



1 May 2020

JOINT MEDIA STATEMENT ON THE PRESENTATIONS BY THE MINISTERS OF BASIC EDUCATION AND HIGHER EDUCATION, SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY REGARDING THE REOPENING OF THE PRE-SCHOOLS, SCHOOLS AND HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

As the COVID-19 pandemic wreaks havoc around the world we are experiencing the greatest display of solidarity in human history. This is the solidarity we expect in our education institutions and we as education trade unions felt that we should jointly respond to the Ministers' plans. The lockdown and confinement are in place to prevent the rapid spread of the virus within communities.

The pandemic response was and still on containment and mitigation and supporting the health and care workers who are on the frontline in the retail, cleaning, security in many other vital sectors. The schools and higher education institutions were closed before the actual term closure as part of the strategy to disrupt the spread of the virus. This strategy was adopted in many countries as part of flattening the infection curve and we as education unions supported this strategy because the spread of the virus had to be fought in every learning institutions and workplace.

Today is World Workers Day and we salute the workers in health, care workers and other frontline sectors whose work is essential to saving lives and providing vital products and services. We also salute all our teachers and lecturers who continue doing their utmost in helping learners and students under difficult circumstances.

We have noted the presentations and plans by both Ministers.

The post schooling plans as outlined by the Minister of Higher Education will be monitored and we will engage with the department from time to time to address the challenges that might arise.

We have further noted the dates as determined by the Minister of Basic Education with regard to plans for reopening onsite education as opposed to the higher education sector that shall not be reopening.

According to the Minister these dates were informed by health experts and education specialists. She indicated that the plan was based on scientific information hence we regard these dates as forming part of her social contract with the people of our country. The announced dates will help us and the public hold her accountable for the delivery of the essentials as required for the fight against

the spread of the virus via our schooling system. These dates will also be used by unions to monitor progress on the implementation of the non-negotiables as stated in the plan.

We wish to emphasise the importance of the dates because the health experts and curriculum specialists who advised the Minister knew and assured her that by the 11th May 2020 all the non-negotiables shall be in place because the School Management Teams (SMTs) are required to report to schools. The work of the SMTs is to plan the timetables and how to receive the teachers and support staff. It is paramount that their health and safety be guaranteed.

It is not the duty of the SMTs to supervise infrastructure or fixing of schools. It's not the duty of the SMTs to install sanitizers nor to deep cleanse the schools (i.e. fumigation or disinfecting the schools). That is the work of public works or the infrastructure unit of the department. The SMTs will have to tick the list of the completed work and determine if the teachers and support personnel can return to work.

We therefore call upon the district or circuit offices not to require Principals to come to circuits before the 11th May 2020. The Principals will receive the masks on the 11th May after they have been screened by the health officials at the schools as stated by the plan. They must also find all sanitizers installed. The entire SMTs may only be called on the 12th May when all the essentials were ticked to be 100% delivered. The SMTs must be screened daily by the health officials and have their social distancing determined and then plan for the return of the teachers.

To understand the reopening of district and circuit offices, and the required number of staff, we shall request an urgent meeting with the Minister. Our Provincial Secretaries will also request urgent meetings with the MECs and Heads of Departments in provinces to monitor the plan by the Minister and further provincial plans. These meetings must happen before the 6th and on the 10th we shall request a final meeting with the Minister to tick the box of all the non-negotiables. If there is no progress the Minister will be required, in the interest of transparency to address the nation about the reasons and how the challenges are being addressed. Workers will not be expected to report for duty because there will be no safety. The law requires that the employer guarantees a safe workplace for the employees.

The unions shall request the Minister to regulate or reduce her presentation into a circular with all the details to assist the circuit, districts and head offices on the one-third of the workforce that may return to work, as required under Alert Level 4.

This will include those who will have to report for duty from the 4th May 2020. All employees shall be provided with PPEs and the offices shall have been deep cleansed as well.

The unions shall request the Minister to also detail in the regulations, or a circular, how to deal with special schools, pre-schools, employees with pre-existing conditions, the elderly and all aspects of comorbidities. The regulations should also address the issues of pregnancies.

The regulations should furthermore address how combined schools shall be treated when it comes to both Grade 7 and Grade 12 reporting on the same day at the same school. They must further provide clarity on the boarding schools as it relates to hostels. All these things are critical to avoid any loss of life.

To clarify this point, the WHO has highlighted six conditions that should be met before governments start to lift current restrictions on social and physical movement related to the spread of COVID-19:

1. Disease transmission is under control.
2. Health systems are able to “detect, test, isolate and treat every case and trace every contact”.
3. Hot spot risks are minimized in vulnerable places, such as nursing homes.
4. Schools, workplaces and other essential places have established preventive measures.
5. The risk of importing new cases “can be managed”.
6. Communities are fully educated, engaged, and empowered to live under a new normal.

The fourth point of the WHO conditions is what make us list all that the regulations must address because we are still in Alert Level 4.

In our last meeting with the Minister, we agreed that she would meet the Unions on the 11th May for feedback of the implementation of all the non-negotiables. Now that she has determined the dates before reporting progress to us, we request that she meet with us on the 10th May for report back.

We wish to request that the issue of Regulation 16(5) which provides that

- a) *Any person who was not at their place of residence, or work before the lockdown period and who could not travel between provinces, metropolitan and districts during the lockdown, will be permitted on a once-off basis, to return to their places of residence or work and will be required to stay in such place until the end to the Alert Level 4,*

be addressed in the regulations or circular because teachers and support staff in education travel daily from one province to the other. This is the reality and we are making this request because we take the regulations very seriously. We value the lives of our people and anything that can increase the transmission of the virus must be addressed urgently.

The unions have expressed their desire and commitment to participate in the curriculum realignment in order to discharge their responsibilities as mandated by the practitioners from the classrooms. Teachers are professionals and experts in their work and their inputs in the catch up programme is vital.

We wish to remind the Minister of the agreement for our team of medical experts to be part of the task team that is dealing with modeling and planning to avoid schools being new epicentres of the virus.

We call upon the minister and MECs in their respective provinces to secure permits for our leaders to travel to districts and circuits to monitor and report back to us.

******* End of Statement*******

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