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NAPTOSA

National Professional Teachers' Organisation of South Africa

STATEMENT BY NAPTOSA ON NATIONAL YOUTH DAY 2020

On 16 June 1976 learners from schools in Soweto started an uprising that profoundly changed the socio-political landscape in South Africa. It had its origins in the education policies of the apartheid government of the day. Now, 44 years later, learners are again under threat, this time from an unseen adversary.

No one could envisage at the start of 2020 how disruptive the year would be to our country, specifically to learners and students. Every academic year is jam packed as it is. To lose more than two months of schooling seems overwhelming, but knowing the calibre of teachers we have and the resilience of learners, it is believed that we could still see a positive academic outcome by the end of the year.

Ever since the Disaster Management Act, 2002, was invoked by Government to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic in South Africa, NAPTOSA has held the position that "Saving the academic year can never trump the lives of our members and learners". But because we have been alive to the plight of learners and teachers who did not want to see the academic year lost, the union has worked tirelessly to ensure that schools re-open; however, not without all the necessary health and safety measures in place to protect learners and teachers.

Sadly, a universal re-opening of schools was unachievable because of the failure of education departments to timeously provide the required COVID-19 protective equipment and materials to all schools. Grade 7 and 12 learners, at schools unable to open on 8 June 2020, are therefore further disadvantaged. Attempting to limit the damage caused to the learners of these schools, NAPTOSA has demanded that the Department of Basic Education publish a cohesive plan on how it will ensure that such schools open at the earliest opportunity. Imagine the gravity of the situation if these schools are not re-opened by the time the next cohort of learners are to return to school?

Last year our Youth Day statement largely focussed on violence in schools, because it had developed into a real national crisis. COVID-19 and the resultant closure of schools as part of the national lockdown has, for the past few months, removed this matter from the public agenda.

The opening of the economy under Lockdown Level 3 has, however, already seen a spike in societal violence. Being generally accepted that this is the bedrock of school violence, we could see this problem resurfacing now that schools have re-opened and as more groups of pupils return to school.

Add to this the psychological effect of the COVID-19 pandemic and it is clear that external factors will continue to have a significant influence on the school environment. Throughout our consultation with the Minister of Basic Education and the Department on the re-opening of schools, NAPTOSA has called for the provisioning of sufficient psycho-social services to schools – not only for purposes of learners, but also our educators and education support personnel – to alleviate the pressure caused by this external factor.

On Youth Day 2020, NAPTOSA's prayers are for the health and safety of our children and all our education personnel during this trying time. May we look back next year, this time, to a salvaged 2020 academic year, a COVID free environment and a normalised society.

B.L. MANUEL
EXECUTIVE DIRECTOR