



## Schools as nodes of care and support

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## Current schooling context



- The **rotational system** disrupted teachers' ability to complete the curriculum, negatively affecting learners' mastery of core skills and content knowledge, particularly in the younger grades where children learn foundational concepts.
- Learner **absenteeism**, particularly in the youngest grades, is a key factor driving **learning losses** – with learners in historically disadvantaged schools learners losing 50% - 75% of contact time.
- **School dropout tripped during the pandemic** with an estimated 750 000 children dropping out of school
- Despite **Matrics** continuing to attend classes in full, grade 12 learners from low SES schools are estimated to have lost around 35% of contact time.
- **Online learning** during the pandemic amplified socioeconomic divisions. While 90% of South African households have access to a mobile phone, only 60% can access the internet via their mobile phone.
- Over 2000 or 0.6% of **teachers lost** their lives between March 2020 and late May 2021.
- It is predicted that learners will be **an entire year of learning behind** their pre-pandemic peers.

*COVID-19 has amplified the deep inequalities in South African schooling – as in all other sectors.*

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## Beyond the curriculum

Schools are more than places of learning:

- Provide access to health care and nutrition (through the Integrated School Health Programme (ISHP) and National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP))
- Hubs of social interaction and play
- Provide structure, routine and predictability.
- Through daily interaction with others, children learn relational dynamics and socialisation.

*Schools are extremely important spaces that help build a child's social & emotional development and play a key role in identity formation and self-regulation.*

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## Beyond the curriculum: Impact of COVID-19

- In many schools silence is conflated with coping, with the result that children and adolescents are becoming increasingly disconnected from themselves, their peers and their teachers. This often leads to avoidant, aggressive and/or high risk behaviour.
- Even before the pandemic it was estimated that one in three people would be affected by mental health illness in their lifetime. Typically, these issues manifest in poor academic performance, **with the schooling system mostly unable** (not necessarily unwilling) to help youngsters address underlying issues of depression and anxiety.
- Research in countries across the world during and after large-scale situational crises has shown that in schools that encouraged **immediate adult-led discussion** of the crisis, children had measurably better signs of behavioural health than those in schools that avoided adult-led discussion.
- The health of a child influences the extent to which they can fully attain their personal and educational potential.
- The threats posed by the COVID-19 pandemic to both the health and education of school-going youth are likely to have devastating long-term impact on children and our broader society.

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## Schools as nodes of support

- The role of the school & educator becomes more critical in the context of **fragile family systems**, in creating opportunities for children to feel safe and secure.
- Given the absence of psychosocial support for the majority of young South Africans, the **school becomes critical in mainstreaming and promoting mental health**, particularly during periods of adversity
- Teachers need to have a **basic understanding of mental illness** in order to grasp how trauma affects self-esteem, behaviour and interpersonal relationships. We need to move away from the stigma and ignorance of trauma, towards normalising children's experiences associated with mental illness.
- Creating **emotionally safe spaces**: children need to learn the language of self-expression and be taught the skills of emotional literacy.

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## Psycho-social support and teacher wellbeing

- Build the capacity of teachers to support learners who are struggling with emotional and psychosocial issues.
- Provide psychosocial support for teachers who are experiencing their own emotional distress.
- Strengthen & centralise the role of School-Based Support Teams within these collaborations (referrals).
- Strengthen partnerships between schools, universities, districts.
- Sharpen referral pathways between schools, districts & NGOs.
- Introduce interactive activities that encourage expression through writing, speaking & drawing; visual aids; child centered YouTube clips.

*This is in line with one of the key recommendations of the Basic Education Sector Lekgotla: 26 – 28 January 2022*

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