconvinced that the system will be ready for the next phase of almost 6 million learners.

The fact that the next phase will coincide with the expected spike and peak in the COVID-19 cases in our country calls for sober and innovative decisions to be taken by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the Provincial Education Departments. Fixation on the published school calendar as if it is cast in stone will not do in these circumstances. What is needed is flexibility and introspection. Options such as an earlier than intended break, or the postponement of the next phase, rather than having to consider random and unplanned school closures, will have to receive the Minister's and the DBE's serious consideration. We trust that they will not shy away from doing so.

If non-pharmaceutical measures were important in the first phase, they will be critical in this next phase. NAPTOSA therefore holds the Minister and the Director-General to their commitment that the return to school of the next cohort of learners will be guided by assurances that these measures are in place and that schools will only open if it is safe to do so. Information at this stage indicates that there are many schools where PPEs from the first phase have not been replenished, which raises concerns whether sufficient supplies will timeously be delivered to schools for learners of the next group.

Another concern is the varied and inconsistent application of the Standard Operating Procedures by Provincial Education Departments. Whilst one Department decides to close a school when a COVID-19 positive case occurs, another would sanitise the school and carry on with schooling. What is the use of having these procedures if they are not enforceable? NAPTOSA will not hesitate to institute charges against officials who deviate from the Procedures, and in the process misdirect our principals, thereby putting the safety of our members in jeopardy.

Teachers in the current climate already work in a highly stressful environment. Departments seem to underestimate the further psychological impact that these inconsistencies have on teachers. Add to this the inconsistent application of the comorbidity measures and generally poor communication by Departments on issues such as the schooling models to be implemented or how the return of the next group of learners is to be implemented (as a single group or staggered over a number of days) and the psychological issue becomes major.

Provincial Education Departments are becoming stretched trying to deal with the many issues at schools. Departmental offices are empty, unable to assist schools that need help because the available officials are running around trying to put out fires, and this with only Grades 12 and 7 back at school. Learning that many departmental officials are not in the office, but are working from home, not necessarily because of comorbidities, is unfathomable. We call on Provincial Departments to ensure that they open completely, that they urgently bring back all officials not granted comorbidity concessions and that they ready themselves for this next phase.

NAPTOSA remains in discussions with the DBE and Provincial Education Departments on their readiness to receive the next group of returning learners. We are not convinced at this stage that schools are ready. We are also not wavering from our position: Non-negotiables are still non-negotiables, which begs the question “Given what we know now, Minister, is it safe to open schools for the next cohort of learners?”

In summary:

- Our position as NAPTOSA, that we will only support the return to school if conditions are safe, is an absolute.
- Our survey indicates that provinces are NOT ready with non- pharmaceutical intervention measures.
- Added to this is the fact that PPEs from the first phase are still outstanding.
- The psychological impact of the pandemic on teacher, education worker and learner mental health has largely been ignored.
- The ill-advised blanket statement by the Minister, of teachers being dishonest about comorbidities and the further reckless statement that schools do not need replacements for teachers on comorbidity concession-leave, have caused untold instability and anxiety in schools and amongst staff and encouraged reckless action by provinces and districts.
- Revised ATP’s have still not reached schools making planning exceedingly difficult.
- In addition, the expected peak in Covid-19 infections has parents, learners, and teachers in a state of anxiety as never witnessed before.
- Schools are NOT ready to admit the next cohort of learners.
- NAPTOSA calls for a delay in the return of the next cohort until at least the first week of August.

**BASIL MANUEL**

**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**