



# COVID-19 and the South African curriculum policy response

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## RESEARCH NOTE

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## ABSTRACT

This note tracks curriculum and assessment policy changes over three-years (2020 to 2023) in South Africa in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. Some changes were made to the national CAPS curriculum documents in the form of trimming content (2020), identifying ‘fundamental’ knowledge (2020) and reviewing subject content (2022). The focus was on retaining the curriculum whilst allowing for flexibility in coverage through weakened controls over moderation, assessment and promotion requirements, ceding most curriculum and assessment decisions to the school and classroom levels. Given a very unequal system, this meant that curriculum coverage and learning losses mapped onto and deepened pre-COVID-19 patterns of educational disadvantage. During the pandemic the Department of Basic Education claimed remote solutions as a key mechanism for addressing curriculum coverage, despite very few learners having access to these. Post-COVID a similar approach of devolution of curriculum decision-making to school and teacher level has been taken. There has been no attempt to recoup *time* in order to *remediate* learning losses, apart from very recent attempts in one province. The insistence on a largely business-as-usual approach to curriculum implementation fails to recognise and address the severe educational impact of the pandemic, especially on learners in the poorest communities.

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# INTRODUCTION

Curriculum policy is a cornerstone of educational governance and has powerful effects on what happens in classrooms through curriculum documentation, assessment regimes, monitoring and accountability mechanisms. This policy note considers curriculum policymaking in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, between May 2020 and May 2023. Curriculum decisions were taken in a socio-economic setting of extreme inequalities. They were also taken in the context of an established curriculum policy trajectory. For about 10 years prior to the pandemic, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) had established a strong centralised role in determining curriculum content and quality assuring assessments for schooling. In the face of on-going and significant loss of teaching time from May 2020, it ceded this role to the local level, with an increased emphasis on self-directed learning, remote learning, home learning and flexibility. Responsibility for curriculum decisions were devolved to the school and teacher level and responsibility for learning to the individual learner. In the very unequal social and educational context, devolving decisions around the selection, pace and evaluation of curriculum knowledge meant that curriculum coverage and assessment practices would vary considerably between schools and classrooms. Devolving learning to the home environment would mean widening inequalities depending on the capacity of the home to provide educational support. This note considers both the actions taken by the DBE, and the inaction in the face of the pandemic shock to schooling.

South Africa's national curriculum, the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), is a tightly structured curriculum organized in four 10-week terms with clearly specified content for each of the 40 school weeks for 13 grades (grades R-12) of schooling. The Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) are an additional set of documents providing further detail on the minimum weekly content with notional hours to be taught as well as assessment details. In this way, *content is tightly bound to time*. There were four central curriculum strategies undertaken by the DBE to try and recover time given the decline in curriculum coverage:

- a) Reduction in curriculum content
- b) Suspension / rationalising of subjects
- c) Changes to assessment
- d) Remote learning

Policy initiatives are discussed in relation to these four areas below. This note argues that while there were some strengths in the approaches, devolution to a highly unequal system without support or opportunities for remediation presents a long-term problem of learning losses that map onto patterns of prior social and educational disadvantage.



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# LOSS OF INSTRUCTIONAL TIME AND LEARNING LOSSES

It is difficult to calculate the loss of instructional time for all learners as school closures affected different schools and grades differently. After the initial lockdown in May 2020, a phased return to schooling meant that some grades lost many more days than others. Many schools delayed opening due to lack of readiness to manage social distancing or a rise in infections. Most schools adopted a system of alternating (rotational) attendance, where children in each grade would alternate attending school and staying at home. In 2021, schools commenced a month late due to a 'wave' of infections, and 80% continued with rotational timetabling to meet mandated social distancing requirements. Thus, throughout 2020 and 2021 most learners received only a third to half of the instructional time that they would have in a normal year. Gustafsson (2022) estimates an average loss of 54% of contact time due to changes in the school calendar in 2020, and an average of 22% lost contact time in 2021 due to rotational schedules. He emphasises, however, large socio-economic inequalities in time loss, depending largely on factors such as school size and local politics relating to the pandemic as well as economic and social trauma in households. In 2022 schools finally returned to normal timetables with all learners and teachers expected to attend daily.

Findings regarding the impact of the loss of instructional time on learning began to emerge in 2021. A number of studies showed severe impacts on early grade reading levels, reported to be between 46% and 118% of a year of learning among Grade 2 to 4 learners in no-fee school samples (Ardington et al, 2021; Kotze et al, 2022). The largest study, however, was that by Van der Berg et al (2022) who compared performance in Mathematics and Language on the Western Cape Systemic Tests in 2019 to that in 2021. The same schools and the same test items in 2021 and 2019 were considered and showed that conservatively, compared to cohorts assessed in 2019, grade 3, 6 and 9 cohorts assessed in 2021 were 40% to 70% of a school year behind in Language and much more behind, 95% to 106% of a school year, in Mathematics. Declines in average learner performance on the tests were larger in primary grades, and larger in mathematics than language. There was also evidence of widening inequality in learning across wealthier and poorer parts of the system.

Curriculum policy processes in the context of these learning losses are discussed below.

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# REDUCTION IN CURRICULUM CONTENT

## May 2020 - 'Curriculum Trimming' in the Revised Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs)

In preparation for the re-opening of schools planned for June 2020 after the initial lockdown period, the DBE undertook a process of trimming the ATPs. Driving principles for this initial process included curriculum progression, coherence and sensitivity to the particularities of different school contexts, articulated as:

- Feasibility – analyse and examine the content in the light of the time and resources available to the schools, considering the current socio-economic and political climate.
- Coherence – systematic curriculum mapping must have horizontal, vertical, subject area and interdisciplinary coherence<sup>2</sup>.

The Grade 12 curriculum was not trimmed but there was some reorganisation of content given school closures. In this process of trimming, further school closures were not anticipated and in many cases changes constituted more a reorganisation (especially the shift of Term 2 content to later in the year) than a significant reduction in content (Hoadley, 2020). The trimming was assumed as a temporary measure for 2020 with a return to the normal curriculum in 2021. The Revised ATPs as these came to be known were published with a set of mediation documents (primarily PowerPoint presentations on the DBE website).

## July 2020 - the 'Fundamentals'

Once schools reopened in June, it became increasingly evident that there would be considerable further loss of teaching time, particularly in the context of the delayed and staggered reopening, rotational timetabling and much higher teacher and learner absenteeism than normal. A second process of curriculum content reduction was thus undertaken, focusing this time on minimum concepts, content and skills per grade and per subject. These were called 'Fundamental skills and content' released via 'Circular S3'<sup>3</sup>. The main mechanism for reducing curriculum coverage demands in the Fundamentals process was to identify broad, priority topics without detailed content specifications, and to delink topics from specific time frames for completion (as presented in the ATPs). In other words, selection and pacing requirements were relaxed and curriculum decisions devolved to the school level. This was a response to the evidently vastly different experience of schooling across contexts.

Circular S3 also released guidelines for implementation of the Revised ATPs and placed a strong emphasis on collaboration. Teachers were expected to inform their trimming decisions in collaboration

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<sup>2</sup> DBE (2020). School Recovery Plan in Response to COVID-19.

<sup>3</sup> DBE (2020). Circular S3 of 2020 Distribution of the Teacher Guidelines for the implementation of Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) and the Minimum Core Content and Skills per subject and per grade.

with colleagues from the preceding and following grades. Further expectations on teachers included: designing and using diagnostic assessment to inform curriculum selection; collaboratively planning on-going selections based on formative assessment; balancing face-to-face, remote and self-guided learning; and conducting continuous communication between teachers around coverage<sup>4</sup>.

Circular S3 recognised that the curriculum wasn't going to be completed in 2020, and devolved planning for 2020/2021 to 'school-based efforts', with a view to "using part of the 2021 academic year to revise and remediate 2020 work" (para 1). The policy required teachers to function as autonomous, highly-skilled individuals, able to exercise just-in-time professional judgements regarding content selection, in-person and remote pedagogies and appropriate assessments. These were very unrealistic expectations for the average South African teacher, particularly in the context of a very unstable schooling system buckling under the strains of a pandemic. In addition, high levels of subject and pedagogical expertise would be needed to meet these requirements.

## **2021 – the Recovery ATPs**

In December of 2020 the DBE issued the 'Recovery' ATPs for 2021 via Circular S13<sup>5</sup> as an 'interim deviation' from the original CAPS curriculum in order to deal with learning backlogs. Essentially, for most levels and subjects, the Recovery ATPs allowed three weeks for catch-up at the beginning of Term 1 and a return to the pre-COVID curriculum for that term (Term 1 of the CAPS had never been trimmed as school closures occurred for the first time at the end of Term 1 in 2020). For the remaining terms some of the changes from the trimming process were retained; in other subjects and grades there was reversion to the original CAPS.

The Recovery ATPs were designed for a full return to school but persisting social distancing requirements meant that rotational timetabling continued in most schools through 2021. Schools also commenced a month late in February due to a wave of infections. No other curriculum directives regarding the ATPs in the context of continued rotational timetabling were issued in 2021 and teachers were *de facto* mostly unable to adhere to the ATPs. They were also dealing with significant learning backlogs in their classrooms from 2020, sustained high levels of absenteeism and much greater heterogeneity in learner preparedness given altered promotion practices from 2020 (see below). Curriculum coverage continued to be very unequal across schooling contexts, depending on the nature of rotations at the school (linked to number and size of classes and classrooms), the capacity for remote learning (especially online), levels of learning support in the home, and further closures and absenteeism in response to infections in the school.

## **Stasis in 2021 / 2022**

No plans were made in 2021 for ATPs for 2022. No resources were allocated for any catch-up programs and no systematic catch-up plan was published. In 2022 schools continued to work with the Recovery ATPs in the same way as 2021, again differing in the capacity and inclination of local school actors to plan for and address learning losses. What differed, however, was a Cabinet decision from

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<sup>4</sup> DBE (2020) Teacher Guidelines for Implementing the Revised Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) ('Teacher Guidelines').

<sup>5</sup> DBE (2020). Circular S13 Release of The Curriculum Recovery Annual Teaching Plans for 2021.

January 2022 to end rotational schooling with immediate effect (Circular S1 of 2022). Thus, all learners returned to school full-time in 2022.

## The 2023/24 ATPS

From 2021 there was uncertainty and unevenness regarding the status of the Recovery ATPs, as well as their integrity. Midway through the year UNICEF funded a process to review the ATPS to identify and rectify a number of problems that had been identified, including gaps in the core and/or fundamental knowledge; coherence and progression of content (knowledge, skills, values and attitudes) within and across phases; content overload or unnecessary repetition across subjects and grades; alignment between the ATPs and specified formal assessment tasks.

Circular S33<sup>6</sup> asserted that the review process was not a curriculum redesign activity and was intended as an interim measure. Emphasis was placed on the key principles of coherence and progression of content within and across phases.

Almost all subjects at all levels were revised (except most Grade 12 subjects and Foundation Phase Language and Life Skills). Across the rest of the curriculum, minor adjustments were made by removing or reducing some content; increasing time for some content; shifting content between grades and reorganising content within a grade (often to deal with issues of progression). Some reorganisation of content deals with remediation in the Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase where content from earlier grades is drawn in. In the Intermediate Phase, two weeks is allocated for remediation, revision, and consolidation. While there has yet been no proper evaluation of the new ATPs, the process appears to have adhered to its purposes and principles and resulted in more considered and coherent documents. However, there is no evidence of additional time or accelerated learning opportunities or any serious curriculum policy mechanisms for dealing with learning backlogs. While the difficulty of deriving a plan for a system so unequally affected by the pandemic is acknowledged, additional measures to the ATPs would have been expected given the gravity of learning losses especially in mathematics and reading.

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<sup>6</sup> Circular S33 of 2022 Release of 2023/24 Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs), including revised weightings to school based assessment and examinations (Grades R- 12), effective from the 2023 academic year.



# RATIONALISING OF SUBJECTS

An early document published by the DBE, *Guidelines for Development of the School Timetables reopening of schools COVID-19 (DBE, 2020)* emphasised the importance of Mathematics and Language in the curriculum, suggesting that schools keep core subjects such as Mathematics, Home Language and English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the timetable daily while alternating subjects such as Life Skills or Life Orientation. The Revised ATPs, however, reasserted the equal importance of all subjects, ensuring that “no subjects are done away with, or their time gets allocated to subjects that are deemed important by the school”<sup>7</sup> (p.24). The chance to focus on key, gateway subjects was thus fleeting, although there was some ambivalence across documents around integrating Life Skills into Home Language in the Foundation Phase. Later in the year, with the introduction of the Fundamentals, reducing the subjects offered in the Senior Phase became possible. In these grades, Grade 7 to Grade 9, Languages, Mathematics, Natural Science and Life Orientation were to remain compulsory, however, schools could drop two of four subjects from their timetable: Economic and Management Sciences, Technology, Social Sciences or Creative Arts. These optional subjects were well-chosen. They do not have strong progression requirements and their omission is less likely to compromise their continued learning at a later stage (in contrast, for example, with a subject like mathematics that builds concepts cumulatively over time, later learning being dependent on mastery of earlier concepts).

However, there was union resistance to the suspension of any curriculum subjects and schools complained about the lack of support in developing timetables to institute these changes. It is unclear how many schools rationalised subjects in the Senior Phase in 2020. Schools were mandated to teach all subjects in the Recovery ATPs through 2021 and 2022. Responding to research around learning losses, in June of 2022 the Western Cape Education Department reduced Life Skills in Foundation Phase from six to three hours, adding an additional hour to mathematics per week and an additional two hours to Home Language and First Additional Language teaching of reading. Following the tabling of this model to recover time in Foundation Phase at the Council of Education Ministers, the strategy was approved for adoption nationally for 2023 and 2024.<sup>8</sup> The approach was, however, optional in other provinces.

There are no suggestions for rationalising or reducing the weighting of any subjects in other grades in the 2023/24 ATPs.

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<sup>7</sup> DBE (2020). *Guidelines for Development of the School Timetables reopening of schools COVID-19* ('Timetabling Guidelines', May).

<sup>8</sup> WCED (2023). Circular S5 of 2023 Guidelines on the adjustment of instructional time for Languages and Mathematics in the Foundation Phase for the purpose of curriculum recovery.

# REDUCING AND CHANGING ASSESSMENT

The changes to assessment were the most consequential of curriculum policy changes made during the COVID period. In 2020, at the General Education and Training (GET) level all June examinations were cancelled<sup>9</sup>. School-based tests were to replace end-of-year examinations in all subjects and were to include only content that had been covered. In the Foundation Phase there were to be no formal assessment tasks. The number of assessments was decreased across Grades 4 to 9. In 2023, midyear assessment was reinstated in the form of controlled tests for Grades 4 to 9 and examinations for Grades 10 and 11.

Across assessment policies and guidelines, a strong emphasis was placed on formative assessment. School-based assessment (SBA)<sup>10</sup> was also given greater emphasis while summative tests and examinations were de-emphasised. Table 1 below shows the changes in the weighting of SBA from 2019 (pre-COVID-19) to 2023. The SBA component of the final mark for promotion purposes was increased in all grades apart from Grade 12 and the Foundation Phase (which remained at 100%). The change in the weighting of SBA must be seen in the light of a known lack of reliability of school-based assessments, thus increasing the lack of reliability in promotion decisions<sup>11</sup>.

**Table 1: School-Based Assessment vs. Examination mark contribution to final mark for promotion purposes**

	Grade R-3	Grade 4 – 6		Grades 7 – 9		Grades 10 & 11		Grade 12	
	SBA	SBA	Exam	SBA	Exam	SBA	Exam	SBA	Exam
<b>2019</b>	100	75	25	40	60	25	75	25	75
<b>2020</b>	100	80	20	80	20	60	40	25	75
<b>2021</b>	100	80	20	80	20	60	40	25	75
<b>2022</b>	100	80	20	60	40	60	40	25	75
<b>2023</b>	100	80	20	60	40	40	60	25	75

<sup>9</sup> DBE (2020). National Assessment Circular 02 Of 2020 Implementation and Quality Assurance of the Amended 2020 Assessment Programme in the General Education and Training (Get) Band (Grades R-9).

<sup>10</sup> A clear definition of School-Based Assessment is difficult to pinpoint in the policy. While the nomenclature makes sense in relation to Grade 12, where the Senior Certificate is an external, national examination, and the rest of the assessment is school-based, all assessment in from grades R to 11 is school-based. What SBA seems to imply is: 1. A greater range of assessment types other than summative examinations (tasks, assignments, projects, investigations, orals); 2. Assessments designed, administered and marked at the school level; 3. Less rigorous moderation than tests and examinations; 4. The keeping of complete records of assessments of all subjects by teachers, to be made available for monitoring and moderation purposes. The number of SBA tasks is specified for each subject and level in the CAPS.

<sup>11</sup> Van der Berg & Shepherd (2015); Lam et al. (2011). Every year the vast majority of SBA marks in the NSC are excluded from the final mark calculation due to there being more than 15% discrepancy between the final exam mark and the SBA mark (personal comment, former senior DBE bureaucrat).

School-based tests or examinations would carry a reduced weighting and time allocation, and “not all content and aspects of a subject are included with priority given to those aspects considered core for progression into the next grade” (Circular 02, para 7.3). Circular 02 of 2020 and 01 of 2021 also suggested an easing of the moderation processes, devolving these to the school level. Allowance was also made in the centralised assessment management system for flexibility in the number of assessments recorded<sup>12</sup>.

For the GET Phase, it took until November of 2020 for the DBE to release details for the promotion requirements for learners at the end of the very disrupted year<sup>13</sup>. A mark adjustment of 5% was allowed in a maximum of three subjects to compensate for possible learning losses. Further, where a learner met all the requirements for promotion from one grade to the next, apart from the minimum level 3 (40%) in Mathematics, the learner was to be condoned in Mathematics. This applied equally to Grade 4 learners and Grade 9 learners, and in relation to the latter the circular specifically stated: “Grade 9 learners who obtain a condonation in Mathematics with mark of below 30%, (after the condonation has been approved) have the option of continuing with Mathematics in Grade 10. They may also opt to take Mathematical Literacy. As in 2019, there was no restriction of only choosing Mathematical Literacy as a result of the Mathematics condonation” (p. 2). The same condonation dispensation was retained for 2021<sup>14</sup> and 2022. In short, what all these changes meant was that many more learners were progressing to the following grade without having mastered the content of the previous grade. This is particularly serious in a subject like Mathematics that has a strict sequence of conceptual development. Learners benefitting from the special condonation would likely find they lack the requisite foundation to progress in that subject, especially in the absence of robust opportunities for remediation. Overall, teachers at the beginning of 2021, 2022 and 2023 were likely to face many more learners who not only had significant gaps in their knowledge due to the loss of instructional time, but also those who had not sufficiently mastered content that had been taught.

Although the changes at the GET level were significant, the most dramatic assessment changes were at the Grade 10 and 11 levels. June examinations were cancelled. The SBA component for promotion increased from 25% to 60%. Controlled tests<sup>15</sup> replaced examinations at the end of the year, set only on content taught<sup>16</sup>. External moderation of examinations was devolved to the school level and no common examinations or tests were to be administered<sup>17</sup>. The number of examination papers and the duration of the examinations were also decreased. In this way the requirements for passing these grades were reduced considerably. In 2023, mid-year examinations were reintroduced for Grade 10 and 11.<sup>18</sup> The SBA contribution in Grades 10 and 11 to a final mark for promotion purposes was adjusted down from 60% to 40%, still higher than pre-COVID-19's 25%.

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<sup>12</sup> The system is the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). Adjustments to the system included a built-in functionality to address cases where an assessment was not administered, removing the task from the learner's SBA, automatically redistributing the weight proportionally to other tasks and adjusting the promotion mark.

<sup>13</sup> DBE (2020) National Assessment Circular No. 7 of 2020 Special Condonation Dispensation for learners in Grades 4-9

<sup>14</sup> National Assessment Circular 01 of 2021 on the Implementation of the 2021 Assessment Programme in Mainstream and Special Schools across the General Education and Training (GET); National Assessment Circular 03 of 2021, dated 30 October 2021.

<sup>15</sup> No clear definitions are provided in documentation distinguishing between controlled tests and examinations. It is implied, however, that examinations cover two full terms' work whereas controlled tests cover a narrower range of content.

<sup>16</sup> Circular S7 Revised promotion requirements for Grade 10 and 11 for the 2020 year (para 5e).

<sup>17</sup> Ibid.

<sup>18</sup> Circular S33 of 2022.



Fewer changes were made at the Grade 12 level. The June 2020 Senior Certificate and National Senior Certificate ('Matric')<sup>19</sup> examinations were shifted later to November / December in 2020<sup>20</sup>. In the same year, the June examinations were suspended, and reinstated in 2023 as controlled tests (which makes sense as they write their preliminary or trial examinations only about two months later). The examinations assessed all curriculum content.

Learning losses had been great and very uneven so the rationale for devolution in assessment practices and the easing of promotion requirements is clear. But there was no cushioning of the effects on the system. Teachers would confront much greater heterogeneity in student preparedness than before. There were also many more learners enrolled, especially in the higher grades, due to a decline in dropping out and repetition rates (Wills & Van der Berg, 2022). These larger numbers of less prepared students with significant learning losses in the final grades of high school were provided with little curriculum support and additional time for remediation. Strategies for catch-up were left to the school and teacher.

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## REMOTE LEARNING

Lockdowns brought about a focus on the possibilities of remote learning to ensure curriculum coverage while schools were closed. Most of the initial provincial responses were web-based, either proposing or providing online platforms and virtual classrooms through zero-rated websites. Later the national department expanded offerings into television and radio. These efforts were piecemeal, uncoordinated, poorly publicized and, for the lower grades especially, unconnected to the curriculum. One of the more prominent initiatives, for example, the television-based Woza Matric that focused on revision for Grade 12s, had no coverage of high enrolment subjects like Mathematical Literacy and English First Additional Language and offerings across subjects were in English only.

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<sup>19</sup> Directions issued by the DBE in terms of Regulation 4(3) of the Regulations published in terms of section 27(2) the Disaster Management Act, 2002, as amended.

<sup>20</sup> Circular E11 (2020, July). Implementation and quality assurance of 2020 School Based Assessment: Grades 10-12.

Subscription numbers to the various channels were extremely low (Spaull, 2022) and there is no evidence to suggest that any of the initiatives were effective. Part of the reason for this is found in the General Household Survey (2018) indicating that only 9% of households with children have a household internet connection (Spaull, 2022, p. 10). Wills & Van der Berg (2022) also show the limitations of remote learning using StatsSA data, where nationally just 11% of youth aged 5-24 in educational institutions participated in remote learning in 2020 (StatsSA, 2022, p10). Taking race as a proxy for social advantage, StatsSA (2022) shows that at least 36% of Indian/Asian and White youth (aged 5-24 in educational institutions) accessed remote learning in 2022 compared to 9% of Black African youth (p12).

The 2020 Teacher Guidelines placed a strong emphasis on blended and home learning while making no assumptions around connectivity on the part of learners. Many of the proposals, though well-intentioned, were unrealistic, making considerable demands on teachers, students and parents to re-structure learning processes at a chaotic time. The emphasis in the guidelines was on self-directed learning, echoed in the School Recovery Plan<sup>21</sup> that argues for learners taking responsibility for their own learning:

In the case of Self-directed learning, the learning material is prepared in such a manner that learners are able to progress from the known to the unknown on their own (or with minimal supervision), given the clear exposition and illustrated presentation of content; such content must be well scaffolded and mediated through templates and vivid examples (p. 6).

At-home-learning, flexibility, blended models and self-directed learning all became part of the general policy thrust towards devolving responsibility for learning to the school, teacher and individual learner level. The notion of self-directed learning was likely to deepen inequalities in the same ways as digital offerings. The opportunities to engage in self-directed learning were as unequally distributed as the resources required to do it.

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## 2023 DEVELOPMENTS

In May of 2023, just over three years after the first school closures two initiatives, one provincial, one national, were declared. It was politically important to signal a clear strategy prior to the release of the PIRLS 2021 results, given these were expected to show starkly the negative impact of COVID-19 on reading outcomes. In the Western Cape, a costed and budgeted plan for a catchup campaign, ‘#BackOnTrack’ was launched, with R1,2bn allocated to Grade 4 to Grade 12 tutoring, Saturday classes, holiday camps, training and resources for parents. In addition, R118 million was allocated to Grades R to 3. This was the first, concerted system-wide strategy (i.e. across all grades) to allocate additional time and resources to catching up curriculum.

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<sup>21</sup> DBE (2020). School Recovery Plan in Response to COVID-19.

At the same time, at the national level the directorate of Teacher Development released Learning Recovery Programme (LRP) guidelines. “The essence of the LRP will be teachers identifying what has not been learned in previous years, and planning to ‘catch up’ that learning. This will happen every year and the skill of teachers in using assessment for learning (AfL) is at the heart of the LRP” (p.3).

The plan provides several different tools to be used at different levels of the system (classroom, school, district), including a ‘Weekly monitoring, reflecting and responding’ tool for teachers to track and reflect on their progress in covering the ATP. While the guidelines highlight a number of important points around the need for assessment, differentiation and explicit planning for learning recovery, responsibility is again devolved to the teacher and senior managers in the school, without additional time or resources for this work. Strategies to address losses, such as “arranging some extra teaching time before or after school” are left to the individual teacher. This, and the reliance on professional learning communities (PLCs), to address learning backlogs, is reminiscent of 2020 proposals, devolving the exercise of professional judgement and curriculum choices to the teacher and school and assuming existing collaborative work and professional learning communities within schools. The LRPs also demand a whole new set of complex practices and reporting at a time when the system is buckling. Budget for training on these new sets of practices has yet to be allocated. No additional time or material resources have been allocated at the national level for a catch-up programme.

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## COVID CURRICULUM POLICY PROCESS SUMMARY

This note has provided an overview of curriculum and assessment policy changes over the period 2020 to 2023. In relation to the national CAPS documents, changes were made in the form of trimming content (2020), identifying ‘fundamental’ knowledge (2020) and reviewing subject content (2022). *Changes to subject curriculum specifications overall were minimal.* The focus was on retaining the curriculum whilst allowing for flexibility in coverage through weakened controls over moderation, assessment and promotion requirements. Substantial changes to assessment allowed for flexibility in what was assessed and reduced the requirements for promotion to the following grade. Targeting of core or gateway subjects was minimal. Remote learning opportunities were curtailed by lack of access to web-based offerings and poor and patchy quality of other mediums.

There were some notable successes in the policy process. The impetus towards, and principles for, trimming the curriculum were sound, paying attention to issues of progression and coherence in subjects. Early on in the pandemic (2020) suggestions were made for the suspension of certain subjects, the selection of which was sensible and conceptually-grounded. Reducing the assessment requirements was also logical, especially reducing examination periods in favour of extended instructional time. Managing to retain the National Senior Certificate (NSC) examinations, the only high-stakes exit level examination with huge consequences for learners future academic and work



opportunities, was a stellar achievement. The curriculum as represented in the 2023/2024 ATPs is likely a strengthened curriculum, having undergone a number of reviews utilizing clear and appropriate principles (notably coherence).

Despite these successes, overall the curriculum policy response can be described as inadequate, primarily in the decisions to devolve a range of curriculum and assessment decisions and activities to a very unequally capacitated system. In the face of on-going and significant loss of teaching time, the DBE gradually ceded its centralised role in determining curriculum content and quality assuring assessments to schools and teachers, with an increased emphasis on remote, self-directed learning and home learning. This meant that curriculum coverage and assessment practices would vary considerably between schools and learners depending on their levels of educational disadvantage. Van der Berg et al (2022) show empirically how this resulted in schooling outcomes that mapped onto and deepened pre-COVID inequalities in academic outcomes. While we may question whether devolution was avoidable, the policy reflected unrealistic notions of what most teachers, parents and learners were expected to do in remedying the enormous loss of learning. As argued above, an emphasis on self-directed learning and digital offerings shifted responsibility for addressing learning losses away from the DBE to the vagaries of learners' access to social and educational supports. As Hargreaves puts it, pithily, "independent learning is inequitable learning" (Hargreaves, 2021).

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The second weakness in the policy response was the absence of attempts to provide opportunities for catch up. Early in the pandemic, there were clear messages around the need to act quickly, as the opportunity gap for learning would grow as time went on, with compounded learning losses for the most educationally disadvantaged. Key to curriculum catch up was finding additional time, either by extending available instructional time, prioritising certain (gateway) subjects or running accelerated programmes of learning.

The only references to accelerated learning in the South African COVID-19 policy were two early ideas in the School Recovery Plan (DBE, 2020). One was to lengthen the school day in order to recover lost instructional time. The other referred to accelerated learning and accelerated education programmes “which expose learners to intensive learning programmes that focus on core skills, values and knowledge” (p.12). Neither of these proposals were taken up again in any other policy proposals although private providers were contracted to run ‘matric camps’ in certain provinces at the end of 2020<sup>22</sup>. Crucially, no budget was allocated for any curriculum catch-up programme until the

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<sup>22</sup> See Sunday Times (13 September, 2020). Millions for ‘outside’ teachers, camps.

Western Cape's #BackonTrack campaign, in May 2023, and relevant only to this province. Prioritising core subjects was an option briefly proposed in the Foundation and Senior Phase in 2020, and has recently become policy in the Western Cape province in relation to the shortening of Life Orientation in favour of Mathematics and Language teaching in the Foundation Phase. This is optional in other provinces and there is no sense of whether this has been adopted anywhere else. Thus far, in practice, the sum total of hours accrued to address learning losses through policy has been an additional three hours per week in the Foundation Phase for one province.

Reviewing the announcements and plans of the Department of Basic Education, as well as DBE reports to the Parliamentary Monitoring group, there have been and are still no national, funded plans for catching up learning losses (Spaull, 2022, p. 10). This was the case up until the most recent meetings and reports in May 2023. No money was allocated in the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement and the DBE's budget for plans to catch up the lost time and learning from 2020 to 2023. Only towards the middle of 2022 was there some consolidation of the curriculum revisions made in 2020 to provide clarity on future curriculum expectations in the ATPs, and these largely followed the pre-COVID curriculum with almost no attention to learning loss and remediation strategies. Responsibility for catch-up was devolved to the school, and although some baseline tests were provided for use by teachers, they were given scant support in how to use them, especially where learning losses straddled different grades (and teachers) and phases (at times different schools). In the Western Cape province, following persistent calls to focus on foundation literacy and numeracy and provide learners with additional text<sup>23</sup>, Foundation Phase learners received an additional reading anthology in 2023.

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## CONCLUSION

There are many possible reasons for the DBE's inaction regarding learning losses and proposals for remediation and acceleration. The period in question was one of a great deal of instability and unpredictability, particularly regarding the opening of schools and the changing regulations around social distancing. Curriculum planning under these conditions is extremely difficult. But once it was clear that there had been significant loss of instructional time, and learning, the inertia persisted. One reason could be a lack of capacity within the DBE (Gustafsson & Taylor, 2022), the lack of political will to allocate or redirect budget towards catch-up plans or opposition from the teacher unions to curriculum changes. There were no existing repair mechanisms within the system to deal with learning

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<sup>23</sup> For example, Hoadley, U. (2020, May). Covid-19 curriculum response: focus on our early grade learners. Business Day. Retrieved from: <https://www.businesslive.co.za/bd/opinion/2020-05-21-covid-19-curriculum-response-focus-on-our-early-grade-learners/>

backlogs pre-COVID-19 that might have been leveraged in the pandemic. The DBE also persisted with existing curriculum priorities (with project plans and budgets) that commanded their attention.<sup>24</sup>

There are any number of institutional, social and political processes and cultures informing the production or non-production of policy texts that could have underpinned the DBE's COVID-19 curriculum response. But two statements made to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group stand out as indicative of the DBE's stance on the issue of COVID-19 and learning losses. The first was in relation to a statement made by the Minister and Deputy Minister of Education to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group on 24 August 2021 on the DBE's 2020/21 performance. The DBE claimed its main response to school closures was remote solutions, 'via broadcasting (TV and radio) and online platforms; as well as, virtual classrooms'<sup>25</sup>:

Benefits of the programme are an interactive online education platform for educators and learners leading to effective and efficient teaching and learning; it is accessible to teachers and learners anywhere and anytime using different web-enabled devices; it equips learners with 21st century skills for the workplace; and supports the emergence of a new type of school.

The statement could not be further from the truth for the majority of learners. Nationally, only 22% of households have a computer and 10% an internet connection. In North West and Limpopo provinces, only 3.6% and 1.6% respectively have access to the internet at home (Amnesty International, 2021). Is the DBE really this ignorant of the broader social and educational system and the reality of (most) learners' experience of schooling in poor communities? What the statement demonstrates is the extent to which government has lost touch with those it most needs to serve.

The second statement was from the Deputy Minister of Education on the department's 2022/2023 performance on 22 March 2023:

Experts say that the improvement seen in the NSC from 2020 to 2022 is due to the help in trimming the curriculum content to rather focus on the fundamentals of learning. The trimmed curriculum has helped DBE focus on the depth of the curriculum rather than the width<sup>26</sup>

This is the second of only two mentions in all reports to parliament from the DBE that obliquely references the COVID-19 era. It is also totally disingenuous in its reference to unnamed 'experts'. Rather, experts argued that the 2022 results should not be taken as a barometer for the education

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<sup>24</sup> A number of these priorities pertained to vocationally-oriented plans, some related to the 'Fourth Industrial Revolution'. In 2021, three new subjects Kiswahili; Entrepreneurship and Coding and Robotics were trialled in Grades R to 9. Coding and Robotics was officially added to the school curriculum in 2023 in Grades 1,2 and 3, demanding an hour of instructional time in Grades 1 and 2 and two hours in Grade 3. For Entrepreneurship, Employability and Education (DBE-E3) in 2022 two Senior Phase teachers from every school were to attend a five-week online training course (SACE endorsed) on Project-Based Learning in preparation for implementation in Term 3. The DBE issued a number of statements in public fora regarding the deferral of curriculum decisions to 2025 when they will revise the curriculum in line with a 'competency-based framework'. These new initiatives, demanding extensive time, energy and resources were on-going while learning losses remained unaddressed.

<sup>25</sup> Parliamentary Monitoring Group committee (2022). <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/35409/>

<sup>26</sup> Mwel, H. (2023). <https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/36616/>



system<sup>27</sup>. There was a lack of transparency around the standardisation processes utilised by the examining authority (UMALUSI) as well as no reporting by the DBE on throughput rates. This information was relevant given the COVID-19 curriculum issues and the changing size of the matric cohort given changed progression patterns. The statement is also disingenuous in tying improvements in the NSC to the COVID-19 curriculum changes given there were no changes to the Grade 12 curriculum!

When school closures interrupted access to the national feeding scheme for around nine million students who depend on school meals for their daily nutrition in 2020, government delays forced NGOs to go to court to compel the government to resume the National School Nutrition Programme. It is a pity that a similar process was not undertaken in relation to instructional deprivation, compelling government to put in place feasible opportunities for learners to catch up missed time with appropriate remedial plans and learning support resources. It would seem that the outcomes of the 2022 National Senior Certificate may have presented the DBE with a cover for their inertia, a superficial cover that has already been exposed by more reliable measures of learning outcomes and system efficiency.

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<sup>27</sup> Daily Maverick (2023) matric class of 2022 should be celebrated, but results not accurate 'barometer' for education system — experts, 20 January.

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