

**Official statement from the National Parents' Representation
20 April 2020**

Within the context of the current lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic and with reference to the possible re-opening of schools in May, the National Parents' Representation (NPR) wishes to express the following:

With regard to homeschooling:

The National Education Ministry has gone to considerable lengths and has met its responsibilities by putting in place a website (www.schouldoheem.lu) within a very short space of time. This website makes it possible for pupils and parents to access supplementary resources so that pupils can continue studying during lockdown.

Even if, broadly speaking, six weeks or two months of educational restrictions do not seem disastrous within a school career lasting 13 years, the NPR welcomes an initiative that allows pupils and parents to remain connected to the school system.

Equally, the NPR is satisfied that the Minister for National Education, Claude Meisch, has taken into account some of the principal concerns of parents, notably those related to pupils already in difficult situations or who are otherwise underprivileged and the need to focus efforts on essential subjects.

Nevertheless, we would also like to point out that parents are not teachers and can only substitute them in a very limited way.

Moreover, there are considerable inequalities in parents' abilities to assume the responsibility for home-schooling children. For example, understanding of languages used in the Luxembourg educational system, basic competences in specific subjects, and general teaching abilities are distributed very unequally throughout the population. Languages alone are a major pressure for half of the population, given the composition of the Luxembourg society. Moreover, one should not forget that large numbers of parents are working day and night to provide care to patients of Covid-19, or work in other professions providing basic services, or are working from home themselves and cannot, therefore, dedicate sufficient time to teaching their children. Lastly, it should be noted that distance learning requires technical facilities (computers, printers, fast internet access) that are not necessarily available to all families in Luxembourg.

As a result, the NPR is convinced that the online system in place risks exacerbating existing differences and inequalities between pupils and believes that return to school will expose the differences between pupils who have progressed considerably in their studies and those who have gone backwards.

The NPR therefore calls upon the ministry to continue the work it has started and provide the means necessary to reduce the risk of these inequalities to a minimum. One suggestion from the NPR would be to rapidly remind parents of the helpline available to parents (Tel: 8002 90 90) and reorient its services. Given that there are numerous teachers working in more than a dozen languages, we would suggest providing a more comprehensive service to pupils and parents by offering regular support

courses and explanations in different languages. This could be done either by video-link or by telephone. We would also be very grateful if communes, the ministry, schools and other private donors would provide tablets to pupils who need them to access this more comprehensive support.

With regard to the content to be taught during the lockdown period, the NPR supports the approach of the Ministry aimed at focusing learning on subjects that are essential and necessary for continuing the next academic year's programmes. It is a fact that many parents felt overwhelmed by the excessive volume of homework given to pupils during the three weeks before Easter, which also covered too many subjects. In families with many school-age children, these difficulties were so great that it became impossible to manage the children's education in a healthy manner.

The NPR requests that clear guidelines should be set for primary school teachers and that secondary school teachers of all classes should be properly coordinated so as to prevent children being overworked after the Easter holidays.

The NPR is also of the opinion that the lockdown period should be taken advantage of to promote family values and social responsibility with children and pupils. In fact, the current situation provides an unprecedented opportunity for many families to experience a break from normal life, with its stresses, obligations, and constant coming and going. It also gives us the chance to refocus on ourselves and our loved ones, to think about supporting one another, to do housework as a "family team", and to reconnect with a more simple life by being forced to abstain from the over-consumption that is all too present in our society.

With regard to final school year classes and 4.2 cycle:

Lastly, the NPR appreciates the adjustments and modalities implemented for school-leaving exams; nevertheless, we ask the Minister to take all the necessary steps, both in Luxembourg and on a European level, to ensure that access to foreign universities remains completely open to our pupils. Likewise, the cancellation of tests in the 4.2 cycle should in no way result in any pupil being disadvantaged in their access to secondary level schooling. In case of any doubt, decisions should be made to support the wishes of pupils and their parents.

With regard to government plans to re-open schools in May:

First of all, the NPR deeply regrets that the Minister of National Education did not take the necessary step to consult the representatives when putting in place plans to reopen schools and the modalities proposed, given that it is absolutely essential to take parents' opinions in consideration in this particular context.

Firstly, it is undeniable that large numbers of parents are very worried about the gradual reopening of schools in May. This is demonstrated by the fact that an internet petition demanding that schools should not be reopened on 11 May has collected 10,000 signatures in a matter of a few days. Likewise, surveys published on social media show that only 20% of voters agree with government plans and that two thirds of people believe that it is too early for children to go back to school.

The NPR believes that the issue of when schools should be re-opened should be determined entirely by scientific studies and advice on health and safety and not influenced by possible economic, political or other needs.

Secondly, the NPR is against splitting classes into two halves when pupils return to school. Splitting the classes is extremely difficult to implement for pupils, teachers, parents, schools and school management. Moreover, on/off weeks are really difficult to manage for working parents and their employers. Returning to the issue of inequalities, we would find ourselves once again in a scenario in which certain families would be in a ideal position to allow their children to spend off weeks at home

whilst other families would be faced with the same technical, language or organizational difficulties as mentioned above. Splitting classes would do nothing to prevent the growth of inequalities.

Our counter-proposal is to adapt morning timetables in both primary and secondary schools, with classes running from 8 a.m. to 1 p.m. This would also mean that children would not have to eat at school or nearby. The eating of packed lunches also seems impractical and raises many other issues. Obviously, school transport would have to be improved and reorganized for these timetables.

This standard solution for both primary and secondary school would also ease pressure on parents who would be able to work in the morning and, when absolutely necessary, take time off in the afternoon for family reasons.

Thirdly, the NPR believes that children up to six years of age in the first cycle in primary school should not be obliged to return to school for the rest of the school year. It would be extremely difficult for children of this age to obey safety rules, such as wearing a face-mask and social distancing. It should be the parents' decision to decide whether children should be sent to school or schooled at home. The same goes for children with special needs who attend the "Centres de Compétences", who, depending on their particular difficulties, will not all be able to respect the sanitary instructions. For cycle 1 (early years and nursery) and for the "Centres de Compétences", attendance at school should be entirely optional. Parents should decide which option they wish before schools are reopened, so that classes can be properly organized.

Fourthly, clear options should be put in place to protect children in families in which one member is considered to be a vulnerable person. Parents must have the right to choose homeschooling for pupils who normally attend primary, secondary or Skill centres, if medical risks for their children or other members of the family are deemed to be too great.

The ministry should continue efforts to ensure the www.schouldoheem.lu website remains available to all children and pupils who do not attend school, and to expand the range of services available via the helpline. Likewise, it is necessary to organize and continue to monitor and diagnose students with special needs in order to ensure they do not lose time in their special education.

Fifthly, the NPR believes that the importance of basic hygiene rules should be taught to all pupils. The wearing of masks should be obligatory, not only on the way to school and in the playground, but also in classrooms, as far as possible. It goes without saying that plentiful supplies of essential basic hygiene equipment, that is to say, soap, paper, hydro-alcoholic gel and masks, should be available.

The NPR was established by law on 1 August 2018 as a National Parents' Representation.

It is made up of 12 members who were elected for a mandate of 3 years on 8 Feb 2020. Its aim is to strengthen cooperation between schools and pupils' parents by means of a democratically elected body to represent parents and to provide advice to the Ministry of National Education.

The National Parents' Representation may issue opinions on draft laws and curricula, formulate propositions about school life and teaching, and, more broadly, express opinions about any issues concerning the interests of parents and pupils.

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