

Protocol for dealing with Covid-19 infections at school

The Covid-19 pandemic orchestrated an unprecedented global shift in many countries. Across the globe, nations are combatting the spread of the virus through various measures recommended by scientists, medical personnel and the World Health Organisation. South Africa has followed suit and implemented a strict lockdown in order to curb the spread of the virus. Schools have also been forced to close their doors and have been granted permission to gradually resume teaching and learning under strict hygienic conditions. However, what happens if a learner or employee interacts with a person who tested positive for Covid-19, or becomes infected with Covid-19? This document briefly sets out the prescribed protocol outlining the procedure to be followed by schools.

Protocol

1. Learners

The latest Standard Operating Procedures ('SOP's') instructed schools to ensure their premises are thoroughly sanitised and plans formulated to mitigate the spread of the virus. The SOP's proceeded to highlight the procedure to follow when learners arrive at school, and it should accordingly be consulted in conjunction with this simplified document if uncertainty arises:

1.1 Arrival at School

Principals are issued with instructions to screen learners when they arrive at school, but the new SOP determine that the needs of different learners ought

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to be taken into consideration. All learners ought to be able to understand the content of the screening questionnaires. In the event that a learner is unable to understand the questions, it should be explained to the learner through the use of gestures or visual aids. This is of particular importance where dealing with learners with special education needs.

Learners and staff are to report whether they **feel ill** and **they need to wear cloth masks**. Education authorities should be notified immediately if a person entering the premises has been in contact with a person infected with Covid-19, or if they themselves have been diagnosed with it.

No person, other than a learner or official, may enter a school premises or hostel, unless such person obtains the permission of, and arranges with, the principal or Head of Department in advance before entering the school premises. Fogging or misting of persons accessing the premises is prohibited and a social distance of at least one meter should always be maintained.

1.2 If a learner appears ill, displays symptoms or has been in contact with a person infected with Covid-19

If it happens that a learner appears to carry the symptoms associated with Covid-19, and these symptoms are noticed at the school gate, such learner may not be permitted to access the school premises. On the other hand, it could well happen that the learner develops symptoms during the course of the day and in both instances, our members should comply with the directions prescribed by the SOP. Inform the learner's parents immediately and isolate the learner from other learners and staff members until a health professional can provide

an assessment of the learner.¹ If the learner is not in possession of a face mask, provide him or her with one.

The SOP's prescribe that the school nurse or the nearest appropriate health facility should be notified as well as the National Institute for Contagious Diseases (NICD) Covid-19 hotline at 0800 029 999. Once the matter is reported, prompt instructions will follow.

If a learner has been **in contact** with a person who is a confirmed bearer of Covid-19, then such learner should be **quarantined at home for 14 days and will not be allowed to attend school**. This does not mean the learner should abandon schooling during this period; The Head of Department, or a person duly authorised by him or her, must make reasonable arrangements with schools to ensure the provision of learning material and continued teaching to learners who are unable to attend school. A parent, caregiver or a designated family member, must ensure that the teaching and learning material are collected or accessed as per arrangement with the school.

1.3 If a learner tests positive

¹ It is not the school's responsibility to arrange such an assessment.

Once the situation has been reported, and a positive diagnosis confirmed, the Department of Health is supposed to contact the school and recommend further steps, actions and precautions. If health officials fail to contact the school, the school should contact one of the following relevant provincial officials:

Provincial Communicable Disease Control Directorate			
Eastern Cape	Thomas Dlamini Nosimphiwo Mgobo	thomas.dlamini@ehealth.gov.za Nosiphiwo.Mgobo@ehealth.gov.za	083 378 0189 060 579 9027
Free State	Dikeledi Baleni Babsy Nyokong	balenid@fshealth.gov.za nyokonqb@fshealth.gov.za	083 757 8217 082 463 7499
Gauteng	Chika Asomugha Caroline Kesebilwe	Chika.Asomugha@gauteng.gov.za Caroline.Kesebilwe@gauteng.gov.za	082 330 1490 083 490 8165
KwaZulu-Natal	Premi Govender	premi.govender@kznhealth.gov.za	071 609 2505
Limpopo	Marlene Freda Ngobeni Mashudu P. Mudau	Marlene.Ngobeni@dhsd.limpopo.gov.za Prudance.Mudau@dhsd.limpopo.gov.za	079 491 1909 071 678 3864
Mpumalanga	Mandla Zwane Hluphi Mpangane	MandlaZw@mpuhealth.gov.za hluphim@mpuhealth.gov.za	082 229 8893 076 522 8511 / 013 766 3411
North West	Chriseldah Lebeko	clebeko@nwpg.gov.za	082 421 7985
Northern Cape	Gloria Hottie	hottieg@webmail.co.za	072 391 3345 / 053 830 0529
Western Cape	Charlene Jacobs	Charlene.Jacobs@westerncape.gov.za	072 356 5146 / 021 483 9964

In most cases, **closure of schools will not be necessary**. Closure and dismissal will be discussed below.

2. Staff

Schools have a duty in terms of the Occupational Health and Safety Act to ensure that the workplace is reasonably clean and safe. To this end, the SOP provides:

2.1 If a staff member appears ill, displays symptoms or has been in contact with a person infected with Covid-19

If an employee had been in contact with an infected person, he or she should self-quarantine for a period of at least 14 days. The matter should be reported to the DPSA

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via the dedicated email address: COVID-19@dpsa.gov.za. The Department of Health will issue further instructions, if necessary. If other employees have been in contact with the aforementioned employee, then the Head of Department should formally allow them to self-isolate for a period of 14 days as well. These employees can request to continue with their duties from home.

The same procedure applies if an employee is suspected of being infected with Covid-19. The employee should self-isolate for 14 days. If they are already at school, they should be isolated on the premises while arrangements are made regarding transport to a medical facility. These arrangements are initiated by reporting the employee at the NICD hotline at 0800 029 999.

1.4 Learners that may not access the school premises

Certain learners are identified by the SOP and may not return to school when schools reopen. These learners should be assisted by schools to resume their schooling using alternative methods. The following learners have been identified by the SOP:

- Learners with comorbidities;
- Learners from Covid-19 hot-spots;
- Learners whose parents feel their children's lives are being put at risk (the obligation to ensure the learner's education moves apace falls on the shoulders of the parents – the parents ought to contact the school to make appropriate arrangements).

Schools should ensure that mechanisms are in place to assist parent, guardians and caregivers in contacting the school should their children not be able to return to school.²

² See par. 28.3 for a detailed discussion regarding learners with special education needs.

2.2 If an employee tests positive

In this regard, distinction should be made between departmental educators, departmental non-educators and SGB staff.

In the event that a departmental non-educator tests positive, the HOD should formally grant the employee sick leave, in accordance with the [Determination and Directive on Leave of Absence in the Public Service](#).³ Incapacity leave should also be considered or ill-health retirement processes should be initiated as a matter of last resort, if the non-educator has exhausted his or her normal sick leave. The HOD should formally grant approval for all employees who worked closely with the infected employee to self-quarantine for a period of 14 days.

The provisions of the *Personnel Administrative Measures* apply with regards to departmental educators, and these measures should, for additional guidance, be read in conjunction with the [State of Disaster: Protocol for Principals of Public Schools in Respect of Leave for Educators Affected by Covid-19](#),⁴ as well as the Education Labour Relations Council's [Collective Agreement](#) 1 of 2020 regarding concessions for employees with comorbidities. In terms of the abovementioned protocol, principals may grant an employee special leave with full pay for a period of 14 days if such an educator has been screened and tested for Covid-19 because such an educator had travelled to a high risk area, been in contact with confirmed or suspected Covid-19 bearers or been at a facility where Covid-19 patients are treated.

With regards to staff members employed by a governing body, governing bodies should follow the procedure set out in FEDSAS' '[Covid-19 Occupational Health and Safety](#)'

³ This document is available at www.fedsas.org.za → Covid-19 Related Documents → C19 Useful Information.

⁴ See in particular par. 4.4: Special Leave for Purposes of Quarantine. This Protocol is available at www.fedsas.org.za → Covid-19 Related Documents → C19 National Department of Education.

Measures in the Workplace' which can be found on www.fedsas.org.za → Covid-19 Related Documents → C-19 Legal Opinions.

A list of these employees must be kept and submitted to the Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) and contact must be maintained with such employees as a means of monitoring and support. Reports of cases of COVID-19 and those who are in quarantine must be submitted to the DPSA, in the required format, via the dedicated email address: **COVID-19@dpsa.gov.za**. Thorough cleaning and disinfection of the infected person's workspace must also be conducted. An infected and isolated employee may only return to school if he or she tests negative for the virus.

2.3 Employees refusing to report for duty

In some instances, employees might refuse to report for duty because they are fearful of contracting Covid-19. In terms of South African labour law, an employment contract is the **legal link** between an employee and an employer. The conditions of employment are set out in the contract and one of these conditions is when an employee may **legitimately** not report for duty.

As far as the Covid-19 pandemic is concerned, the Department has put measures in place to ensure that the workplace is a **reasonably safe workplace**. If an employee, out of his or her own volition, decides to stay at home, such will be **misconduct**, which should be dealt with in accordance with **established disciplinary procedures**. The **burden of proof** is on the **employee** to prove how the school is **not** a safe workplace. However, it should also be mentioned that staff members with comorbidities or those who are at a higher risk should, as far as possible, be allowed to work from home.⁵

⁵ See in this regard the Education Labour Relations Council Collective Agreement 1 of 2020 for departmental staff.

2.4 School offering therapeutic services

Many learners rely on therapeutic services offered by schools and steps are set out in the SOP to ensure the continued provision of these services in a safe manner. The SOP encourages schools to study the steps posited in the SOP and contextualise them for the unique circumstances and needs of the school, learners and staff, with emphasis placed on preventing the spread of Covid-19.⁶ See paragraph 21 vir a complete discussion regarding these steps.⁷

3. Distinction between closure and dismissal of schools

A school **closure** means the school closes its gates and no one is allowed to teach and learn on the school premises. Closure of schools should not be taken lightly and in terms of the *Directions* issued by the Department of Education in Notice 343 of 2020⁸ can only be ordered by the relevant Head of Department after **consulting with health officials** and following **procedures set out by the relevant provincial department**.⁹ The latest SOP indicate that closure of schools will be unnecessary in the event of a suspected or concerned Covid-19 case if the person in question was in a classroom, or on the school premises, for less than two days, whilst infected. Close and direct contacts should be

⁶ Par. 21.2 "...the therapeutic team must contextualise the guidelines to suit the unique setting of the school and learners being supported."

⁷ See also par 25 for a discussion regarding the provision of learning aids.

⁸ The full title of the *Directions* is "Directions Issued in Terms of Regulation 4(3) of the Regulations Made Under the Disaster Management Act, 2002 (Act no. 57 of 2002) Regarding the Re-opening of Schools and Measures to Address, Prevent and Combat the Spread of Covid-19 in the National Department of Basic Education, All Provincial Departments of Education, All Education District Offices and All Schools in the Republic of South Africa" as published in *Government Gazette* 43465 of 23 June 2020.

⁹ Some provinces might issue additional circulars with additional instructions pertaining to the closure of schools. See for example, Gauteng Department of Education Circular 8/2020 which prescribes at 4(c) that schools may only be closed upon recommendation of a Public Health Official. Schools should ensure close cooperation with provincial education and health departments for guidance in this regard. However, the *Directions* provide clear guidance that the authority to close a school is vested in the Head of Department in consultation with a health official.

monitored in such an event and relevant areas should be thoroughly cleaned and sanitised. Closure of schools will, however, be unnecessary.

Dismissal of schools refers to learners being sent home. During school dismissals, schools **may stay open for staff** and childcare programmes (unless they are ill) while **learners stay home**. Keeping facilities open will allow educators to develop and deliver lessons and have access to teaching resources and materials remotely, thus maintaining continuity of teaching and learning. In the event of a cluster outbreak (where more than 25% of a class is suspected of having, or tests positive for, Covid-19), the relevant class, grade or division may be dismissed for isolation. Two days is sufficient for cleaning and sanitising.

Conclusion

Even though governing bodies are independent entities, they are required to provide their support and cooperation when attempting to curb the spread of Covid-19. Report infections or suspected infections immediately and ensure the advice and instructions of officials from the Department of Health are implemented. The closure of schools should be a matter of last resort and can only be done by the Head of Department after thorough consultation with the Department of Health. If schools are closed, determine the time when the school can reopen through consultation with the Department of Health. Ensure the school is sanitised thoroughly in the meantime.