

Addressing safety risks in special needs schools

In light of tragedies involving learners of special needs schools, and as part of its mandate to continue in earnest to protect all children, the Safety Directorate of the Department of Basic Education prioritised 450 special needs schools in South Africa for Disaster Risk Management Planning - a key aspect of school safety. According to the National Disaster Management Centre (NDMC) among all public facilities, these children are the most vulnerable during disasters.



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South African general insurer, Santam is drawing on its risk management expertise to ensure that the safety of differently-abled learners and their teachers in both urban and rural settings is prioritised and optimised. Santam assisted with the development of a Standard Risk Assessment Tool based on its own survey practices that can be utilised to identify the risk hot spots in special needs schools in South Africa. The Department of Basic Education, the NDMC alongside Santam are working to roll-out its National School Safety Framework (NSSF).

The NSSF outlines 10 measures for a school to be prepared, aware, able to take the required action and to take care of learner safety and security. Even though the plan provides an undeniably robust foundation, the adoption and implementation rate of the NSSF varies across the 24,000 schools in South Africa.

While the framework has been developed to assess risks in all schools, priority is being given to our most vulnerable learners: those who are differently-abled. A pilot project at St Vincent School for the Deaf has been successfully executed and produced some valuable learnings for other schools.

Tersia Mdunge, CSI Manager at Santam, said the pilot was conducted as part of Santam's CSI programme. "We have seen St Vincent's making considerable progress. The school has prioritised our recommendations and scheduled implementation accordingly. We were able to collate some extremely useful learnings which can now be rolled out to other special needs schools."

Mdunge said among the most useful learnings were:

- The existence of a well-functioning School Safety Committee is a minimum requirement. In addition, involvement of the school management, and especially the principal, is essential.

- There is high value in practical simulations, such as the fire drill conducted by St Vincent School, to test its own response and those of key partners [e.g. the Emergency Management Services (EMS)].
- The conscious competence of all staff on-site is every bit as important as protocols. Training and sensitisation play a key part in emergency prevention and risk management.
- Special equipment, such as evacuation chairs, must be a key consideration in schools with learners who have restrained mobility or are wheelchair bound.
- First aid training may have to be focused on the most likely type of emergencies – which depend on the type of activities (e.g. wood working, metalwork, welding, cooking, sewing) the school engages in.

The focus on schools forms a vital part of a broader, successful initiative - the Partnership for Risk and Resilience (P4RR) - which is a country-wide intervention and partnership between Santam and the NDMC, COGTA, District and Local Municipal structures, as well as local communities. Funded by Santam's Emthunzini BBBEE Community Trust, P4RR is an initiative developed to mitigate against systematic risks and to strengthen the capacity of local municipalities so they are able to manage risk 'on the ground'.

The second phase of the pilot continued in early September with the use of the project's Standard Risk Assessment tool at the Thibologa School for the Deaf and Blind in the Thabo Mofutsanyana District Municipality. This assessment was attended by 21 representatives from Learners with Special Education Needs, and Free State Provincial Safety Coordinators in the Free State Province. Santam hopes that the representatives will conduct self-assessment at their own schools and continue to advocate for the safety of their learners.

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