



WAVE 2

National Income Dynamics
Study (NIDS) – Coronavirus
Rapid Mobile Survey (CRAM)

COVID-19 and basic education: Evaluating the initial impact of the return to schooling

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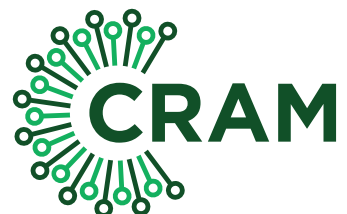
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N.i.D.S.
NATIONAL INCOME DYNAMICS STUDY



CORONAVIRUS RAPID MOBILE SURVEY 2020

COVID-19 and basic education: Evaluating the initial impact of the return to schooling

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Abstract

After schools closed on the 18th of March 2020 in response to the initial spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, a phased approach to reopening schools was adopted by the government. On the 8th of June, grade 7 and grade 12 pupils returned to school, with grade 6 and grade 11 learners returning on the 6th of July. Schools were then closed again on the 24th of July. This paper describes the partial return to school that occurred during June and July, drawing mainly on the second wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey. To what extent was there alignment between the grades that were gazetted to return in June and July and actual school attendance rates by children across the grades? How worried were parents and guardians about sending their children back to school and how did this vary across society? What was the state of readiness of schools to operate under the new COVID-19 regulations? Did school reopening have any observable impact on the spread of COVID-19? Lastly, what can be said about the negative impacts of not being able to attend school on children, whether through nutritional or learning losses? Based on an exploration of these questions several recommendations are then made for the resumption of schooling over the months to come.

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Executive Summary

After schools closed on the 18th of March in response to the initial spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, a phased approach to reopening schools was adopted by the government. This paper describes the partial return to school that occurred during June and July, drawing mainly on the second wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey.

The first main finding is that school attendance rates were significantly lower than usual even in grades that were officially “open”, but perhaps relatively high given the exceptional circumstances. School attendance was highest amongst grade 12 learners at an estimated 88%. A noteworthy finding is that a significant proportion of learners in grades not yet officially open were already attending school in July. This varied widely by household socio-economic status: Amongst the bottom 80% of households, attendance rates for learners in grades “not yet open” ranged between 14% and 19% while it was an estimated 49% for the richest 10% of households, including private schools. This has worrying implications for the potential widening of educational inequalities.

NIDS-CRAM also asked respondents how worried they were about their children returning to school. About 72% of adult respondents living with children said they were “very worried” about children returning to school. Interestingly, there were significantly lower rates of worry amongst more affluent respondents. Higher concern was expressed amongst adult members of larger households and households with very young and older residents. We also observe no difference in reported school attendance rates between those who report being “very worried” and other respondents, at least amongst children in grades that were already open. This may have implications for the way we interpret high levels of expressed concern amongst parents: Even if they are concerned, most of these parents still decide to send their children to school. The high levels of worry about returning to school leads to a key recommendation of this paper: There is a need for clear communication to the public about the low levels of risk posed to children by COVID-19 and about the low rate of transmission from children to adults.

The paper also explores the readiness of schools to reopen under the new COVID-19 standard operating procedures. This was an enormous logistical undertaking, which in most schools appears to have been relatively successful, even if it took a while to adjust. However, this process has also exposed some of the inequalities and vulnerabilities in the school system. Perhaps the most important evaluation question facing the school system in the initial phases of reopening is whether the opening of schools contributed to an unacceptable spread of COVID-19 infections. The limited South African data relevant to this question seems consistent with international evidence that (1) children are less likely to become infected with COVID-19 than adults, (2) children are very unlikely to become seriously ill from COVID-19, (3) children are usually not the ones who spread COVID-19 to adults in schools and homes, and (4) school openings (closures) have not significantly contributed to (mitigated) the spread of COVID-19.

The paper finally considers the impact on child nutrition and learning resulting from substantial lost time spent in school during 2020, ranging from 17% of school days for grade 12 to 43% for grades 5 and 8. About 25% of NIDS-CRAM respondents reported that a child had received a meal at school in the previous seven days (compared to about 80% of learners under normal circumstances). Although it has not yet been possible to measure the effect of South Africa's school closures on learning, the recovery of learning is perhaps the most important matter facing basic education as we move forward. We know from international literature that interruptions to schooling of the current magnitude have serious, and often lifelong, effects on educational attainment and labour market outcomes. South Africa cannot afford greater social and economic inequality and it is therefore imperative to prioritise investments in learning that are based on evidence of impact.

The evidence presented in this paper suggests that the reopening of schools was necessary and

that the phased return seems to have allowed schools to adjust to the implementation of COVID-19 protocols. In light of the low health risk posed by school openings and the high risks posed by school closures, it is crucial that schools now remain open and that access to nutrition and learning be given the highest priority.

1. Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has disrupted much of the world, from public services to private life. Scientific knowledge about the disease continues to evolve while the effects are felt worldwide. This paper is the second education paper from the National Income Dynamic Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM). The first paper (Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe, 2020) dealt with the education context of South Africa, explaining progress in learning outcomes since 2002, what we know about COVID-19 and education quality as well as a proposed model for estimating learning loss and how long these impacts may last.

This paper deals with the impact of the COVID-19 on the basic education sector from July to August 2020, examining the phased return to school and how attendance, school readiness and infection rates changed. The paper also presents information on the perceptions of adults living with children on the return to school and how this might have affected attendance. The paper then discusses an updated estimation of the potential learning loss for 2020 following finalisation of the school calendar, and provides international advice on how learning may be potentially recovered. Finally, the paper reflects on what happened in schools when the national school feeding programme resumed following a landmark court case on the duty of the education sector to continue with school feeding for all grades.

2. School reopening

Knowledge on the transmission of COVID-19 amongst children has shifted dramatically from an argument that schools could be high infection sites to an understanding that children had lower chances of infection, being transmitters and even suffering from the illness. The report⁴ on Wave 1 education data released in July 2020 provides a discussion on these developments and the rationale for them.

School closures have been part of international responses to reducing the spread of COVID-19. In April 2020, schools in approximately 193 countries, including South Africa, were closed. However, this declined to 112 countries at the start of June 2020, the same time at which South African schools reopened. At the start of September 2020, only 46 countries still had COVID-19 school closure.⁵ These numbers may also be affected by the timing of pre-planned academic breaks in some countries.

After schools closed on the 18th of March in response to the initial spread of COVID-19 in South Africa, a phased approach to reopening schools was adopted by the government. Several government gazettes were issued on the dates for school reopening. The first gazette was dated 29 May 2020 and the latest 2 August 2020. *Table 1* provides a summary of the grades and dates during which schools were open from the start of the return to school in June 2020 until the end of August when all grades reopened. The table only provides information for ordinary schools and excludes focus schools and special education needs schools. In addition to the national dates for reopening by grade, the gazettes cited above made provision for deviation from the phased return based on a school's ability to comply with COVID-19 guidelines and approval by the provincial Head of Department. Finally, although the parental choice to not send learners back to school had been acknowledged and permitted, the August 2020 gazette formalised this and provided guidance on

⁴ Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe (2020)

⁵ UNESCO 2020

the commitments and conditions for permission to be granted.

The first grades scheduled to return on the 1st June were grade 12 and 7. However, this was delayed by a week to the 8th June 2020 when provincial monitoring reports indicated that schools had not completed all COVID-19 protocols. After almost a month, grade 11 and 6 were also re-opened on the 6th July 2020. This was a substantial reduction in the grades initially expected to return. Although changes were experienced between the grades expected to reopen and the dates and grades gazetted, the most dramatic change was the closing of all public schools for the week of the 27th to the 30th of July 2020. This announcement by the President happened amidst rising infection rates overall in the country, rather than as a result of schools being high infection zones. The statement by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) alludes to the same, reflecting on the success of the sector in reopening multiple grades but acknowledging the overall increase in infection rates and the psychological and emotional effects of this on learners, teachers and schools as institutions. There was, however, a reiteration of the importance of keeping schools open for the benefit of learners.⁶ This closure was followed by a second round of phased reopening, with all grades expected to be back in school on the 31st August 2020.

Table 1: Phased-in school reopening dates between 1 June to 31 August 2020 by grade

	June					July				August				
	1	8	15	22	29	6	13	20	27	3	10	17	24	31
Grade R														
Grade 1														
Grade 2														
Grade 3														
Grade 4														
Grade 5														
Grade 6														
Grade 7														
Grade 8														
Grade 9														
Grade 10														
Grade 11														
Grade 12														

Source: Own compilation based on GOVERNMENT GAZETTE, 2 AUGUST 2020, DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION, NOTICE 411 OF 2020; GOVERNMENT GAZETTE, 7 JULY 2020, DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION NOTICE 370 OF 2020; DBE statements on changes

Since the onset of the pandemic in South Africa, the decision to reopen schools has been contested publicly by political and education commentators and teacher unions, amongst others. The Educators Union of South Africa (EUSA) filed against the reopening, however, the court case was struck off the roll of the Gauteng High court on the 10th of June 2020.⁷ The court case was followed by a EUSA statement dated the 20th of July 2020 with personal attacks against the DBE spokesperson and Minister, accusing them of misinformation, a mission to commit genocide and failure to protect learners and children and threatening a shutdown of schools on the 1st of August. The statement includes phrases such as “A Dead Teacher Cannot Teach and a Dead

⁶ Department of Basic Education, 2020

⁷ NEWS24, 2020

Learner Cannot Learn!”⁸ A second court case was brought by the South Africa Movement (OSAM) and Mr Maimane, a former Member of Parliament and leader of the opposition. They accused the government of irrational, unlawful measures that were unconstitutional and abandoning efforts to curb the COVID-19 epidemic. The applicants asked the court to put aside the decision to re-open until various readiness and implementation plans were submitted. In addition, the applicants opposed the phased reopening, proposing instead that all schools reopen simultaneously. Evidence considered including international advice by UNESCO, an independent risk analysis by the South African Medical Association, the South African Paediatric Association, and the Paediatric and Adolescent Endocrinology and Diabetes Society. After consideration, the case was dismissed.⁹ The cases cited are not exhaustive but serve to reflect the nature and extent of opposition.

The opposition has continued beyond the legal process through various statements and interviews by a range of stakeholder. More recently there have been some disruptions of schooling by several groups, including School Governing Bodies (SGBs) and Congress of South African Students (COSAS). SGBs in Gauteng reportedly disrupted up to 83 schools in Daveyton/Etwatwa, Tsakane and KwaThema in the first week of August 2020. However, extensive consultations with stakeholders seem to have increased consensus, as the various grades returned to schools.

3. Attendance

Given that the reopening of schools was not a strategy completely without risk, and not universally supported at the time, it is important to assess how many children, in fact, returned to school and how parents felt about it. The second wave of NIDS-CRAM data provides a unique opportunity to measure learner attendance rates during a time where the spread of COVID-19 in South Africa was peaking, and only certain grades were officially supposed to be back at school. However, there are certain complexities in how to measure attendance given the way questions were asked, and that an unforeseen re-closure of schools occurred on the 24th of July, roughly in the middle of Wave 2 data collection.

The first way to measure school attendance is to compare the number of children in the household that were reported to be attending school in March prior to lockdown, to the number of children reported to have attended school in the last seven days. Two limitations of this method are that it is not robust to changes in the number of children present in the household between March and the Wave 2 survey in July or August. It is also not possible to differentiate attendance rates between children who were officially supposed to be back at school and those in grades not yet open. According to this method, it is estimated that 34.7% of children had attended school within the seven days prior to the survey. If we exclude survey dates after the 30th of July (six days after the schools were closed on the 24th of July), the estimated attendance rate only slightly increases to 37.3%. The exclusion of surveys conducted after the 30th of July leads to the exclusion of approximately 22% of the weighted sample.

A second set of questions allows for a better method of estimating school attendance rates. Firstly, respondents were asked for the grade of each child in the household who attended school in the previous seven days. A follow-up question asked for the grade of each child who had not yet returned to school. Unfortunately, after the 30th of July, these two questions do not work as well, since there may be children who had already returned to school but also had not attended school in the previous seven days. If we exclude data collected after the 30th of July, however, we can estimate attendance rates that are robust to changes in household composition since March as well as estimate attendance rates for each grade.

Figure 1 shows attendance rates by grade based on responses gathered between the 13th of July and the 30th of July. As expected, there is a clear difference between the grades that were officially

⁸ Educators' Union Of South Africa, 2020

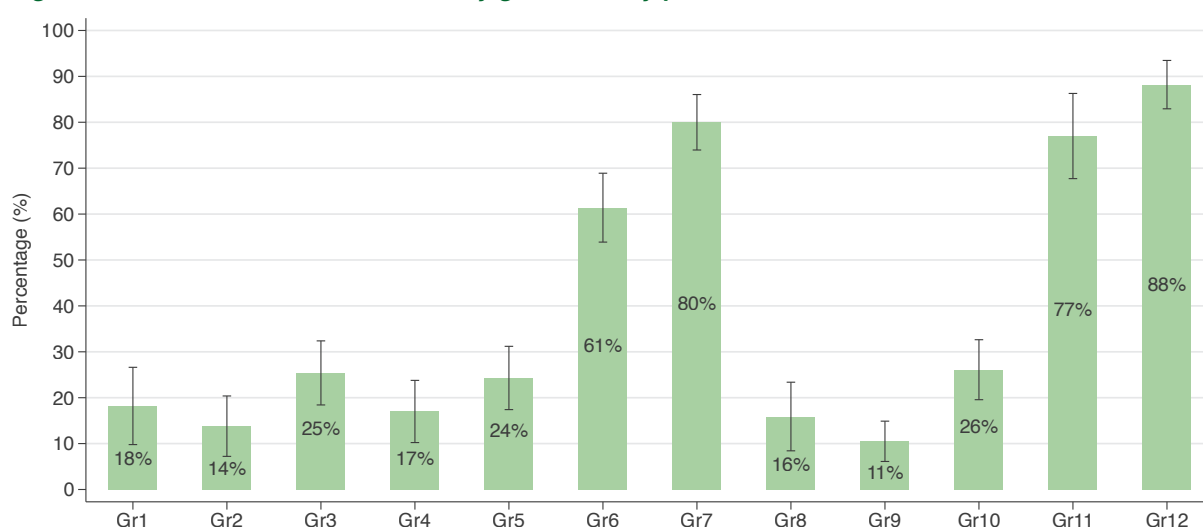
⁹ One South Africa Movement and Mmusi Maimane v The President of the Republic of South Africa and others, 2020

open (grades 6, 7, 11 and 12) and the grades that had not yet reopened. Attendance was highest amongst grade 12 learners at 88%, perhaps reflective of the urgency these learners, their parents and the school system is feeling to ensure a fair chance to write the National Senior Certificate (“Matric”) examinations.

A second point to note is that school attendance rates were significantly lower than in normal times, even for those grades officially open. According to the General Household Survey (GHS) of 2018, about 2% of learners are absent from school on an average day. For grade 12 learners, therefore, one might say that absenteeism was about six times higher than usual. On the other hand, one might argue that attendance was surprisingly high under the circumstance given uncertainty about the health risks around COVID-19 and school attendance being so different and potentially traumatic, including having to wear a mask for an extended period, regular sanitising, and other social distancing measures.

A third point of interest in *Figure 1* is that significant numbers of children in grades that were not yet officially open were reportedly attending school. There are at least two possible explanations for this pattern. First, we know that some schools, especially but not only independent schools, did apply for permission to have other grades return. Secondly, some schools made significant attempts to provide remote schooling through online platforms such as video streaming or WhatsApp groups. In such cases, some NIDS-CRAM respondents may have interpreted “attending school” to include a form of remote schooling.

Figure 1: Estimated attendance rates by grade in July prior to closure



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

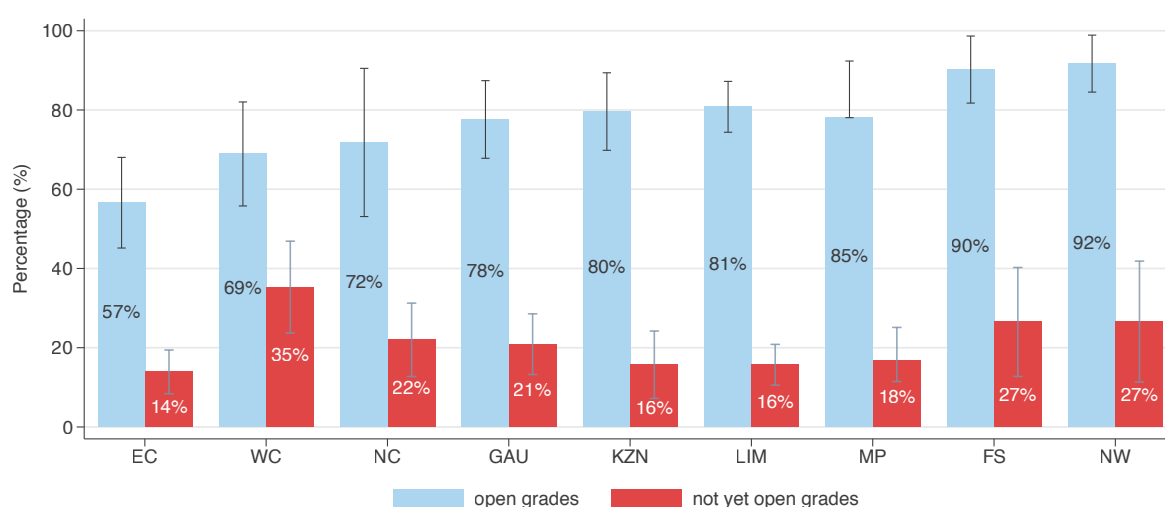
1. Sample is limited to those adults who reported living with children aged 0-17 at the time of the interview, as well as interviews that took place prior to July 31 2020.
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

The next graph shows school attendance rates by province, first for those grades that were officially open (grades 6, 7, 11 and 12) and second for those grades “not yet open” (grades 1-5 and 8-10). It is important to note that the NIDS-CRAM survey was not designed to guarantee reliable estimates at a provincial level - aside from relatively small samples per province, a limited number of enumeration areas were selected within each province; this allows the sample to be nationally representative but not necessarily provincially representative. The confidence intervals in *Figure 2* are rather wide, and so we need to be careful about making strong conclusions about different attendance rates across the provinces. However, it is interesting that Western Cape has the highest attendance rates amongst learners in “not yet open” grades despite having relatively low attendance rates amongst learners in “open” grades. This may reflect a larger number of schools in that province obtaining permission to allow other grades back, something which was legally possible if heads of provincial

departments granted such permission. It is also possible that a greater percentage of schools provided remote schooling opportunities in the Western Cape and this may have been interpreted by some respondents as attending school.

Monitoring data collected by national and provincial department of education officials provides another perspective on attendance rates in July. This data was collected in 611 schools across eight provinces (excluding the Western Cape) between the 1st and the 10th of July. The sample was not drawn with probability sampling and therefore cannot be interpreted as being representative, but it did cover a range of contexts (urban/rural, primary/secondary, varying school poverty quintiles) in roughly similar proportions to those found in the full population of schools. It is, therefore, not an obviously skewed sample in any particular direction. The average rate of absence in this sample of schools as reported by school principals was 17% (only counting “open” grades). This is roughly in line with what was observed in *Figure 1* above. *Figure 3* indicates a small handful of schools with very high rates of absence, whilst the largest number of schools fell into the absence range of between 10% and 25% (40% of schools had absence rates below 10%).

Figure 2: Estimated attendance rates by province in July for “open” and “not yet open” grades

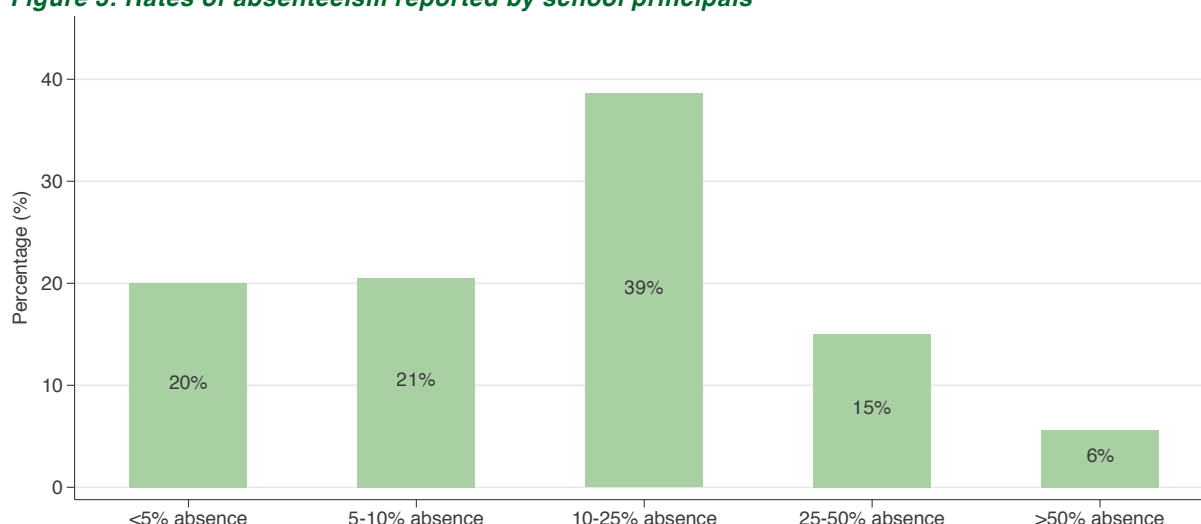


Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. Attendance rates for “open” grades (Grades 6, 7, 11 and 12) and attendance rates for grade “not yet open” (Grades 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 8, 9 and 10) are pooled for this figure to achieve a large enough sample size.
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

Figure 3: Rates of absenteeism reported by school principals



Source: DBE Monitoring data in 611 schools

Note:

1. The data was collected in a non-random sample of schools between 1-10 July.

Figure 4 shows estimated school attendance rates by household socio-economic status (SES). Before commencing with the discussion, it needs to be noted that there are, similar to the National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS), significant issues of non-random missing household income as well as under-reported household income in the NIDS-CRAM data (Ardington, 2020). Because NIDS-CRAM is a panel of adult individuals answering questions about their household, there is no guarantee that this individual is the most knowledgeable household member with regards to income. We represent the SES of a household in several ways. First, we compute quintiles and deciles of per capita household income using reported household income (assigning the within-bracket median household income where bracket information was provided) and household size. Missing income data is replaced with a lower-bound estimate that is created by combining available data on individual earnings after tax and individual grant income with household grant income based on the reported number of child support grants and state old age pensions received by the household (see Ardington, 2020; Jain et al, 2020). We advise readers to keep these adjustments in mind when interpreting the results. We construct six categories of SES according to the per capita income distribution: the bottom 20%; the 20th-40th percentile; 40th-60th percentile; 60th-80th percentile; the 80th-90th percentile; and the top 10%. The split of the top quintile is made in view of the known large variation in household SES that occurs towards the top of South Africa's income distribution.

Our alternative measures of household SES make use of NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 and Wave 2 information on resource accessibility and socioeconomic vulnerability of the home. A resource index¹⁰ based on access and/or usage of educational resources in the home, access to piped water, dwelling type,¹¹ the main source of household income and the highest education level of the respondent is estimated. As with our per capita income measure, households were then split into five quintiles, and the fifth (most affluent) quintile was then further split into two. Socioeconomic vulnerability is captured using responses to three questions, namely, "In the month of June, did your household run out of money to buy food?", "In June [were Government grants]... the main or biggest source of income for this household?" and "Has the household lost its main source of income since lockdown started on the 27th of March 2020?".

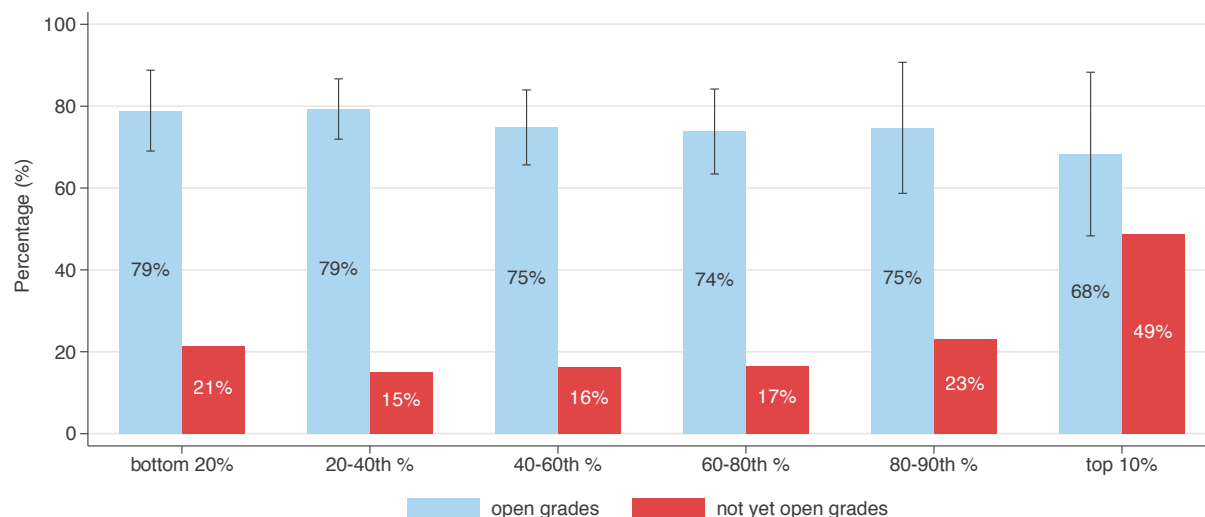
Two points are worth noting about Figure 4. First, for grades that were already "open", attendance rates do not appear to differ across socioeconomic groups. Secondly, for grades that were "not yet open", attendance was significantly higher in the top 10% of households. The same pattern emerges

¹⁰ This is estimated using polychoric principal component analysis (PCA).

¹¹ A house or flat, traditional house (e.g. mud hut) and an informal house (e.g. shack).

in *Figure 5* using a resource index measure. An interesting question is whether these patterns reflect different household choices or different levels of school readiness to reopen across parts of the country. The pattern of lower attendance of even “open” grades amongst the most resource-poor indicated by *Figure 5* and “not yet open” grades amongst more vulnerable households in *Figure 6* may be indicative of the latter.

Figure 4: Estimated attendance rates by SES (per capita income) quintile/decile in July

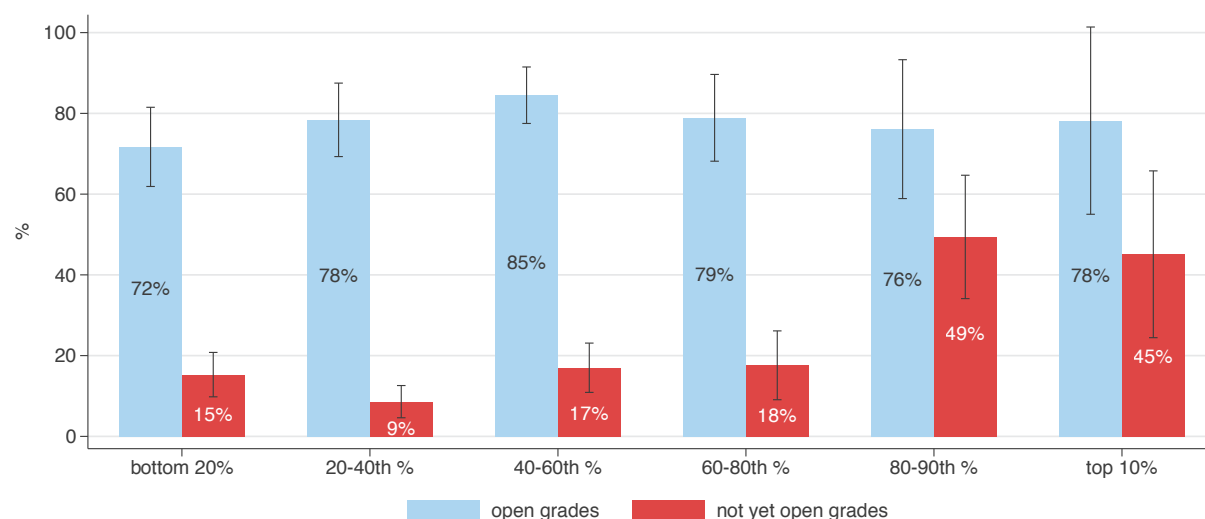


Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. Attendance rates for “open” grades (6, 7, 11 and 12) and grades “not yet open” (1 - 5, 8 - 10) are pooled for this figure to achieve a large enough sample size.
2. Household per capita income is estimated using point estimate and bracket responses to household income items in NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 with missing data represented by a lower-bound estimate based on earnings and receipt of child support and old-age pension grants.
3. Data are weighted.
4. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

Figure 5: Estimated attendance rates by SES quintile/decile using resource index

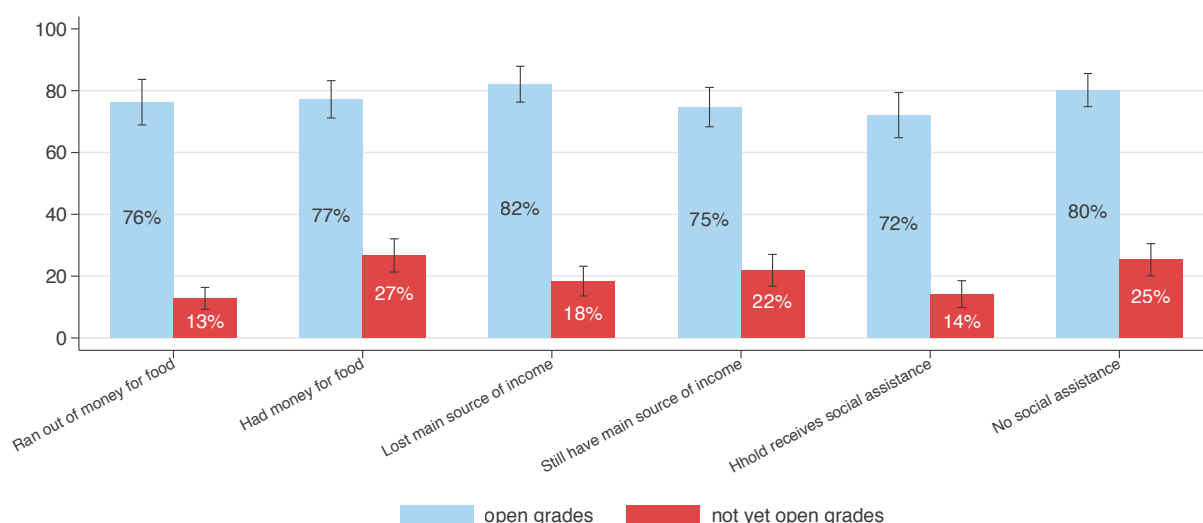


Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 1 and Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. Attendance rates for “open” grades (6, 7, 11 and 12) and grades “not yet open” (1 - 5, 8 - 10) are pooled for this figure to achieve a large enough sample size.
2. The household resource index measure is derived using polychoric principal component analysis of access to educational tools used during remote learning, dwelling type, access to piped water, and main source of household income.
3. Data are weighted.
4. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

Figure 6: Estimated attendance rates by SES quintile/decile by vulnerability of household



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

1. Attendance rates for “open” grades (6, 7, 11 and 12) and grades “not yet open” (1 - 5, 8 - 10) are pooled for this figure to achieve a large enough sample size.

2. Data are weighted.

3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

4. School readiness

A series of plans, guidelines, protocols and interventions have been progressively developed and published by the DBE as part of school readiness preparations. These include a risk adjusted strategy that discusses safety and health issues associated with reopening; criteria for reopening, specifying issues of social distancing, infrastructure, as well as protective gear and practices; and standard operating procedures on the screening of learners and school cleaning. These are only three of at least eight documents on creating a safer environment in school. The enormous logistical task involved in developing these and orienting schools to a new operating — especially in a context of significant fear, uncertainty and opposition to opening schools — needs to be recognised. The next set of documents under development focuses on learning. This includes a school recovery plan with proposals for recovering lost teaching days; guidelines for developing new timetables as well as Revised Annual Teaching Plans with a trimmed and reorganised curriculum. These are intended to assist teachers in their classroom practice and the core business of learning and teaching.

In a media statement dated the 5th of July 2020 the DBE reported that more than 97% of schools reported readiness to receive two more grades, namely grade 6 and 11 after having Grade 12 and 7 learners in attendance since the 8th of June 2020. Prior to the reopening of schools, 3500 schools were classified as experiencing water challenges; when the statement was released, 2175 schools had already been supplied with water tanks. Similarly, 910 schools in Eastern Cape and 453 schools in Limpopo that had sanitation challenges reportedly had these addressed¹². One of the final preparation stages prior to reopening was the monitoring of schools for readiness based on the guidelines mentioned above. This was done by a range of stakeholders, including NGOs, Parliamentarians, and school management teams.

The analysis in this section draws again on the DBE monitoring exercise conducted in 611 schools between 1-10 July. In addition to questions about attendance, the prevalence of comorbidities and COVID-19 cases, the monitoring tool also included 54 questions on different aspects of the school's readiness and compliance with the new protocols for schools in the pandemic. These 54 questions were grouped into nine thematic areas as follows: facilities; water and sanitation; orientation for

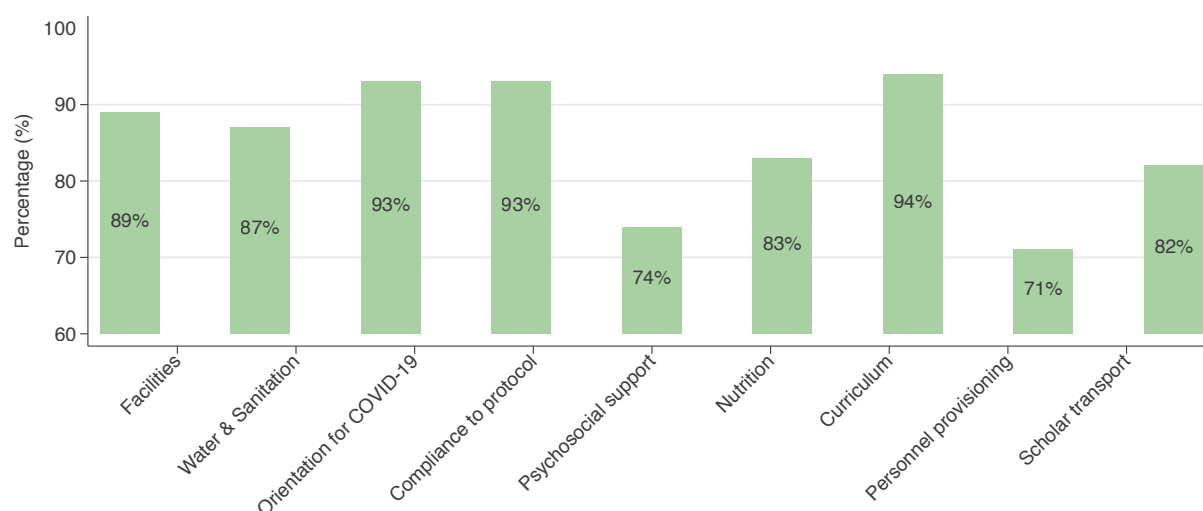
¹² Department of Basic Education, 2020

COVID-19; compliance with COVID -19 protocols; psychosocial support; administration of the National Schools Nutrition Programme (NSNP); curriculum; personnel provisioning; and scholar transport. It should be noted that all 54 questions were “Yes/No” questions and covered fairly basic aspects of readiness. For example, the curriculum related questions were not exploring the extent of curriculum coverage but rather whether revised Annual Teaching Plans had been developed by the province and distributed to schools and teachers.¹³

An overall school readiness index was derived from all 54 questions. The first step in deriving this index was to derive nine separate indices for each of the nine thematic areas covered in the monitoring tool; for example, the first section of the tool consisted of nine questions on facilities and these were simply added together to create an index which was equally weighted across those nine questions. After repeating this for each of the nine thematic areas, the overall index of school readiness was created by adding all nine indices together, weighting them equally and expressing this index as a percentage score out of 100.

A number of overall patterns emerged from this data. Across most thematic areas in the tool there were relatively high levels of readiness on average with the lowest levels recorded for psychosocial support, nutrition and scholar transport, and the highest levels of readiness recorded for orientation and compliance to COVID-19 protocols and curriculum (see *Figure 7*). There was some variation in readiness across the provinces, with the highest level of readiness being observed in the Free State and the lowest level of readiness being observed in Eastern Cape. There was no significant difference in readiness observed between primary and secondary schools, with slightly higher readiness observed amongst quintile four and five schools compared to quintile 1-3 schools (see *Figure 8*). These monitoring figures, and others reported by the department, indicate that most schools managed this transition, and can be regarded as a significant achievement. However, the crisis has also exposed some of the inequalities and vulnerabilities in the school system. In particular, it has highlighted the difficulties around water and sanitation and the urgency to address these.

Figure 7: Average levels of school readiness by thematic area in early July



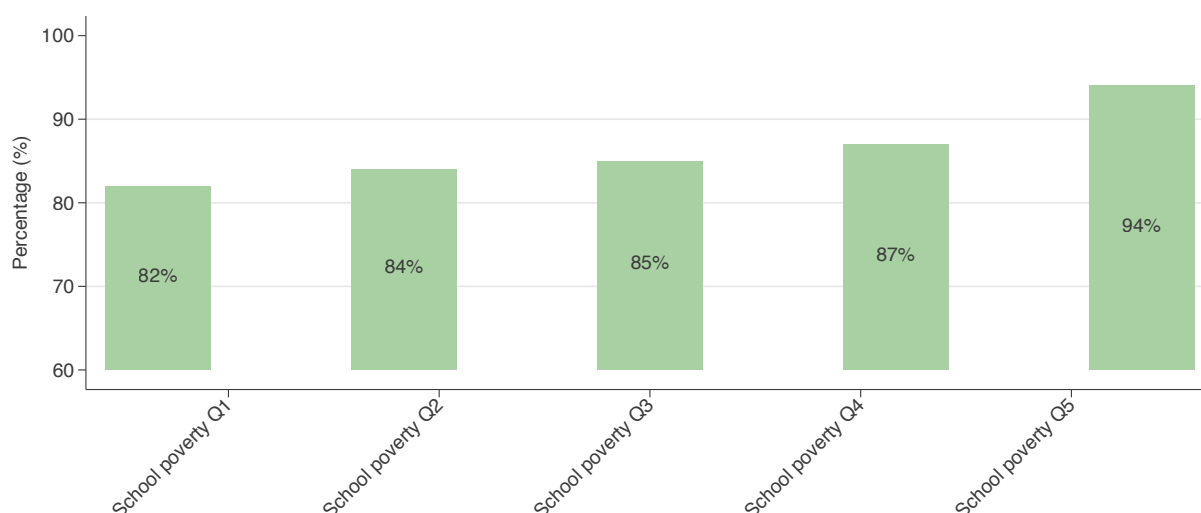
Source: DBE Monitoring data in 611 schools

Note:

1. The data was collected in a non-random sample of schools between 1-10 July.

¹³ It should be noted that this monitoring exercise was only one of several ways in which the DBE monitored school readiness during the period of reopening schools. Neither this dataset nor other data collected or reported by provinces are in the public domain.

Figure 8: Average levels of school readiness by official school poverty quintile



Source: DBE Monitoring data in 611 schools

Note:

1. The data was collected in a non-random sample of schools between 1-10 July.

Compared to a similar monitoring exercise conducted in early June, levels of readiness were higher in all 9 sections of the monitoring tool, with the biggest improvements seen in the areas of curriculum and orientation to the new protocols. Even water and sanitation, which might be expected to take longer to address, improved significantly from 79% readiness to 87% readiness in July. It is also encouraging to note that all eight provinces improved their average level of readiness since the June monitoring, with the largest improvements seen in Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal. Only the Eastern Cape had a readiness score less than 80% of 79%.

It is worth noting that there may have been an interaction between school readiness and attendance rates: the Eastern Cape registered the lowest levels of school readiness in both the June monitoring and the July monitoring undertaken by the DBE, and this was also the province with the lowest attendance rates observed in NIDS-CRAM (see the previous section of this paper). Attendance rates might therefore reflect not only the decisions of households to send children to school but also the readiness of the system to have schools open and compliant to the new protocols.

5. Perceptions on returning to school

As argued by Levinson et al (2020), the question of how to reopen schools is not just a scientific and technocratic one, but also an emotional one. Although the return to school is an important (and welcomed) step, the fact that going back to school is unlikely to look anything like it used to is expected to cause some anxiety and raise concerns in households with children. These concerns can be exacerbated when the reopening of schools is followed by decisions to temporarily close, or the readiness of schools to mitigate the potential spread of COVID-19 or provide the necessary learning and psychosocial support to learners comes under scrutiny.

Limited research has been conducted on adult and parent perceptions of schooling under the COVID-19 pandemic. The evidence thus far has been mostly from the United States (US). A study of parents' feelings towards school reopening during COVID-19 in Indiana,¹⁴ for example, points towards concerns around difficulties in maintaining precautions for mitigating COVID-19 transmission amongst children at school, particularly mask wearing and social distancing, *as well as* the impact of school schedules (e.g. grade rotation) on household work schedules and child care. The Kaiser Family Foundation (KFF) Health Tracking Poll, a nationally representative public-

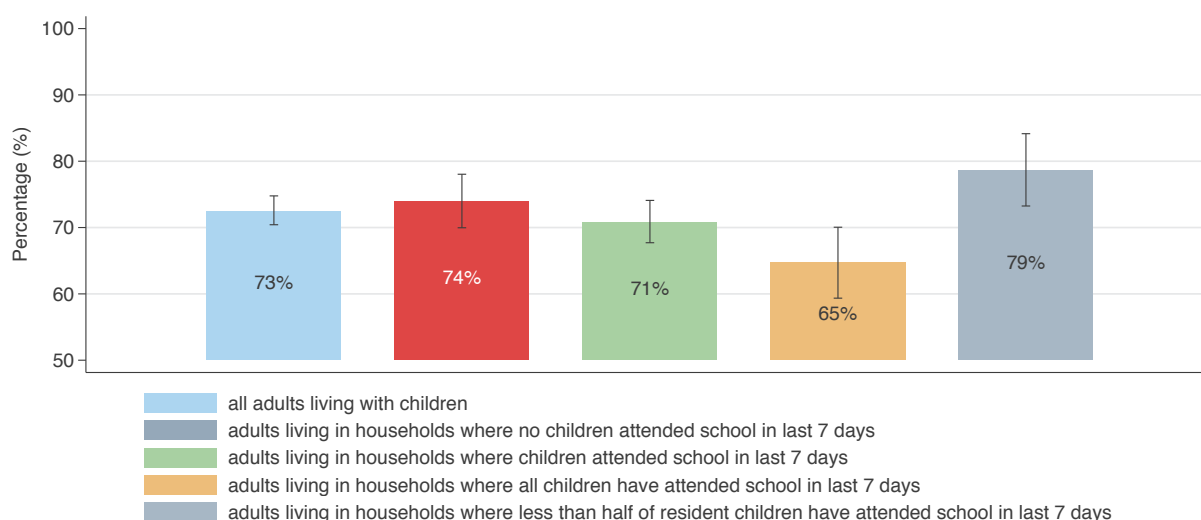
¹⁴ Flanagan et al (2020).

opinion telephonic survey, found that 60% of parents of school-aged children thought it was better to open schools later to minimise transmission risk, whilst 34% thought it better to open sooner to avoid further learning delays. Mothers were found to be significantly more concerned than fathers about contagion (85% vs 70%) and the unwillingness/inability of children to comply with protocol (82% vs 71%). At the same time, mothers also expressed twice the level of concern for children having enough to eat at home and having access to the necessary technology for distance learning. Overall, 65% of respondents were concerned about their children falling behind academically and socio-emotionally. Parents are therefore also giving consideration to the effects of school closure and reopening on the quality of education, especially if households have been and continue to be given responsibility for their children's remote learning.

The following question was added to the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 questionnaire to understand adult perceptions around the return to school during the current pandemic: "How worried are you about learners in your household returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic? Not worried, a little worried, or very worried?" Of all adult respondents living with children aged 0-17 years, 72.6% expressed high concern for the return of learners in their households. This level of concern amongst adults, many of whom are parents and some educators, is reasonable. However, the relative ambiguity of this question — concern for whom and why — implies that responses may be indicative of multidimensional concern and linked to multiple factors in nuanced ways. Unfortunately, the time limitations of Computer Assisted Telephone Interviewing (CATI), as employed in NIDS-CRAM, did not allow for further questioning of respondents regarding the source of their concern for school return. However, it is possible to analyse the extent to which individual and household factors that shape experiences of the COVID-19 pandemic might provide for a broad range of perspectives on the return to school. It is worth reminding readers that the NIDS-CRAM survey is not a household survey, but rather expresses the views of single adults in a particular household. The extent to which the opinions of the respondent are indicative of the general sentiments of the household is debatable, and should be kept in mind when interpreting the results that follow.

It is conceivable that school attendance and household concern for the return of learners will be related. We, therefore, begin by assessing differences in the level of "high concern ("very worried") by the return status of households and their learners; that is, whether or not any of the children living in the household who were reported as attending GrR to Gr12 prior to the lockdown on the 27th of March 2020 have attended school recently (within the most recent seven days prior to the interview). As with the analysis above, we limit the sample to interviews that took place before the 31st of July 2020, given the closing of all public schools from the 27th to the 30th of July 2020. *Figure 9* below indicates that the proportions of adults expressing high concern do not differ significantly between households in which no child/ren or at least one child attended school recently. However, if we compare adult concern by the level of household attendance, we find that concern is significantly lower amongst adults reporting 100% household attendance rates.

Figure 9: Proportion of adults living with school-aged children that are very concerned about their return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, by return status of learners in the household



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

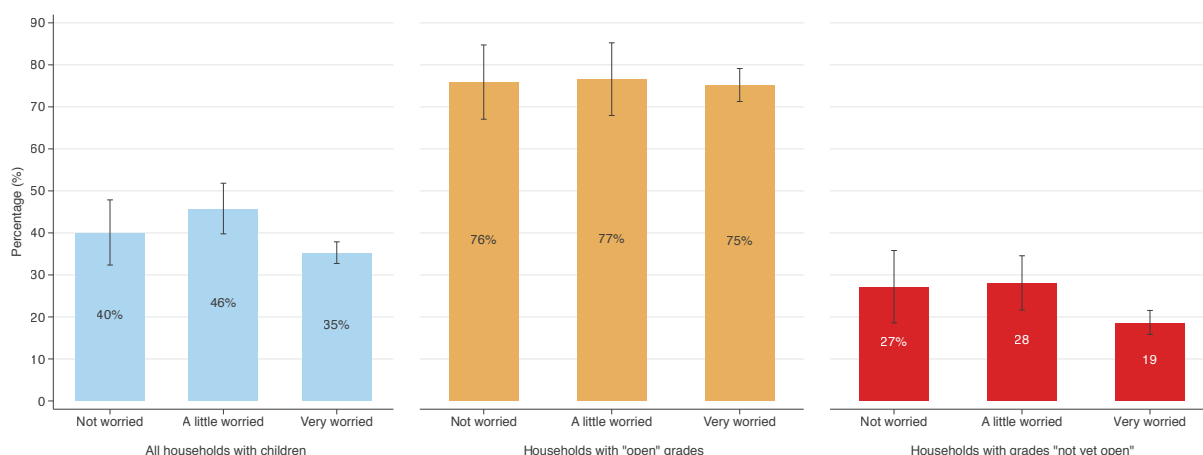
1. The sample is all adults 18 years or older who reported living with at least one child 0-17 years at the time of the interview.
2. The samples related to attendance are restricted to interviews that took place before 31 July 2020.
3. Data are weighted.
4. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

This difference in perceptions by school attendance may signal a bidirectional relationship between attendance and opinions. Are concerns amongst high-attendance households lower because learner attendance has not been associated with increased risk to the household, or is attendance high because these households perceive less risk to school attendance? *Figure 10* shows the rate of household attendance by level of worry. Overall, attendance is significantly lower (10 percentage points) when high concern is expressed compared to little concern (no significant difference with “not worried”). However, when the comparison is made taking into account “open” grades only, no difference in attendance rates are found. Limiting the sample to households with grades “not yet open”, attendance is significantly lower (at the 10% level) when high concern is expressed. Overall, although a negative association is suggested, the findings of *Figure 10* indicate that attendance of school, and therefore learning, remains important to the majority of households, irrespective of the level of concern about school return.

Given the differences in attendance rates by socio-economic status of the household (see *Figures 4, 5 and 6*), it is worth investigating whether or not the results in *Figure 10* are driven by differences in perceptions by socioeconomic status. *Figure 11* indicates a negative association between household SES and high concern for learner return to school. Adults from the poorest 40% of households are significantly more likely to express high concern than other SES groups. Although there does not appear to be much difference among the bottom 60% of the distribution, the top decile shows significantly lower concern than the bottom 80%, and almost half the level of high concern as the bottom 40%.¹⁵

¹⁵ Analysis of adult perceptions was also conducted by race, with white respondents reporting significantly lower levels of high concern (32%) than African (76.5%) and coloured (75%) respondents. We chose not to report these results given that only a sample of 77 white respondents reported living with children aged 0-17 years, compared to 3 257 African and 311 coloured respondents. The Indian sample is even smaller (24 respondents living with children) and so we chose to exclude them from all analyses. We may posit that the lower level of concern amongst white adults is related to socioeconomic status and higher concentrations of continued learning online; 75% of white respondents living with school-aged children at the time of lockdown level 5 reported that children were accessing educational content online. This is compared to 37.5% and 34.5% of African and coloured respondents, respectively. Furthermore, white respondents were twice as likely (statistically significant) to respond that you cannot avoid catching COVID-19 than African respondents in both NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 and Wave 2.

Figure 10: Household attendance by official Grade return status and level of concern about learners' return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

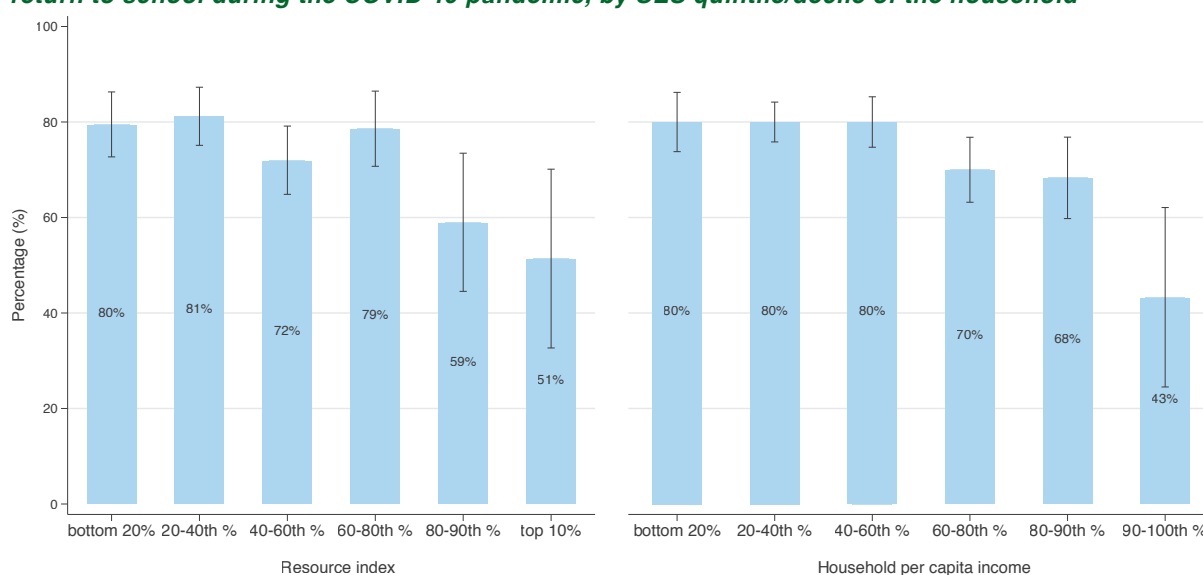
Note:

1. The sample is all adults 18 years or older who reported living with at least one child 0-17 years at the time of the interview.
2. The samples related to attendance are restricted to interviews that took place before 31 July 2020.
3. Data are weighted.
4. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

It is difficult to say from the data what is driving this result. As shown earlier in this paper, attendance amongst the top income households is significantly higher than the bottom 80%. Therefore, the lower concern might be related to already higher exposure to school return that may dampen feelings of concern, or higher levels of school readiness as these children are most likely to be attending quintile 5 and independent schools. Alternatively, since these schools were more likely to be able to provide online learning during the lockdown, the low "concern" may reflect low concern with regards to disruptions to and quality of learning. Indeed, learners from wealthier households are less likely to experience lower exposure more generally, given the possible continuation of learning online at home and transportation modality, for example, the use of own/private vehicle to travel to school versus public transport and/or walking, which do not allow for careful management or observation of children's behaviour in terms of mask wearing and social distancing. Contagion is of particular concern in predominantly low-income communities, where schools tend to be overcrowded and understaffed.¹⁶

¹⁶ Levinson et al (2020).

Figure 11: Proportion of adults living with school-aged children that are very concerned about their return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, by SES quintile/decile of the household



Source: NIDS, Wave 1 and Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

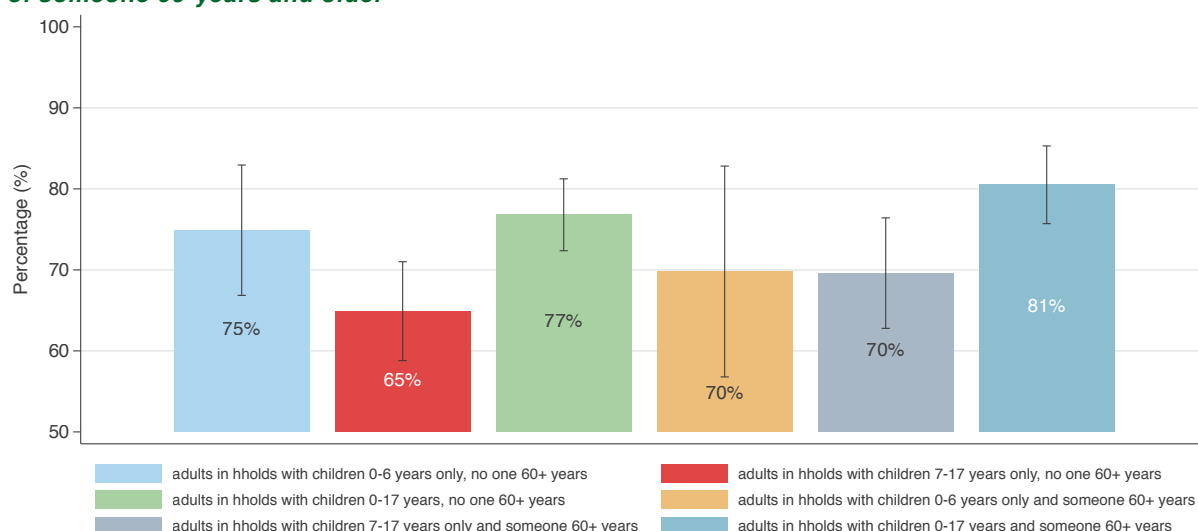
1. The sample is all adults 18 years or older who reported living with at least one child 0-17 years at the time of the interview.
2. The samples related to attendance are restricted to interviews that took place before 31 July 2020.
3. Household per capita income is estimated using point estimate and bracket responses to household income items in NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 with missing data represented by a lower-bound estimate based on earnings and receipt of child support and old-age pension grants.
4. The household resource index measure is derived using polychoric principal component analysis of access to educational tools used during remote learning, dwelling type, access to piped water, and main source of household income.
4. Data are weighted.
5. 95% confidence intervals are shown.

Next, we assess whether or not the concern for school return differs by the composition of the household. *Figure 12* indicates that adult concern is significantly lower amongst households with school-aged (older than 6-years of age) children only compared to households in which young children (0-6 years) and school-aged children reside. Disaggregation of school-aged children by primary and secondary school does not change this result. The presence of a household member that is 60-years or older does appear to be related to somewhat elevated concerns. Households with members ranging from below age 6 to over 60-years are significantly larger (average of 8 members) than any of the other household age-constellations considered in *Figure 12*. Conversely, households in which we find either young children or school-aged children only and no adults 60-years and older are significantly smaller (average of 4-5 members). A higher concern may therefore be related to factors of increased exposure (and contagion), socio-economic status, comorbidities and a higher prevalence of generally more vulnerable household members. Relatedly, we find that adults living in households with only primary school or only secondary school learners as members — suggestive of a smaller household size — show lower levels of high concern. We also tested whether or not these trends differ by whether or not the respondent lives with their biological children or not, as well as the marital status of the respondent (not shown here). As with *Figure 12*, we find higher concern amongst adults living with **both** very young **and** school-aged children.

If concern with learners' return to school is signalling concern with contagion specifically as opposed to concerns with learning and/or the wellbeing of children, we would expect to find differences by the perceived risk of infection. Wave 2 of NIDS-CRAM asked respondents whether they felt personally at risk of getting COVID-19 and whether they believed that getting COVID-19 can be avoided. Concern for school return does not differ significantly across these responses (see *Figure 13*), although there is some evidence that a belief that contracting COVID-19 is avoidable is related to higher concern for learner return. This makes intuitive sense as one method for avoiding contagion is to limit exposure, including keeping children at home.¹⁷

¹⁷ It is worth noting that the responses of respondents to the question of avoidance of contracting COVID-19 did not differ between those who lived with children 0 -17 years and those who did not. However, respondents living with children were significantly more likely to

Figure 12: Proportion of adults living with school-aged children that are very concerned about their return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, by child age-profile of the household and presence of someone 60-years and older

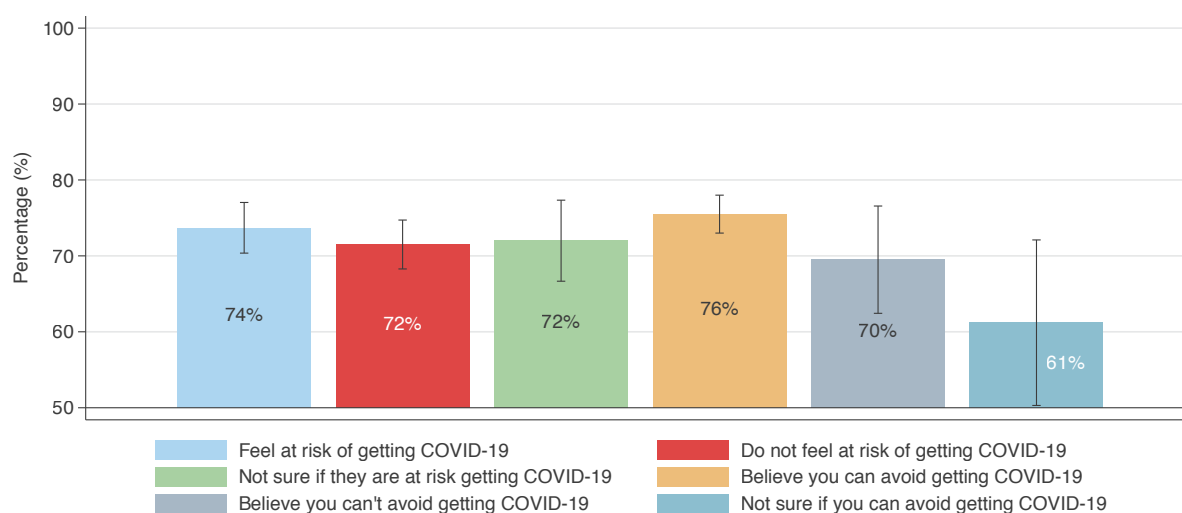


Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. The sample is all adults 18 years or older who reported living with at least one child 0-17 years at the time of the interview.
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

Figure 13: Proportion of adults living with school-aged children that are very concerned about their return to school during the COVID-19 pandemic, by perceptions of risk and avoidance of getting COVID-19



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. The sample is all adults 18 years or older who reported living with at least one child 0-17 years at the time of the interview.
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

The findings above, some of which seem to contradict expectations — depending on how the question of ‘concern’ is interpreted — need to be understood in the context of risk communication and community response to that communication. Not only does the response to a “pandemic

respond that they felt at risk of contracting COVID-19 (45% compared to 38%).

require[s] many different actors to work together in a way not usually done”,¹⁸ but it also depends on a high level of public trust in government information. The provision of clear and consistent advice can, and has been, very challenging for governments. Where information has been slow to appear or has been altogether missing, the public have had to turn to sometimes unreliable and misleading information from mainstream and social media sources, resulting in confusion.^{19,20}

In July 2020, more than 100 principals in the Western Cape (from predominantly quintile 3 and 4 schools) signed a memorandum calling for schools to close until the passing of the COVID-19 peak, with one principal citing that “[w]e don’t know which scientist and which researcher’s opinion we should follow. We are confused, week in week out. The one says this and then the other one contradicts the other one.”²¹ Another principal had concerns for the quality of learning and resourcing, saying that “more educators [as many as 10 additional teachers for grade 12 alone] have to be assigned to each grade in order to teach classes in line with physical distancing.”²² Lack of clear and consistent public information, as well as differing positions being taken between national and provincial governments, other groups and individuals of prominence and authority, as well as the deep politicisation of school (and sectoral) reopening, contribute to the emergence of ‘fright factors’;²³ for example: the outcome is dreaded; the hazard is coerced; the invisible agent is poorly understood; and there is widespread disagreement on how to manage risk.²⁴

6. What was the impact of school reopening on the spread of COVID-19?

The most important research, monitoring and evaluation question about schooling around the world has arguably been whether school attendance leads to an unacceptable increase in the spread of COVID-19. Parental anxiety is of some relevance to decisions around school opening; attendance rates are also an indicator of support for and the effectiveness of school opening; the readiness of schools to comply with new hygiene and social distancing protocols is also important to monitor; but ultimately what matters is the extent to which school attendance is causing the spread of infections. It is hypothetically possible for instance that having schools open could lead to high virus spread even despite good compliance to regulations at schools. Conversely, it is hypothetically possible that having schools open has a negligible impact on virus spread even despite low compliance with new protocols at schools.

Although there is always the possibility of contextual differences, the most reliable and relevant evidence on the COVID-19 related health risks associated with school attendance comes from emerging international literature. Several overall findings are emerging, all of which are good news from a schooling perspective. Firstly, children (especially younger children) are significantly less likely to become infected with COVID-19 than adults (Munro and Roland, 2020). Secondly, children who do contract COVID-19 are usually less severely affected than adults, and rarely become seriously ill (Munro and Roland, 2020). Thirdly, although the role of children in transmission still needs further analysis, there is no evidence that children are “super-spreaders”, as was initially feared. In fact, there is fairly consistent evidence that children are usually not the ones responsible for bringing COVID-19 into households (Munro and Faust, 2020). Fourthly, although the virus can be spread between children at school, the evidence suggests that child-to-child transmission in schools is uncommon and that school closures have in general not been an effective mechanism for slowing the spread of COVID-19 (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020).

18 Leask and Hooker (2020: 3)

19 It is interesting to note that levels of concern for school return do not differ significantly by trusted source of information about COVID-19 (asked in Wave 1 of NIDS-CRAM).

20 Nutbeam (2020)

21 CapeTalk (23 July, 2020)

22 CapeTalk (23 June, 2020)

23 As identified by risk perception research e.g. Bennett and Calman (1999)

24 Leask and Hooker (2020: 2)

International evidence to date shows lower susceptibility and milder symptoms for children under 20 years, their chances of infection are estimated at being less than 50% when compared to people over the age of 20. Estimates for South Africa range from children accounting for approximately 7% to 10% of infections. Even when they are infected their symptoms are often mild and negligible compared to other childhood diseases in Africa. From March 2020 until the 22nd of August 2020 the median age for infection in South Africa was 40 years, with the lowest cumulative infection rate amongst 0-9 year olds followed by the age category of 10-14 year olds and then 15-19 year olds (National Institute for Communicable Diseases of South Africa, 2020).

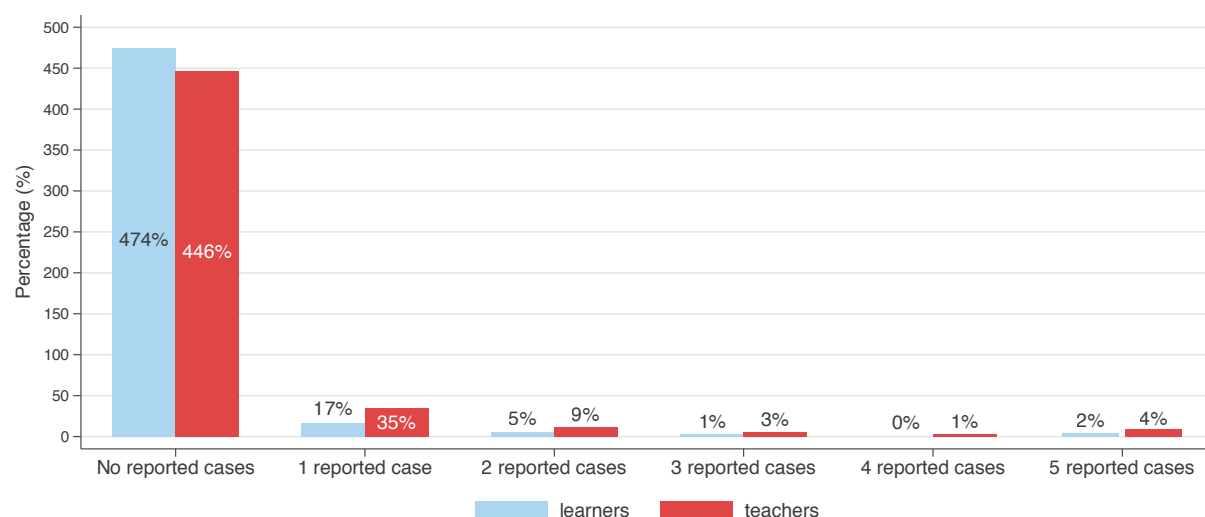
Unfortunately, we have very limited data with which to make assessments about the spread of COVID-19 at schools. We have reports from various provincial education departments, the 611 school DBE monitoring dataset referred to earlier in the paper, and data from school principals in the Gauteng province on identified COVID-19 cases during July (reported on by Gustafsson, 2020). According to a DBE media release issued on 5 July 2020²⁵, since the reopening of grades 7 and 12 on 8 June 2020, 968 out of the country's 25 762 schools had to be closed and reopened due either to COVID-19 cases or non-compliance with COVID-19 protocols. Minister Motshekga also reported that approximately 2740 teachers had confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections (less than 1% of teachers in the country). During the same period approximately 1260 learner cases were reported (less than 0.01% of learners).

Information from the Western Cape and Gauteng is perhaps most relevant, since these provinces had particularly high infection rates in July. The Gauteng data indicates more reported COVID-19 infections amongst teachers (793) than amongst learners (294), despite the fact that there were significantly more learners attending school than teachers. This is consistent with the national picture reported by the Minister on the 5th of July and with what was reported by the Western Cape Education Department (WCED, 2020), and also with the international literature finding that children are less likely to contract COVID-19.

Figure 14 shows the numbers of cases amongst both learners and teachers found in the DBE monitoring that took place in 611 schools. 95% of schools in this sample reported zero confirmed cases of COVID-19 amongst learners, while almost 90% of schools reported zero cases amongst teachers. There were 17 schools that reported having a single case of COVID-19 amongst learners, and 35 schools that reported a single case amongst teachers. Only three schools reported more than 2 learner cases and 8 schools reported more than 2 teacher cases. The encouraging thing about these statistics is that there do not appear to be any schools with mass spread of the virus. If schools were significantly contributing to the spread of the virus, one might expect to see some schools with large numbers of infections. The same pattern was noted by the Western Cape Education Department (2020), which noted that schools usually only report one or two cases. This means that schools can identify one or two cases of COVID-19 and close temporarily before a wide outbreak has occurred. This supports the current strategy of keeping the schooling system open and then dealing with confirmed cases as they are identified. In order to protect teaching time quarantining infected children or teachers may also be considered if there are only isolated cases.

²⁵ Department of Basic Education, 2020

Figure 14: Cases of COVID-19 infections amongst learners and teachers reported by principals



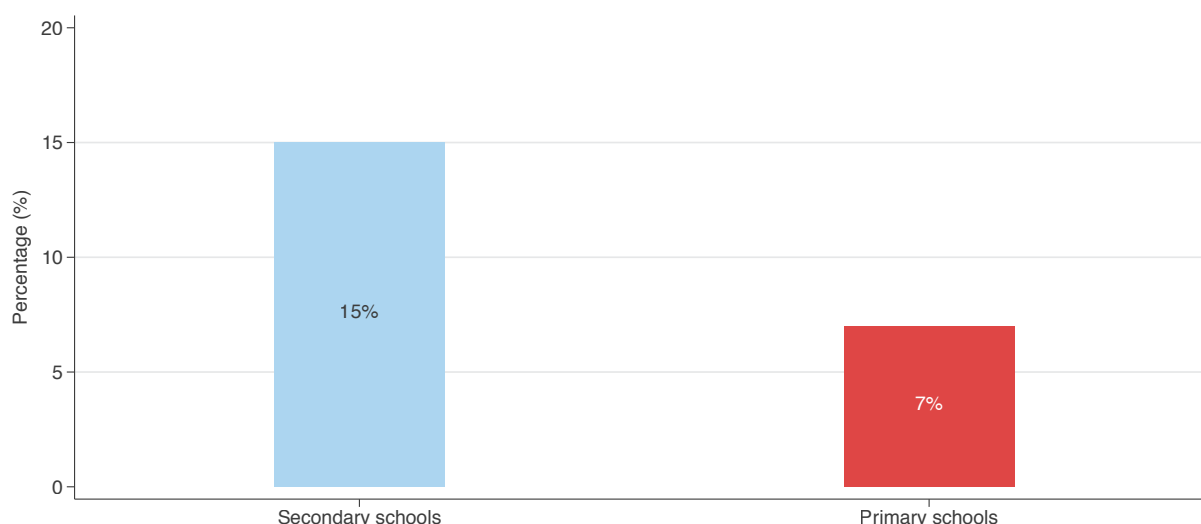
Source: DBE Monitoring data in 611 schools

Note:

1. The data was collected in a non-random sample of schools between 1-10 July.

As the figure below shows, primary schools were less likely than secondary schools to report any cases of COVID-19 among teachers. To some extent, this pattern reflects the fact that secondary schools have more teachers on average than primary schools and therefore are more likely to have a case of COVID-19. However, a multivariate regression analysis indicated that even after controlling for school size, primary schools were less likely to have COVID-19 cases than secondary schools. It is possible that this pattern is reflective of virus spread at secondary schools due to the presence of older learners (grade 12), who we know from other studies are more likely to spread the virus than younger children (ECDC, 2020). However, this conclusion cannot be firmly made based only on this limited dataset.

Figure 15: Percentage of schools with at least one COVID-19 case amongst teachers



Source: DBE Monitoring data in 611 schools

Note:

1. The data was collected in a non-random sample of schools between 1-10 July.

Gustafsson's (2020) analysis of the Gauteng data on COVID-19 cases at schools focuses on the prevalence of infections amongst teachers. This is perhaps the most relevant line of inquiry, since the risk to children appears to be so low. Gustafsson finds little overlap between learner and teacher cases in schools. While 505 schools reported at least one teacher case and 207 schools reported at least one learner case, only 56 schools reported both learner and teacher cases. Gustafsson also finds that the infection rate among teachers in Gauteng was not significantly higher than among other workers of a similar age. The WCED made the same conclusion in their 21 July Statement (WCED, 2020).

It is therefore clear that the limited South African data on COVID-19 cases at schools is consistent with the international evidence that (1) children are at low risk of contracting and becoming seriously ill from COVID-19, and (2) that school reopenings have not led to a noteworthy increase in the spread of the virus. Having concluded that school reopening presents a relatively low health risk linked to COVID-19, the next section of the paper considers the damage done by keeping schools closed.

7. The negative effects of not attending school

7.1 Learning Losses

While the primary question has been whether schools should reopen, increasingly, international discussions are shifting to the reopening of schools, emphasizing the recovery of the curriculum and learning as an important focus. It is worth stating that this should be understood beyond the academic year and years of schooling, but rather as a focus on quality learning. The Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe (2020) report from the first Wave of the NIDS-CRAM survey provides a comprehensive account of learning gains in South Africa between 2002 to 2019, modelling the pre-COVID learning trajectory and communicating the significant changes that can be expected through the loss of learning.

Literature from the US has shown learning losses during the school summer break²⁶; this is more adverse for low income environments.²⁷ A study of learning loss in Malawi measuring learners as they change grades across three grades showed the same trends.²⁸ More extensive reviews of learning loss internationally and specifically in South Africa may be found in the reports by Van der Berg and Spaul (2020) and Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe (2020). Suffice to say, the expectation that the COVID-19 school closures have likely led to learning loss are well founded. Statements by the Department of Basic Education reflect a similar concern about the negative long term effects of school closures, as mentioned in a parliamentary briefing on the 25th of June 2020, especially for the poor and marginalised.²⁹

Van der Berg and Spaul (2020) calculated the number of school days lost based on earlier gazettes indicating a staggered return to school up to the 7th of August 2020. The table below provides a recalculation of this based on the latest school calendar published on the 11th of August 2020³⁰ and updates on grade attendance discussed in *Table 1* above. The estimated school days lost range from 17% for grade 12, less than the initial calculations, to 43% for grade 5 and 8 learners who missed a full term of school. Learners across 6 grades lost at least 40% of school days. These are likely to be under-estimates as some individual schools may have closed for longer periods in response to infections as well as to allow social distancing protocols to be observed. In some cases schools have introduced different attendance practices such as allowing learners to attend every alternate day in order to adhere to social distancing protocols within classrooms.

26 Cooper et al., (1996), Heyns 1978

27 Alexander et al., 2001

28 Slade et al., (2017)

29 Department of Basic Education (2020)

30 Government Gazette No. 43609 G, 11 August 2020

Table 2: School days lost due to school closures in the 2020 calendar year

School days lost for 2020				
	(New calendar) Current school days in 2020 calendar	(Old calendar) Pre-COVID scheduled school days in 2020	Days lost in 2020 (assuming no further closures)	School days lost as a percentage of pre-COVID scheduled school days in 2020
Grade 12	170	204	34	17%
Grades 7	165	204	39	19%
Grade R,6 and 11	137	204	67	33%
Grade 1,2,3,4,9 and 10	122	204	82	40%
Grade 5 and 8	117	204	87	43%

Source: adapted and updated from Van der Berg, S. & Spaull, N. (2020) based on published calendar, Government Gazette, 11 August 2020

International education institutions propose thinking of lost school days in terms of learner trajectories, measuring how much an average learner learns in a year and then estimating the learning loss resulting from the pandemic. This requires an empirical measure of average learning and estimates of the percentage of school days lost in order to develop a ratio to estimate the learning loss. Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe (2020) consider research on these measures and various simulation tools, proposing a ratio of 1.25 for South Africa. This is higher than the ratio proposed by the World Bank but lower than other suggestions. Using this ratio we can estimate a learning loss of about 21% for learners in grade 12, as they would have lost an estimated 17% of school days, and up to 50% for the majority of grades including grade 1 to 4, 9 and 10 that lost 40% of school days. These estimates are concerning, particularly for the majority of learners that may have lost up to 50% of what they would have learned in a normal year. Fortunately, evidence on the South African context shows that these gaps should not be expected to increase if they are to follow patterns similar to historically observed learning gaps in learner attainment within the education system³¹. Gustafsson and Nuga Deliwe (2020) model how much the learning trajectories change if there are no catch-up efforts and how quickly the initial trajectory may be caught up if catching-up is successful. The period ranges from 5 years where there are concerted efforts, through to 10 years where no catch-up efforts are made. This underscores the importance of careful, well designed and sustained support to learners and teachers in the current return to school spanning several years. This discussion that follows examines three approaches to addressing learning losses throughout the school closure period and the period that follows.

Initial suggestions in response to the school closures and reduce learning loss focused on the use of technology to deliver teaching. A 2017 report by the Internet Society³² targeted at providing policy-makers with evidence on internet access in Africa, drawing from several sources including reports by the World Bank, and regional ICT efforts showed that approximately 75% of learners on the continent had limited or no access to the internet. In their report on COVID-19 related learner access, Van der Berg and Spaull (2020) estimate that at most 5-10% of learners in South Africa have a computer at home based on data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2015) amongst other sources. According to Gustafsson (2020), it is only amongst the wealthiest 5% of schools where at least 90% of learners have access to a computer and the internet at home.

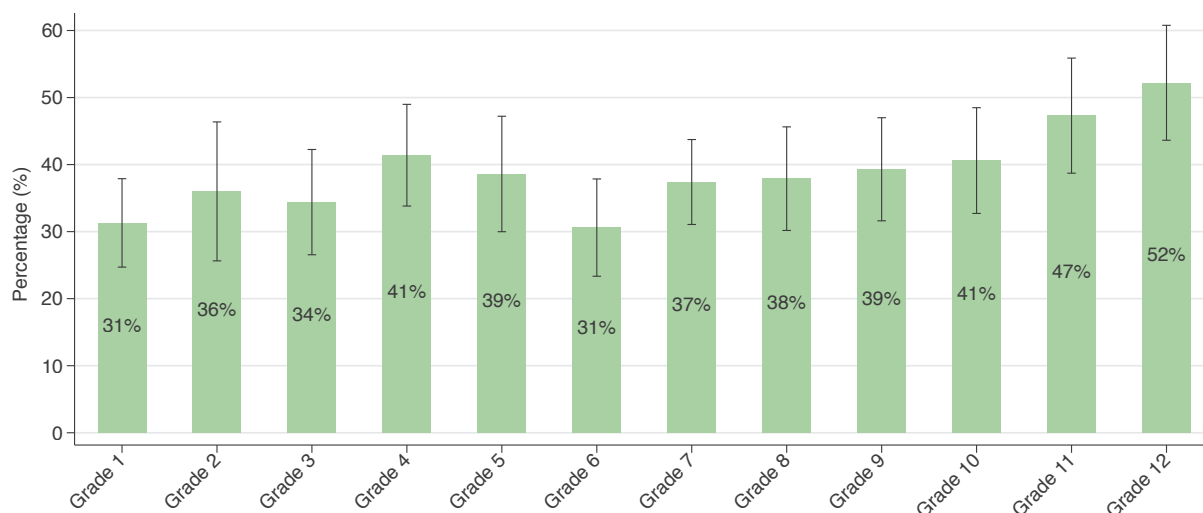
Figure 16 below shows how limited online access to educational content was across the grades for learners not attending schools. Learners in the earlier grades had the least access at about 30%, while grade 12 learners had the highest at about 50%. At worst this means that about 75%

³¹ Spaull and Kotze (2015) and Taylor and Taylor (2013)

³² Internet society, (2017)

of learners in the foundation phase had no access to online learning, while only half of grade 12 learners had access. Using online learning as an alternative to physical school attendance is clearly not feasible in the context of South Africa.

Figure 16: Access to online content when at home and not attending school by grade



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Waves 1 and 2 (2020)

Note:

1. The question about access to online educational content was asked during NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 (7 May - 27 June), while the questions about grades attended were asked in Wave 2 (13 July - 13 August).
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

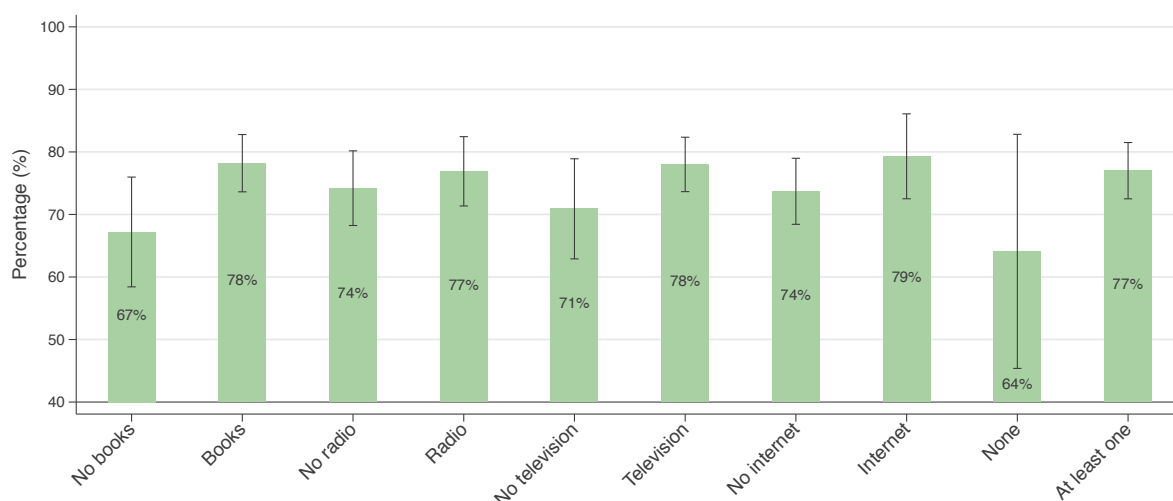
The Internet society report (2017) cited above also highlighted that success in using ICT for education requires a holistic and integrated approach to technology, spanning broad access to computer labs at schools through to one-on-one access in the homes of learners and teachers. It is also clear that the role of teachers as mediators in a blended learning approach should not be understated; careful training and incentives for professional development to enable this is necessary. Ngware (2020) makes the case that while the COVID-19 school closures have created an increased appetite for innovation, a systematic and sustainable approach needs to be followed to really leverage ICTs for education in Africa.

Over and above the role that teachers would play in an ideal ICT learning setting, there are limitations to content provision through television, radio and the internet in South Africa. Van der Berg and Spaull (2020) highlight these as providing limited content per grade, with a focus on grade 10 to 12, and content that is available for only 1.5 hours per day across three channels. Continuous efforts by the DBE and partners to increase the content available on radio, television and other multimedia platforms are commendable. However, considering the need for subject and grade-specific provisioning, instructional time does still not equate to a full school day. Estimates calculate this as equivalent to about 5% of instructional time³³

Figure 17 below shows school attendance of “open” grades by access to educational content at home including internet, radio, and television as well as non-digital educational resources such as books. Firstly it is clear that access is not leading to learners opting out of physical attendance, and secondly, although the confidence intervals overlap, attendance is higher for learners with access to these resources. This may reflect the inadequacy of ICTs in replacing the quality of instruction offered through school attendance as well as a higher valuing of teacher mediation amongst those with more resources.

33 Van der Berg and Spaull (2020)

Figure 17: Estimated attendance rates in July by access to educational content at home



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Waves 1 and 2 (2020)

Note:

1. Attendance rates for Grades 6, 7, 11 and 12 are pooled for this figure to achieve a large enough sample size.
2. Data are weighted.
3. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

Although technology is clearly inadequate as a national curriculum catch-up solution, other strategies have been identified to mediate learning loss. Internationally, recommended efforts by the Centre for Global Development, the World Bank and UNESCO suggest recovering learning loss primarily through targeted programmes for accelerated learning with a simplified and reduced curriculum. The aim of these accelerated programmes is not to do more with less time but rather to facilitate high-quality catch-up with a simplified curriculum, focusing on core skills and components. Sierra Leone, with a simplified and accelerated curriculum, attempted to implement two academic years over one year in response to the Ebola pandemic. Preliminary evidence suggests that learning losses had been reduced.³⁴

It is anticipated that learning loss will differ across schools but also within schools. Providing teacher-led remedial support to learners that have the largest learning loss for part of the school day or as part of extended school time may assist. Evidence on the effectiveness of this in low learning contexts exists. The work of Pratham, particularly in India, over several years, working from concept to implementation at scale, shows the positive impact of targeted learning in catching up on basic skills. The approach often referred to as Teaching at the Right level may be helpful to support learners, especially in the Foundation Phase, in catching up.³⁵

Earlier in this report, several curriculum guidelines were mentioned as part of school protocols introduced. The most significant of these in the trimmed curriculum as captured in the revised Annual Teaching Plans, were developed for all subjects. These plans communicate the core areas to be taught as well as how they should be taught, along with when omitted areas will be caught up. This often refers to spreading content across several grades.³⁶

7.2 Social protection from schools

Schools do not only act as locations for learning to read and count, they also offer social protection and support learner wellbeing. One of the ways this is done is through the provision of a meal as part of the government's National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP). We know from analysis of

³⁴ Carvalho et al., (2020)

³⁵ Banerjee et al., (2017)

³⁶ The ATPs per grade and subject are accessible here: <https://www.education.gov.za/Home/RecoveryPlan2020.aspx>

STATS SA's General Household Survey in recent years that approximately 80% of children benefit from the NSNP, estimated at 9.6 million meals a day, and that the coverage of this programme has expanded significantly over the years.

The programme is well-targeted to schools serving poorer communities. A 2016 nationally representative implementation evaluation³⁷ found that the NSNP implementation was largely successful and that approximately 96% of learners received a meal daily, while meal composition and the timing of meals needed improvement. Only 50% of schools were serving different food groups in the right proportion, while 42% received two food groups only. The food group most often missed was fruits or vegetables. The main recommendations were improving infrastructure through mobile kitchens, with constant water supply and sufficient preparation and storage areas, developing norms and standards for staffing and improving training on food composition and portions.

The NSNP programme was suspended from the 18th of March 2020, when the national school closure was announced. There were several early appeals³⁸ for the DBE to continue with the NSNP even during the lockdown and these were followed by several open letters issued by Equal Education in partnership with Section27, the Children's Institute and the Centre for Child Law. The first of these was published on the 10th of April 2020 titled 'Open Letter To The Minister Of Basic Education Planning In A Time Of Crisis – School Feeding Schemes Can And Must Continue.'³⁹ Although initial responses from the DBE indicated that the DBE would not be in a position to provide the NSNP during the lockdown, an 11th of May response letter committed to commencing with the NSNP at the reopening of schools. Several additional letters were written by Equal Education and partners with responses by the DBE and PEDs committing to this. A contradiction between a commitment to implement for all grades with the reopening of schools on the 8th of June and provincial circulars limiting this to the open grades only, grade 12 and 7, led to the urgent filing of a court case on the 12th June 2020.

The court case⁴⁰ was filed by Equal Education and the School Governing Bodies of Vhulaudzi Secondary School and Mashao High School, against the DBE and eight of the nine Provincial Education Departments, excluding the Western Cape, as the province had publicly declared that feeding would resume from the 8th of June 2020 when schools reopened. The applicants requested an order to implement the NSNP programme immediately for all grades, not only grade 7 and 12, regardless of the other grades being "not yet open".

On 17 July 2020, the Gauteng High Court ruled against the DBE and PEDs⁴¹. The court found that the Minister of Basic Education and Education Members of the Executive Council (MECS) had a constitutional and statutory duty to ensure that the NSNP provides a daily meal to qualifying learners. This is significant as the right to nutrition, although a constitutional right, was previously seen as a supplementary education function, rather than an educational right. The court found the Minister and MECs in breach of their duty. The court further declared that hunger is not just an issue of charity but justice and instructed that NSNP implementation should resume within 10 days of the judgement for all grades. In addition, the court ordered the filing of reports under oath every 15 days, setting out progress on NSNP provisioning as well as plans with timeframes for when the next steps would take place.

Figure 18 below shows the percentage of households where children received a meal at school, based on data from NIDS-CRAM Wave 2. At least 25% of all households received a meal regardless of grades or attendance, this is less than one third of the average recipients. It is clear though that school attendance and the reopening of additional grades increased feeding by an additional 15%, the most significant feeding was seen amongst grade 12 learners and those with open grades,

37 The evaluation was jointly commissioned by the Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation and the Department of Basic Education and conducted by JET Education services (2016)

38 Business Day article by Nic Spaull "Government needs to come up with a plan to help poor families now that schools are shut" 23 March 2020

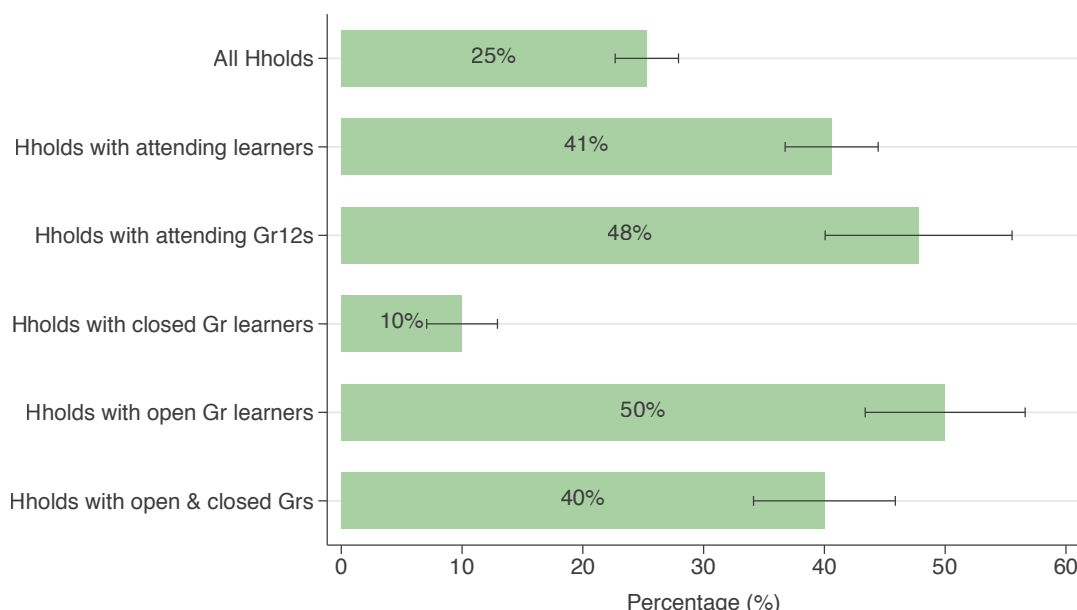
39 Section 27 open letter 14 April 2020

40 Equal Education and others v Department of Basic Education and others (2020)

41 Equal Education and others v Department of Basic Education and others (2020)

with about 50% of learners receiving a meal. In interpreting these difference keeping the phased reopening of grades is important. Since schools reopened on different dates across grades, the responses may reflect feeding from the 8th of June 2020 for grade 12 and 7 learners, while for other grades this may have been from the week after the court ruling, the 20th of July 2020, at the earliest.

Figure 18: Percentage of households where a child received a meal at school



Source: NIDS-CRAM, Wave 2 (2020)

Note:

1. Data are weighted. 2. 95% confidence intervals indicated.

The second report⁴² filed on progress and plans on NSNP implementation showed that approximately 5.9 million out of 9.7 million learners received meals between July and the 26th of August 2020. The provinces with the lowest numbers of learners were Eastern Cape, providing meals for about 340 000 out of 1.6 million learners, and North West, with about 75 000 out of 720 000. The reasons for these lower numbers seem to be poor learner uptake, which may reflect parent fears of learner infections and transport issues in attending or visiting schools to obtain meals. An announcement that learners may receive meals at the school closest to them, not where they regularly attend, may address the latter while certain grades were “not yet open”. However, clear communication on the lower infection risks of children should also be better communicated. It is anticipated that the number of learners receiving meals should increase since all grades resumed attendance.

8. Conclusion and recommendations

This paper builds on emerging evidence on COVID-19 effects on education in South Africa and similar contexts and conclusions may be reconsidered based on additional waves of data expected from the NIDS-CRAM. It is clear that although the initial decision to close all schools in March 2020 with the initial spread of COVID-19 in South Africa was in line with best practice at the time, the decision to implement a phased return to school moving forward is appropriate.

One of the primary questions has been whether the reopening of schools would lead to an increase in the spreading of the virus. The evidence that children are at lower risk of infection, transmission and falling seriously ill has been sustained in this paper. Through reviewing data from Gauteng and Western Cape, the paper has also made the case that teachers are not at a higher risk than those in similar professions, thus sustaining the case for the reopening of schools.

⁴² Department of Basic Education- Judgement and court order compliance: National School Nutrition Programme. Report as at 26 August 2020

The contestation against the reopening of schools shows both how much education is a societal issue and how difficult managing and leading change through a crisis can be. The generation of evidence and research has been an important input into this process. Enhancing strategies for communicating this evidence continuously and effectively for multiple audiences is perhaps one of the key takeaways.

The efforts by schools to implement COVID-19 protocols and preventative measures are commendable. Although some of the preparations revealed long-standing infrastructure issues such as a lack of access to water and sanitation, monitoring data shows that the system was able to respond to these challenges meaningfully in a short period. The monitoring questions may have been simple, but the use of a readiness index has been a useful approach.

The reopening of schools is not just a technocratic exercise, but also an emotional one, particularly in the context of the unpredictability of the coronavirus pandemic. The perceptions data examined in this paper showed that the majority of adults are worried about learners returning to school. However, the levels of worry differ by income, being particularly lower for the top decile. This may reflect lower risk in exposure to co-morbidities or other vulnerabilities. While more than 70% of adults reported being very worried about the return of children to school, the levels of worry did not in fact affect school attendance patterns. This may mean that parents are both aware of the risk of the pandemic and the need for schooling to resume uninterrupted.

Although school attendance was lower than prior to COVID-19, it was relatively high, particularly for grade 12 learners at 88%. As part of the phased-in approach, schools could apply for the earlier return of “not yet open” grades. Attendance amongst these “not yet open” grades differed by socio-economic status, underscoring the importance of government-led broader reopening of schools to allow the majority of learners to return. Without this, inequalities in access to education and learning may be deepened. While differences in attendance by province should be interpreted carefully due to NIDS-CRAM not being representative at a provincial level, it appears that the Eastern Cape had the lowest levels of readiness and attendance.

Internationally, learning loss and the importance of learning recovery has become the areas of emphasis as schools reopen. As this unfolds, this must be seen as a long term endeavour rather than a compliance exercise for 2020. Previous reports have explained learning loss, while the current focus is in the context of extended school closures due to COVID-19. The total number of lost days is alarmingly high, going up to 40% for some grades. While this is astounding, the estimated learning loss is estimated to be as much as 50% of a year of learning for some grades. The high number of schooling days lost for the majority of grades is concerning. While ICTs cannot be used as a remediation approach for the sector, efforts such as focusing on core skills over a period longer than one academic year have been proposed in the paper.

Finally, the paper has shown the broader social net provided through schooling. The court ruling that the NSNP should provide meals for all grades as a constitutional right expands the significance of the continued operation of the NSNP. The judgement stated that hunger is a matter of justice, not charity. The information on the rates of access to meals starts to respond to this question, an important legal and justice question.

Based on this paper and the evidence summarised in this section, we recommend that schools should remain open across the grades for the remainder of 2020 and the foreseeable future. While minimum compliance has been reached in the general COVID-19 protocols, psychological support, nutrition and scholar transport need attention, especially in the next phase as schools are now largely open. The recovery of learning losses should become a primary focus, especially for the grades most adversely affected over a sustained period. Finally, we recommend that future perception surveys be interpreted carefully because as shown here, worry does not mean schools should be closed.

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