



NEWSFLASH

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COVID-19, SCHOOLS AND THE EXPECTED RECOVERY PLAN

There are many uncertainties about the impact of the current restriction on education and schools. Following numerous speculative media reports in the mainstream and social media, there is certainly a need to communicate more concrete information. The SAOU forms part of the inner circle of planning and is therefore happy to provide answers to some of the most relevant questions, provided that it must be recognized that –

- the lockdown ends on 30 April;
- the information shared forms part of planning;
- answers to all problem situations do not exist yet; and
- no final decisions have been made.

1. Will the school calendar have to be revised?

If the state of Lockdown is terminated on 30 April, the schools will reopen on 4 May, 2020 for teaching staff and on 5 or 6 May, 2020 for learners. If so, approximately 24-26 school days for the first returning grades will be lost. It will not be possible to catch up on the days if no adjustments are made to the school calendar. The preliminary planning is to shorten the June holiday by two weeks and also to shorten the September holiday. However, this will be especially tiring for younger learners and the SAOU is not at all in favour of simply pushing through without any significant breaks.

2. Will maintaining social distances of 1.5m between people (“social distancing”) be mandatory?

The Department of Health and the President's advisory committee on the Corona virus expect the rate of infection to increase after the Lockdown. The Department of Health is adamant that maintaining a social distance of 1.5m is extremely important. Following discussions within the SAOU, this aspect is regarded as extremely complex within the school context. Schools will have to consider compliance very carefully. This will be especially difficult in the lower grades and during public transport. This will undoubtedly have an impact on the demarcation of the playground, joint meetings, class exchanges, communication, staff rooms, etc.

3. Will schools have to be sanitised?

The DBE has indicated that each school will receive a sanitation package with which the school must be regularly sanitized. The initial planning was for external contractors to do this, but the logistics of doing so before the schools' opening on 4 May, 2020 for more than 24,000 schools is not possible. It is also envisaged that more than 24,000 sanitation packages will not be easily delivered to schools on time before 4 May, 2020. Therefore, school boards will have to make appropriate arrangements in consultation with school governing bodies. However, this will not be a one-off action and the continuous sanitation of areas of high traffic and touch viz. door frames, staircases, changing rooms, school desks, etc. must take place to prevent infections.

4. Will masks and other personal protective equipment be provided by the education authorities?

The feasibility of providing this for more than 12 million learners and for more than 400,000 teaching staff on a weekly basis is logistically not possible. There is still great uncertainty about this. The most feasible options are that the education authorities provide an earmarked budget for each school, or that the school itself will have to fund it. However, the SAOU is adamant that the personal safety and health of teachers and learners is non-negotiable.

5. How will it be ensured that infected learners and teaching staff are not allowed onto school premises?

The timely identification of infected persons is crucial in combating infections. It is especially the people who are asymptomatic (show no or few symptoms) that are problematic. It is all the more important to note that the peak of infections is expected during August-September. It is clear that this aspect is crucial. However, in what way and by whom the testing will be done, is still uncertain.

6. Will the same arrangements apply to ELSEN schools?

ELSEN schools are far more complex than mainstream schools and the same measures can undoubtedly not be applied without bias to this sector. The SAOU identified the lack of a coherent approach. The DBE has already been contacted to develop an articulated plan of action as soon as possible.

7. Will nursery schools also reopen on May 4, 2020?

Maintaining social distance of 1.5m will be particularly difficult for many young pre-schoolers. There are still no measures for this age cohort.

8. Do principals and / or other teaching staff qualify for travel permits?

The occupational groups that qualify as essential services are contained in regulations promulgated under the National Disasters Act. Principals and / or other teaching staff are not mentioned in the regulations and consequently travel permits will not be issued easily. A special arrangement will have to be made at the local SAPS office. An affidavit will have to be made as to why an action, e.g. visit to the school is considered essential. The SAPS will then exercise its discretion and issue the permit, or not.

9. Will SAOU members be requested to provide a mandate regarding reopening of schools and the reception program?

During the week of 20 April 2020, SAOU members will be invited to participate in an electronic mandate process and provide mandates on a variety of topics. The mandates will enable the SAOU to communicate with the education authorities on an informed basis and to make the voice of the SAOU member clear and unambiguous.

10. When are answers to the many uncertainties outlined above expected?

The world last experienced a similar pandemic during the Spanish Flu in 1918. Lessons learned there cannot easily be applied to modern education systems. The SAOU is affiliated with Education International, which represents 32 million educators, and during telephone conferences and webinars it is deduced that many countries with disabilities and their effects on education are struggling. Consequently, no easy answers and / or lessons learned from other countries exist. In short, SA is on a steep learning curve and finding answers is difficult. As stated, the planning and documents in circulation are part of planning processes and are not final. Once greater finality exists, it will be communicated to members without delay.

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