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BASIC EDUCATION DEPARTMENT CONCERNED AT LEVEL OF LEARNING LOSSES SUFFERED DUE TO COVID-19

The Department of Basic Education is concerned about the learning losses the sector has incurred particularly since the pandemic began last year.

The closures of schools and the disruptions to teaching and learning have resulted in the reversal of gains made in the last 20 years.

Lost school days leads to foregone learning (learning losses) – recent from around the world even before the pandemic has clearly demonstrated this. International experiences of these kinds of losses in learning due to disruptions caused by things like natural disasters shows us that the children who are affected often end up obtaining lower overall educational outcomes and ultimately lower lifetime earnings as a result.

“We have now begun to measure COVID-19 related learning losses in South Africa by comparing how much children learned in 2020 with how much they learned in a normal school year before that. These measures indicate that between 50% and 75% of a normal year’s worth of learning was lost during 2020,” said Dr Stephen Taylor, Director for Research at the Department of Basic Education.

The delay in the start of the academic year in 2021 and the extended absence of learners from school would have a long lasting negative impact on society in general and not only for the education sector.

“Although we only have this information for certain grades and learning areas (such as reading), it is likely that learners across grades and subjects would have been similarly affected,” Dr Taylor said.

The sector lost a week in the extended winter school holiday resulting in the reduction of the number of school days as initially scheduled in the amended school calendar.

It is also likely that these learning losses would have been greater in poorer communities, where children have less access to effective remote learning opportunities and home support.

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The impact on early learning for children attending ECD centres is also likely to have been significant since attendance rates at ECD centres have also dropped considerably since the pandemic.

There is now evidence from the NIDS-CRAM survey that more school-aged children are not attending school than usual; it is not yet clear whether this is temporary non-attendance or will become permanent (dropout).

In the long run, the learning losses in primary school may lead to an increase in dropout when these children reach grades 10, 11 and 12. It is at this point when learners with weak learning foundations begin to drop out in larger numbers. This creates an urgent need to recover learning that has been lost.

The first step towards addressing the crisis of lost learning, is to prevent further disruptions to school time and therefore prevent further learning losses.

Children remain at low risk to COVID-19, and the department's efforts to introduce comprehensive safety protocols in schools and to vaccinate teachers have now created the possibility to keep schools open and return to everyday attendance. The second step, which will take some time, will be to introduce measures to catch up what was lost.

The Department urges all stakeholders in the sector to support efforts aimed at ensuring that education continues without any further delays or disruptions.

ISSUED BY THE DEPARTMENT OF BASIC EDUCATION

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