



NATIONAL NEWS FLASH



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BETTER, BUT STILL NOT THERE YET

As 24 August 2020 gets closer, the 'big' return to school day, there appears to have been improvements in some of the areas of concern pertaining to the opening of schools, but alas, a number of the real concerns still remain.

NAPTOSA and the other recognised unions in the educator sector have just completed the **5th Survey on School Readiness** in anticipation of the re-opening of schools. As expected, the loss of teaching time is significant both as a result of national school closures as well as the number and length of school closures, due to COVID-19 infection rates. NAPTOSA, however, believes that the revised curriculum, if properly executed, could still markedly mitigate this loss, coupled with the apparent reduction in the national infection rate that will hopefully continue to show a downward trend.

The survey revealed that a worrying factor that still remains is poor learner attendance, especially if viewed against the fact that only 51% of schools that participated in the survey managed to send work home to learners and, of those schools, only 40% have had learners complete more than 50% of the work. Even more troubling is the fact that schools indicated that they have lost all contact with 29% of learners and parents.

When NAPTOSA called for the closure of schools during the expected peak period of infections, we consistently expressed the view that education departments should utilise this period to ensure **all** schools are properly resourced with equipment and materials to make them COVID-19 compliant by the time they were ready to receive the majority of learners on 24 August. Remember what our position was: "Non-negotiables are non-negotiables". Sadly, the survey shows that, nationally, we are not there yet.

Another matter of concern revealed by the survey was that, while the ability of schools to conduct the screening of learners as well as the provisioning of water to schools appears to have improved, a situation of full compliance (a minimum standard) has not yet been reached. Especially with regard to water tanks, respondents in four provinces (NC, EC, GP and WC) indicated that they continued to experience serious shortages, with fewer than 30% of schools in these provinces that need tanks, having received them. The refilling of water tanks in at least 3 provinces also remains a problem.

Whilst the percentage of schools that have received the required cleaning equipment and materials, for current circumstances, exceeds 74% across provinces, the percentage drops significantly (with the exception of one province) when viewed against what the position will be upon the return of learners on 24 August 2020. The same pattern is detected insofar as hand sanitisers for frequent sanitisation are concerned.

The survey shows an increase in the confidence of schools that run school feeding schemes to provide meals to eligible learners, but 23% of schools expressed uncertainty as to their ability to do so. Because this will influence a substantial number of learners, we expect education departments to urgently assist those schools that are struggling.

As far as teaching is concerned, schools appear to experience definite challenges in the following areas:

- Planning teaching for returning grades
- Planning for “learning at home”
- Construction of time-tables due to constraints of space and teacher availability
- Assistance from circuit managers

These challenges should not exist if education departments were to perform their assigned functions. We call on the departments to assist the schools that are tussling with these problems and to be severe on those circuit managers and district officials who appear to be neglecting their duties. It cannot be that 34% of schools have only partially received assistance from circuit managers, or not at all.

When only 62% of schools surveyed express confidence that they will have covered the necessary content by the time the National Senior Certificate exams are due to start, it is clear that education departments have major work ahead of them.

There are still School Governing Bodies (SGBs) that have failed to interact with their schools to assess the effectiveness of procedures to safeguard teachers, education support personnel and learners. This is wholly unacceptable. These SGBs ought to realise that they cannot distance themselves from the issues confronting schools. School Governing Body Associations must bring these negligent members in line.

Like so many other organisations, fee-paying schools have also felt the brunt of the lockdown situation. We petition the parents of these schools to make their school fees contributions to enable schools to continue to pay municipal accounts, print learning and teaching material and employ additional teaching, administrative and security staff, for the benefit of their children.

After having analysed the results of the survey, the question is “Where does this leave us?” NAPTOSA has never wavered from its position and is not bound to do so in the face of progress in some areas of school readiness. If the required PPEs, equipment and materials are not available at

any school before they open their doors for the grades that are set to return on 24 August, these schools should not accept learners and must remain closed to them until such time as the requirements are met. Equally, if these resources are not available for teachers and education support personnel they are not to remain at the school. COVID-19 health and safety standards have not been relaxed during the school closure period and NAPTOSA will not accept any watered-down application of these measures.

For the umpteenth time we call on the DBE and provincial education departments to make the most of the remaining period until 24 August to ensure complete readiness of all schools. At this late stage there should be no school that is prevented from receiving learners (from all the returning grades) because of insufficient, or absent, COVID-19 resources.

To our members who have already returned to school and those who will be returning in the week to come, thank you for your dedication to our learners and to the education system. Please remember, NAPTOSA will not relent in its struggle to ensure a safe working environment.

BASIL MANUEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR