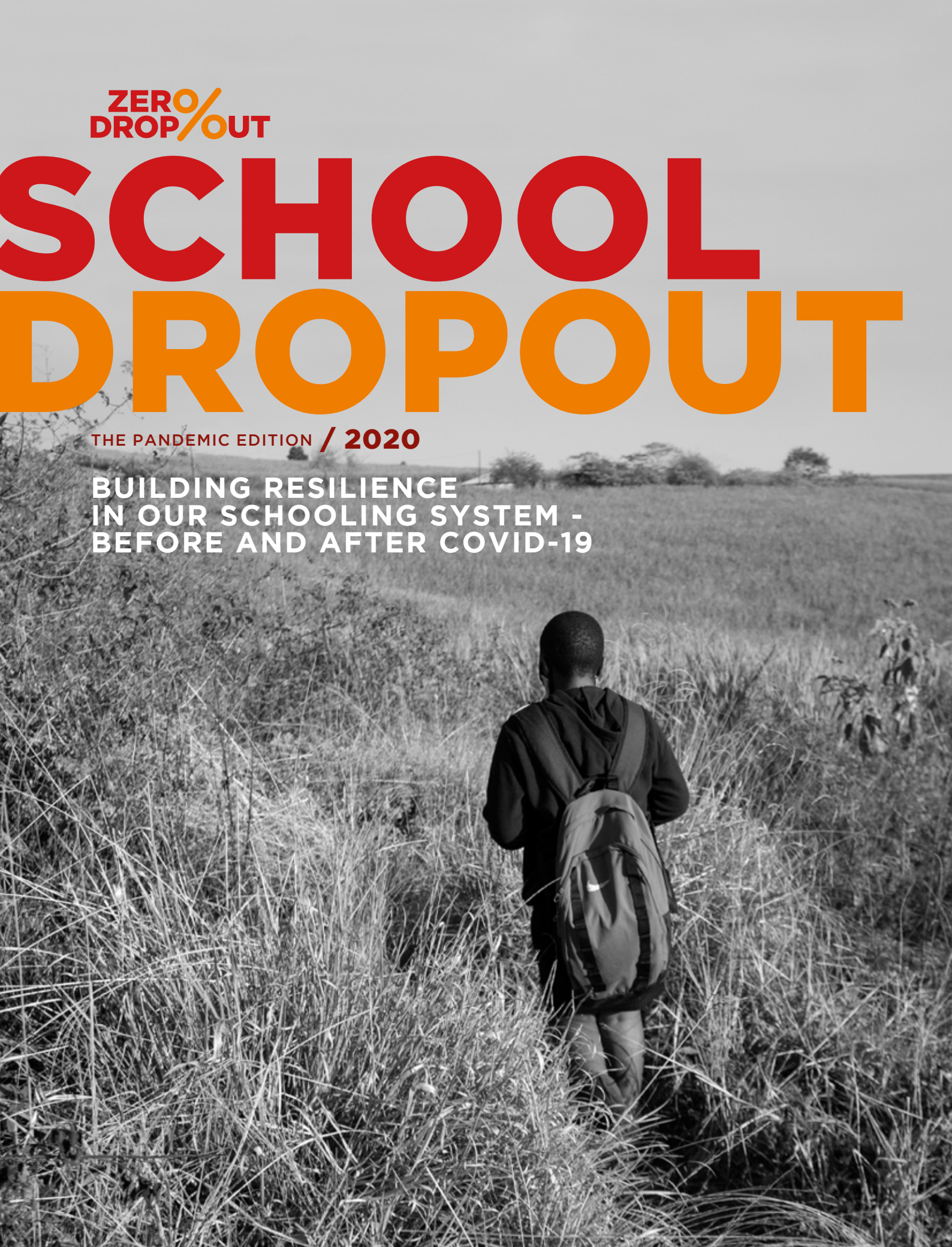


**ZERO  
DROP/OUT**

# **SCHOOL DROPOUT**

**THE PANDEMIC EDITION / 2020**

**BUILDING RESILIENCE  
IN OUR SCHOOLING SYSTEM -  
BEFORE AND AFTER COVID-19**





# THE CAMPAIGN AGAINST SCHOOL DROPOUT

Although at least 40% of all young people in South Africa drop out of school, there is no national task force focused on addressing this crisis. The vision of the Zero Dropout Campaign is to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030 – which requires a collaborative effort targeting a range of actions that can prevent and intervene in school dropout. Towards this end, the Zero Dropout Campaign pursues four strategies to ensure school dropout is firmly on the national agenda with a clear pathway for significant change:

- 1 / Driving a powerful public advocacy agenda focused on mobilising a range of actors to take action on school dropout;
- 2 / Developing an accelerated learning programme focused on the rapid catch-up of skills that enable reading for meaning to address underlying learning backlogs that contribute to learner dropout;
- 3 / Supporting the development and mobilisation of a network of schools committed to Zero Dropout; and
- 4 / Piloting innovative approaches to reducing dropout and learning from the implementation experience.

We believe that a co-ordinated response to school dropout must begin with accurate data tracking of individual learners, together with evidence-based interventions aimed at reducing learner risk and increasing learner engagement to prevent school dropout.

**ZERO  
DROPOUT**

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\* Name has been changed





*“School is important to me because when I finish school, I can get a job, and have my own things and not be dependent on other people. I want to be a pilot. What I love about being a pilot is travelling and seeing many different countries.”*

**GHAYIYA\* (17)**  
Grade 9 learner  
Gonubie, East London

\*Name has been changed

# FOREWORD



**MARY METCALFE**  
CEO, PILO

**The Preamble to our Constitution states that we, the people of South Africa, will work together to create a society in which we ‘free the potential of each person’. It positions the collective potential and capabilities of our citizens as a critical resource to the success in the developmental challenges we face.**

**T**he reality is, due to the state of education in our country, much of this potential is squandered each year. The work of the Zero Dropout Campaign shows that an alarmingly high proportion of learners drift away from school over the course of their school careers, with four out of 10 learners ultimately dropping out without any certification on which to build a post-school pathway. This is the result of gradual alienation and disengagement, a growing sense of exclusion, and a withering of hope. And the consequences for these learners – but also our country – are dire.

In fact, few challenges are more urgent in South Africa than school dropout. The consequences of the loss of nearly half of our young people who start their schooling journey will undermine the urgent tasks of building a just and inclusive society, where everyone is able to contribute to the development of our economic, social and political systems; as well as family and community wellbeing.

While dropout is often seen to be an individual failure or weakness, the scale of dropout is so significant in South Africa that we have to ask: What is happening – in society and in our education sector – to drive this phenomenon so systemically? Do these drivers affect some more than

others – and do they intersect with our national fault lines of class, race, gender and rurality?

Based on thorough research, the Zero Dropout Campaign is making visible both the causes and the pervasiveness of dropout in the country. The campaign is proposing interventions that all schools can adopt to minimise the risk of disengagement and eventual dropout by learners,

**The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed even more learners at risk of dropout, has made the need for the Zero Dropout Campaign more urgent than ever before.**



and advocating for policy interventions at the national and provincial level to stem the tide of learners' lost potential each year.

The onslaught of the Covid-19 pandemic, which has placed even more learners at risk of dropout, has made the need for the Zero Dropout Campaign more urgent than ever before. For instance, Grade 9 and 10 learners – a precarious age of early adolescence – lost approximately 40% of the days in their school calendar year; even when they were able to return to school, many could only do so on alternate days (or weeks) as schools sought to accommodate learners within physical distancing requirements. The Department of Basic Education has indeed expressed concern at poor attendance rates post-lockdown and sounded alarm bells of increased dropout moving forward.

In what is sure to be an ongoing period of uncertainty for both learners, and the country at large, we need all stakeholders to work together to make schools places in which learners feel safe, welcomed, and supported to learn and catch up. We need to be even more vigilant in identifying learners who are at risk. Now, more than ever, is the moment to ensure all our learners are able to leave school with the necessary credentials in hand to declare they have succeeded and met a minimum standard of performance in their school years. Young people deserve to leave school with a sense of achievement and their self-esteem intact, so that they are able move forward into a range of pathways and feel they have a contribution to make. The Zero Dropout Campaign's rigour, advocacy, ideas and engagement with a range of stakeholders has the power to do just this, and alter the trajectory of young people by ensuring we 'free their potential' – not just to improve outcomes for each individual learner, but for the development of our nation as a whole. %



*“Matric is important because, firstly, I want to be an architect as I have a passion for drawing. And secondly, I want to look after my family one day, especially my mother. She’s a nurse in town and a single parent – I owe her a lot.”*

**EDWIN (18)**

Grade 12 learner  
Prince Albert, Western Cape

# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

**A**

Almost all South African children enrol in school, setting out on a journey that is intended to develop their social, emotional, cognitive, and academic abilities – and eventually lead them to a matric qualification. But the path from starting Grade 1 to ultimately completing Grade 12 is paved with obstacles. Four out of 10 learners who start school will drop out before reaching matric.<sup>1</sup>

It can be challenging to land on two feet, stay on track, and finish the course. Disruptions at home, at school, and in the neighbourhood, can unsteady learners<sup>2,3</sup> – some get stuck, some fall behind, and some fall through the cracks entirely.

In 2020, Covid-19 school closures, together with the economic effects of the pandemic, both widened and deepened the cracks learners must traverse on the path to school completion. Gaps in learning have multiplied;<sup>4,5</sup> divides between well-resourced and lesser-resourced schools have expanded; and instability in many homes has worsened.<sup>6</sup> Learners who were already on shaky ground are now at even greater risk of school dropout. During the mandatory Covid-19 school closures, many lost not only a physical space for learning, but also an essential source of support, socialisation and nourishment.

The Zero Dropout Campaign aims to halve the rate of school dropout by 2030, through advocacy that promotes data-driven approaches to track, monitor and prevent dropout, and that strengthens psychosocial support systems at schools. The Covid-19 pandemic has increased the urgency of this work and the call for a sustained, national response to school dropout.

The reality is that school dropout affects us all. Among the 3.4 million South African youth who are not in education, training or employment, the vast majority have also not completed Grade 12.<sup>7</sup> Leaving school without a matric qualification cuts young people off from many life chances –

the chance to participate, to learn, to earn, and to contribute to social and economic life.<sup>8</sup> These are the chances on which our country's future depends.

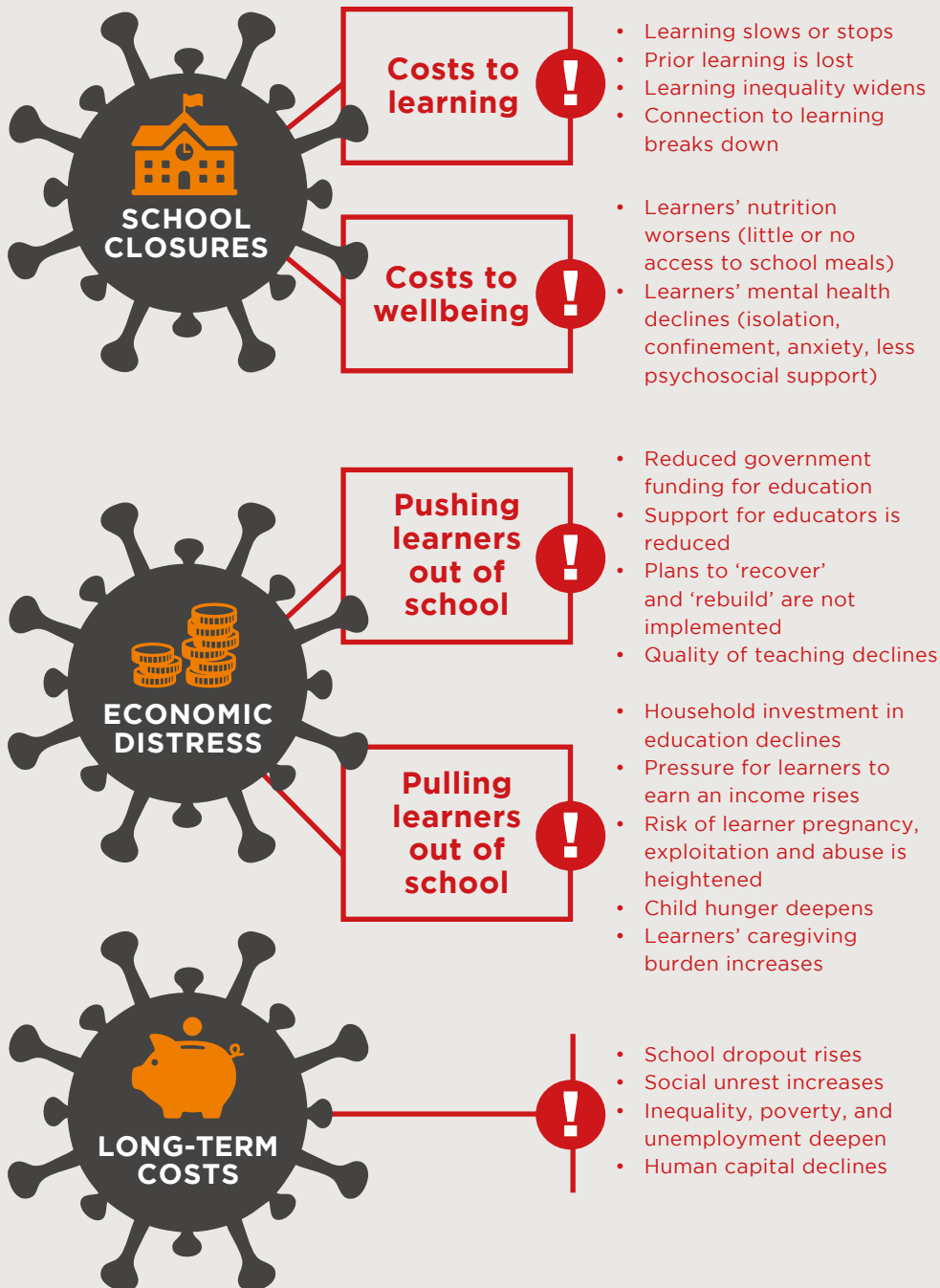
This publication looks at how Covid-19 has intensified learners' vulnerabilities to dropout in South Africa. But, it is also about how we can recover, strengthen and build resilience in our schooling system, so that young people are able to stay in school and succeed. This means bridging the gaps, strengthening the foundations, and guiding young people back on course – so that more learners are steadied and supported on their way to school completion.

Covid-19 has led to lockdowns and school closures across the world. This has had consequences for individual learners, their families, as well as the broader schooling system. Some of these effects will be short-term, while others will stretch far into the future – compounding and intensifying the disruptions that lead to dropout.

The infographic on the next page is adapted from a similar graphic developed by the World Bank, as a means to reflect and prepare for both the short- and long-term shocks to education experienced worldwide due to the pandemic. Of course, this is not the first time that a health crisis has led to school closures. For example, there are lessons we can draw from how other African countries made their schooling systems more resilient during the Ebola outbreak in West Africa between 2014 and 2016; and how this later informed their Covid-19 response. Further examples are included in the infographic.

One of the expected long-term effects of Covid-19 disruptions to education is an increase in school dropout worldwide. This is of deep concern in South Africa, where rates of dropout are already high. In this publication, we explore the many disruptions that cause South African learners to drop out of school, and how these have intensified as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. %

# COVID-19 DISRUPTIONS TO EDUCATION: A GLOBAL PICTURE



## LESSONS FROM THE EBOLA EPIDEMIC

*Remote learning is often more accessible to teachers than learners. Drawing lessons from the Ebola crisis, some Rwandan organisations offered digital mentorship for teachers during Covid-19 school closures.*

*After Ebola, Sierra Leone developed and implemented an accelerated curriculum, which was rolled out to all teachers and designed to help learners catch up.*

*In the Democratic Republic of Congo, school leaders and teachers were trained in 'psychosocial first aid', offering practical care and support to those in Ebola quarantine, while connecting people to information and services.*

*During Ebola crisis points, learning often went unmonitored. In hindsight, West African countries learned that it was essential to track progress in key areas like literacy and numeracy. This allowed them to assess who was being reached through distance learning, and who was not, so that interventions could be adapted to reach more learners.*

SOURCES: Disruptions graphic, adapted from: World Bank Group. 2020. 'Figure 1.1 Shocks to Education,' in *The Covid-19 Pandemic: Shocks to Education and Policy Responses*. Available at: <https://openknowledge.worldbank.org/handle/10986/33696>. Ebola Lessons drawn from a series by Global Partnership for Education. 2020. Available at: <https://www.globalpartnership.org/blog/4-lessons-evaluations-education-response-ebola>.

## GLOSSARY OF TERMS

### **AGGREGATE DATA**

Information or data that has been collected from multiple sources and/or on multiple measures, variables or individuals, and then compiled into summaries – typically for the purposes of public reporting or statistical analysis.

### **COHORT**

A group of learners who work through a curriculum together; for example, a group of learners who begin Grade 1 in the same year and finish school together in Grade 12, would be part of the same cohort.

### **FURTHER EDUCATION AND TRAINING (FET)**

The band or level of education in the NQF that comprises Grades 10, 11 and 12; some occupation-orientated and technical education and training offered at TVET colleges is also included in this band.

### **NATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS FRAMEWORK (NQF)**

This integrated framework serves to award registered learners with national accreditation based on their skills and knowledge. The NQF is made up of 10 levels that fall within 3 bands: the General Education and Training (GET), the Further Education and Training (FET) band and Higher Education. A matric, or qualifications of a similar level, are classed as NQF4.

### **NATIONAL MATRIC PASS RATE**

The percentage of learners who sit the matric exam and pass – including grade repeaters but excluding those who drop out.

### **TRUE MATRIC PASS RATE**

The percentage of learners from the original Grade 1 cohort who sit and pass matric 12 years later.

### **POLICY ON PROGRESSION**

A learner may only be retained once in the FET phase in order to prevent the learner from spending more than four years in a phase. This implies that a learner who fails a grade for the second time cannot be retained in the grade, but must be allowed to progress to the next grade. However, such a learner at the end of Grade 12, must satisfy all the requirements of the NSC in order to be awarded the matric certificate.

### **QUINTILE**

South African schools are divided into quintiles based on the socio-economic profile of the community in which they are located. Quintile 1 schools are located in the poorest communities, while Quintile 5 schools are in the wealthiest. Funding allocations differ across quintiles. Learners in Quintiles 1-3 do not have to pay school fees.

### **SCHOOL DROPOUT**

Also known as early 'withdrawal' or 'attrition', dropout is leaving the schooling system without obtaining a minimum credential. A learner in South Africa is therefore considered to have dropped out if they leave school before they obtain a National Senior Certificate (NSC) in Grade 12 or equivalent certificate such as the NC(V) or NQF Level 4 (from a post-schooling education and training institution).

## ACRONYMS

<b>CAP</b>	Community Action Partnership
<b>DBE</b>	Department of Basic Education
<b>DDD</b>	Data Driven Districts
<b>ECD</b>	Early Childhood Development
<b>EE</b>	Equal Education
<b>FET</b>	Further Education and Training
<b>GEC</b>	General Education Certificate
<b>KDG</b>	Khula Development Group
<b>LURITS</b>	Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System
<b>LSA</b>	Learner Support Agent
<b>MDO</b>	Masibumbane Development Organisation
<b>NACCW</b>	National Association of Child Care Workers
<b>NIDS-CRAM</b>	National Income Dynamics Survey – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile
<b>NQF</b>	National Qualifications Framework
<b>NQF4</b>	National Qualifications Framework Level 4
<b>PPE</b>	Personal Protective Equipment
<b>SA-SAMS</b>	South African School Administration and Management System
<b>SRH</b>	Sexual and Reproductive Health
<b>TVET</b>	Technical and Vocational Education and Training

### **SCHOOL COMPLETION VS. SCHOOL DROPOUT**

The word ‘dropout’ often calls up images of lazy, irresponsible teens, who aren’t in school because of their own poor choices. **But this is usually not the case.** Because ‘dropout’ carries this stigma, some who work in this field prefer the term ‘school completion’. In this publication, we have chosen to stick with ‘dropout’ because it demands sharper, clearer action. **As a society, we should expect ZERO DROPOUT!**

# 1

# DROPOUT: A COLLECTIVE PROBLEM

**YOUNG PEOPLE WHO DROP OUT OF SCHOOL FIND IT MUCH HARDER TO BUILD SECURE FUTURES FOR THEMSELVES – AND THE COUNTRY.**

Leaving school before Grade 12 puts young people on a much shakier path to secure livelihoods, while also cutting them off from important forms of social and economic participation. Since South Africa's future depends on our youth, this means the impact of school dropout goes far beyond individual learners. Dropout prevents young people from reaching their full potential, reinforcing cycles of poverty and inequality that prevent us from moving forward as a nation.


This section demonstrates the ripple effects of school dropout, both for individual learners, and for South Africa as a whole. It also tackles some of the major misconceptions about school dropout, which often get in the way of an urgent and sustained dropout prevention plan.

# PROPORTION OF THE UNEMPLOYED BY EDUCATION LEVEL


## Q3: 2020



 **LESS THAN MATRIC**  
53.2%

 **MATRIC**  
36.4%

 **OTHER TERTIARY**  
7.9%

 **GRADUATES**  
2.1%

 **OTHER**  
0.5%

DROPOUT - A COLLECTIVE PROBLEM

COVID-19 AND THE HOPSCOTCH TO SCHOOL COMPLETION

BUILDING BACK BETTER

# THE LONG-TERM EFFECTS OF SCHOOL DROPOUT

LEAVING SCHOOL BEFORE GRADE 12 LIMITS YOUNG PEOPLE'S CHANCES FOR:



## FURTHER EDUCATION

Without a matric certificate (or NQF4<sup>9</sup> equivalent), young people generally cannot access tertiary education, which is their most likely route to employment and higher income. Completing Grade 9 is enough to enter a Technical Vocational Education and Training (TVET) college, complete an NQF4 qualification, and then pursue a tertiary education (NQF levels 5-7). Yet, only 1% of learners who drop out of school before matric hold a non-school certificate or diploma, issued, for instance, by a TVET college.<sup>10</sup> This is partly because TVET colleges are more likely to select Grade 12 graduates who, in their view, stand a greater chance of graduating. On average, TVET colleges receive about half the number of enrolments as public universities.<sup>11</sup> But, the evidence is clear: *any* post-school qualification significantly improves young people's job prospects.<sup>12</sup>





*“I am more ambitious, making sure I pass my studies. I want to go to college. I want to come back and plaster and paint the house, put in a plasma TV. I want to get my own car.”*

**OWAMI (15)**

Grade 10 learner  
Mid Illovo, KwaZulu-Natal



## EMPLOYMENT

Not only are young people without a matric less likely to be employed than their peers who have completed school, they also remain jobless for longer,<sup>13</sup> which can lead to depression and demotivation.<sup>14</sup> While the figures differ, research suggests that a young person with a matric certificate is 4-9% more likely to find a job,<sup>15</sup> even without further education.

When it facilitates entrance to a post-school qualification, a matric certificate becomes even more powerful. Any post-school qualification, including a diploma, dramatically improves young people's employment chances (by a further 17%).<sup>16</sup>

During the Covid-19 lockdown, having a tertiary education was also found to be protective against job losses. Those with a matric certificate or less experienced a 23% decrease in employment between February and April 2020, while employment among those with tertiary qualifications dropped by 10%.<sup>17</sup> Although there was some recovery in employment between April and June 2020, those with less than a matric qualification were least likely to experience this 'bounce back.'<sup>18</sup>



## JOB SECURITY AND HIGHER INCOME

Without a matric, young people are not only more likely to be jobless, but also to remain jobless for longer.<sup>19</sup> The jobs they do find are also more likely to be insecure.<sup>20</sup>

Worldwide, there is strong evidence to show that the longer a person stays in education, the higher their expected earnings.<sup>21</sup> In South Africa, education has the biggest effect on young people's earning potential from the completion of matric onwards.<sup>22</sup> While the findings are mixed and a few years old, studies suggest that those with (only) a matric qualification can earn about 40% more than those without.<sup>23,24</sup>

During lockdown, those without a matric qualification made up a higher proportion of people who had their salaries reduced compared to those with a matric certificate or post-school degree. Twenty-five percent (25%) of those with less than a matric had their salaries reduced during lockdown.<sup>25</sup>



*"My motivation [to stay in school] is my home. I want to change it. Without education, I know there is nothing I can do that will bring me money."*

**NOZIPHO (17)**  
Grade 12 learner  
Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal



## LONG-TERM WELLBEING

A growing body of international research shows that young people who do not complete secondary education experience higher levels of poverty, ill-health (both mental and physical), and substance abuse, as well as longer-term dependence on social assistance. In South Africa, a long, unsuccessful job search – which those without a matric are more likely to experience – has been shown to negatively affect young people's mental health and subjective wellbeing, while also increasing their reliance on social grants.<sup>26</sup>



## SOCIAL JUSTICE

The quality and length of a young person's education has a direct impact on their social and economic future. After 26 years of democracy, poor-quality education traps young people in cycles of poverty and retraces apartheid inequalities. In South Africa, a young person's journey through education is still very much shaped by 'where they are born, how wealthy they are and the colour of their skin.'<sup>27</sup> Poor schooling means that, no matter how motivated or talented children are, most will inherit the social position of their parents.<sup>28</sup> We must work to change this. Keeping children in school and supporting them to succeed helps to break this cycle.

The effects of Covid-19 school closures, coupled with the economic impacts of lockdown, have not been evenly distributed; in actual fact, Covid-19 has widened existing inequalities. Those who were already disadvantaged – including women, informal workers, vulnerable households, and youth – have suffered most.<sup>29</sup> They have borne the brunt of job losses and hunger; and are far more likely to be detached from learning or labour market opportunities.



*"I want to finish school because I want to help my parents – especially their financial situation. And I want to stand on my own two feet. I want to make a success of my life."*

**JURANDRA (17)**


Grade 12 learner  
Prince Albert, Western Cape

# FACT CHECK

## DROPPING OUT OF SCHOOL IS NOT ABOUT LAZINESS OR POOR CHOICES. #1

Very often, the factors pushing and pulling learners out of school are beyond their control. Poverty and inequality are still the strongest underlying causes of dropout. Learners with poorer access to resources, support networks, and opportunity are both more likely to experience disruptions to their education, and less likely to withstand them.

This means that for some children, the odds of completing school are stacked against them long before they enter a classroom. As they make their journey through school, many learners have to contend with homes, classrooms, or neighbourhoods that are unsafe, unsupportive, and under-resourced. Despite what many people may think, young people who drop out of school have often been very committed to their education, and end up leaving after years of struggle.



*“I have friends who have already dropped out of school. One of them left school because her parents got divorced. She doesn’t even live at home anymore. I think it’s a sad thing. She has nothing to do with why her parents got divorced. Because she’s dropped out of school, she won’t be able to find a job and will always be dependent on people. Most of my friends like school and are serious about it.”*

**LIHLE\* (16)**

Grade 7 learner

Duncan Village in East London, Eastern Cape

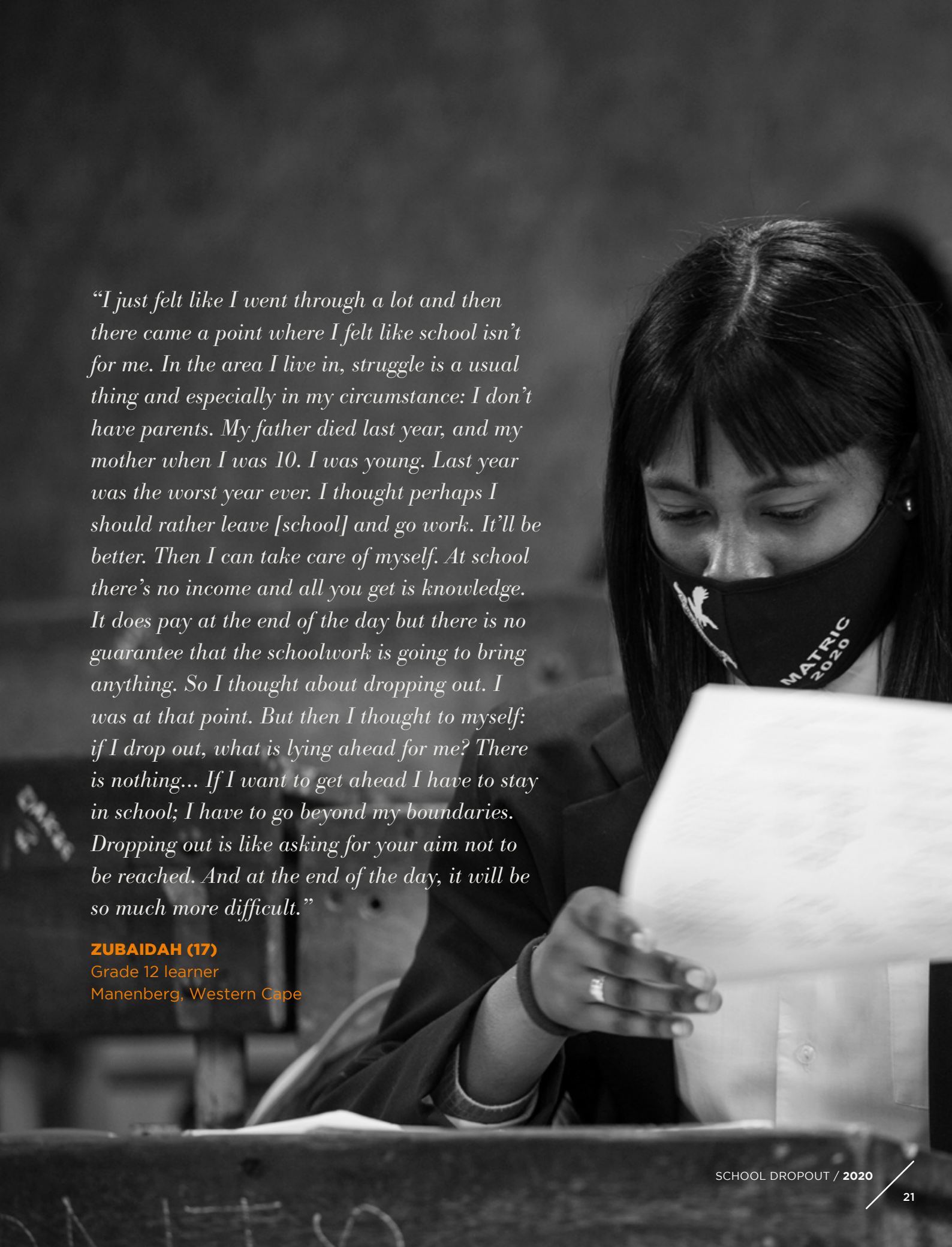
# FACT CHECK

## SCHOOL DROPOUT IS NOT A ONCE- OFF EVENT. #2

Dropout is a process through which young people become increasingly detached from their education over time. Throughout their schooling journey, learners often face multiple disruptions to their education. Some go without textbooks; others without teachers.

Some have to take care of sick relatives; others must take care of smaller children and siblings. Some will stay home because of transport strikes; others because of community violence. For many learners, the journey to school completion is long and full of tricky obstacles, which makes it all the more difficult to stay on course.

Gaps in foundational learning can catch up to learners in later grades. In South Africa, eight out of 10 Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language.<sup>30</sup> By the time they reach Grade 9, two out of three cannot do basic calculations, match tables to bar graphs, or read a simple line graph.<sup>31</sup> Without the foundational skills to grasp the curriculum, many learners get lost, long before reaching matric. Those learners that make it to their final three years of schooling have often endured years of struggling to catch up with their peers; more than half have repeated at least one grade.<sup>32</sup>



*“I just felt like I went through a lot and then there came a point where I felt like school isn’t for me. In the area I live in, struggle is a usual thing and especially in my circumstance: I don’t have parents. My father died last year, and my mother when I was 10. I was young. Last year was the worst year ever. I thought perhaps I should rather leave [school] and go work. It’ll be better. Then I can take care of myself. At school there’s no income and all you get is knowledge. It does pay at the end of the day but there is no guarantee that the schoolwork is going to bring anything. So I thought about dropping out. I was at that point. But then I thought to myself: if I drop out, what is lying ahead for me? There is nothing... If I want to get ahead I have to stay in school; I have to go beyond my boundaries. Dropping out is like asking for your aim not to be reached. And at the end of the day, it will be so much more difficult.”*

**ZUBAIDAH (17)**

Grade 12 learner

Manenberg, Western Cape

## FACT CHECK

**GRADE REPETITION IS ONE OF THE BIGGEST PREDICTORS OF DROPOUT. HOWEVER, WHETHER OR NOT A LEARNER REPEATS OFTEN HAS LITTLE TO DO WITH THEIR ACADEMIC READINESS.**

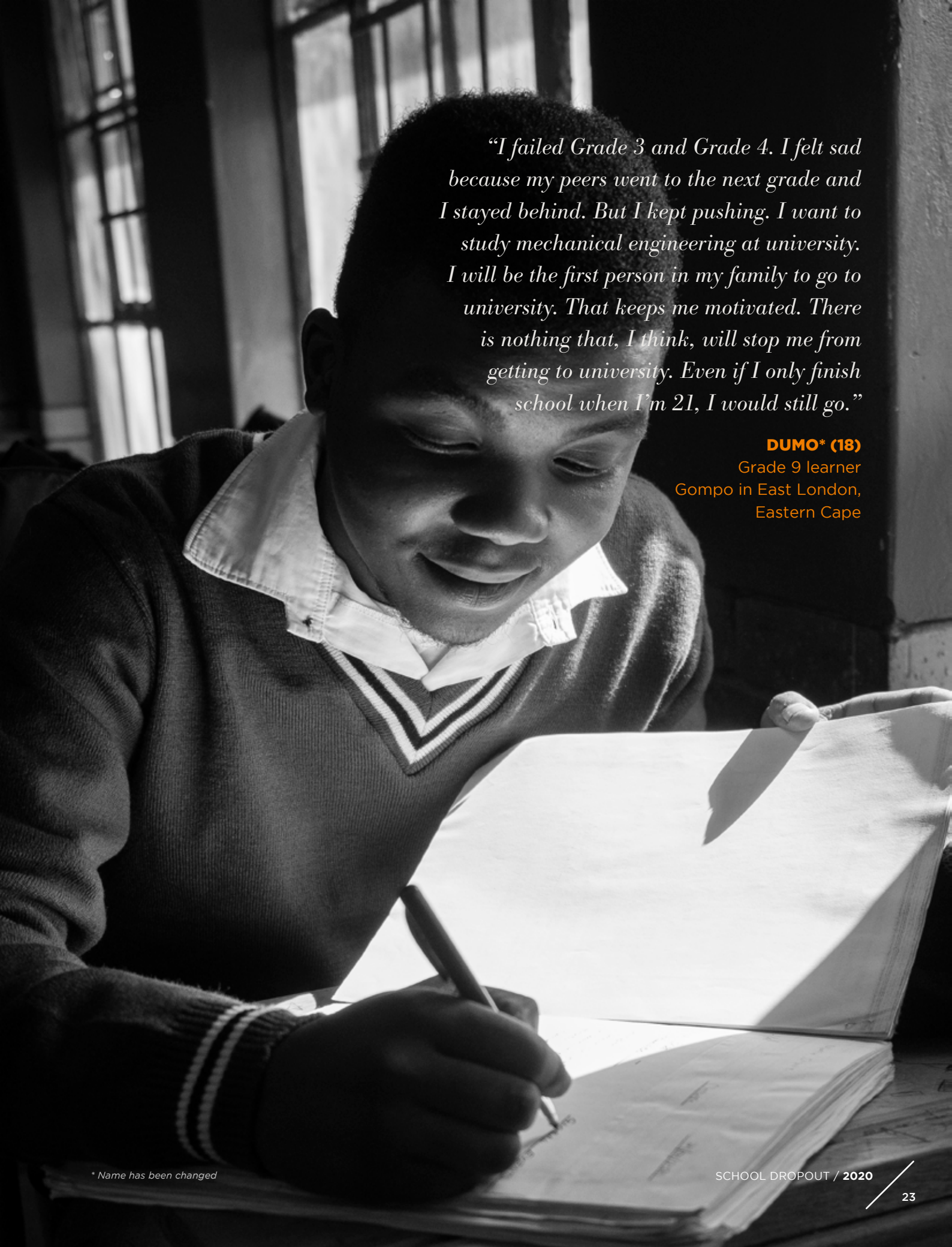
# #3

Once they reach high school, the number of learners repeating grades more than doubles,<sup>33</sup> making them more vulnerable to dropout.<sup>34</sup> This is typically because gaps in foundational learning often catch up with learners in later grades.<sup>35</sup> But it also raises concerns that some schools might be purposively holding back learners who are unlikely to pass the matric exam so as to meet their pass rate targets.

To prevent learners from repeating the same grades multiple times, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) introduced a progression policy that only allows learners to repeat once within each phase of their schooling (Foundation Phase, Intermediate Phase, Senior Phase, and FET). This means some learners are progressed – even if they don't meet the academic standards to pass the grade.<sup>36</sup>

Whether it's holding back learners to protect pass rates, or pushing them through to meet policy requirements, decisions about learners' grade repetition sadly often have little to do with supporting learners or helping them to catch up academically. Covid-19 school closures have resulted in many more learners falling behind because of learning losses, placing them at even greater risk of grade repetition and dropout.



A black and white photograph of a young man, identified as Dumo, sitting at a desk and writing in a notebook. He is wearing a dark sweater over a light-colored collared shirt. He has a focused expression and is looking down at his work. The background shows a window with vertical bars, suggesting a school setting. The lighting is dramatic, with strong highlights and deep shadows.

*“I failed Grade 3 and Grade 4. I felt sad because my peers went to the next grade and I stayed behind. But I kept pushing. I want to study mechanical engineering at university. I will be the first person in my family to go to university. That keeps me motivated. There is nothing that, I think, will stop me from getting to university. Even if I only finish school when I’m 21, I would still go.”*

**DUMO\* (18)**  
Grade 9 learner  
Gompo in East London,  
Eastern Cape

\* Name has been changed

# FACT CHECK

## IF YOU WANT A QUALITY JOB, EDUCATION STILL MATTERS. #4

While South Africa is seeing a worrying rise in unemployment among people with tertiary education, young people's quality and length of education is still a crucial factor in determining whether they find work. By the third quarter of 2020, South Africa's national unemployment rate was 31%.<sup>37</sup> A post-school education greatly reduces rates of joblessness: the rate of unemployment was 8.9% among university graduates, and 20.7% for those with other tertiary qualifications.<sup>38</sup> Access to tertiary education requires a matric certificate (or NQF4 equivalent).



*“It was a hard decision to stop studying, because I love studying and wanted to be a doctor. You don’t find a job without Grade 12. I dropped out because of my situation – not because I wanted to drop out. At that time, I didn’t have food and a place to stay. Even today, I want to go back to school. But if I went back to school now, I’d feel too old in the class.”*

**ANELE\* (21)**

Left school in Grade 8  
Gompo in East London, Eastern Cape

\* Name has been changed


## FACT CHECK

### THERE IS NO NATIONAL RESPONSE TO DROPOUT. #5

South Africa needs a unified national response to school dropout, with carefully targeted plans and policies. We still have not seen a comprehensive, multi-stakeholder response from national government. Given the Covid-19 school closures, coupled with the economic shocks of lockdown, are expected to worsen school dropout, this call could not be more urgent. We need a sustainable education recovery plan NOW.

### THE SCALE AND COMPLEXITY OF SCHOOL DROPOUT CAN FEEL INSURMOUNTABLE. EVIDENCE SHOWS, HOWEVER, THAT THERE ARE SIMPLE INTERVENTIONS THAT WORK. #6

We must change the perception that school dropout is normal or inevitable by showing that there are real ways to prevent it and turn the situation around. For example: a) having just one caring adult to support a learner through school dramatically improves their chances of finishing matric;<sup>39,40,41</sup> b) tracking learner attendance, behaviour and academic performance can signal at-risk learners and trigger the right support at the right time;<sup>42</sup> c) ensuring foundational literacy and numeracy can set learners up for academic success.



*“Focusing on school has freed me inside. School helps me to be focused and not get distracted.”*

**MILANI\* (17)**  
Grade 9 learner  
Gonubie, East London

\* Name has been changed

## HARLEM HOPSCOTCH

Maja Angelou

*One foot down, then hop! It's hot.  
Good things for the ones that's got.  
Another jump, now to the left.  
Everybody for hisself.*

*In the air, now both feet down.  
Since you black, don't stick around.  
Food is gone, the rent is due,  
Curse and cry and then jump two.*

*All the people out of work,  
Hold for three, then twist and jerk.  
Cross the line, they count you out.  
That's what hopping's all about.*

*Both feet flat, the game is done.  
They think I lost. I think I won.*



# 2

# COVID-19 AND THE 'HOPSCOTCH' TO SCHOOL COMPLETION

## HOPSCOTCH AS A METAPHOR FOR THE SCHOOL JOURNEY

Hopscotch is one of the oldest, most universal children's games and has many variations around the world. In South Africa, it goes by many names, including: *Blokke*, *Eensbeentjie*, *Uguni*, *Haasie*, *Bhoriki*, *Klippie* and *U-qxa*. The basis of the game of hopscotch is a pathway of numbered blocks. While the pathway may seem straightforward, players are presented with obstacles along the way, requiring them to hop on one leg, jump large gaps, or begin again. This is not unlike the school journey from Grades 1 to 12 – particularly for South African learners, who must face many obstacles on the road to school completion. Often, the odds are stacked against them from the start. The realities of Covid-19 have widened the gaps that learners must overcome on their pathway through school. But there are ways we can support them to gain a foothold, withstand disruptions, and stay on course.



**Many learners face ongoing disruptions to their education – at school, at home, and in their neighbourhoods. Covid-19 school closures, together with the economic shocks of lockdown, have worsened the impact of these disruptions. Now, learners whose ‘hopscotch’ to school completion was already unsteady must jump even greater obstacles**

**A**t the end of 2019, South Africa’s Department of Basic Education was celebrating. Eighty-one percent (81%) of learners who wrote the national matric exams had passed.<sup>43</sup> But this upbeat response to the end-of-year results masked a much harsher reality: four out of 10 learners who started school 12 years earlier had likely dropped out before even reaching matric.<sup>44</sup> When 2019’s matric results were released, few could have predicted the new disruptions and challenges that 2020 would bring.

For many South African learners, crisis is nothing new. School closures, absent teachers, crumbling infrastructure, and struggles to catch up to the curriculum have kept them from schooling before. However, Covid-19 has deepened the cracks in our schooling system and further unsteadied learners’ already challenging journey to completing matric. So what does a ‘new normal’ mean for South Africa’s schooling system, when the ‘old normal’ was already governed by frequent disruptions to learners?

Now, more than ever, we must build resilience in our schooling system, by strengthening networks of support around learners. As learners continue their ‘hopscotch’ to school completion, we must find ways to bridge the gaps and steady the journey, so that young people stay in, and succeed at, school.



# DISRUPTED HOMES

Too many young people in South Africa live in challenging households where they don't get the emotional care they need to support their education. There are many reasons why parents or caregivers might not be available to support their children's education. Some may work long hours or away from home; some may not have completed schooling themselves; some may be ill; and some may have died.



ED

*“This is the second primary school I’ve attended. I had to change schools in Grade 3 because I lost my mother. I went to live with my grandmother. There was no-one pushing me to do my homework or motivating me. I failed Grade 4. Then I moved in with my aunt and she encouraged me to go to school. My school marks improved.”*



*“I didn’t like missing school during lockdown. I was scared of getting sick and dying. I was distracted by house chores and didn’t have time to focus on my books. I prefer schoolwork to housework. When I’m at school, I’m more focused.”*

**LIHLE\* (16)**

Grade 7 learner  
Duncan Village in East London,  
Eastern Cape

**A** history of migrant labour, urbanisation and deepening unemployment have meant that many South African homes are fragmented or stretched across urban and rural residences. As caregiving needs within households shift, and adults change or lose jobs, children may move between homes, too.

South Africa also has a heavy ‘quadruple burden’ of illness: communicable diseases like HIV/AIDS and TB; high maternal and child mortality; non-communicable diseases, including hypertension, diabetes and mental illness; as well as violent injury. Illness or death in the family can put immense strain on young people. Illness may mean added caregiving responsibilities for young people. If family members die, the burden of grief may be compounded by the loss of a breadwinner or primary caregiver. Some young people may find themselves under pressure to earn an income, or have to move homes and schools. This disruption in their schooling can cause them to fall behind.

Households with chronically ill members are especially vulnerable to Covid-19. Not only does Covid-19 place those with co-morbidities at greater risk of illness or death, chronically-ill household members are also more likely to stay home from work (or school) to avoid health risks.

Under Covid-19 lockdown, with schools closed for most learners and Early Childhood Development (ECD) centres unavailable, those caregivers lucky enough to return to their jobs often had to leave their children at home. Some learners had to look after their younger siblings. These caregiving responsibilities make it difficult for young people to stay connected to learning.

**Learners from poorer households are often at greater risk of dropout. These families are less likely to be able to afford the added costs of schooling, like transport, textbooks, or uniforms.<sup>45</sup> They are also less resilient to household shocks like death, illness, or loss of income. Learners from these homes are therefore at higher risk of dropout.**

The economic shocks of the Covid-19 lockdown have further amplified the troubles of vulnerable households. Many households have lost income: according to NIDS-CRAM Wave 1, one in three people who had an income before lockdown started, had lost it by April 2020.<sup>46</sup> Also in April, half of households reported running out of money to buy food. And with schools closed, many learners lost access to free school meals. By July 2020, one in seven households were reporting that a child had gone hungry in the previous week.<sup>47</sup> In the same month, the courts ordered that the DBE provide food to learners, re-instituting the National School Nutrition Programme, on which nine million learners depend.

After 20 years of improvement in reducing child hunger, Covid-19 has undone this progress.<sup>48</sup> Hunger and malnutrition make it very difficult for young people to learn. As a result of prolonged undernutrition, over a quarter (27%) of South African children under the age of five are stunted.<sup>49</sup> The risk of stunting has been amplified by the pandemic as Covid-19 deepens hunger. Children who are stunted experience cognitive difficulties<sup>50</sup> and are less likely to finish school.<sup>51</sup> As they reach adulthood, they earn 20% less (on average) than their peers,<sup>52</sup> and are also more likely to live in poverty.<sup>53</sup>

Households that are food insecure are in urgent need of support. Yet only 30% of those who lost their jobs in April 2020 reported receiving any form of household-level grant protection in May and June 2020.<sup>54</sup>

Lessons from past health crises, like Ebola, teach us that confinement, mixed with intensified financial pressures, can worsen stress, tension and conflict in homes.<sup>55</sup> Household financial stress, and emotional exhaustion of caregivers, can have severe mental health consequences for learners.

**Recent research on the effects of lockdowns, school closures and natural disasters shows an increase in rates of substance abuse, fear, loneliness, domestic violence and child abuse.<sup>56,57,58</sup> After schools were closed for a month in Hubei, China, due to Covid-19, nearly a quarter of children in Grades 2-6 reported symptoms of depression.<sup>59</sup>**



*“I am an only child. I live with my mom. I lost my father when I was 10 and I was heartbroken. My father motivated me to like school, get an education and go to university.”*

**DUMO\* (18)**  
Grade 9 learner  
Gompo in East London,  
Eastern Cape

\* Name has been changed



*“It has affected me badly. Yoh, I can’t think straight. It’s so lonely, you feel like you’re losing your mind.”*

**OWAMI (15)**

Grade 10 learner  
Mid Illovo, KwaZulu-Natal



*“I feel like pregnancy here is the one thing that causes dropout. This year, almost in every grade, more than one girl is pregnant. They are still here, but they are not going to finish the year. Some say they are going to come back. But most won’t. Is their house situation stable enough? They’ll need to work to make money.”*

**ZUBAIDAH (17)**

Grade 12 learner  
Manenberg, Western Cape

Previous public health crises also suggest that young women may be especially vulnerable to the effects of lockdown. During the Ebola crisis in Sierra Leone, adolescent pregnancy increased by up to 65% in some areas, and in neighbourhoods hardest hit by the epidemic, girls often left school because of the weight of domestic responsibilities, or pregnancy.<sup>60</sup> While figures vary across research papers<sup>61,62</sup> the most recent research suggests that, before Covid-19, about 33% of school dropout among young women in South Africa was related to pregnancy.<sup>63</sup>

Learners who are also young mothers might struggle to catch up after time spent away from school. After returning to school, many also face stigma from peers, teachers, family, and community members, which impacts their schooling and ability to access care.<sup>64</sup>

As the research on learner pregnancy shows, disruptions that lead to dropout can be gender specific. While girls are at risk of unplanned pregnancies, and carry greater domestic and caregiving responsibilities, particularly during school closures, boys are almost twice as likely to repeat grades.<sup>65</sup> When boys drop out, it is more often because they feel disconnected from schooling. This disconnection may have deepened with extended school closures.<sup>66</sup>



## SUPPORTING HOUSEHOLD RESILIENCE

**In order to alleviate child hunger and lessen the financial pressure on homes, we must sustain and broaden access to the (increased) child support grant, and ensure grant increases are awarded per child rather than per caregiver (as has been the standard). This added support is necessary if we want to buffer the severe economic effects of the Covid-19 lockdown and protect already-vulnerable households from deep poverty. Access to grants, like the Covid-19 special relief grant, should also be improved and extended. The ability of many South African learners to stay in, and succeed at school, depends on them having a minimal level of social protection.**

Meanwhile, the National School Nutrition Programme must continue to run for all learners, regardless of whether they are physically attending school. Human rights lawyer, Sasha Stevenson, who defended learners' access to school meals in the Gauteng High Court, described the hardships faced by families when the nutrition programme was suspended: *"The families we spoke to talk about their children going hungry and lacking energy, families fighting over food, children finding work to support their families. Learners who returned to school and were being fed described their guilt at receiving a meal when their siblings remained at home and hungry."*<sup>67</sup>

While sustaining the National School Nutrition Programme, we must also work to widen access to nutrition for learners who live far from school grounds, or who cannot reach school safely – especially during times of remote learning.

Finally, to support households we must also champion primary caregivers. Over the course of the Covid-19 lockdown, some learners have reported that they have appreciated having more quality time with their caregivers. Some remarked that alcohol restrictions created more peaceful home environments.<sup>68</sup> Women and children are at particular risk of alcohol-associated violence or emotional harms.<sup>69</sup>

Caregivers need our support, particularly in times of economic and emotional distress. By building strong referral networks, we can link caregivers to the professional and social services that they need. Schools should also think creatively about how to keep caregivers connected to their child's schooling journey, especially during periods of school closure. Some might use virtual caregiver support groups, or connect individual caregivers with a school-elected mentor.

**REAL  
LIFE**

# *Anele's\** *story*

\*Name has been changed



“M

*My name is Anele. I dropped out of school after Grade 8. Today, I'm 21 years old and live in Gompo in the Eastern Cape.*

*I went to different schools during my primary school education. At first, I was staying with my aunt, but then she took me to live with my grandparents. That's why I changed schools. I didn't have a good relationship with my grandfather. He was always complaining about me, saying I wasn't listening. After some time, they sent me to my mother. But my mother didn't treat me well, so instead, I went to live with my father. I lived with him for 18 months. That shack was unsafe. It was not good for people to stay there. There was only a bed – no food or anything; no electricity. Nothing. He didn't have work. He would go out and find a job and come back with R50 or R30 to buy bread or something to eat. I didn't have toiletries. I didn't have food. No-one was helping me. I was 15. I was coming to school with an empty stomach. I applied for a social grant, but it was hard for me to fetch it because I had to borrow transport money and travel to collect the grant from my aunt.*

*I failed Grade 7 twice. After that, I went to live with my grandmother and eventually passed Grade 7. But I couldn't stay with her very long. So, I came back here, to Gompo, to do Grade 8. During that time, I stayed with my boyfriend at his home. It wasn't my intention to stay with him, but I was desperate to finish high school. It was like I was selling my body, because I had nowhere else to go. He was beating me, and doing anything he wanted, just because he knew that I didn't have anyone else. He was giving me a place to stay and food; he was helping me with my school things. When I needed files or a uniform, he bought them for me.*

*I fell pregnant. Although I didn't want a baby, my boyfriend did. We started fighting and I went back to my father's shack. Eventually, I dropped out of school because I had to find a job. I had to work, so I could eat and do things for myself. My boyfriend said I could stay with him again. I was ashamed of myself to come to school pregnant because all the teachers knew me, and they liked me.*

*It was a hard decision to stop studying, because I love studying and wanted to be a doctor. You don't find a job without Grade 12. I dropped out because of my situation, not because I wanted to drop out. At that time, I didn't have food or a place to stay. Even today, I want to go back to school. But if I went back to school now, I'd feel too old in the class.”*

Anele's story is a good example of how disruptions at home can push learners out of school. Anele moved between different households. In some homes, she didn't get the care she needed. At other times, her family struggled to afford school-related costs. To protect her safety and independence, and support her child, Anele eventually left school to earn an income. The fact that Anele finished primary school, struggling for three years to pass Grade 7, is a testament to her perseverance and commitment. But, even with all her determination, Anele couldn't do it alone. Learners like Anele should not be falling through the cracks. We need to stand alongside them, and offer wrap-around support, to steady their schooling journey.



# DISRUPTED SCHOOLS

Even before Covid-19, about 135 000 learners were going untaught every day, because their teachers were absent.<sup>70</sup> Textbook shortages continued to be reported throughout the country.<sup>71</sup> Even with teachers and textbooks present, many learners lacked interest in the curriculum, or the literacy and numeracy skills to grasp it.

ED

**REAL  
LIFE**

*Khanya's  
story*

“M

My name is Khanya. I'm 18 and in Grade 11. I live with my grandmother and two cousins in Umbumbulu, KwaZulu-Natal. My parents and siblings live in Port Shepstone, but I moved to Umbumbulu to look after my grandmother.

Due to the virus, we Grade 11s have had limited time in the classroom. Since March 2020, we haven't been learning. I guess this will cause a lot of damage, because we do want to succeed. It's not been so good. Sitting at home doing nothing, you end up being discouraged and I've seen that maybe you end up doubting you will ever reach your goals.

During the short time that we returned to school, I was trying to adapt, trying to cover the time we lost. But now that school has closed again, I'm not sure whether I will be able to get back on track.

I don't think I'm in danger of dropping out because I'm very perseverant and determined. When schools open again, I think I will work to my best ability to cover the whole time I lost. I will never drop out.

We tried to form a WhatsApp group, but it was not efficient because some of us don't have cellphones. We only had one teacher on our group. He mostly assisted us with mathematics, but not with other subjects. Maybe if we had access to e-learning it wouldn't be so bad. But being in a rural area like this one, sometimes there's no network. Sometimes you don't have enough data to learn online. These are the obstacles that prevent us from working at home. If we had equipment, like iPads, at least that could allow us all to be getting learning from our teachers; it's no use to teach four people in a class who do have these things, while 80% of the class does not. I think if we were all of the same standard it would be possible for the teachers to communicate with us.

After matric, my goal is to become a medical doctor. I am working towards that goal. I want to help people in my area – even if I had to be a doctor here in Umbumbulu clinic.

Each and every one of us wants to make our families proud, wants to make our teachers proud – because they are also our parents. We especially want to make our principal proud.

I think that one thing I would share to my peers is that it is essential that we don't lose focus in times like these. I think it's very crucial that we, every day, recall our dreams; that every day we work very hard. ”



*“It [lockdown] was very bad, because it is not easy to understand when there isn’t a teacher [around].”*

**NOZIPHO (17)**  
Grade 12 learner  
Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal

**C**

ovid-19 school closures have only deepened these disruptions to teaching and learning. By 7 August 2020, South African learners had lost between 25–57% of their ‘normal’ school days.<sup>72</sup> In June 2020, when schools reopened for Grade 7 and 12 learners (before closing again in July), many teachers and learners remained absent – either because they were afraid of contracting Covid-19, or because they were in mandated isolation. Attendance in open grades did not differ by economic status, although attendance in closed grades was far higher among the richest 10% of learners.<sup>73</sup> This may be because private schools did not phase in the return to school, based on grades.

For those learners who could not access the internet, it was impossible to continue learning from home, even when there were online resources available. In the 2018 General Household Survey, about 22% of households reported having a computer, with 10% reporting having an internet connection.<sup>74</sup>

*“In most instances, educators were not able to effectively communicate with their learners or their caregivers due to a lack of reliable electronic devices and data in households. For the same reason, most caregivers were not able to access the online resources provided by the Department of Basic Education.”*

**KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP,**  
an implementing partner of the Zero Dropout Campaign in Paarl and Stellenbosch

The longer a child is away from the classroom and loses that important attachment to schooling, the less likely they are to return – especially if the connection was tenuous or strained to begin with. The number of school days lost is also not a good way of estimating the amount of learning lost, however. With so much time away from school, many learners may have forgotten what was learnt before the closures. Without proper catch-up plans, some researchers estimate that learning losses will

affect Grade 12 results until 2022, or even as far as 2031.<sup>75</sup> This, in turn, will affect post-school institutions, and ultimately, the country's labour market. While children may not be most vulnerable to serious Covid-19 illness, they are likely to bear the brunt of the pandemic, bearing the costs of economic and educational disruption well into their futures.

**For much of 2020, children and young people were not able to see friends or family, and for the first five weeks of 'hard' lockdown, they could not leave the house except for a medical appointment, or essential shopping. In the life-worlds of children, schools are not only spaces for learning; they are also spaces for socialisation, structure, enrichment, regular meals and social support. By being barred from school, many learners lost an important source of care, stimulation, and safety.**

For instance, a learner from KwaZulu-Natal reported to one of our implementing partners that she missed playing sports. And a caregiver in the Western Cape said school activities had helped keep her son safe and out of trouble. These experiences signal the value of school beyond being simply a place of learning.

In addition to absent teachers and a lack of learning materials, South African learners also face a number of disruptions on a daily basis. For example, many schools are overcrowded and do not have proper access to water and sanitation.<sup>76</sup> In 2020, a quarter of primary schools still did not have access to running water, and 21% did not have adequate toilets.<sup>77</sup> Without access to sanitary pads, private cubicles, and proper running water, it is not uncommon for female learners to be absent from school during their menstrual cycles, causing them to fall behind or drop out of school entirely.



*“Right now, it will be very difficult to adapt, and to finish the whole syllabus. Some of us need more time to understand things.”*

**KHANYA (18)**

Grade 11 learner  
Umbumbulu, KwaZulu-Natal



*“Lockdown has been extremely hard because every time the children come back it feels like you’re starting from scratch. The children don’t remember anything.”*

**XOLISWA ADONIS**

Grade 7 teacher

Duncan Village in East London,  
Eastern Cape

After two months of lockdown, when school was set to resume for Grade 7 and 12 learners, more than 1 000 schools could not re-open as planned because they still did not have access to water, proper infrastructure, or safe sanitation facilities.<sup>78</sup> In addition to being a basic requirement for hygiene during a pandemic, safety and sanitation are essential for basic dignity in the everyday life of learners.<sup>79</sup>

Already, educational outcomes for South African learners are deeply unequal, and all too often determined by race. At the age of 30, more than 80% of Indian and white youth have a matric qualification or higher;<sup>80</sup> only about half of black and coloured youth can say the same.<sup>81</sup> Meanwhile, Grade 9 learners in the poorest 60% of schools are thought to be about five years behind their wealthier peers in terms of learning.<sup>82</sup> The learning losses experienced as a result of Covid-19 will only entrench these inequalities. The more crowded a school, for example, the less space there is for learners to “physically distance”, and the more school days are lost in an effort to keep learners apart.<sup>83</sup> Learners in no-fee schools are most likely to be cut off from learning resources and also least likely to receive psychosocial support.

**Because of the unequal circumstances of both homes and neighbourhoods, the extent of learning lost is likely to vary significantly both within and between schools. As more and more learners return to school, they will likely arrive with very different needs; some will be in a much better position to ‘catch up’ than others. One of the challenges for educators and policymakers is how to deal with diversity and inequality in classrooms, and to make sure all learners are supported to move forward according to their unique circumstances.**





*“My mother chased me away from home when I dropped out of school. I moved from my mother’s house to my grandmother’s house. I would spend the whole day smoking drugs. My friends who were still at school would visit. They were always asking me why I was not in school. They motivated me to go back to school.”*

**MIKHULU\* (19)**

Returned to school after dropping out in Grade 8  
Mdantsane in East London  
Eastern Cape

\* Name has been changed

**REAL  
LIFE**

# *Xoliswa's story*

“M

My name is Xoliswa and I'm a Grade 7 teacher, living in Duncan Village in the Eastern Cape.

During lockdown, I made some pamphlets for them [the learners]. I printed them and asked some of them to come to school for their pamphlets. When the schools opened, I found out they haven't done anything with those pamphlets. It's been very hard. Now that the children are back, they are not serious; they are not cooperating. You just see that they are not 'at' school. They are here, but their minds are not here. I'm so worried because they have to pass.

**It's a big responsibility to be a teacher. When you are a teacher, you are taking on many careers. You are also a parent, a nurse, a social worker and a psychologist.**

When a child drops out of school, I am traumatised. I wish I could take that child and help them to see the importance of being educated. I would like that child to know that life is a long span. You don't just look in front of you. You must know that there is a long way to go in life. They don't know that in the future they will be something. They must understand that what we are doing is because we love them. We have love for them.



# BUILDING RESILIENT SCHOOLS

Schools offer learners multiple forms of care and support that go far beyond teaching and learning. Regardless of whether teaching is happening, schools should remain access points for meals, psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health (SRH) services.



*“There is a WhatsApp group here. They [the learners] can share information, so now even at their homes they have got schoolwork so they are not just sitting there.”*

**LEONARD DLAMINI**

Educator

Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal

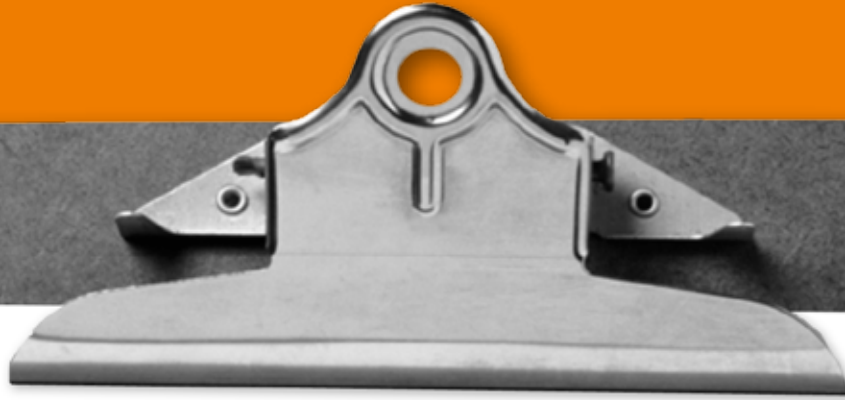
## KEEPING LEARNING ALIVE AND APPROPRIATE TO LOCAL SETTINGS AND NEEDS

Even before Covid-19, South African learners were faced with multiple disruptions to their schooling – at home, at school, and in their neighbourhoods. And yet, we have little or no plans in place to safeguard young people’s learning in times of difficulty. If we don’t find creative ways to keep learners connected to their schooling, more young people will be at risk of dropout.

Maintaining this connection to school – whether through peer chat groups, virtual mentorship, online games, or reading clubs – is critical to keeping learners engaged in their schooling community and learning.

As there are so many reasons why South African learners fall behind, we need to create ongoing systems to identify and fill learning gaps. This is especially important in the Foundation Phase of a learner’s education. In addition to accelerated learning programmes, it is critical that teachers are able to make the existing curriculum engaging and relevant. They need to be able to present content in a manner that nurtures a sense of imagination in learners, as well as the ability to think critically, be curious, and express their ideas.

So long as distance learning continues, we must also prioritise no-tech and low-tech solutions to make sure that we are reaching all learners. All school curricula should also include violence prevention, psychosocial support, and emotional learning activities that will help us embed resilience within the crisis response and help lessen the impacts of disruptions. The support we offer learners must also be responsive to gender, and attuned to different needs and circumstances.



## **QUESTIONS SCHOOLS CAN ASK THEMSELVES TO BOOST RESILIENCE TO SCHOOL DROPOUT**

- Are all learners registered with up-to-date contact information for both learners and their caregivers?
- Are we tracking academic performance, behaviour, and chronic absenteeism - at the individual learner level?
- If learners are falling behind, do we have plans in place to bring them up to speed?
- If learners are regularly absent from school, do we have ways of checking up on them?
- Are we connected to a network of psychosocial support services to whom we can refer learners and caregivers?
- Are we finding ways to connect with learners' caregivers?
- Can we better support our educators?
- Are we connected to other schools in our area, so that we can learn together, support one another, and share resources?

## CREATE RELIABLE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS

A growing body of research suggests that one of the best ways to prevent school dropout is through effective monitoring systems that not only track learner progress, but also alert education officials when learners are at risk of disengagement.<sup>84</sup>

Now, more than ever, we need Early Warning Systems to prevent school dropout. By tracking the academic performance, behavioural struggles, and chronic absenteeism of individual learners, we can get a better picture of their journey through school. This will signal when disruptions hit and ensure that we are able to design timely and well-informed support programmes.

At present, South Africa simply does not have the right types of datasets to measure and monitor school dropout properly. While there are several datasets tracking matric exam results, annual school surveys, and master school lists, this information is often only reported at the 'aggregate' (collective) level, not at the level of individual learners. Learner-level information could help flag which learners are most at risk of dropping out. Government is currently introducing a learner-level data management system, but it remains unreliable because of poor data management at school level.

Data collected at the right level, and the right time, is a tried-and-tested practice for prevention of learner disengagement.

In 2013, we saw the introduction of Data Driven Districts (DDD), a collaborative project between NGOs and government, which seeks to improve the collection and use of education data to help learners succeed. At the heart of the programme is the DDD Dashboard – a web-based tool that draws together and maps learner performance information. The dashboard provides a broad summary of learner performance, along with more detailed information for each learner, to help education officials make informed, evidence-based decisions.

## START BY DEFINING DROPOUT!

The starting point for monitoring learners' progress through school is having a standardised definition of dropout. School dropout can be defined in many different ways, and in South Africa, these inconsistencies make it very difficult to get an accurate picture of dropout rates. It is important to be clear and precise about what is meant by dropout. Otherwise, the number of school dropouts can be significantly under- or over-estimated.<sup>85</sup>



# EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS IN PRACTICE

One of our implementing partners, Masibumbane Development Organisation (MDO), uses and responds to data regularly as a way of identifying early signs of learner withdrawal, and to offer the right care at the right time. MDO's Check and Connect Mentors systematically monitor learners by checking their attendance, academic performance, and behaviour using school data. They then connect learners to the appropriate support services and resources.

As another example, Khula Development Group (KDG) hires Dropout Catchers who work with schools to monitor learner absenteeism. If a learner is regularly absent, Dropout Catchers follow up by visiting their homes and caregivers. These home visits help Dropout Catchers understand what might be pulling learners out of school. They can then work with caregivers to support and re-engage learners.

When schools are closed, or learners are away from school (due to co-morbidities, class staggering, or isolation, for example), we must find other ways to track their engagement, communication, and wellbeing.

*“The low attendance rate, combined with the different models schools are applying to adhere to social distancing, means teachers aren't keeping up with high-risk cases. It feels like all learners became high-risk cases overnight, so our Early Warning Systems aren't functioning.”*

**COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP,**  
an implementing partner of the Zero Dropout Campaign in the Western Cape

*“The Check and Connect mentorship programme helps because some of them [the learners] come from parents who are demotivated. When the social worker is helping them you at least see the child is motivated. If I'm having a problem, I'll ask the social worker to help. Then she would talk to them. Since she's familiar to them, they will listen to her. She knows how to talk to them.”*

**XOLISWA ADONIS**

Grade 7 teacher  
Duncan Village, Eastern Cape



*“We have a Check and Connect Mentor to look after the kids who are not well-performing and have a capacity to drop out. As a result, most of those kids did get through to Grade 12. Without that support, they wouldn't have achieved that.”*

**NTOMBIZOKE MAMATU**

Principal  
Mdantsane, Eastern Cape

## BUILD BRIDGES BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND CAREGIVERS

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Covid-19 has reminded us that if we want to keep young people connected to learning, what happens outside classrooms is as important as what happens inside. We must build bridges between schools and homes.

There are many reasons why caregivers might find it difficult to engage with their children's education; supporting them to do so can make all the difference for learners. Some schools hold caregivers' workshops, either virtually or physically. Caregivers can also benefit from mentorship and referrals to psychosocial support for themselves and their children.

The Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners noticed that many schools had no way of communicating with caregivers during lockdown, and that many caregivers were not receiving or collecting learning materials for their children. Some teachers accused caregivers of being uncaring. This reflected a breakdown in the caregiver-educator relationship, which is key to a child's learning journey, and must be strengthened if we are to support learners through school. Knowing that caregivers needed support, our partners offered virtual mentorship, educational materials, and emotional support.



*“I was losing my mind at home. I wanted to be with teachers at school, and socialise with friends.”*

**OWAMI (15)**  
Grade 10 learner  
Mid Illovo, KwaZulu-Natal

## USE RECOVERY AS AN OPPORTUNITY FOR REFORM

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While the pandemic has given us new reasons to be concerned about large class sizes, shoddy infrastructure, expensive internet data, and poor supply of learning materials, the reality is that these injustices have been disrupting and derailing young people's education for decades.

Reporting on the return to school following lockdown, some of our implementing partners said that learners and educators valued the smaller class sizes that some schools introduced as a Covid-19 prevention measure, as these created a better connection between teacher and learner. In fact, some schools said they hoped to continue this in future, perhaps with the innovation of mobile classrooms.

A post-Covid schooling system should not return to 'normal'. The situation in many of our schools has not been normal for some time. This is an opportunity to build back better.



*“As teachers, we have a lot of influence on kids. We don’t just teach them the topic we are studying. We teach them the ways of life. We are not only teachers in the class. We are teaching them all aspects of life.”*

**TAMSANQA NGESI**

Teacher

Mdantsane in East London,  
Eastern Cape





# DISRUPTED NEIGHBOURHOODS

Covid-19 has brought severe disruptions to everyday life and livelihoods, putting society under immense psychological, social, and financial pressure. Existing social inequalities have widened, vulnerability has worsened, and pre-existing injustices are inflamed. Across the world, many are expecting the economic and psychosocial fallout of Covid-19 to deepen social unrest.<sup>86</sup>



# ED URHOODS

## SOCIAL UNREST

Community protest, teacher or transport strikes, and political demonstrations have kept South African learners from school before.<sup>87</sup> It's possible that these disruptions will become more frequent with the economic fallout of Covid-19. As unemployment levels continue to rise, learners, families, and whole communities may also lose faith in the value of school or the possibility of a meaningful, healthy livelihood. In some neighbourhoods, gangsterism, alcohol or drug-use already pull learners out of school by offering alternative sources of belonging, self-worth and survival. This 'pull' may be amplified in a post-Covid world.

*“My father caught me smoking weed once. He wanted me to stop because he was once involved in drugs and drinking, and knows it isn't good. He was worried that I'd drop out of school. Some of my friends have dropped out of school, but they are still too young to be out of school. Since I stopped smoking my friends are mocking me.”*

**QHAYIYA\* (17)**

Grade 9 learner

East London, Eastern Cape

## GENDER INEQUALITY

Given that those who were already disadvantaged have been worst affected by Covid-19, the pandemic has further deepened inequality in South Africa. Women in particular have been hardest hit by the economic shocks caused by Covid. Of the three million jobs that were lost between February and April 2020, women accounted for two million, even though they made up less than half of the workforce in February. Almost half of women surveyed said they had worked fewer or no hours in April. Among the disadvantaged groups that suffered the greatest job losses – including the less educated, the poor, black communities, and informal workers – women in these groups faced further job losses. Researchers have described this as a 'double disadvantage'<sup>88</sup> for women. Since women are largely the primary caregivers of children, shocks felt by women are also felt by learners.

In addition to the economic losses experienced by adult women, girl children are also thought to be particularly vulnerable under Covid-19 lockdown. As already discussed, Covid-19 school closures, together with economic pressures, put girls at greater risk of dropout because they are more likely to take on domestic or childcare responsibilities, and are at greater risk of sexual exploitation and pregnancy. Unless we disrupt this trend, and support women and girls, Covid-19 is likely to deepen gender inequalities, and increase the risk that girl children do not return to school.

## ACCESS TO HEALTH SERVICES

One in four participants in the NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 survey reported being unable to access medication, condoms, or contraception in the previous four weeks.<sup>89</sup> Over the course of the lockdown, some clinics experienced temporary closures when staff tested positive for Covid-19. In other instances, the fear of contracting Covid-19 kept staff at home, and kept patients from seeking health services. The attention diverted to Covid-19 may also have disrupted other routine healthcare services. To add to this, those young people who once accessed condoms and contraceptives through schools were unable to do so while schools were closed. Also important to consider, if chronically-ill relatives are not able to receive medicine and stay healthy, it may mean greater caregiving responsibilities for learners, or the potential loss of an important care provider.

\* Name has been changed



# NEIGHBOURHOOD RESILIENCE TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT

Schools and families cannot tackle dropout alone. They need our support. In each of our neighbourhoods, we can play a role in supporting young people to complete their schooling. Dropout is a collective problem. It needs a collective solution.

We know that those learners who stay in school, despite difficult circumstances, often succeed because they have stable, positive, and supportive relationships with at least one key adult. This could be a caregiver or teacher, but it may also be a community member or mentor.

For neighbourhoods to nurture, champion, and steady young people on their journey through school, they must also be equipped with strong support services and referral networks. This should include youth-friendly health services, social workers, and counsellors. There should be places of safety and care for those who have survived, or feel at risk of, domestic and gender-based violence; and those struggling with their mental health. And learners at risk of dropout should be able to be identified and supported.

**In our efforts to strengthen neighbourhoods, our focus should be on keeping learners safe, tackling gender inequality, and building resilient webs of psychosocial support.**

**REAL  
LIFE**

# *Amy-Lee's\** *story*

*Name has been changed*

“M

My name is Amy-Lee. I'm from Grassy Park in the Western Cape and dropped out of school in Grade 10. I'm now 21 years old.

The main reason I dropped out was that my mind wasn't at school. My mind was at home with my friends, with the drink. It took my mind off school. My friends really put lots of pressure on me. I'd call them in the morning and say I was going to school, and they'd say I was boring. Come on, come on... And then I'd join the clique.

I stay with my mother. She was really upset. She couldn't get over the fact that such a clever girl wanted to leave school. I'd worked really hard. She didn't understand. But I went in another direction. My mind was made up.

I have so many regrets now. I know that if I'd stayed in school I'd be so far by now.

I have a basic certificate for Home-Based Care. My uncle had a stroke and needed help. I helped my aunt and I liked it. She encouraged me to do the certificate. I was at my aunt and uncle's home last year doing that when the gangs came and smashed the house completely.

The gangsterism is so bad here. When I see them my heart stands still. I think back to that day they destroyed my aunt's house.

I want to do my matric but I'm nervous about going to the night school, because it's so dangerous to get to and from it. I'm thinking of working out a lift club situation with a few friends who also want to do it, then maybe we can Uber and pool our money. If we go in a group, we can have our own matric ball! ”

Amy-Lee's story shows us how dangers and pressures in the neighbourhood can pull and keep young people out of school, even when they are very motivated to finish. At first, she was attracted to drinking and spending time with her friends. She wanted to be accepted as part of the group. Eventually, she dropped out of school altogether. Now, her plans to start night-school have been delayed because the neighbourhood is unsafe. Amy-Lee is hoping that by building a network of motivated friends, they can complete their schooling together. She also now has her mother's support to draw on.

# COVID-19 AND DISRUPTIONS TO SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION: WHAT DOES THE DATA TELL US?

As of 9 October 2020, the South African government reported that there were about 320 000 learners who, following Covid-19 lockdown, could no longer be accounted for.<sup>90</sup> Despite these estimates, it is in fact very difficult to give accurate measures of school dropout, because we do not have complete datasets at the learner-level. However, there are data we can use to improve our understanding of the disruptions that lead to dropout, and how these might have been deepened by Covid-19 and lockdown. To do so, the Zero Dropout Campaign has drawn on two types of data.





## QUALITATIVE DATA

Collected by our implementing partners,<sup>91</sup> through a combination of observational surveys and semi-structured interviews with learners, caregivers, and educators. Respondents spanned 22 schools across three provinces.

**STRENGTHS:** *Provides detailed, first-hand accounts of the everyday experiences of learners, caregivers and educators.*

**WEAKNESSES:** *The data are not representative of the national picture, and only reflect a snapshot of experiences taken at the time of the interview.*



## QUANTITATIVE DATA

As it stands, there is no accurate and complete dataset tracking individual learners' pathways through school. The recent institution of the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) tries to address this problem, but is still wrought with gaps and inaccuracies, because of problems with school-level data management. To be able to identify and support at-risk learners, we need to strengthen our data! Our primary source of quantitative data to understand the impact of Covid-19 on learners is the NIDS-CRAM (Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey). Wave 1 data was collected from a broadly representative sample of 7 000 respondents, drawn from the National Income Dynamics Survey (NIDS). By Wave 2, 5 600 respondents remained in the study cohort, which was still deemed broadly representative. NIDS-CRAM also draws on Department of Basic Education (DBE) monitoring data, collected from principals in 611 schools (excluding the Western Cape) between 1 and 10 July 2020.

**STRENGTHS:** *Approximates the national picture and allows for comparison across Waves.*

**WEAKNESSES:** *Is less suited to illustrating the complexity and variety of Covid-19 experiences, and cannot explain emerging trends.*



**Both datasets tell us that INEQUALITY IS DEEPENING with important implications for dropout. While there are some common challenges across the country, the varying circumstances of learners, households, and schools have also resulted in very different experiences over the course of 2020. These differences map onto, and worsen, existing social inequalities, so that those learners, households, and schools that were already vulnerable are also worst affected by Covid-19 and lockdown. If we want to lessen the impact of disruptions like Covid-19, and reduce school dropout, we must build resilient support systems around learners.**



*“I live with my great-grandmother and mother in one of the flats – along with a bunch of other people. Sometimes there is like seven or eight of us. So the small place is completely filled with people. I have no space to myself.”*

**LEILA\* (19)**

Left school in Grade 10  
Manenberg, Western Cape

\* Name has been changed

# DISRUPTED HOMES

*We know that learners are at greater risk of disengaging from school if:*

- they have a heavy load of domestic and caregiving responsibilities
- they come from poorer and/or large households
- they often go hungry
- they have caregivers who are chronically ill
- they have suffered the loss of a breadwinner or primary caregiver.

## COVID-19, AND LOCKDOWN, HAVE DEEPENED THESE DISRUPTIONS BY...



### ...ADDING TO LEARNERS' CAREGIVING RESPONSIBILITIES.

- Some learners – particularly girls – reported being overburdened by chores during lockdown; others were caring for younger siblings.

### ...DEEPENING HOUSEHOLD HUNGER.

- With caregivers having lost jobs and income, many learners in our qualitative study reported that there was less food at home. ❖ One in two families surveyed by NIDS-CRAM ran out of money to buy food in April 2020.



### ...PUTTING MANY CAREGIVERS OUT OF WORK AND INCOME.

- All of our implementing partners reported that there were learners at their schools whose caregivers had lost their jobs and/or income. ❖ NIDS-CRAM reported that, in the first month of lockdown, three million people had lost their jobs.


### ...PUTTING THOSE IN CROWDED HOMES AT EVEN GREATER DISADVANTAGE.

- Learners from homes that were busy and noisy had no alternative place to learn.




### ...CAUSING HOUSEHOLD ILLNESS AND (SOMETIMES) DEATH.

- Some participants in our qualitative study reported that the death of a caregiver or relative from Covid-19 had strained their household.



### ...DEEPENING PSYCHOLOGICAL DISTRESS FOR LEARNERS AND CAREGIVERS.

- Across all schools in our qualitative study, learners reported feelings of worry, anxiety, and fear related to Covid-19.
  - ❖ Meanwhile, job losses among adults in NIDS-CRAM were associated with increased depressive symptoms.
- 

*“I wanted to help poor people during lockdown. I spoke to my mother, and we took our savings and bought soup, rice and vegetables, and cooked for people who had nothing.”*

**MILANI\* (17)**

Grade 9 learner  
Gonubie in East London,  
Eastern Cape



\* Name has been changed

# DISRUPTED SCHOOLS

*We know that learners are at greater risk of disengaging from school if:*

- they do not have the resources they need to learn
- their classrooms are overcrowded
- their teachers are frequently absent
- they have fallen behind the curriculum
- they repeat grades
- they are chronically absent from school.

## COVID-19, AND LOCKDOWN, HAVE DEEPENED THESE DISRUPTIONS BY...

### ...MAKING IT HARDER FOR LEARNERS TO ACCESS LEARNING RESOURCES.

● Across all schools in our qualitative study, there were learners without smartphones or data to continue learning from home. Even in cases where hard-copy learning materials were available, some learners lived too far from school to collect these materials regularly.

### ...WIDENING THE GAP BETWEEN SCHOOLS AND FAMILIES.

● Both caregivers and educators in our qualitative study complained about poor communication between schools and homes, which made it difficult for learning to continue. Some educators did not have updated contact details for caregivers; while some caregivers struggled with data and connectivity.

### ...LEAVING LEARNERS FURTHER BEHIND.

● The number of school days lost in 2020 ranged from 17% of school days for Grade 12, to 43% for Grades 5 and 8. Importantly, the amount of learning lost is not equivalent to the number of school days lost. ● Many learners reported being unable to remember prior learning after long teaching gaps. Attempts by teachers to 'catch up learners' by cramming content into short blocks was often experienced as overwhelming. Most learners in our qualitative study reported that, since March 2020, they had performed worse at school. Some worried this would impact their ability to pass their grade; others thought it would affect their university eligibility.

### ...WORSENING ATTENDANCE.

● There is still no systematic and complete attendance data available from government, despite this being an important metric for learning losses.<sup>92</sup> But the NIDS-CRAM survey provides some idea of school attendance. When schools reopened in July 2020, NIDS-CRAM reported that most schools were experiencing between 10-25% absenteeism, as compared to the normal 2%. Thirty-five percent (35%) of parents reported that they were 'very worried' about whether their children would return to school. Among learners in the 'closed' grades, those in the wealthiest 10% of homes were three times more likely to attend school than those in the poorest 80% of households.<sup>93</sup> ● After the reopening of schools, some learners did not return to school because they feared contracting Covid-19; they were queueing for Covid-19 relief grants; they had caregiving responsibilities at home; or they felt demotivated by the amount of school days lost. Some learners whose relatives had tested positive for Covid-19 reported being stigmatised by their peers.

### ...MAKING IT HARDER FOR LEARNERS TO ACCESS TEACHERS.

● Learners without phones or data reported less engagement with teachers. Once schools reopened, many rotated attendance daily, weekly, or bi-weekly, which meant less teaching time overall. At times, Covid-19 exposure, a positive Covid-19 test, or other comorbidities, meant teachers had to self-isolate. This left fewer teachers in classrooms, and a greater burden of work for those who remained.



*“During lockdown, I did a lot of studying, trying to catch up because I knew the teachers wouldn’t be able to catch up with the work. So, I pushed myself and studied.”*

**NOLUTHANDO\* (17)**

Dropped out of school for a year and returned  
Gonubie in East London,  
Eastern Cape

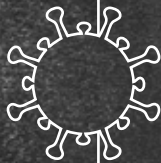
*\* Name has been changed*

# DISRUPTED NEIGHBOURHOODS

*We know that learners are at greater risk of disengaging from school if:*

- their journey from school is long and/or dangerous
- they are a target of peer pressure or gang recruitment.

## COVID-19, AND LOCKDOWN, HAVE DEEPENED THESE DISRUPTIONS BY...



...CUTTING LEARNERS OFF FROM SCHOOL WHICH, FOR SOME, IS A PLACE OF SAFETY.

- In our qualitative study, some caregivers reported being concerned that their children were at greater risk of being drawn into gangsterism or negative peer pressure now that they were spending so much time at home.

...MAKING OTHER HEALTH SERVICES, INCLUDING CONTRACEPTION AND CHRONIC CARE, LESS ACCESSIBLE.

- NIDS-CRAM Wave 1 illustrated reduced access to these basic primary healthcare services.



# COVID-19 AND REPETITION



**SERVAAS VAN DER BERG**

Professor of Economics at the University of Stellenbosch

The past year will be remembered as the year of Covid. For children, the pandemic brought with it lockdowns and school closures, and when schools reopened, most children could only attend on alternating days or weeks. As a result, far less teaching, and consequently, far less learning took place. There was also probably much forgetting. As the US literature tells us: even long summer holidays cause a lot of learning loss or forgetting, especially for those from more disadvantaged backgrounds. As we enter a new year, we must think about what is happening in our schools, and what impact this will have on learner repetition and dropout - particularly in the context of an ongoing pandemic.

**R**

esearch on Socio-Economic Policy – a research unit in the Department of Economics at Stellenbosch University – undertakes quantitative analyses of important issues, such as dropout and repetition. We were commissioned by the Zero Dropout Campaign to conduct a two-part study on the impact of Covid-19 on schools by investigating dropout, repetition and enrolment, and the consequences thereof for the curriculum.

For the first part of our study, we used LURITS datasets from the Department of Basic Education to track learners from one year to the next. This gave us a good indication of

the number of learners repeating grades. Unfortunately, the lack of unique identifiers for learners meant that they could not be tracked between schools. This means that if Learner A were in a particular school in 2018 and 2019, we could determine whether the learner had progressed or repeated a grade. However, if the learner left that school at the end of 2018, we are not able to say if they simply moved to another school (and progressed to the next grade or had to repeat a grade at their new school) or left the public school system altogether. Repetition estimates are, therefore, slight under-estimates, and dropout rates are difficult to determine.

Despite this, LURITS allowed us to form a clearer picture of learners' journeys through the school system than we




were able to before. We found much higher repetition for boys than for girls in every school quintile and in all grades. Repetition is much lower in Quintile 4 and 5 schools, and in primary rather than secondary schools. It is especially high in Grades 1, 4, 10 and 11. There are also large differences across provinces, with the repetition rate in the Western Cape peaking at 17% in Grade 10; while on the other extreme, the rate in Limpopo is 39% in Grade 10 and 30% in Grade 11.

High repetition leads to many learners being over-aged for their grade, which increases their odds of dropping out. Even in Grade 7, the end of primary school, 36% of learners are already overaged; by Grade 12, that proportion rises to 56%. More than one in five learners who reach matric are at least three years over-age, showing how common repetition is.

The upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic has created uncertainty about how repetition policy will be applied going forward. Some indication has been given on the rules for promotion, but it is still not clear how parents and learners may respond to the uncertainty of the pandemic, the new repetition policy and poor job prospects.

If many more learners than usual were promoted to Grades 11 and 12 at the end of 2020, there will be important implications for how classrooms, books and teachers are assigned. Learners in all grades would also be academically further behind, compared to previous years. To add to



**The upheaval of the Covid-19 pandemic has created uncertainty about how repetition policy will be applied going forward.**

this, depending on their socioeconomic background, some learners will have been more disrupted and experienced greater disadvantage than others. They will face even greater inequality in the classroom as teachers try to catch them up within circumstances that were already challenging prior to the pandemic.

While there may be many grey areas ahead, we know for certain that repetition is endemic in South Africa, which in turn contributes to our dropout crisis. %

# 3

## BUILDING BACK BETTER

### HOW DO OUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS INNOVATE?

School closures not only disrupt learners' educational journey; they also disrupt their social lives, their access to essential services (including school meals), and their connections to adult mentors and supporters.<sup>94</sup> When schools reopened in June 2020 for Grades 7 and 12 learners, our implementing partners continued to report very low attendance rates. At some schools, attendance was less than 20%. So how can we keep learners engaged with schooling, as well as the multifaceted forms of care that schools offer, during periods of prolonged crisis?

Each of the Zero Dropout Campaign's implementing partners aims to prevent school dropout through mentoring, counselling, life skills, and referrals to state and professional services. They work with schools, learners, educators and community advocates to keep learners engaged in schooling. Faced with Covid-19 disruptions, our implementing partners have had to find even more creative ways to reach learners and keep them connected to school and learning.



*“Haai, haai, haai. I am worried. Here in Grade 11, if I can go there now and bring my register, the attendance is very poor. There are learners who did not even come on the opening.”*

**LEONARD DLAMINI**

Educator  
Pietermaritzburg,  
KwaZulu-Natal



COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP

## COMMUNITY ACTION PARTNERSHIP (CAP)

CAP's Changemakers programme creates a network of support around learners to help them stay in school. They operate in Swellendam in the Western Cape, using community-based support teams to aid schools, teachers, and learners. During the Covid-19 pandemic, CAP has had to be flexible, adapting to the most pressing needs of schools and learners. As much learning had to take place virtually, CAP re-directed parts of its implementation budget to providing data for Grade 12 learners. They also printed online learning material and delivered it to learners in quarantine and isolation. With many learners no longer able to access the National School Nutrition Programme, food parcels were delivered to homes. Once the Feeding Scheme reopened, CAP offered support in the form of packaging and PPE. Lastly, CAP recognised that lockdown was creating anxiety among teachers, learners and school leaders. In response, much of CAP's work during this period was to provide emotional and moral support.



## KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP (KDG)

KDG's mission is to reintegrate primary school children, who are at risk of dropping out, back into the school system. They work with 23 schools in Paarl and Stellenbosch, with a particular focus on vulnerable communities. When the Covid-19 lockdown was announced, KDG moved quickly to distribute worksheets, books, and learning materials during their regular home visits. Once lockdown restrictions began to ease, occupational therapists and social workers could join these visits. The purpose of the home visits has been to offer emotional support, demonstrate ways for learners to keep learning at home, and to raise awareness about Covid-19. KDG's aim has been to keep learners engaged in their education, and connected to school life, by promoting a culture of learning at home.



## MASIBUMBANE DEVELOPMENT ORGANISATION (MDO)

MDO runs an evidence-based mentoring programme that seeks to reduce dropout by keeping learners engaged with schooling. Learners who show signs of school disengagement such as absenteeism, behaviour problems, skipping classes, and poor academic performance are referred to a Check and Connect Mentor assigned to the school. Parent meetings and workshops are also key to the MDO programme, encouraging caregivers' involvement in their children's schooling. When the Covid-19 lockdown saw schools close, MDO's main focus switched to providing psychosocial support and ways of coping during the crisis. They also tracked the psychological, economic, and social impact of Covid-19 and lockdown so that they could be more responsive to learners' needs.



**NOLUTHANDO\* (17)**  
Grade 8 learner  
(dropped out of  
school for a year)  
East London,  
Eastern Cape

*“After I had my daughter, the [MDO] Check and Connect Mentor helped me get back to school. She would call me almost every day and encourage me to come back to school. She would tell me to come back, change how I behave and focus on my studies so I can be somebody in the future. My mother looks after my daughter while I am at school now. Becoming a mother changed me because before I had a child, I was always in the street visiting friends. But now that I have a child I am always at home and I am focusing on my studies. Now that I’m back at school, my parents are very proud of me and encouraging me to stay at school and not drop out again. When I dropped out, they were very disappointed, but they kept on encouraging me to go back to school.”*

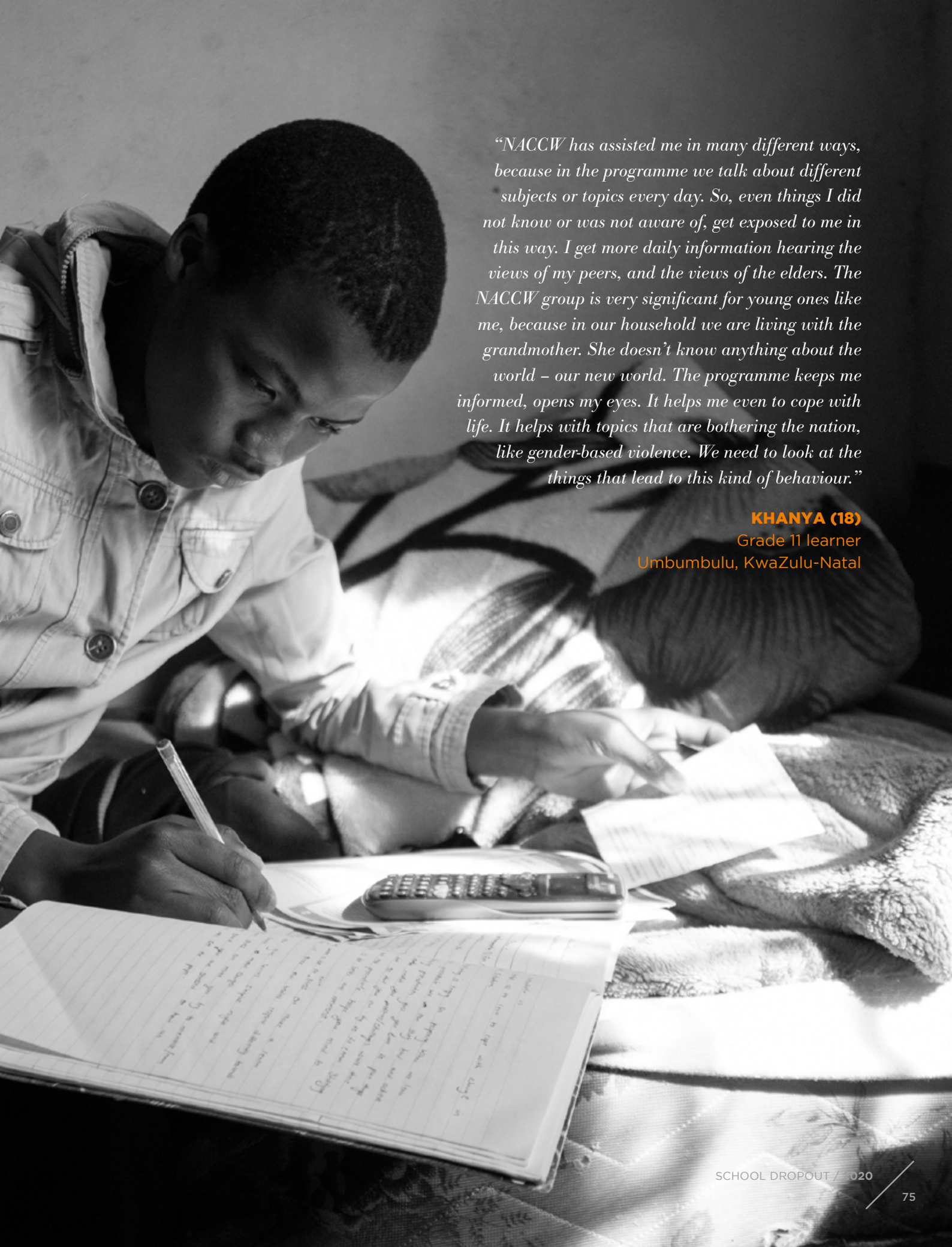


## NATIONAL ASSOCIATION OF CHILD CARE WORKERS (NACCW)

The NACCW aims to prevent dropout by providing school-based services to meet the complex needs of vulnerable adolescents in KwaZulu-Natal. In their Isibindi Ezikoleni model, child and youth care workers train and capacitate Learner Support Agents (LSAs). The LSAs provide support to at-risk learners through mentorship programmes. Learners are enrolled in a mentorship programme if they have a history of absenteeism, show a lack of interest in school, and display antisocial behaviours.

When faced with school closures, the NACCW had to adapt quickly – knowing that the risk of learners disengaging and dropping out would rise dramatically. And so they created a ‘virtual lifespace’, using WhatsApp texts, calls, videos, and voicenotes to offer psychosocial and educational support. Those without access to smartphones received phone calls. Through NACCW’s virtual programme, learners could play chess, join reading clubs, debate, participate in spelling bees, and receive curriculum support. At a time of great anxiety and uncertainty, they were offered some semblance of routine and connection to learning.

\* Name has been changed



*“NACCW has assisted me in many different ways, because in the programme we talk about different subjects or topics every day. So, even things I did not know or was not aware of, get exposed to me in this way. I get more daily information hearing the views of my peers, and the views of the elders. The NACCW group is very significant for young ones like me, because in our household we are living with the grandmother. She doesn’t know anything about the world – our new world. The programme keeps me informed, opens my eyes. It helps me even to cope with life. It helps with topics that are bothering the nation, like gender-based violence. We need to look at the things that lead to this kind of behaviour.”*

**KHANYA (18)**  
Grade 11 learner  
Umbumbulu, KwaZulu-Natal



# LESSONS ON PREPAREDNESS FROM OUR IMPLEMENTING PARTNERS



*“It has helped me because they [NACCW] create a space for us to be able to talk about things, even if they are topics that are sensitive or we feel uncomfortable talking about. Then they allow us the space that we can actually share and talk to them.”*

**NTANDOKAZI (16)**

Grade 11 learner  
Impendle, KwaZulu-Natal

Over the past few decades, many countries across the world have had to think about how to protect learning continuity in times of crisis – from Syria and Afghanistan; to Somalia, the Philippines and Sri Lanka. Unfortunately, when programmes to support learning have been trialled, their impact has often not been systematically monitored and evaluated. To keep learners in school amid difficult circumstances, we need to know what approaches work. This is yet another reason to keep quality, individual-level data on learners’ progress through school. Here we look at what the Zero Dropout Campaign’s implementing partners have learnt so far while working on dropout prevention:

*“The morale of educators and principals are at an all-time low and many of them are genuinely concerned about their health and safety, especially when the rest of the learners return. Although they are eager to teach again, the low attendance of learners and the fact that so many learners are already very far behind, has demotivated them considerably.”*

**KHULA DEVELOPMENT GROUP (KDG),**

an implementing partner of the Zero Dropout Campaign in the Western Cape

## **TO MEANINGFULLY SUPPORT LEARNING AND PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT, WE NEED TO BE ABLE TO IDENTIFY, AND ADAPT TO, LEARNERS' CHANGING NEEDS.**

This means having monitoring systems in place that help educators stay connected to learners and their circumstances. Tracking learners over time will help us make sure that those at risk of dropout can get the support they need, when they need it.

## **ROUTINE MATTERS.**

School is a place for learning, but it also offers learners a routine. Safeguarding routines, even when circumstances are difficult, can give learners a sense of stability, while also supporting their mental health and productivity. Keeping the basics of teaching and learning going, however possible, provides learners with a routine to rely on and keeps them connected to their education.

## **EMOTIONAL AND SOCIAL SUPPORT IS AS IMPORTANT AS EDUCATIONAL SUPPORT.**

In fact, learning depends on the wellbeing of the learner. As part of the support offered to learners during lockdown, NACCW mentors facilitated a 'daily feelings check-in' to get a sense of how learners felt about the pandemic, lockdown restrictions, and returning to school. To keep learners interested, different check-in activities were used, asking learners to describe their feelings using lyrics from a song, the title of a book, story characters or emojis.

## **SUPPORTING LEARNERS ALSO MEANS SUPPORTING PARENTS AND TEACHERS.**

Sometimes learning is disrupted because caregivers or teachers feel overwhelmed or under-supported. Keeping learners in schools means building networks of support around them.

## BUILDING RESILIENCE TO PREVENT SCHOOL DROPOUT:

# A NATIONAL ACTION PLAN



Connect households to the right forms of **PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT**, whether it be counselling, health services, social workers and mentors. This relies on strong referral networks that can be reliably activated when needed.

Sustain and broaden access to the (increased) **CHILD SUPPORT GRANT**, and ensure these increases are per child rather than per caregiver (as has been the standard). There is strong, long-standing evidence to show that access to the child support grant reduces child hunger and malnutrition, and alleviates household poverty; while also improving school attendance, and decreasing risky sexual behaviour.<sup>95</sup>

**SUPPORT CAREGIVERS** in their central role in children's learning journey, while recognising that caregivers, too, are in need of support.

**BUILD MEANINGFUL CONNECTIONS** between schools and households, starting with a reliable means of contacting learners and caregivers.

**MAKE SCHOOLS ACCESS POINTS** for essential services, like food, psychosocial support, and sexual and reproductive health services. This means ensuring that the National School Nutrition Programme keeps running for *all* learners, regardless of whether they are physically attending school.

**CONNECT LEARNERS** – even if virtually – to offer one another social, emotional and learning support.

Ensure every learner has access to **AT LEAST ONE CARING ADULT** to stand alongside them in their journey through school; someone who is interested and engaged with the daily practicalities of schooling.<sup>96,97</sup> This may be a caregiver, teacher, mentor, or community volunteer.

**ENGAGE YOUNG PEOPLE** by seeking their input on school closures, distance learning, and the return to classrooms. Learners' experiences and needs should inform how schools seek to recover learning and build resilience.

**MEET LEARNERS AT THEIR LEVEL** and respond to their needs. Where possible, plans to recover lost learning, through accelerated catch-up programmes, for example, should be tailored to learners' needs, rather than their age or grade. Recovery plans may also require a special focus on young women, as well as flexible learning approaches that would allow pregnant learners or young mothers to re-enter schooling without falling too far behind.<sup>98</sup>

Offer **SUPPORT GROUPS FOR TEACHERS**, even if these are virtual.

Capacitate schools to **COLLECT AND USE DATA** to prevent dropout. This could include the wider roll-out of Data Driven Districts to support evidence-based decisions and learner support.

Equip schools with the **PROPER INFRASTRUCTURE** to meet the minimum standards for healthy, safe learning environments. Well-run and maintained schools, in which young people feel safe to learn, greatly improve their chances of completing school – even when they come from challenging home environments.





## IN NEIGHBOURHOODS

Provide uninterrupted access to condoms, contraceptives, and broader **SEXUAL AND REPRODUCTIVE HEALTH (SRH) SERVICES**. When sexual and reproductive health services are in school, learners are more likely to access them.<sup>99</sup> Schools must remain access points for SRH support.

**BOLSTER PUBLIC SAFETY AND DRUG PREVENTION PROGRAMMES** that will safeguard learners during their schooling journey.

**SAFEGUARD WOMEN** as a way of safeguarding learners. In South Africa, women are the main caregivers of children.<sup>100</sup> They have also been most affected by the economic shocks of Covid-19 lockdown.<sup>101</sup>



## IN THE EDUCATION SYSTEM

**MAKE DROPOUT REDUCTION A KEY PERFORMANCE INDICATOR (KPI).** Dropout prevention should be an explicit goal of the schooling system, requiring schools to regularly report on their levels of learner disengagement.

**CHAMPION DATA AND MONITORING.** We must maintain detailed and up-to-date records of each learner's academic results, behavioural changes, and chronic absenteeism. These indicators offer ways of tracking learner progress and engagement, and provide early signs of disruption to learners' emotional, physical, or social wellbeing. Research shows that one of the best ways to prevent school dropout is through effective monitoring systems. To improve our monitoring systems, we must expedite the rewrite of the South African School and Administration Management System (SA-SAMS) and universalise the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS), which tracks individual learners.

**INTRODUCE EARLY WARNING SYSTEMS (EWS)** using robust, learner-level data. The EWS should signal when learners are at risk of dropout, triggering the right support at the right time.

**STRENGTHEN PSYCHOSOCIAL SUPPORT.** Early Warning Systems should trigger a strong referral network of psychosocial support services, targeted to the needs of learners and schools. This referral system would be further strengthened through inter-sectoral collaboration between the Departments of Health, Social Development and Basic Education.

**RECOVER FROM, BUT DO NOT REPLICATE THE PAST.** Pre-Covid schooling was already characterised by too little learning, high levels of inequality, and regular disruption. Now, more than ever, we need a national, comprehensive response to school dropout that includes a national catch-up strategy attuned to the diverse needs of learners.

# CONCLUSION

**WHEN SOUTH AFRICAN LEARNERS SET OUT ON THEIR SCHOOL JOURNEY, THE ODDS OF THEM LEAVING WITH A MATRIC CERTIFICATE ARE ROUGHLY 40%; AND ONLY A SMALL PROPORTION OF THEM WILL GO TO UNIVERSITY, USUALLY ONE OR MORE YEARS AFTER MATRICULATING.<sup>102</sup>**

As they make their way through school, learners must contend with a host of disruptions to their education – at home, at school, and in their neighbourhoods. As in a game of hopscotch, finishing the course means overcoming obstacles and setbacks, often with unsteady footing. For most, the game feels rigged against them.

Covid-19 school closures, together with the economic shocks of lockdown, have amplified the disruptions that lead to dropout. When schools closed, many learners lost the connection not only to teaching and learning, but also to the social, nutritional and emotional safety nets that school can provide. Vulnerable households have come under deeper financial and emotional strain. In some cases, pressures to earn an income, care for relatives, or perform household chores have been displaced onto learners, making it more difficult for them to return to school.

**The Covid-19 pandemic has deepened the vulnerability of already vulnerable learners, putting them at greater risk of dropout. But it is not the first nor the last disruption they will face.**

To buffer the impact of these disruptions, we must build resilient systems of support around learners – in homes, schools, communities, and the wider education system. With an urgent and sustained dropout prevention plan, we can work to bridge the gaps, light the path, and steady learners on their journey to school completion.



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**The Zero Dropout Campaign is working towards halving the rate of school dropout by 2030.**

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The logo for DGMT, consisting of the letters 'DG' stacked above 'MT' in a white, bold, sans-serif font, set against a solid yellow square background.

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