

# Papering over the Cracks: The COVID-19 and Post-COVID South African Curriculum Policy Response

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## Abstract

This article documents curriculum and assessment policy changes over four years (2020 to 2024) in South Africa in response to the COVID-19 pandemic and school closures. Early on, some changes were made to the national CAPS curriculum documents in the form of trimming content (2020), identifying “fundamental” knowledge (2020), and reviewing subject content (2022). The focus was on retaining the curriculum while allowing for flexibility in coverage through weakened controls over moderation, assessment, and promotion requirements, ceding most curriculum and assessment decisions to the school and classroom levels. Given a very unequal system, this meant that curriculum coverage and learning losses mapped onto and deepened pre-COVID-19 patterns of educational disadvantage. Post-COVID, a similar approach of devolution of curriculum decision-making to school and teacher level was taken. There were no attempts to recoup *time* in order to *remediate* learning losses, apart from later attempts in one province. Post-COVID, the Department of Basic Education tightened controls over coverage again but maintained leniency with respect to assessment and progression. During the pandemic the Department of Basic Education claimed remote solutions as a key mechanism for addressing curriculum coverage, despite very few learners having access to these. There were few mechanisms to address the severe educational impact of the pandemic, especially on learners in the poorest communities. The article argues that rather than address learning losses directly government strategies have masked them.

**Keywords:** COVID-19; curriculum; assessment; learning losses; South Africa; policy



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## Introduction

Curriculum policy is a cornerstone of educational governance and has powerful effects on what happens in classrooms via curriculum specifications, textbook elaborations, assessment regimes, monitoring, and accountability mechanisms. This article documents curriculum policymaking during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, between May 2020 and May 2024.

For about 10 years prior to the pandemic, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) had established a strong centralised role in determining curriculum content and quality assuring assessments for schooling. In the face of ongoing and significant loss of teaching time from May 2020, it ceded this role to the local level with an increased emphasis on self-directed learning, remote learning, home learning, and flexibility. Responsibility for curriculum decisions were devolved to the school and teacher level and responsibility for learning to the individual learner. In the very unequal social and educational context, devolving decisions around the selection, pace, and evaluation of curriculum knowledge meant that curriculum coverage and assessment practices would vary considerably between schools and classrooms. Devolving learning to the home environment would mean widening inequalities depending on the capacity of the home to provide educational support. Once the pandemic was over, rather than address learning backlogs through acceleration or remediation programmes, the DBE strategy sustained lenient progression requirements introduced during the COVID-19 pandemic, meaning that students would progress through the system without needing to fully master the requirements of each grade. The article argues that papering over the cracks of learning losses in this way compromises teaching and learning and potentially the integrity of school certification processes.

## Loss of Instructional Time and Learning Losses

It is difficult to calculate the precise loss of instructional time for all learners that followed the school closures from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic from May 2020. Closures affected different schools and grades differently. After the initial lockdown, a phased return to schooling meant that some grades lost many more days than others. Many schools delayed opening due to lack of readiness to manage social distancing or a rise in infections. Most schools adopted a system of rotational attendance, where children in each grade would alternate attending school and staying at home in order to meet social distancing requirements. In 2021, schools commenced a month late due to a “wave” of infections, and 80% continued with rotational timetabling to meet sustained mandated social distancing requirements. Thus, throughout 2020 and 2021 most learners received only a third to half of the instructional time that they would have in a normal year. Gustafsson (2022) estimates an average loss of 54% of contact time due to changes in the school calendar in 2020, and an average of 22% lost contact time in 2021 due to rotational schedules. He emphasises, however, large socio-economic inequalities in time loss, depending largely on factors such as school size and local politics relating to the pandemic as well as economic and social

trauma in households. In 2022 schools finally returned to normal timetables, with all learners and teachers expected to attend daily.

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

How did curriculum policy processes attempt to mitigate these losses at the time of the pandemic and in the years that followed? South Africa's national curriculum comprises three parts: the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement*, the *National Policy Pertaining to the Programme and Promotion Requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R–12* and the *National Protocol for Assessment Grades R–12*. The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS)* is tightly structured and organised in four 10-week terms with clearly specified content for each of the 40 school weeks for 13 grades (Grades R–12) of schooling. The Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) are an additional set of documents providing further detail on the minimum weekly content with notional hours to be taught as well as assessment details. In this way, *content is tightly bound to time*. There were four central curriculum strategies undertaken by the DBE to try and recover time given the decline in curriculum coverage:

- Reduction in curriculum content
- Suspension/rationalising of subjects
- Changes to assessment
- Remote learning.

Policy initiatives are discussed in relation to these four areas. The article argues that while there were some strengths in the approach, devolution to a highly unequal system without support or opportunities for remediation presents a long-term problem of learning losses that map onto patterns of prior social and educational disadvantage. In addition, greater leniency in assessment meant changes in progression through the system leading to greater within classroom heterogeneity and increased “schooling without learning”. This has been compounded in the most recent time by sustained relaxed progression rules.

## Reduction in Curriculum Content

### **May 2020—“Curriculum Trimming” in the Revised Annual Teaching Plans**

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

- Feasibility—analyse and examine the content in the light of the time and resources available to the schools, considering the current socio-economic and political climate.
- Coherence—systematic curriculum mapping must have horizontal, vertical, subject area and interdisciplinary coherence (DBE 2020a).

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

### **July 2020—the “Fundamentals”**

Once schools reopened in June, it became increasingly evident that there would be considerable further loss of teaching time given delayed and staggered reopening of schools, rotational timetabling, and much higher teacher and learner absenteeism than normal. A second process of curriculum content reduction was thus undertaken, focusing this time on minimum concepts, content, and skills per grade and per subject. These were called “fundamental skills and content” released via “Circular S3 of 2020” (DBE 2020b). The main mechanism for reducing curriculum coverage demands in the Fundamentals process was to identify broad, priority topics without detailed content specifications, and to delink topics from specific time frames for completion (as presented in the ATPs). In other words, selection and pacing requirements were relaxed and curriculum decisions devolved to the school level. This was a response to the vastly different experience of schooling across contexts that had become evident.

“Circular S3 of 2020” also released guidelines for implementation of the Revised ATPs and placed a strong emphasis on collaboration. Teachers were expected to make curriculum trimming decisions in collaboration with colleagues from the preceding and following grades. Further expectations on teachers included: designing and using diagnostic assessment to inform curriculum selection, collaboratively planning ongoing selections based on formative assessment, balancing face-to-face, remote and self-

guided learning, and conducting continuous communication between teachers around coverage (DBE 2020c).

“Circular S3 of 2020” recognised that the curriculum was not going to be completed in 2020, and devolved planning for 2020/2021 to “school-based efforts”, with a view to “using part of the 2021 academic year to revise and remediate 2020 work” (DBE 2020b, para 1). The policy required teachers to function as autonomous, highly skilled individuals, able to exercise just-in-time professional judgements regarding content selection, in-person and remote pedagogies, and appropriate assessments. These were very unrealistic expectations for the average South African teacher, particularly in the context of unpredictable schooling and social instability at the time. Most teachers in South Africa teach at no-fee schools, where they contend with persistent high levels of social trauma among the learners they teach (Hoffman, Sayed, and Badroodien 2016). Teachers’ heavy workloads, their low morale, and inability to cope are related to the poor material and organisational conditions that define their work and the lack of adequate support (Shalem and Hoadley 2009).

### **2021—the Recovery ATPs**

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

The Recovery ATPs were designed for a full return to school, but persisting social distancing requirements meant that rotational timetabling continued in most schools through 2021. Schools also commenced a month late (in February) due to a wave of infections. No other curriculum directives regarding the ATPs in the context of continued rotational timetabling were issued in 2021 and teachers were *de facto* mostly unable to adhere to the ATPs. They were also dealing with significant learning backlogs in their classrooms from 2020, sustained high levels of absenteeism, and much greater heterogeneity in learner preparedness given altered promotion practices from 2020 (see below). Curriculum coverage continued to be very unequal across schooling contexts. Rotations varied between schools, depending on the number and size of classes and classrooms. To cite one example from a classroom-based study at the time, Grade 3 learners in a Limpopo primary school received 13 days of schooling in Term 2 of 2021 given their classes were split into three (Hoadley et al. 2022). Curriculum coverage in different contexts was also dependent on the capacity for remote learning (especially online), levels of learning support in the home, and further closures and absenteeism in response to infections in the school.

## **Stasis in 2021/2022**

No plans were made in 2021 for ATPs for 2022. No resources were allocated for any catch-up programmes and no systematic catch-up plan was published. In 2022 schools continued to work with the Recovery ATPs in the same way as in 2021, again differing in the capacity and inclination of local school actors to plan for and address learning losses. What differed, however, was a Cabinet decision from January 2022 to end rotational schooling with immediate effect (DBE 2022a). Thus, all learners returned to school full-time in 2022.

## **The 2023/24 ATPS**

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

“Circular S33 of 2022” (DBE 2022b) asserted that the review process was not a curriculum redesign activity and was intended as an interim measure. Emphasis was placed on the key principles of coherence and progression of content within and across phases.

Almost all subjects at all levels were reviewed, except most Grade 12 subjects and Foundation Phase Language and Life Skills. Minor adjustments were made by removing or reducing some content, increasing time for some content, shifting content between grades, and reorganising content within a grade (often to deal with issues of progression). Some reorganisation of content dealt with remediation in the Senior and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase where content from earlier grades was incorporated later on. In the Intermediate Phase, two weeks were allocated for remediation, revision, and consolidation. There was, however, no evidence of additional time or accelerated learning opportunities or any serious curriculum policy mechanisms for dealing with learning backlogs.

## **Rationalising of Subjects**

An early document published by the DBE in 2020, *Guidelines for Development of the School Timetables—Reopening of Schools COVID-19* (DBE 2020e), emphasised the importance of Mathematics and Language in the curriculum, suggesting that schools keep core subjects such as Mathematics, Home Language, and English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the timetable daily while alternating subjects such as Life Skills or Life Orientation. The Revised ATPs, however, reasserted the equal importance of all subjects, ensuring that “no subjects are done away with, or their time gets allocated to subjects that are deemed important by the school” (2020e, 24). The chance to focus on

key, gateway subjects was thus not taken up, apart from in the Foundation Phase where Life Skills was integrated into Home Language (more on this below). Later in 2020, with the introduction of the Fundamentals, reducing the subjects offered in the Senior Phase became possible. In these grades, Grade 7 to Grade 9, Languages, Mathematics, Natural Science and Life Orientation were to remain compulsory; however, schools could drop two of four subjects from their timetable: Economic and Management Sciences, Technology, Social Sciences or Creative Arts. These optional subjects were well-chosen. They do not have strong progression requirements, and their omission was less likely to compromise their continued learning at a later stage (in contrast, for example, with a subject such as Mathematics that builds concepts cumulatively over time, with later learning being dependent on mastery of earlier concepts).

However, there was union resistance to the suspension of any curriculum subjects, and schools complained about the lack of support in developing timetables to institute these changes. It is unclear how many schools rationalised subjects in the Senior Phase in 2020. Schools were mandated to teach all subjects in the Recovery ATPs through 2021 and 2022. Responding to research around learning losses, in June of 2022 the Western Cape Education Department reduced Life Skills in Foundation Phase from six to three hours, adding an additional hour to Mathematics per week and an additional two hours to Home Language and First Additional Language teaching of reading. Following the tabling of this model to recover time in Foundation Phase at the Council of Education Ministers, the strategy was approved for adoption nationally for 2023 and 2024 (DBE 2023a). The approach was, however, optional in other provinces and not taken up anywhere else.

There were no suggestions for rationalising or reducing the weighting of any subjects in other grades in the 2023/24 ATPs. In summary, there was no sustained strategy for focusing on gateway subjects by modifying or suspending certain subjects during and after the pandemic. This is in contrast to countries such as Chile, Vietnam, Tanzania, and Uganda (among others) that undertook such rationalising of subjects, instituting an abbreviated or “prioritised” curriculum (Alejo, Naguib, and Yao 2023).

## Changes in Assessment and Promotion Rules

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

Across assessment policies and guidelines, a strong emphasis was placed on formative assessment. School-based assessment (SBA)<sup>1</sup> was also given greater emphasis while summative tests and examinations were de-emphasised. Table 1 below shows the changes in the weighting of SBA from 2019 (pre-COVID-19) to 2024. The SBA component of the final mark for promotion purposes was increased in all grades apart from Grade 12 and the Foundation Phase (which remained at 100%). The change in the weighting of SBA must be seen in the light of a known lack of reliability of school-based assessments, thus increasing the lack of reliability in promotion decisions (Van der Berg and Shepherd 2015).<sup>2</sup>

**Table 1:** School-based assessment vs. examination mark contribution to final mark for promotion purposes

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

School-based tests or examinations would carry a reduced weighting and time allocation, and “not all content and aspects of a subject are included with priority given to those aspects considered core for progression into the next grade” (DBE 2020f, para 7.3). “Circular 02 of 2020” (DBE 2020f) and “Circular 01 of 2021” (2021a) also suggested an easing of the moderation processes, devolving these to the school level. Allowance was also made in the centralised assessment management system for flexibility in the number of assessments recorded.<sup>3</sup>

- 1 A clear definition of school-based assessment is difficult to pinpoint in the policy. While the nomenclature makes sense in relation to Grade 12, where the Senior Certificate is an external, national examination, and the rest of the assessment is school-based, all assessment from Grades R to 11 is school-based. What SBA seems to imply is: 1) a greater range of assessment types other than summative examinations (tasks, assignments, projects, investigations, orals); 2) assessments designed, administered, and marked at the school level; 3) less rigorous moderation than tests and examinations; 4) the keeping of complete records of assessments of all subjects by teachers, to be made available for monitoring and moderation purposes. The number of SBA tasks is specified for each subject and level in the CAPS.
- 2 Every year the vast majority of SBA marks in the NSC are excluded from the final mark calculation due to there being more than 15% discrepancy between the final examination mark and the SBA mark (personal comment, former senior DBE bureaucrat).
- 3 The system is the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS). Adjustments to the system included a built-in functionality to address cases where an assessment was



Although the changes at the GET level were significant, the most dramatic assessment changes were at the Grade 10 and 11 levels. In 2020 June examinations were cancelled. The SBA component for promotion increased from 25% to 60%. Controlled tests<sup>4</sup> replaced examinations at the end of the year, set only on content taught (DBE 2020g, para 5e). External moderation of examinations was devolved to the school level and no common examinations or tests were to be administered (DBE 2020g, para 5e). The number of examination papers and the duration of the examinations were also decreased. In this way, the requirements for passing these grades were reduced considerably. In 2023, mid-year examinations were reintroduced for Grades 10 and 11 (DBE 2022b). The SBA contribution in Grades 10 and 11 to a final mark for promotion purposes was adjusted down from 60% to 40%, which is still higher than it was pre-COVID-19 at 25%.

Fewer changes were made at the Grade 12 level. The June 2020 Senior Certificate and National Senior Certificate (“Matric”)<sup>5</sup> examinations were shifted later to November / December in 2020 (DBE 2020h). In the same year, the June examinations were suspended and reinstated in 2023 as controlled tests (which makes sense as they write their preliminary or trial examinations only about two months later). In 2024, June examinations, preliminary examinations, and final examinations at Grade 12 were re-established.

In an attempt to regain some oversight of assessment in 2022, guidelines for the quality assurance and moderation of school-based assessment in the FET Phase were released that outlined in detail five key components of the assessment regime that needed to be evaluated: (a) the school-based assessment system, (b) the assessment task, (c) the administration of the assessment task, (d) the learner evidence, and (e) the assessment feedback. This moderation was to occur at different levels of the system: school, district, province, and national.<sup>6</sup> These guidelines were re-released in 2023 and 2024 in some provinces.

## Promotion Rules

For the GET Phase, it took until November of 2020 for the DBE to release details for the promotion requirements for learners at the end of the very disrupted year (2020i). A mark adjustment of 5% was allowed in a maximum of three subjects to compensate for

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not administered, removing the task from the learner’s SBA, automatically redistributing the weight proportionally to other tasks, and adjusting the promotion mark.

- 4 No clear definitions are provided in documentation distinguishing between controlled tests and examinations. It is implied, however, that examinations cover two full terms’ work whereas controlled tests cover a narrower range of content.
- 5 Directions issued by the DBE in terms of Regulation 4(3) of the Regulations published in terms of section 27(2) of the Disaster Management Act, 2002, as amended (RSA 2002).
- 6 The Department of Basic Education released “Circular E06 of 2022: Guideline on the Quality Assurance of School-Based Assessment (SBA), including Practical Assessment Tasks (PATs) and Language Oral Assessment, for Grades 10–12” (2022c).

possible learning losses. Further, where a learner met all the requirements for promotion from one grade to the next, apart from the minimum level 3 (40%) in Mathematics, the learner was to be condoned in Mathematics. This applied equally to Grade 4 learners up to Grade 9 learners. Thus, up until Grade 10, a learner could not fail a grade on the basis of failing Mathematics but would have to fair very poorly in a number of other subjects as well to fail. Furthermore, failure in Mathematics in Grade 9 did not preclude a learner from choosing the subject in Grade 10: “Grade 9 learners who obtain a condonation in Mathematics with mark of below 30%, (after the condonation has been approved) have the option of continuing with Mathematics in Grade 10. They may also opt to take Mathematical Literacy” (2021a, 2021b, 2). The same condonation dispensation was retained for 2021 (2021a, 2021b) and sustained through 2024. In short, what all these changes meant was that many more learners were progressing to the following grade without having mastered the content of the previous grade. This is particularly serious in a subject such as Mathematics that has a strict sequence of conceptual development. Learners benefitting from the special condonation would likely find they lacked the requisite foundation to progress in that subject, especially in the absence of opportunities for remediation. From 2021 onwards, teachers at the beginning of the year were likely to face many more learners who had significant gaps in their knowledge due to the loss of instructional time and having progressed without sufficiently mastering content from the prior grade.

## Summary

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

Most concerning, however, was the strategy to deal with learning losses in Mathematics. Instituting and retaining the Mathematics condonation was *de facto* admission of defeat in trying to remedy learning losses. The result, however, of so many students who had failed Mathematics being promoted to the next grade simply meant that losses compounded, potentially making teaching the subject increasingly difficult for teachers, especially in the higher grades.

## Remote Learning

Lockdowns brought about a focus on the possibilities of remote learning to ensure curriculum coverage while schools were closed. Most of the initial provincial responses were web-based, either proposing or providing online platforms and virtual classrooms

through zero-rated websites. Later the national department expanded offerings into television and radio. These efforts were piecemeal, uncoordinated, poorly publicised and, for the lower grades especially, unconnected to the curriculum. One of the more prominent initiatives, for example, the television-based Woza Matric that focused on revision for Grade 12s, had no coverage of high enrolment subjects such as Mathematical Literacy and English First Additional Language, and offerings across subjects were in English only. Subscription numbers to the various channels were extremely low (Spaull 2022), and there was no evidence to suggest that any of the initiatives were effective. Part of the reason for this is found in the General Household Survey (StatsSA 2018), which indicates that only 9% of households with children have a household internet connection (Spaull 2022, 10). Wills and Van der Berg (2022) also show the limitations of remote learning using StatsSA data, where nationally just 11% of youth aged 5–24 in educational institutions participated in remote learning in 2020 (StatsSA 2022, 10). Taking “race” as a proxy for social advantage, StatsSA (2022, 12) shows that at least 36% of Indian/Asian and white youth (aged 5–24 in educational institutions) accessed remote learning in 2022 compared to 9% of black African youth.

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

In the case of self-directed learning, the learning material is prepared in such a manner that learners are able to progress from the known to the unknown on their own (or with minimal supervision), given the clear exposition and illustrated presentation of content; such content must be well scaffolded and mediated through templates and vivid examples. (2020a, 6)

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

## Too Little Too Late?

I argued above that the four curriculum strategies engaged by the DBE were unsuccessful in addressing the large learning losses that students incurred. In May of 2023, just over three years after the first school closures, two initiatives, one provincial, one national, were declared. It was politically important to signal a clear strategy prior to the release of the PIRLS 2021 results, given these were expected to starkly show the

negative impact of COVID-19 on reading outcomes. In the Western Cape, a costed and budgeted plan for a catch-up campaign, “#BackOnTrack”, was launched, with R1,2bn allocated to Grade 4 to Grade 12 tutoring, Saturday classes, holiday camps, training, and resources for parents. In addition, R118 million was allocated to Grades R to 3 for additional learning material. This was the first concerted system-wide strategy (i.e., across all grades) to allocate additional time and resources to catching up curriculum. The programme’s reach in terms of the number of learners enrolled was, however, very limited, and the programme expensive as a result.

Also in 2023, at the national level, the directorate of Teacher Development released Learning Recovery Programme (LRP) guidelines. “The essence of the LRP will be teachers identifying what has not been learned in previous years and planning to ‘catch up’ that learning. This will happen every year and the skill of teachers in using assessment for learning (AfL) is at the heart of the LRP” (DBE 2023b, 3). Like previous strategies, responsibility was devolved to the teacher and senior managers in the school, without additional time or resources for this work. Strategies to address losses, such as “arranging some extra teaching time before or after school” (2023b, 8) were left to the individual teacher. At the same time that this policy devolved curriculum choices to the teacher, assuming the existence of collaborative work and professional learning communities within schools, the tightly framed 2023/2024 ATPs were implemented.

## Discussion

The article has provided an overview of curriculum and assessment policy changes over the period 2020 to 2024. In relation to the national CAPS documents, changes were made in the form of trimming content (2020), identifying “fundamental” knowledge (2020), and reviewing subject content (2022). *Changes to subject curriculum specifications overall were minimal.* The focus was on retaining the curriculum while allowing for flexibility in coverage through weakened controls over moderation, assessment, and promotion requirements. Substantial changes to assessment allowed for flexibility in what was assessed and reduced the requirements for promotion to the following grade. Targeting of core or gateway subjects was minimal. Remote learning opportunities were limited given learners’ lack of access to web-based offerings and the poor and patchy quality of other mediums.

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

2023/2024 ATPs is likely a strengthened curriculum, having undergone a number of reviews based on clear and appropriate principles (notably coherence).

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

The second weakness in the policy response was the absence of attempts to provide opportunities for catch-up. Early in the pandemic, there were clear messages around the need to act quickly (Iqbal et al. 2020), as the opportunity gap for learning would grow as time went on (Mundy and Hares 2020), with compounded learning losses for the most educationally disadvantaged. Addressing foundational learning especially was emphasised in the emerging research literature where the biggest losses were identified (Mundy and Hares 2020). Key to curriculum catch-up was finding additional time, either by extending available instructional time, prioritising certain (gateway) subjects or running accelerated programmes of learning (see, for example, Friedlander et al. 2017).

The only references to accelerated learning in the South African COVID-19 policy were two early ideas in the School Recovery Plan (DBE 2020a). One was to lengthen the school day in order to recover lost instructional time. The other referred to accelerated learning and accelerated education programmes, “which expose learners to intensive learning programmes that focus on core skills, values and knowledge” (2020a, 12). Neither of these proposals were taken up again in any other policy proposals, although private providers were contracted to run “matric camps” in certain provinces at the end of 2020 (Govender 2020). Crucially, *no budget was allocated for any curriculum catch-up programme* until the Western Cape’s #BackonTrack campaign, in May 2023, which was relevant only to this province. Prioritising core subjects was an option briefly proposed in the Foundation and Senior Phase in 2020, and has recently become policy in the Western Cape province in relation to the shortening of Life Orientation in favour of Mathematics and Language teaching in the Foundation Phase. Thus far, in practice,

the sum total of hours accrued to address learning losses through policy has been an additional three hours per week in the Foundation Phase for one province.

Reviewing the announcements and plans of the Department of Basic Education, as well as DBE reports to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group, there have been and are still no national, funded plans for catching up learning losses (Spaull 2022, 10). This was the case up until the most recent meetings and reports in 2024. No money was allocated in the Medium-Term Budget Policy Statement and the DBE's budget for plans to catch up the lost time and learning from 2020 to 2024. Only towards the middle of 2022 was there some consolidation of the curriculum revisions made in 2020 to provide clarity on future curriculum expectations in the ATPs, and these largely followed the pre-COVID curriculum with almost no attention to learning loss and remediation strategies. Responsibility for catch-up was devolved to the school, and although some baseline tests were provided for use by teachers, they were given scant support in how to use them, especially where learning losses straddled different grades (and teachers) and phases (at times different schools). In the Western Cape province, following persistent calls to focus on foundation literacy and numeracy and provide learners with additional text (for example, Hoadley 2020b), Foundation Phase learners received an additional reading anthology in 2023.

How would this lack of attention to learning losses impact the system? To keep the whole schooling system functioning, a certain level of progression is necessary to make sure space is opened up for new entrants. Given learning backlogs and a failure to address them, the primary strategy was to relax promotion requirements. These lenient promotion requirements were retained through 2024 and into 2025, notably in the one subject that is likely to show up learning gaps most clearly: Mathematics.

## Conclusion

There are many possible reasons for the DBE's inaction regarding learning losses and proposals for remediation and acceleration. The period in question has been one of a great deal of instability and unpredictability, especially during the period of school closures. Curriculum planning under these conditions is extremely difficult. But once it was clear that there had been significant loss of instructional time, and learning, the inertia persisted. One reason could be a lack of capacity within the DBE (Gustafsson and Taylor 2022), the lack of political will to allocate or redirect budget towards catch-up plans or opposition from the teacher unions to curriculum changes. There were no existing repair mechanisms within the system to deal with learning backlogs pre-COVID-19 that might have been leveraged in the pandemic. At the time, the DBE persisted with existing curriculum priorities (with project plans and budgets), taking up time and resources that could have been allocated to remediation.<sup>7</sup> Some of these were

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7 A number of these priorities pertained to vocationally oriented plans, some related to the Fourth Industrial Revolution. In 2021, three new subjects, Kiswahili, Entrepreneurship and Coding, and Robotics, were trialled in Grades R to 9. Coding and Robotics was officially added to the school

inappropriate given the state of the system, which was reeling from effects of the pandemic.

In the period under review, the DBE made only two statements about COVID-19 to parliament. One claimed benefits to its remote solutions, “via broadcasting (TV and radio) and online platforms; as well as, virtual classrooms” (Parliamentary Monitoring Group [PMG] 2021):

Benefits of the programme are an interactive online education platform for educators and learners leading to effective and efficient teaching and learning; it is accessible to teachers and learners anywhere and anytime using different web-enabled devices; it equips learners with 21st century skills for the workplace; and supports the emergence of a new type of school. (PMG 2021)<sup>8</sup>

The statement represents either wilful or real ignorance of the broader social and educational system and the reality of (most) learners’ experience of schooling in poor communities. Nationally, only 22% of households have a computer and 10% an internet connection. In North West and Limpopo provinces, only 3.6% and 1.6%, respectively, have access to the internet at home (Amnesty International 2021).

The second statement was from the Deputy Minister of Education on the department’s 2022/2023 performance in the National Senior Certificate school-leaving certificate’s improvements on 22 March 2023, arguing “[e]xperts say that the improvement seen in the NSC from 2020 to 2022 is due to the help in trimming the curriculum content to rather focus on the fundamentals of learning. The trimmed curriculum has helped DBE focus on the depth of the curriculum rather than the width” (Mweli cited in PMG 2023). The statement is disingenuous in its reference to unnamed “experts”. Rather, experts argued that the 2022 results should not be taken as a barometer for the education system (Metelerkamp 2023). The improved pass rate was related to a complex number of factors, including a possible lack of response in statistical standardisation procedures given the abnormal increase in numbers of candidates sitting for the examination (Wills, Selkirk, and Kruger 2024). The statement is also disingenuous in tying improvements in the NSC to the COVID-19 curriculum changes given there were no changes to the Grade 12 curriculum.

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curriculum in 2023 in Grades 1, 2, and 3, demanding an hour of instructional time in Grades 1 and 2 and two hours in Grade 3. For Entrepreneurship, Employability and Education (DBE-E3) in 2022 two Senior Phase teachers from every school were to attend a five-week online training course (SACE endorsed) on project-based learning in preparation for implementation in Term 3. The DBE issued a number of statements in public fora regarding the deferral of curriculum decisions to 2025 when they will revise the curriculum in line with a “competency-based framework”. These new initiatives, demanding extensive time, energy, and resources were ongoing while learning losses remained unaddressed.

- 8 Statement made by the Minister and Deputy Minister of Education to the Parliamentary Monitoring Group on 24 August 2021 on the DBE’s 2020/21 performance.

The article argues that in this COVID and post-COVID period the DBE has papered over the cracks of a system unable to deal with the compounding backlogs in learning. These backlogs predated but were exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. When school closures interrupted access to the national feeding scheme for around nine million students who depend on school meals for their daily nutrition in 2020, government delays forced NGOs to go to court to compel the government to resume the National School Nutrition Programme. A similar process was not undertaken in relation to instructional deprivation, compelling government to put in place feasible opportunities for learners to catch up missed time with appropriate remedial plans and learning support resources. Instead, sustained lenient progression rules and greater weighting for SBAs without any large-scale remediation strategies covered up the large-scale progress of learners through schooling who were not achieving the necessary mastery at each grade level. Time will tell what the longer term implications of this will be, especially for the meaning and value of the school-leaving certificate.

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