



## POLICY BRIEF

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

# School Return during the COVID-19 pandemic

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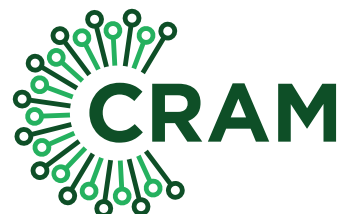
30 September 2020

This policy brief draws from the full paper:

*Mohohlwane, N., Taylor, S. & Shepherd, D. (2020) COVID-19 and basic education: Evaluating the initial impact of the return to schooling*



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



CORONAVIRUS RAPID MOBILE SURVEY 2020

# School Return during the COVID-19 pandemic

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## What did school attendance rates look like after the reopening?

- **School attendance rates during the phased reopening of schools were significantly lower than in normal times** — even amongst grades that were officially “open” at the time of the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 survey (Grades 6, 7, 11 and 12). However, attendance was encouragingly high under the exceptional circumstances — as high as an estimated 88% for grade 12 learners. A significant finding is that amongst learners in “closed” grades, those in the wealthiest 10% of households were 3-times more likely to have attended school than those in the poorest 80% of households.

## If attendance was so high, were parents still worried?

- **72% of NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 respondents reported being “very worried” about learners living in their households returning to school** during the COVID-19 pandemic. The level of concern varies significantly across the socio-economic status of the household (lower concern amongst the more affluent) and child-age profile and composition of the home (higher concern amongst larger households with very young children and pensioners).

## What was the objective health risk of reopening schools?

- **Preparing the school system for an entirely new way of operating under COVID-19 was an enormous logistical exercise, and most schools appear to have complied remarkably well.** However, this exercise has also exposed some of the stubborn inequalities and vulnerabilities in the system, such as unreliable access to water and sanitation.
- **Based on international research and on analysis of reported cases of COVID-19 at South African schools, there is no evidence to suggest that reopening schools contributed to a significant increase in virus spread.** Children, especially young children, appear less likely to contract COVID-19, at particularly low risk of becoming severely ill from it, and are not “super spreaders”, as was initially feared. This is consistent with reports of COVID-19 cases amongst teachers in South African schools, which indicate that teachers are not at greater risk than others in similar professions.

## What should happen now that schools have reopened?

- **The protection of teaching time and the recovery of learning should now be the main priority.** This should not be considered a quick 3-month exercise, but a **long-term endeavour over many years.** Most grades (1-5 and 8-10) have lost up to 40% of schooling days in 2020. Rotational timetabling to ensure social distancing should be carefully optimised to minimise further losses of contact time this year and beyond.
- While ICTs cannot be used as a remediation approach for the sector, efforts such as focusing on core skills, through a trimmed curriculum, targeted remedial support for learners and intensive teacher support may work at scale.

# 1. Attendance rates during phased school reopening

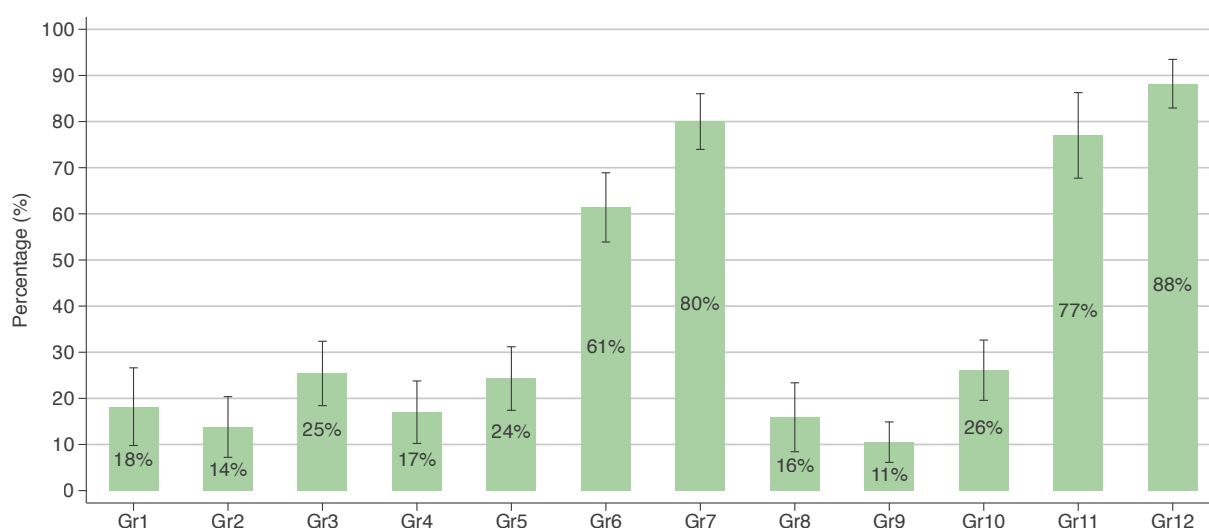
School closures have played a significant role in international responses to reducing the spread of COVID-19. By the start of September 2020, only 46 countries (representing a decline of 76% since April 2020) had COVID-19 school closure. In South Africa, only four grades (6,7, 11 and 12, from this point on referred to as “open” grades) were officially “permitted” to return to school during June and July, although provisions were made for deviations from the phased return based on a school’s ability to comply with COVID-19 guidelines and approvals by the provincial Head of Department. Although the parental choice to not send learners back to school had been acknowledged and permitted, this was only formally gazetted on 2nd August 2020.

Under ordinary circumstances, more than 11.3 million children aged 7-17 attend school every day, and about 2% of learners are absent from school on an average day (General Household Survey (GHS) 2018, StatsSA). Estimates using the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 data collected between the 13th and 30th of July 2020 indicate that 76% of children attending “open” grades had attended school in the previous seven days. This is significantly lower than usual. Figure 1 shows that the highest estimated attendance rate was for grade 12 at 88%, and lowest for grade 6 at 61.4%.

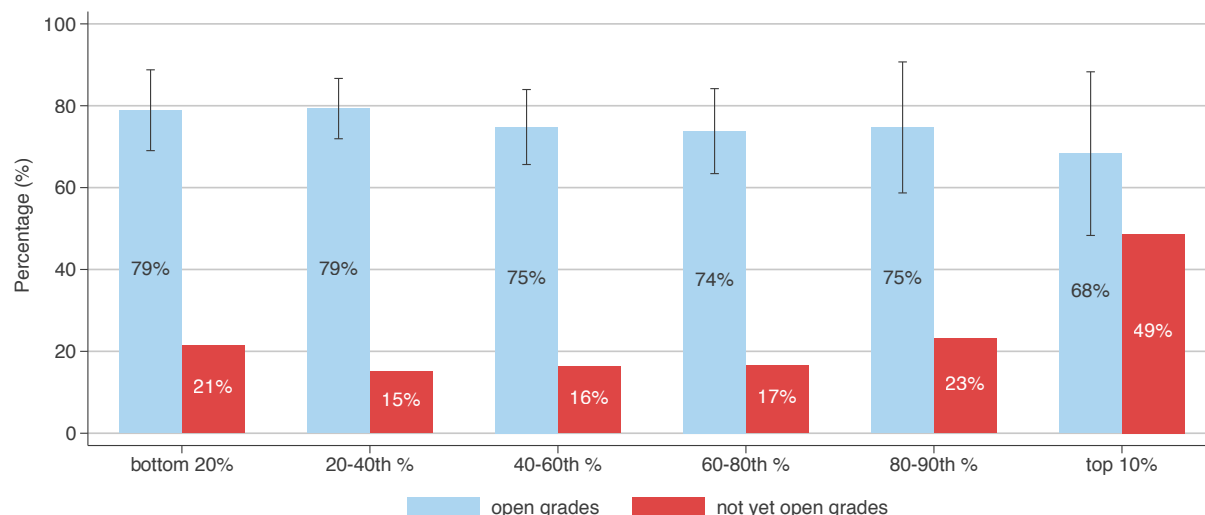
Attendance amongst “closed” grades ranged from an estimated 10.5% (grade 9) to 26.1% (grade 10). On average, 20.6% of “closed” grade learners are estimated to have been attending school in July. School monitoring data collected from a sample of 611 school principals across eight provinces (excluding the Western Cape) between the 1st and the 10th of July indicated an average school absence rate of 17%, and 80% of school principals reported absence rates of 25% and lower.

A relationship between attendance amongst “closed” grades and the socio-economic status of learners’ households emerges from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 data. Figure 2 shows that amongst the bottom 80% of households, attendance rates for learners in “closed” grades ranged between 14% and 19% while it was an estimated 49% for the richest 10% of households. This may be indicative of the relative attendance of private schools and well-resourced public schools amongst this group of households, or school preparedness to receive learners, or “attendance” by means of non-contact online sessions. This has worrying implications for the potential widening of educational inequalities.

**Figure 1: Estimated attendance rates by grade between 13-30 July 2020**



**Figure 2: Estimated attendance rates by SES (per capita household income quintile/decile) in July**

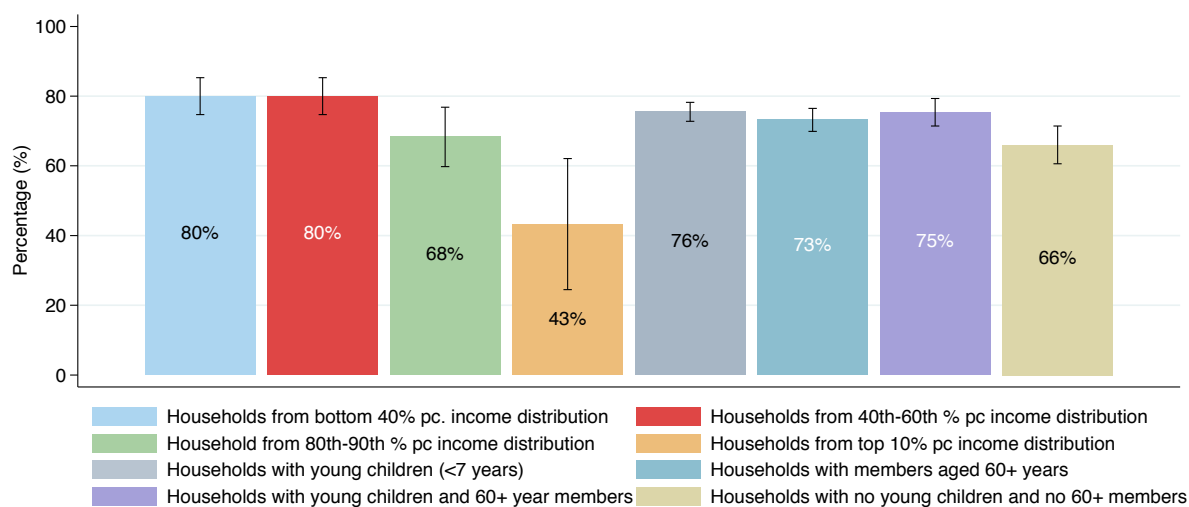


## 2. How worried are adults about learners returning to school?

It is expected that many parents and educators will be reasonably concerned about the partial and large-scale reopening of schools. NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 asked respondents how worried they were about children in their household returning to school during the COVID-19 pandemic. About 72% of adult respondents living with children said they were “very worried” about children returning to school. Interestingly, as shown in Figure 3, there were significantly lower rates of worry amongst more affluent respondents, whilst greater concern was expressed amongst adult members of larger households and households with very young and older residents. The latter of these findings are rather intuitive given that contagion is of particular concern for schools in low-income communities that are often overcrowded and understaffed, as well as amongst households with more vulnerable members (Goldstein, Lipsitch & Cevik, 2020). Reported school attendance rates do not differ significantly between those who report being “very worried” and other respondents — at least amongst children in grades that were already “open”. Even if they are concerned, most parents still decide to send their children to school.

The finding that concern is lower amongst wealthier households is more challenging to explain given that the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 questionnaire did not ask adults to elaborate on the reasons for their concern (or lack thereof). The minimal research on adult and parent perceptions of schooling under the COVID-19 pandemic — largely limited to the United States — has revealed that parents are not only concerned for virus spread (to teachers in particular) but also for the unwillingness/inability of children to comply with mask wearing and social distancing (Flanagan et al, 2020). Questions included in NIDS-CRAM on self-reported perceptions of the risk of getting COVID-19 and whether or not one is able to avoid getting COVID-19 indicate that adults’ concern for learner return is unrelated to perceived risk, but weakly positively related to opinions on avoidance. Some respondents may, therefore, prefer for learners to remain at home because it agrees with a strategy of low risk behaviour that limits exposure. Parents’ concern, therefore, seems to be multidimensional and context dependent.

**Figure 3: Proportion of adult respondents indicating “high concern” with the return of learners to school, by household SES and composition**



### 3. The readiness of schools to reopen and risks to higher Coronavirus transmissions

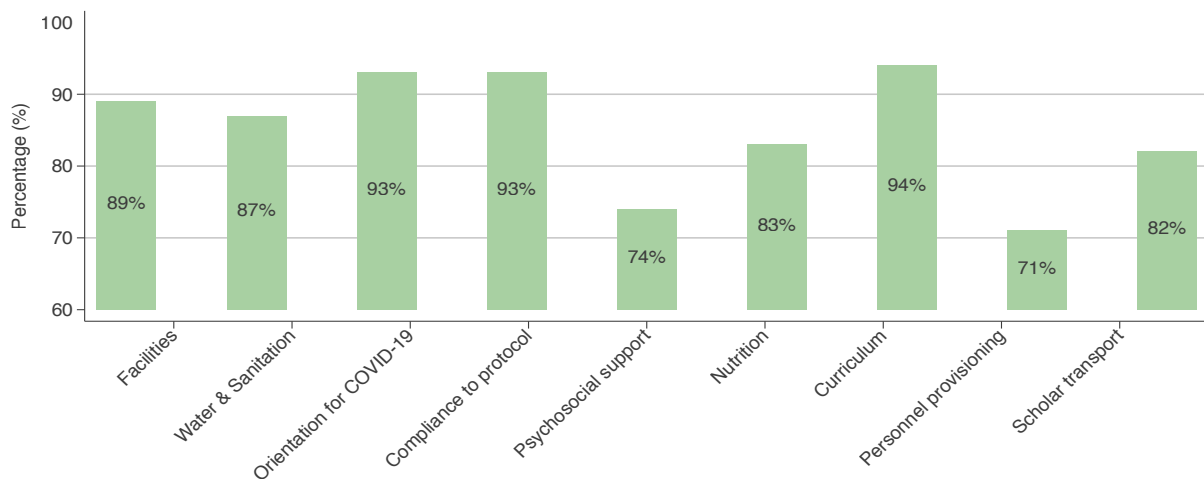
The reopening of schools has been an enormous logistical undertaking that has involved progressive development and publication of a series of plans, guidelines, protocols and interventions. This is not to mention that school orientation to a new way of operating has all taken place in a context of significant fear, uncertainty and opposition to opening schools.

A DBE school monitoring exercise conducted in 611 schools across eight provinces at the beginning of July found that, compared to a similar monitoring exercise conducted a month earlier, levels of readiness were higher in all thematic areas of the tool. The biggest improvements were observed in the areas of curriculum adaptation and orientation to the new protocols. Although this can be regarded as a significant achievement, several inequalities and vulnerabilities in the school system have been exposed. In particular, difficulties around water and sanitation and the urgency to address these: prior to the reopening of schools 3 500 schools were classified as those with water challenges, with 2 175 schools having been supplied with water tanks by 5th July 2020.

The Eastern Cape registered the lowest levels of school readiness in both the June and July school monitoring. It is worth noting that estimates from the NIDS-CRAM Wave 2 data showed attendance to be the lowest in the Eastern Cape at 56.6% and 13.9%, respectively. Conversely, attendance rates amongst all “open” grades in the Free State, the province showing the highest level of readiness, was estimated to be 90% (and 100% for grade 12s). DBE school monitoring also indicated average school readiness to be highest amongst Quintile 5 schools at 94%. Attendance rates might therefore reflect not only the decisions of households to send children to school but also the readiness of the system to have schools open and compliant to the new protocols.

Although school readiness is important to monitor, and attendance rates provide evidence of support for and the effectiveness of school opening, what really matters is the extent to which the opening of schools has contributed to an unacceptable spread of COVID-19 infections. The limited South African data relevant to this question seems consistent with international evidence that (1) children are less likely to become infected with COVID-19 than adults and (2) children are very unlikely to become seriously ill from COVID-19 (Munro and Roland, 2020). Thirdly, although further analysis is required, children are usually not the ones who spread COVID-19 to adults in schools and homes (Munro and Faust, 2020). Finally, school openings (closures) have not significantly contributed to (mitigated) the spread of COVID-19 (European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control, 2020).

**Figure 4: Average levels of school readiness by thematic area in early July**



Since the reopening of grades 7 and 12 on 8 June 2020, less than 4% of South Africa's 25 762 schools had to be closed and reopened due either to COVID-19 cases or non-compliance with COVID-19 protocols. It was further reported by Minister Motshekga that less than 1% of teachers in the country, and less than 0.01% of learners, had confirmed cases of COVID-19 infections. The work of Gustafsson and Chanee (2020) indicates that of Gauteng schools reporting positive COVID-19 cases, roughly 8% report both teacher and learner cases. Information from the Western Cape and Gauteng — both with particularly high infection rates in July — indicated more reported cases amongst teachers than amongst learners, despite the fact that there were significantly more learners attending school than learners, and infection rates amongst teachers were not significantly higher than workers of a similar age. Additionally, cases rarely exceed one or two per school, which means that schools can adopt a strategy of temporary closure to prevent further spread as confirmed cases are identified.

#### 4. Policy options: What can policymakers do about this?

- **Now that schools are open, they should remain open:** In light of the low health risk posed by school openings and the high risks posed by school closures, it is crucial that schools now remain open and that access to nutrition and learning be given the highest priority.
- **Minimise further losses in teaching time through timetabling:** Both the official regulations that get developed and the specific solutions implemented by schools should strive to minimize the losses in contact time for children. More lenient regulations and solutions (i.e. more teaching time) may be appropriate for younger children (Foundation Phase) where the risk of contracting and spreading COVID-19 is especially low.
- **Strengthen communication to parents:** The high levels of anxiety observed amongst parents, may imply that most parents are not yet aware of the low risk that COVID-19 poses to children. This message needs to be foregrounded in government communications, whilst still emphasizing the need for adherence to new hygiene protocols at school. The evidence and rationale for decisions need to be clear and detailed, yet also accessible to multiple audiences.

For further information please see [cramsurvey.org](https://cramsurvey.org)