



# NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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## CLOSURE OF SCHOOLS: PARTIAL MEETING OF MINDS

The President's announcement that schools are to close from 27 July to 23 August 2020 for a period of 4 weeks in anticipation of the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic is the culmination of a series of engagements by NAPTOSA, the other recognised education trade unions and a host of other organisations with the Ministry of Basic Education over the past week.

The call for the closure of schools was based on sound reasons and not because of the education unions wanting to show their strength or the unwillingness of teachers and education support personnel to work, which seems to be a common accusation. The rising infection rate in the country, the expected peak period of infections, the problems being experienced with school readiness, the inconsistent application of the Standard Operating Procedures, the psychological impact of the pandemic on staff as well as the health and safety of staff in these circumstances were some of the compelling reasons for us calling for the temporary closure of schools.

Whilst NAPTOSA is satisfied that a meeting of minds could be achieved to follow the advice of the World Health Organisation (WHO) to close schools during the peak period of the COVID-19 pandemic, we are obviously disappointed that all of the issues tabled by NAPTOSA could not be realised or were watered down.

We welcome the four week closure of schools but cannot identify with the one and two week closure for Grade 12 and Grade 7 learners, respectively. Is government saying that these learners and their teachers are more immune to the virus during the expected peak than those in other grades?

Most frustrating is how the announcement was handled. We understand that the President could not go into any details of how the closure would practically work. It was therefore important that the Minister should have done so, especially keeping in mind that there was one school day left for arrangements to be put in place.

The terse statement by the Minister on the President's announcement has yet again left us with several grey areas and more questions than answers. The Minister *inter alia* highlighted the following, without giving sufficient substance to the issues:

- Allow Grade 12 learners and teachers a break in the first week (27 - 31 July 2020).

- School Management Teams (SMTs) using the whole of the first week (27 - 31 July 2020) to wrap up work at school and returning with teachers a week earlier (17 -21 August 2020) for the return of learners.
- Grade 7 learners to return on 10 August 2020.
- The academic year to be extended beyond 2020.
- School Management Teams (SMTs) to ensure that National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP) continues during the break under safe and orderly conditions.
- Schools must make arrangements with parents for learners to get work or materials for them to remain fully engaged during the break.

From this it appears that members of School Management Teams will not have a break at all and how the school nutrition and feeding schemes are to be continued during the closure period is unclear. The extension of the academic year beyond 2020, without any details, is meaningless. We call on the Minister to urgently pronounce on the matric time- table and, without delay, to engage with stakeholders on the extension of the academic year.

We also call on the DBE and the provincial education departments to utilise this closure period to:

- Replenish PPEs and non-pharmaceutical materials to those schools that had re-opened;
- Ensure the provisioning of PPEs and non-pharmaceutical materials to schools to receive back all grades
- Ensure that those schools that have, up to now, been unable to open, are in a position to do so after the closure period.

NAPTOSA shares the Minister's appeal to communities to protect schools against burglaries and vandalism during the closure period. We cannot allow learners to be further disadvantaged by these criminal acts.

We trust that the Minister will continue her engagement with the education unions as there are clearly a number of issues that will require urgent attention in the short term.

**BASIL MANUEL**  
**EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR**