

The COVID-19 pandemic, enrolments, dropping out and attendance explained¹

8 March 2022

This short report provides a simplified account of what we know about the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on **enrolments**, **dropping out** and **attendance**. In part, this account is aimed at addressing confusion caused by the fact that different data have pointed in different directions. The account is a simplified one – references to reports with the background details are provided. As explained below, there is more certainty around some statistics than around others, and further analysis is needed where there is significant uncertainty.

Recent developments should be viewed against the situation immediately before the pandemic. In the years immediately before the pandemic, there were around 13 million learners in the entire ordinary schooling system. This includes all grades R to 12 learners in public and independent schools, but excludes around 120 000 learners in special schools, who are in general accounted for in a different manner. Of the 13 million, around 600 000 were in independent schools.

Just before the pandemic, **around one million young South Africans were entering the schooling system each year, and one million leaving**, meaning that total enrolments remained roughly at the 13 million level. Figure 1 shows that of the one million entering each year before the pandemic, around 730 000 were entering Grade R, with the remainder entering straight into Grade 1, mostly because they would have done Grade R outside a school. Figure 1 also shows that before the pandemic, around 420,000 of the one million leaving would leave with the National Senior Certificate, 30,000 would leave without the NSC but obtain it soon after leaving², for instance as a part-time examination candidate, around 95,000 would leave with just the statement of results (SoR) from the examination, and around 450,000 would leave before reaching Grade 12.

The sum of ‘Leaving before Grade 12’ and ‘Leaving with just SoR’ in the pre-pandemic period comes to 55% of all leavers. At face value, this implies only 45% of *every age cohort among the youth population* obtained the NSC in Grade 12 or very soon thereafter. However, **Stats SA household data point to around 57% of youths eventually obtaining some qualification at the Grade 12 level**, though this may take some years. A qualification ‘at the Grade 12 level’ would include certain qualifications obtained from TVET³ colleges. Thus, TVET colleges make some difference, and some youths obtain the Amended Senior Certificate, for instance at a community centre, some years after leaving school. Moreover, the 45% figure would be an *under-estimate* given that currently every age cohort around age 18 appears to be below one million, though how much below one million is not completely clear⁴.

It is sometimes claimed that the fact that almost half of youths do *not* obtain a qualification at the Grade 12 level is something that government does not report on. This is not the case. The annual reports on the National Senior Certificate are very clear about these statistics, and

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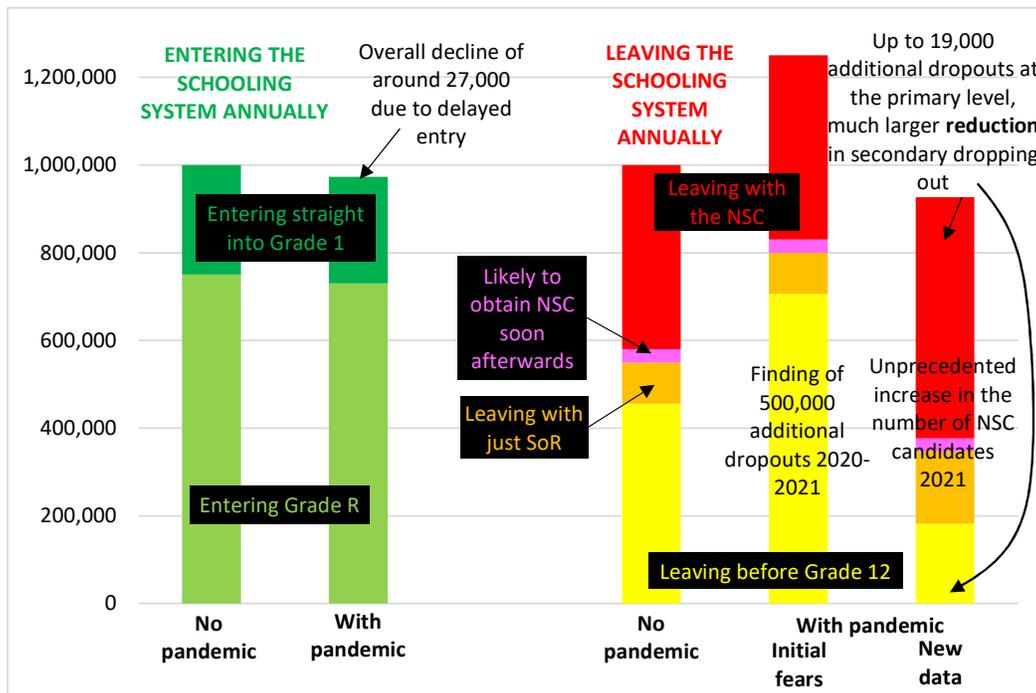
² See *A comprehensive view of full- and part-time NSC candidates* (2 January 2019, available online). Also an updated version of this, dated 21 February 2019, not published.

³ Technical and vocational education and training.

⁴ Stats SA mid-year population estimates of 2021 put each age cohort in the age range 15 to 19 at around 980 000, but it is likely that even this is an *over-estimate*. See for instance the 2016 analysis of Department of Basic Education *Report on progress in the schooling sector against key learner performance and attainment indicators* (p. 61).

moreover point out that South Africa’s statistics are not that different from those seen in other middle income countries.

Figure 1: Leaving and entering the system



Turning to the effects of the pandemic, it is important to note that the pandemic coincided with a very significant increase in total enrolments. But as this increase had already begun in 2019, it cannot be solely attributed to the pandemic, though the pandemic may have assisted in maintaining this trend. Figure 2 below shows that **between 2018 and 2021, total enrolments rose by around half a million**, taking the total to around 13.4 million 2021⁵. This change did not occur because the intake in the early grades rose. In fact, as can be seen in Figure 2, the enrolment in grades R and 1 declined slightly. The increase in total enrolment was the result of a lowering of the numbers leaving the system each year.

An influential report released in July 2021⁶, and based on the NIDS-CRAM household data, **suggested that an additional half a million learners had left the schooling system as a result of the pandemic**. This scenario is represented by the ‘Initial fears’ bar in Figure 1 above. There the 500 000 loss has been split across two years, 2020 and 2021, resulting in an exodus of an additional 250,000 learners in each year. The NIDS-CRAM finding resulted in news headlines such as ‘half a million more children out of school’⁷ and ‘as many as 750 000 children have dropped out of school during the pandemic’⁸. Because the NIDS-CRAM data were based on a relatively small sample, there were large margins of error. This explains the

⁵ Source is the DBE’s *School realities* series. The 2020 and 2021 issues only became available in early 2022, so the trends discussed here were not widely known before that point.

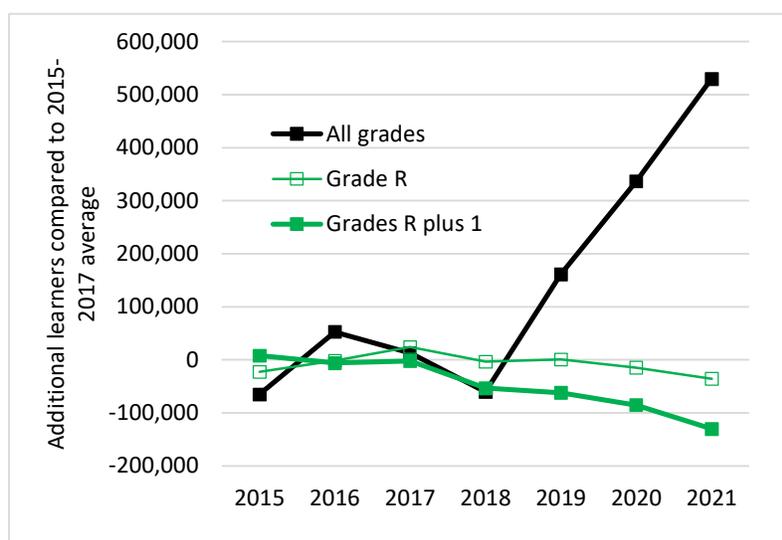
⁶ *The impact of COVID-19 in education - more than a year of disruption*. Dated July 2021. Available online.

⁷ Business Day, 8 July 2021.

⁸ GroundUp, 9 July 2021.

‘as many as 750 000’. Further analysis⁹ of the NIDS-CRAM data pointed to the dropping out being concentrated at the primary level.

Figure 2: Enrolment change over time



Unfortunately, statistics from the education sector’s own administrative systems were slow in coming out. However, when these statistics were produced, they did not support the finding that the pandemic had resulted in an additional half a million drop-outs. Specifically, when enrolment microdata from Term 1 of 2020 were compared to that of Term 1 of 2021, the **conclusion was that there were around 46,000 fewer learners in 2021 than could be expected**¹⁰. The analysis also found that **at the secondary level retention improved considerably**, which would explain the large total enrolment increases discussed above. When Term 1 2021 enrolments were compared to who was attending school in Term 3 of 2021, no decline was found at the primary level, though a decline in Grade 9 of 1.0% was found¹¹. This 1.0% translates to around 10 000 learners. What is not known is whether this is unusual, compared to what was occurring before the pandemic. Dropping out in Grade 9 has historically been an issue, though statistics on this are limited.

Thus, **the pandemic did not appear to have had a massive and negative impact on enrolments, the ‘missing learners’ problem being around one-tenth as large as what the NIDS-CRAM data had suggested**. The abovementioned decline of 46,000 was comprised in part of a loss of 27,000 very young learners, where it was clear that households had delayed entry into grades R and 1. To some extent, such delaying of entry is permitted by the South African Schools Act. A further 19,000 learners, mostly at the primary level, appear to have dropped out between 2020 and 2021. Notes for the columns ‘With pandemic’ and ‘With pandemic – New data’ in Figure 1 explain this.

⁹ See *By how much has school participation declined as a result of the pandemic?*, dated 30 November 2021, in the process of being published online.

¹⁰ See *Impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on school enrolments*, dated 6 October 2021, available online.

¹¹ See *Pandemic-related losses in contact time across seven provinces according to SA-SAMS data*, dated 22 February 2022, in the process of being published online. This comparison of Term 1 enrolments to Term 3 attendance focussed only on grades 3, 6 and 9. The fact that Term 1 enrolments and Term 3 attendance matched each other to a high degree seems to confirm that there was not a widespread and fraudulent inflation of the 2021 Term 1 enrolment figures to maintain enrolments at historical levels. There was a risk of this, given that enrolment data (but not attendance data) are used for staffing and school funding purposes.

Why did the NIDS-CRAM data point to a loss of an additional half a million learners when this did not occur? Analysts involved in the NIDS-CRAM analysis and researchers at the DBE have looked carefully into this. All agree that the NIDS-CRAM data relating to school attendance were in part misleading. A telephonic household survey covering a wide range of topics, and not just education, is far from being an ideal data source for understanding dropping out. It is possible that many adult respondents did not clearly understand the dropping out question. It should be remembered that during the time of the survey, many schools were implementing rotational timetabling. This could have influenced responses.

The **number of NSC candidates for 2021 was unprecedented**, at around 705,000 full-time candidates in just the public examination system¹² – the private systems accounted for around 10,000. This was largely due to pandemic-related changes to rules which allowed more Grade 11 learners in 2020 to be promoted to Grade 12 in 2021. The year 2021 thus saw both an unprecedented number of ‘passes’, and a high number of ‘not achieved’. The implication of this, at least in the short term, is a considerable reduction in the ‘Leaving before Grade 12’ category. The increase in Grade 12 learners implies that the ‘Leaving before Grade 12’ category shrunk, from around 460 000 before the pandemic to perhaps as little as 200 000, though there is considerable uncertainty around this last figure, largely because we do not know yet what 2022 enrolments look like.

The 200 000 figure assumes that the increase in total enrolments slowed down a bit between 2021 and 2022, reaching 100 000 (and not the annual 200 000 seen in previous years – Figure 2). **Declines in the number of leavers, and the inevitable increase in the overall number of learners in the system, can obviously not go on forever.** There are clear limits to this trend, relating to the capacity of the schooling system, and the ability of learners to reach standards required for promotion into the next grade.

The remarkable thing is that **the pandemic may have pushed the system onto a new level at which far more youths obtain the NSC for many years into the future.** However, this depends on how promotion policies are managed. Importantly, the exact reasons for the large increase in NSCs in 2021 is not fully understood yet. Part of the explanation lies in policy shifts, and part in how schools and youths reacted to these in the context of the pandemic. Further analysis is required.

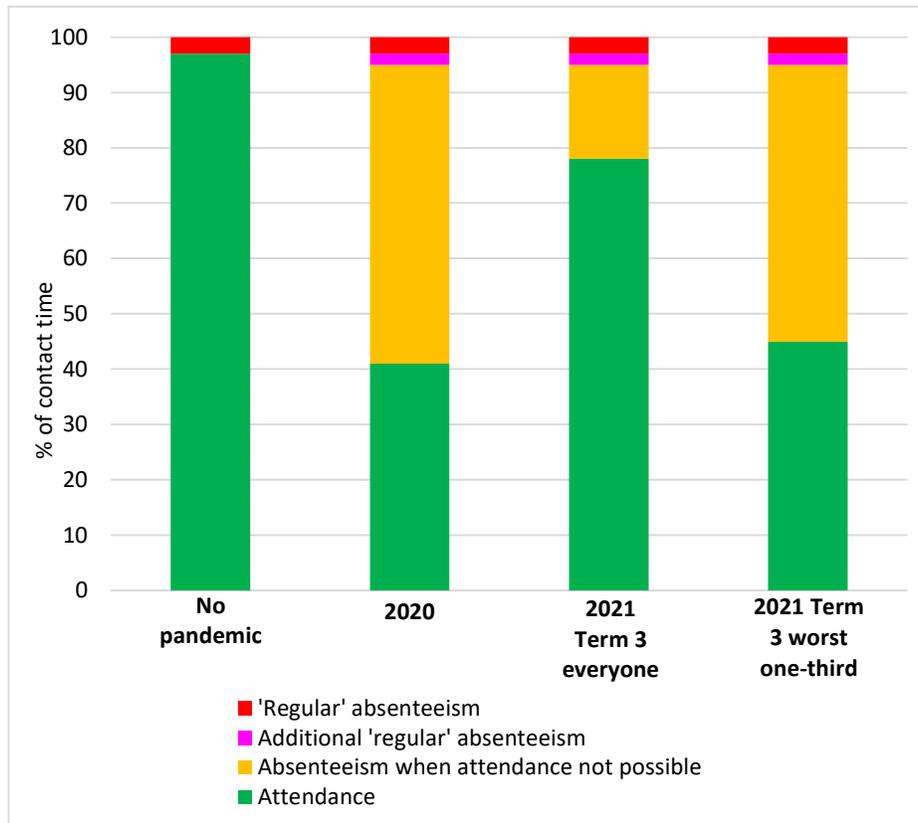
The above discussion is about learners *in* the system, which means they attended at least some of the time. **A related but separate matter is how frequently learners were attending.** Learners lost a large amount of contact time during the pandemic as attendance became impossible, either because of system-wide closures or the introduction of rotational timetables to reduce class sizes, and as households suffered financial and health-related traumas.

Figure 3 illustrates what is known about attendance. Before the pandemic, around 3% of contact time would be lost on average due to ‘regular’ absenteeism, often caused by learner illness. During the pandemic, this rose to 5%: on days when learners could attend, attendance was lower than in the past¹³. In addition, much attendance was lost when attendance was not possible. In the 2020 school year, 54% of contact time was lost due to changes to the school calendar. This is an average for all learners. Official closures worked differently for different grades. This would put **average attendance at 41% in 2020.**

¹² 2021 National Senior Certificate examination report, available online.

¹³ This 5% under-states the magnitude of the problem as this is 5% of *all* pre-pandemic school days. If 54% of contact time was lost due to closures and rotations, then the 5% means that regular absenteeism was 11% *on those days when attendance was possible.*

Figure 3: Declines in attendance during the pandemic



For Term 3 of 2021, there is detailed analysis¹⁴ of attendance data pointing to rotations causing an average loss in contact time of 17%. This leaves **an attendance rate of 78% during this term**. However, rotations were concentrated in certain schools. For the approximately one-third of schools implementing rotations, attendance was as low as 45%.

While a large worsening of dropping out appears not to have been a result of the pandemic, despite earlier fears, **learning losses associated with large losses in contact time are currently a major challenge** the schooling system must deal with. This is not damage that can be rectified in just one or two years. Concerted efforts over many years are needed.

¹⁴ See footnote 11.