



ATTEMPTS TO DECLARE TEACHING AS AN ESSENTIAL SERVICE

NAPTOSA is opposed to teaching being declared an essential service. Essential services are commonly defined as those services whose interruption might inflict substantial harm on the population at large. For example, police, firefighters, and emergency medical professionals are cases of essential services providers. In recent years, however, some governments have resolved that primary formal education should be added to this list of essential services.

The Labour Relations Act (LRA) defines an essential service as “a service the interruption of which endangers the life, personal safety or health of the whole or any part of the population”.

We must remind those who are calling for education to be declared an essential service that South Africa is a member of the International Labour Organisation (ILO) and that the Freedom of Association Committee of the Governing Body of the ILO has found that the education sector does not constitute an essential service.

The debate on whether teaching should be declared an essential service or not is not new. In 2010 NAPTOSA reacted to the Democratic Alliance’s call for teaching to be declared an essential service. NAPTOSA pointed out the many critical issues that needed urgent attention in education and they included inter alia, reduction of class sizes, provision of adequate resources, fixing school infrastructure, supply of new teachers, retention of teachers, correcting the use of teachers outside their areas of specialization, addressing the quality of teacher training and development and ensuring that suitable people are appointed for the job.

The resurgence of declaring basic education an essential service, follows a five-year hiatus by the government. The former president, Jacob Zuma also attempted to rehash the idea in 2013 and he was called upon to rather focus on dealing with the working conditions of teachers. Teachers are often expected to facilitate learning under extremely difficult circumstances, and to support learners in ways that extend far beyond curriculum delivery. Teachers need to be appreciated, respected and to be treated with dignity.

Declaring education an essential service undermines the legitimacy of the grievances that teachers try to raise, through the right to strike, including poor working conditions, lack of teaching resources, and low remuneration. It is an attempt to silence the teachers by weakening their bargaining power. The investigation is detracting from challenges regarding resources. It doesn’t give more money. It doesn’t give more resources. It doesn’t assist with upgrading of teachers. It is just a statement on paper.

NAPTOSA believes education is not an essential service, because no lives and properties are at risk when teachers strike. In fact, for a legal strike to take place, notice is served on the employer and parents are informed. Learners’ lives are never put at risk as parents are requested to keep their children at home.

Declaring Education an Essential Service will be cosmetic. The debate simply draws attention away from the real issues in education that need fixing.

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