

**GUIDELINES FOR SCHOOLS FOR BLIND AND PARTIALLY-SIGHTED
LEARNERS IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19**

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1. Introduction

The accommodation of learners who are partially sighted or blind in schools and hostels during the COVID-19 pandemic requires consideration of the complex and unique needs and accommodations needed to ensure their school attendance is in their best interest. The Minister of Health, Dr Zweli Mkhize, has described the fight against COVID-19 as a people's war against the virus:

We will defeat the pandemic on the basis of collective social behavioural change, that creates a whole new culture of distancing, of use of masks, cough etiquette and ensuring that everybody is cautious of their individual roles, because unless our citizens themselves take responsibility of infection control, then off course we will not be able to win.

From the above, it is obvious that our chance to win lies in our acts of meticulous planning, preparation and constant awareness. A higher degree of these capabilities is, however, required where schools have learners and persons with disabilities or who may be vulnerable and susceptible to contracting COVID-19. For instance, a range of complicating factors may arise in a school context, due to the nature of vulnerabilities and the manner in which schools manage their daily practices in response to these complexities, that may compromise the safety of learners, teachers and support staff.

To this end, these guidelines provide an outline of steps that may be taken in order to limit the chance of contraction of the virus in Schools for Blind and Partially Sighted Learners and at the same time honour their rights and special needs. Schools are alerted to the fact the strength of these guidelines lies in them being used and applied in conjunction with directions from the following documents, which are freely available at www.education.gov.za :

- *Coronavirus Orientation Guidelines for Schools, Teachers, Support Staff and Learners on the COVID-19 Outbreak in South Africa;*
- *DBE Guidelines for Schools on Maintaining Hygiene during COVID-19 Pandemic;*
- *ELRC Collective Agreement 1 of 2020: Concession process to follow for employees with a comorbidity (COVID-19); and*
- *Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities.*

2. Key considerations

- 2.1 Inform the visually impaired learner of the new measures in place to prevent the spread of the virus.
- 2.2 Give the learner information regarding the procedures. Tell the learner about the new procedures regarding the wearing of masks, sanitisation of hands and the taking of temperature. Discuss the steps in detail and inform the learner what he/she would be required to do.
- 2.3 Keep in mind that blind and partially sighted learners may not be able to see demarcated lines on the floor and will have to be guided vocally or by using

physical barriers on where to stand. In some instance, this may mean that additional staff may have to be on duty for this purpose.

- 2.4 Blind learners will not be able to see how far the distance between themselves and the other learners is, and must be encouraged to use their sense of hearing and, where applicable and appropriate, their canes in judging the distance between people.
- 2.5 Learners must be encouraged to be fully independent in mobility and not to request other learners to guide them. Mobility guidance can first be provided vocally, in order to encourage physical distancing, encouraging as much as possible for them to retain a sense of self-mastery. However, when required by the individual learner, mobility assistance needs to be given, as this is the right of every child who has a visual impairment. This may also be needed where learners, who are typically independent, may be suffering from severe anxiety or mental health challenges due to the pandemic.
- 2.6 Accentuate that no books, brailers, stationary, toiletries and other items must be shared. The equipment that leave the school premises must be sanitised to ensure it is not contaminated.
- 2.7 Blind learners trail and touch walls almost automatically in an attempt to find their way. This puts them at greater risk of possible infection. Therefore, i) these areas need more frequent sanitising; and ii) learners need to be alerted to the need for more frequent washing of hands. In this regard, learners should understand the additional importance of and not touching their faces.
- 2.8 The needs and requirements for personal protection for schools for visual impaired learners may be more extensive due to the fact that learners may touch all surfaces more frequently than other categories of learners. This will place a huge responsibility on the educators and support staff to be provided with the necessary materials and equipment so that they are able to comply with a more stringent schedule for disinfecting the areas in terms of frequency and surface areas
- 2.9 The containment, management and prevention of COVID-19 at a School for the Blind and Partially Sighted Learners requires extensive planning and implementation which may require additional human and financial resources in order to keep learners, teachers and support staff safe.

3. Containment of the disease

All learners, educators and support staff should:

- 3.1 Heed the directives issued by the President and the guidance provided by the Ministry of Health with regard to COVID-19.
- 3.2 Avoid gatherings as the disease is spread through direct contact with the respiratory droplets of an infected person, which are generated through coughing, sneezing or talking.

- 3.3 Maintain a social distance of at least 1.5 to 2 meters with others, where possible. It is recommended that a phased approach to the arrival and departure of learners must be applied to further limit physical interaction. Staggering break times must also be used to prevent a concentration of learners in common areas.
- 3.4 Avoid touching the face (i.e. eyes, nose, mouth) with unwashed hands, as well as handshakes, hugs, kisses and sanitise or use soap and water to wash hands frequently. Given the fact that blind and partially sighted learners trail and touch walls and other surfaces almost inevitably as they move around, schools must prepare for the fact that more supply of sanitisers and soap will be necessary to ensure that this as hygienic as possible.
- 3.5 Be encouraged not to share electronic devices, utensils and meals or drinks, textbooks, stationery or any other items. In order to support this, these items must be sanitised or washed with soap and water regularly.
- 3.6 Consult a healthcare facility if there is a suspected COVID-19 infection.
- 3.7 Inform the education authorities immediately if a learner, educator, support staff or parent/caregiver has been in direct contact with an infected person, or if they are diagnosed with COVID-19.
- 3.8 Contribute to the eradication of all forms of stigma and discrimination as a result of COVID-19.

4. Wearing of fabric facemasks

- 4.1 Learners must wear face masks and/or shields at all times according to the requirements of the Department of Health. Schools need to provide blind learners and low-vision learners with the choice of which they find most comfortable, either a face shield or a mask, and no learner should be forced to wear the one they choose not to.
- 4.2 Learners must be taught:
 - 4.2.1 that before touching the mask, they must clean their hands with an alcohol-based hand rub, any appropriate sanitiser available or soap and water.
 - 4.2.2 to place the elastic loops behind the ears or tie at the back of the head so the mask is snug, and to adjust as necessary so that the mask covers the nose and chin comfortably.
 - 4.2.3 not to pull down the face mask when speaking, coughing or sneezing, especial when there are other people nearby.
 - 4.2.4 not to exchange their face masks and/or shields with other learners.
- 4.3 Face shield or cloth masks need to be washed with warm soapy water and dried in the sunlight, and for cloth masks they need to be ironed daily. Communication should be distributed to parents, educators and all staff on taking care of the

cloth masks, as well as to learners in the most accessible manner for their specific and individual needs.

5. Personal hygiene

- 5.1 Learners must be encouraged to do the following:
 - 5.1.1 Frequent (at least six times a day) washing or sanitising of hands, with soap and water, for at least 20 seconds at a time.
 - 5.1.2 Learners must maintain personal hygiene. Schools must consider allowing learners to wear civvies in order to encourage clean clothes daily.
 - 5.1.3 Learners should, if possible, avoid touching their faces and more specifically avoid touching their eyes, mouths and noses. We recognise that this can be a challenge for learners who have a visual impairment, as they may be more prone to touching their eyes, however, for this reason particular attention needs to be given to this point.
 - 5.1.4 Learners must cover a sneeze or cough with a flexed elbow or tissue and then immediately dispose of the tissue and then also properly sanitise their hands afterwards.

- 5.2 Schools must also refer to the *DBE Guidelines for Schools on Maintaining Hygiene during the COVID-19 Pandemic*.

6. Reporting

- 6.1 When a child/learner appears to be sick or displays symptoms of COVID-19, such as dry cough, high fever, respiratory distress or shortness of breath, loss of taste or smell, diarrhoea or report a sore throat, the procedure below must be followed:
 - 6.1.1 Isolate the learner and keep them separate from other learners and staff until they can be assessed by a health professional. The school must ensure that the learner has full understanding of what is happening and why, and for the isolation to be responsibly managed in an area in which the learner feels safe and where they are able to communicate easily with a staff member in an office nearby, in order to avoid any unnecessary anxiety.
 - 6.1.2 Provide the learner with a face mask or face shield if they do not already have one on.
 - 6.1.3 The parents, caregivers or guardians of the child/learner must be informed immediately.
 - 6.1.4 Call the school nurse or the facility manager of the nearest health facility, the NICD toll-free emergency hotline for COVID-19 (0800 029 999) or the provincial officials, whose details are listed in the *DBE Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities*.
 - 6.1.5 The school will be advised on any further actions to be taken.

- 6.2 When a case of COVID-19 is confirmed, the following action should be taken:
- 6.2.1 The school will be contacted by the relevant public health officials to discuss the case, identify people who have been in contact with the infected person and advise on further actions or precautions that should be taken.
 - 6.2.2 If a school has not been contacted regarding a possible case of COVID-19 in the school, they must contact the relevant provincial official whose details are listed in the *DBE Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities* or the NICD toll-free emergency hotline for COVID-19 on 0800 029 999 for referral to the relevant contact.
 - 6.2.3 Public health officials, with the assistance of relevant staff, will conduct a risk-assessment and provide recommendations on the management of children/learners and staff.
 - 6.2.4 In most cases, closure of the school will not be necessary. The decision to close will be school- and context-specific, and must follow the procedure in Section 5.9 of the *Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities*.
- 6.3 Where a child/learner may have been exposed to a suspected/probable case of COVID-19, or a suspected case for whom testing for COVID-19 is inconclusive as reported by the laboratory, the following action must be taken:
- 6.3.1 If a child/learner has been in contact with a suspected case of COVID-19 in a school, no restrictions or special control measures are required until the laboratory test results for COVID-19 have been received.
 - 6.3.2 There is no need to close the institution or send other children/learners or staff home or hostel.
- 6.4 Where a child/learner may have been exposed to a confirmed case of COVID-19, the following action must be taken:
- 6.4.1 All close contacts of a confirmed COVID-19 case are required to quarantine in their homes or any other approved facility for 14 days while being monitored for symptoms. This means that the learner may not attend school or classes during this period, and the school must make alternative and appropriate arrangements for them to continue to receive education. The learner needs to fully understand why this is happening and what quarantining means. Parents need to be informed of the additional hygiene needs of the blind or partially sighted learner.
 - 6.4.2 Learners who are not contacts of a confirmed case should attend school. Family and friends who have not had close contact with the confirmed case do not need to take any precautions or make any changes to their own activities such as reporting to school or work, unless they begin to develop symptoms.
 - 6.4.3 Learners who have interacted with a healthy contact of a confirmed case, specifically, should not be excluded from school. A person who comes

into contact with the healthy contact of a confirmed case, is unlikely to result in transmission.

6.4.4 All case contacts who become symptomatic will be immediately tested by health authorities for COVID-19, and if they test positive for COVID-19, active contact tracing and self-quarantine of all contacts will be implemented.

6.5 Keeping learners at home or closing schools is a serious decision which may restrict the learners' ability to acquire education, amongst other considerations. The decision to direct learners to stay at home or any other approved facility, because of possible exposure to, or infection with COVID-19 should be justified by the available scientific evidence and must be directed by the accountable health authorities.

7. Hostel and dining rooms

7.1 Learners must adhere to physical distancing guidelines by keeping at least 1.5m to 2m apart and also ensuring this spacing between beds, at the tables and when queueing for food. This means that learners must under no circumstances share beds or share their food and utensils with other learners.

7.2 Learners must bathe/shower daily with warm water and soap and wear shoes when going to the bathroom. This means that there must always be a sufficient supply of (warm) water and soap.

7.3 Learners must be encouraged not to socialise in other learners' rooms. However, this may have negative consequences for the wellbeing of learners. Therefore, schools must therefore find creative ways of ensuring sufficient opportunities to socialise safely and that learners' mental and emotional wellbeing is not undermined.

7.4 Learners must be encouraged not to share toothbrushes, beds, towels, washcloths, eating utensils and/or food and drinks or any other items.

7.5 Learners must wear face masks at all times, particularly when they are around other persons or fall in the categories as specified in the *Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities*.

7.6 If a learner is sick at the hostel, guidance in section 5.3 of the *Standard Operating Procedure for the Prevention, Containment and Management of COVID-19 in Schools and School Communities* must be followed.

8. Learners returning to school

8.1 The following categories of learners may not return to school:

8.1.1 *Learners with comorbidities that pose a risk to severe COVID-19 as guided by the Department of Health:* For these learners, schools must ensure that they

set up appropriate mechanisms for these learners to continue with their education.

8.1.2 *Learner from hotspot areas*: For these learners, schools must ensure that they set up appropriate mechanisms for these learners to continue with their education.

8.1.3 *Learners whose parents have concerns about them returning to school in the context of COVID-19*: Parents, guardians and caregivers for these learners must make necessary arrangements with schools to ensure that the education of their children continues.

8.1.4 *Learners whose parents have opted to home-educate*: Parents, guardians and caregivers of these learners must register their children in line with the *Policy on Home Education*, and need to provide evidence of how they will ensure full access to all learning and learning materials to these learners, through appropriate materials and pedagogy for blind and partially sighted learners.

8.2 For the above to happen, schools must set up appropriate mechanisms for parents, guardians and caregivers of the above categories of learners to inform the school in respect of the reasons for not returning to school, and these learners must be assisted to fully understand why they are not returning to school.