



## **MAPSSS QUESTIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS TO MEDE AND HEALTH AUTHORITIES RELATED TO SCHOLASTIC YEAR 2020-2021 IN THE CONTEXT OF COVID-19 OUTBREAK**

**August 2020**

MAPSSS would like to bring to the attention of MEDE and the Health Authorities a list of questions raised by parents through different channels, including social media and emails. We kindly request that these questions are addressed when discussing the three scenarios that are being taken into consideration regarding the schooling of our children in the coming months.

Some parents prefer that their children would return to the school routine, whilst others wish their children to have online lessons; the common underpinning concern of the parents is the safety and well-being of the children and their educators.

Notwithstanding the different positions of the parents, all parents wish that their children are offered a safe environment to proceed with their education. Our role as an association is to bring to the attention of MEDE the concerns of parents to facilitate communication between the different parties.

The parents' questions and recommendations are organised as points according to the three scenarios being taken into consideration by MEDE regarding the schooling system to adapt for the scholastic year 2020-2021<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> These points are an addition to the issues raised during MAPSSS meeting with Dr. Frank Fabri on 6<sup>th</sup> August and the follow-up email sent on 12<sup>th</sup> August 2020.

## **Scenario 1: Remote/Online schooling**

- During the shut-down of the schools from March till June 2020, not all the students needing technical support, such as internet access, tablets, computers, etc, have been reached. How does MEDE intend to overcome the issue of students that “disappeared off the radar”, which have not been in touch with their teachers/schools since the beginning of the outbreak and/or that have not been provided the technical support?
- During the past months, have educators been offered training to online teaching?
- MAPSSS believes that educators (teachers and LSEs) should be provided with more detailed guidelines on the frequency and how they are to communicate with their students online, yet in-person.
- Following the home-schooling experience during the last term, MAPSSS recommends a standardisation in the use of online tools by teachers and urges that every class is provided with the necessary support to follow up on their curricula.
- Should this scenario happen when the new scholastic year starts, MAPSSS believes that students should be supported on a psychological level due to the negative impact of the pandemic on children’s mental health, as suggested in several academic research papers.

## **Scenario 2: Schooling in School Premises**

### Queries regarding Kinder/Primary classes:

- Will wash hand basins and soap for frequent washing of hands be available in classrooms of all kindergarten and primary students?
- Will Breakfast Club service be available and if so, what kind of protocols will be set up?
- Will the prefabricated mobile classrooms similar to those used in St-Paul's Bay Primary school still be operational? If so, does the ventilation system conform with the recommendation of the health authority?

### Queries regarding Secondary classes:

- We note that student clusters will be more difficult to organise due to the frequent change of classes and groups according to subjects and tracks. How does MEDE plan to overcome this issue to guarantee contact tracing and avoid a whole school being put in quarantine if one positive COVID-19 case is found?
- How will break time be organised in Secondary schools, considering that some schools are already reaching their full capacity and social distancing might be difficult to implement?

### Common issues in Primary and Secondary:

- Will students be requested to wear a facemask/visor?
- In the eventuality of a student's parent/guardian to be found positive to Covid-19, will the class be automatically in quarantine?
- Will a swab test negative result be required from the students and, if so, how frequently will these tests be carried out?
- In the eventuality of a teacher to be found positive to Covid-19, what will be the protocol in terms of quarantine for the class?
- If a teacher is in quarantine, will s/he be replaced by another teacher if no quarantine is required for the students? Will online teaching be provided in case a teacher is in quarantine?
- If a student does not attend school for medical reasons - not related to COVID-19 - will a medical certificate from a GP be sufficient or will a swab test be required?

- Even before the outbreak of the pandemic, the lack of replacement teachers was already a chronic issue for many schools. How would the absence of a teacher be handled, and what will be organised for the students since clusters can't be mixed?
- The proposed system of bubbles/clusters would not allow shared LSEs who assist children in different classes as this would break the idea of a cluster. How will this be tackled?
- How will a student be supported if s/he will be in quarantine? One cannot dismiss the fact that teachers and students might be in quarantine for a number of times. This will lead to fragmentation of the teaching-learning process that may have serious implications for students, especially for those preparing for high-stake exams as the Sec exams.
- With regard to school transport, how will the clusters be organised considering the fact that children from different schools/different classes will be sharing the same bus? How will social distancing work inside minibuses and coaches? Will supervision be set up to assure the respect of the protocols during transport time and arrival at school?
- How often are the classes to be sanitised? Will school maintenance and cleaning staff be provided with training and the necessary equipment to ensure that schools are being disinfected properly and regularly?

Vulnerable students:

- What are the criteria for a student to be considered as a “vulnerable person” and what will be the protocol that will be set up to identify the vulnerable person? Depending on how the criteria are defined, how many students and educators will be affected? How is this going to affect the student – educator ratio?
- Will vulnerable children be exempted from attending schooling on-site? If a parent or sibling of a student is a vulnerable person, will the student be exempted from attending school?
- What will be organised to allow vulnerable children or children with vulnerable parents/siblings to follow their curricula?
- MAPSSS would also like to bring to the attention of MEDE the fact that the term “vulnerable children” also includes migrant children in open centres managed by the Agency for the Welfare of Asylum Seekers (AWAS, MHAS). These children also have the right to benefit from proper schooling, should this be online or in class. For online teaching, the Government (MEDE, in collaboration with MHAS) should ensure that OC resident students have access to the necessary hard- and software, as well as Internet access, which has not been the case for a number of children and youth during the lockdown that commenced mid-March.
- MEDE should particularly pay attention not to create any situation that might put vulnerable children in a disadvantageous position.

### **Scenario 3: Hybrid System - Remote online lessons and lessons in premises**

It is not clear how the hybrid system will work out. Parents need more information on the hybrid system option, so they will be able to organise themselves and possibly make arrangements with their place of work and families. One cannot ignore that parents cannot necessarily rely on the support of their elderly family members to take care of the children and transport them to and from school to avoid exposing the elderly to further risks of contagion.

#### **MAPSSS Recommendations**

MAPSSS recommends that

- In view of the negative impact of the pandemic on children's mental health, as suggested in several academic research papers, a mental healthcare support unit is organised specifically to support the students. Suffice to say, this unit would need to be adequately staffed and trained.
- In view of the financial burden and the current uncertainties, MAPSSS believes that the mandatory introduction of school uniforms in specific years should be postponed. The choice should be left in the hand of the parents and flexibility should be encouraged.
- MAPSSS recommends that additional programmes are offered online in order to allow students to revise last term programmes. Particular attention should be paid to Maltese as Foreign Language and the recent experience of online teaching should be enforced for such a subject that unfortunately suffers a lack of teachers.
- MIS platform is currently not accessible to some parents and this situation does not allow students to revise previous work properly. MAPSSS questions the fact that the notes/assignments done during the past scholastic year are not showing in MIS.
- In case of a delay in the re-opening of the schools, as suggested in a paper published in the Times of Malta<sup>2</sup>, MAPSSS requests that the service of Klabb 3-16 for children of working parents be extended until the official re-opening of schools.
- Any system that requires working parents to stay at home to assist their children in homeschooling needs to be discussed with the Employer Associations to ensure that parents are given the opportunity to telework (where possible) and that no disciplinary action is taken against the parents where teleworking is not possible.

Considering that MEDE is responsible for both the education sector and the employment sector, MAPSSS would like to ask:

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<sup>2</sup> <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/vulnerable-students-may-be-asked-to-learn-from-home.812187>

- How will parents of vulnerable children be supported in terms of a financial loss if they need to quit their jobs to stay at home to home-school their child/children?
- Does MEDE plan to provide financial assistance to parents in case of a mandatory quarantine?
- Are any guidelines/agreements being discussed with employers as to how to support parents in case their children are in quarantine?

Moreover:

- Will parents be given the possibility to choose whether to home-school their children for the coming year?
- Will it be possible for parents to choose whether to have their children attending school or to have remote online lessons?

## **Conclusion**

MAPSSS notes that the circumstances for the primary and the secondary cycles of the education system are very distinct. Furthermore, the World Health Organisation has published different guidelines for 2-5, 6-11, 12+<sup>3</sup>. In view of this, MEDE may consider different approaches to the three scenarios of the two cycles.

MAPSSS requests that the final decision on the re-opening of schools is to be communicated with parents as soon as possible and not later than Friday 11th September, in order to allow parents and educators to organise themselves accordingly – in terms of professional arrangements but also in terms of logistics should home-schooling be resumed. For the sake of the children’s wellbeing, parents should be in a position to have the necessary time to explain and prepare their children for their new learning reality.

MAPSSS also strongly recommends that MEDE communicates with parents in a more constant and wider way. Formal announcements, protocols, guidelines should be made public on national TV and radio and not limited to MEDE’s website or via Facebook pages. These should be done in both official languages.

Our questions and comments are forwarded to you in the spirit of collaboration for the wellbeing of the children.

-- ENDS --

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<sup>3</sup> <https://apps.who.int/iris/rest/bitstreams/1296520/retrieve>