

# Addressing Learning Backlogs through Collaboration

*A synthesis report by Reos Partners*

*Submitted: 25 January 2022*



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## 1. Introduction

### 1.1 Preamble (a note from the Zenex Foundation)

Learning backlogs have been a part of the Zenex Foundation Strategy for at least 10 years and continue to be a theme for the current strategy period. Initially, Zenex worked in the Further Education and Training (FET) phase with programmes such as the [Mathematics, Science & English High Schools Project](#), and [Post-school Bridging Project](#). Through intervening in backlogs, Zenex has learnt a lot and continues to build on this knowledge. In the current strategy, Zenex focuses on backlogs in the early grades and at the senior phase based on evidence that these are critical stages to proactively deal with the problem. Zenex is currently supporting a [Senior Phase Mathematics Backlogs Pilot Project](#) focusing on Mathematics in grades 8/9, a project to Address Mathematics Backlogs in Grade 3, and a [Foundation Phase Curriculum Recovery Project](#). We have also commissioned a series of articles on learning backlogs, aimed to; raise awareness of the problem, provoke debate, and to develop appropriate and effective solutions. The series of papers tackles learning backlog issues through Mathematics and Languages, as the key building blocks for all learning.

Like many of the education stakeholders, Zenex's focus on learning backlogs continues to be a focal point especially in the context of the Covid 19 pandemic. The Covid 19 pandemic presented new challenges globally while simultaneously exposing existing challenges in our systems. The education system is one area where existing and new challenges were presented. Both national and international assessments show that even prior to Covid-19, the performance levels of the South African education system were poor, with learners not meeting grade-level expectations. School closures and the ongoing rotational system exacerbated already existing learning backlogs. Our education system faces many challenges, but we believe that learning backlogs can be addressed with appropriate targeted interventions. The Zenex Foundation has tasked [Reos Partners](#) to engage stakeholders to assess where these interventions might be most effective. This report, synthesised by Reos, is the start to understanding the different perceptions and ideas of key stakeholders.

### 1.2 Executive Summary

The Zenex Foundation has taken on the task of facilitating collaboration with various actors in the education sector in an effort to address the increased challenges that are currently faced by learners in South Africa as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic. According to Zenex, schooling time lost during the pandemic has exacerbated learning backlogs already prevalent in the system. It is their intention to collaborate with other stakeholders working in the education sector and to support education recovery while simultaneously addressing learning backlogs.

The Zenex Foundation, together with the Department of Basic Education (DBE), is seeking to understand and respond to the problem. Given the capacity of the DBE and its role in the education ecosystem, there is an awareness that their perception of learning backlogs at hand plays an integral part in how Zenex will contribute to mitigating this problem. However, there are differences about the framing and nature of the problem and the proposed approaches.

Through this first phase, Reos Partners is supporting Zenex and its stakeholders in the sector, to identify the various perceptions of the problem within this ecosystem. This synthesis report of perceptions is input into an upcoming dialogue on 3 February 2022, aiming to build a broader understanding and improved coordination of stakeholder responses. This process requires learning and listening to the differing views of the problem, and in this more complex understanding, identifying what opportunities might exist to address them. The first phase of this process, which Reos refers to as the sensing phase, consisted of one-on-one in-depth interviews with invited and diverse stakeholders. These interviews were conducted between 9 December 2021 and 11 January 2022. In addition to the interviews we conducted in this time period, we had shorter calls with stakeholders who will attend the workshop, who we were unable to interview prior to this report due to time constraints. Through the interviews conducted, Reos has been able to get a snapshot of the various perspectives of the issue of education backlogs in South Africa. These perspectives are captured in this report through a selection of direct, unattributed quotes, which will detail the range of themes already emerging. In addition, this report includes ideas about how interviewees see the key challenges, opportunities and uncertainties in addressing the issue of learning backlogs.

### 1.3 Stakeholders

When choosing the stakeholders to interview, we ensured to bring together people with extensive experience in education that spanned different sectors that include:

- a. Teaching
- b. Academia/ Research
- c. Non-governmental organisations (NGOs)

- d. Donors
- e. Unions
- f. Government

We interviewed 17 stakeholders with extensive and diverse experience in one or more of the aforementioned sectors. This gave us a variety of perspectives on the topic. The depth of insight, willingness to engage and level of candour across these stakeholders provided invaluable input to contextualizing the conditions and systems within which learning backlogs occur, are maintained and worsen.

## 2. Concerns

The purpose of our inquiry was to understand the stakeholders' concerns, perceptions, questions, existing interventions and hopes regarding learning backlogs as a general issue historically faced in South Africa's education system and with particular attention to the Covid 19 pandemic.

### 2.1 Institutionalized inequality

One theme that stood out from the interviews, is that the system in South Africa has had institutional issues that have existed for many years. The Covid-19 pandemic strongly highlighted these existing inadequacies. The failure to respond to longstanding systemic issues effectively has resulted in inadequate adjustments in addressing the impact of the pandemic on the learning outcomes of learners in the country. A shared sentiment across the different interviews with the stakeholders in the system is that the pandemic has provided the necessary pressure for the system to address the longstanding issues affecting the education system. While this was the overarching sentiment, there are various reports produced which provide important perspectives that also need to be referenced.

Long-standing inequalities prevalent in South Africa have been institutionalized and continue to impact learners. This is evidenced in the gaps between rural and underprivileged schools and the well-resourced privileged schools. The DBE has not had the desired success in addressing issues of accessibility to basic resources such as water, toilets and electricity in communities and schools. Their failure to address these service delivery issues, despite their capacity and resources, has left stakeholders uncertain about their capabilities to effectively address inequality that is faced by learners. Under-resourced schools and learners will continue to fall behind if inequality is not effectively addressed.

*"If you compare a primary school in a suburb to one in a township - the learning is richer than a township school can have - is that a backlog or a loss? It is not going to be made up, so to call it a backlog is muddying the water. You're not going to have the time or resources to catch it up. The fundamentals are a backlog because they have to be made up. This will continue in future, inequality is always going to be there. Our gap is vast and historical and haunting us"*

*"Ongoing rotational learning; More of the same, a narrow view of education system - society needs to be called to their obligation; We don't learn from what we have done before; Reliance on technology as solution to everything whilst we forego the human aspect, even when EQ is the increasingly the lead indicator for success , it is increasingly difficult to achieve this online; Everyone wants to do their own thing and we are all shooting in different directions."*

*"A few private schools had the ability to shift to online learning and very few public schools (Model C), a small percentage of them were successful. No one knew this modality and there were mistakes made and lessons learned. Most schools had to grind to a halt."*

The pandemic has highlighted why more needs to be done to address inequalities which influence the gaps between learners across the country. The move towards online learning and rotational school attendance left behind many who are underprivileged and without access to resources. This emphasised the need for accessible learning outside of the classroom.

In addition, conducting online learning or learning at home requires strong support systems for the learners. Given the magnitude of Covid 19 related hospitalizations and deaths, the underprivileged learners also faced instability in their homes, possibly losing parents and caregivers who would have been instrumental in providing the support to learn at home.

*"What have we done to address the death all around them? They know so many more people."*

These factors show that a lot needs to be considered when attempting to address learning losses and backlogs and interventions that are created to support students. For stakeholders working in smaller communities and at grassroots level, they have more contact which allows them to see the significant disparities that learners face. These stakeholders have a role to play with the rest of the system to ensure there are interventions that address these circumstances.

### 2.2 Covid 19 impact

The initial knowledge around the Covid 19 virus and how it spread, influenced mass closures and restrictions on movements across the globe. In South Africa, this influenced a national shutdown and very strict restrictions on the movement of people regionally, nationally and internationally. To mitigate the spread of the virus, in person interactions had to be minimized. The immediate

response was for schools to be closed across all levels of education. President Cyril Ramaphosa announced that schools would be closed on 18 March 2020 until 14 April 2020 however, schools closed for longer.

*“The system scrambled because it was caught unawares.”*

*“The system was not equipped to manage the health and safety measures required in public spaces therefore schools had to close down.”*

The closure of schools was followed by months of introducing virtual learning and other contingencies that included rotational school attendance in developing months. The impact of Covid 19 has a significant impact in shaping the education system’s approach to learning losses and backlogs.

*“There is contention about the definition of terminology to identify the problems faced in the system. The little literature that has emerged on this aspect of the impact of Covid on the education sector, shows that there are increased problems in the system as a result of the pandemic. It exasperated existing problems that the system had been trying to address.”*

*“Backlogs have not been addressed properly for 2 years due to Covid.”*

What the pandemic has done is highlight the importance of addressing the issues that have been prevalent in the education sector for many years. For some stakeholders, they look at Covid 19 as an opportunity to force the sector to work more intentionally towards addressing the issues affecting learners. Their perspective is that Covid 19 has given us opportunities to see what is and is not working regarding the ongoing interventions that pre-date the pandemic. The issue of learners falling behind has been prevalent in the country however, now there is a growing need to find effective ways to address this and meet the needs of learners who require assistance to meet their learning needs and grade targets.

*“The devastation of the number of dropouts during Covid, learners are losing school fitness in the same way we lose work fitness. School fitness requires daily engagement with the brain. How do we keep brain fitness alive?”*

*“Covid had an enormous impact, some subjects which are content based, I am not as concerned about. English is more of a skill-based subject - reading, writing, speaking. There has definitely been a growth in the tail during Covid. The mean of 60% in public schools has definitely fallen. Reading comprehension skills have dropped and this has been addressed by shifting assessment standards to an expected average”*

*“The grades where foundational skills (Grade 8 and Grade 10 especially, which are important at a high school level) have significantly been impacted [by Covid].”*

## **2.3 Collaboration in the education system**

### **2.3.1 Collaboration with government**

The discussion around the disparate framing of what learning backlogs are, highlighted that there are varying perceptions about the relationship between stakeholders and the DBE. The shared sentiment is that there needs to be better coordination amongst the various stakeholders. Some believe that the DBE has an impossible task of catering to the diverse needs of an entire ecosystem, while others believe that with courageous leadership, transparent decision making and genuine collaboration with a host of experts- the DBE could begin to tackle this challenge more effectively.

*“A coordinated effort is needed - this organisation is doing this; the other is doing that. There are 14 million students in the system and I’m not sure if we are pulling them in different directions. 68% of these are in no-fee schools. We call them the “covid generation”.*

*“It is difficult to coordinate people, not everyone will agree on the theories, science, my philosophy is to work with the willing. Don't come up with problems, what is a solution? Don't spend time on problem-oriented people. Sure, we differ but how can we bring our own bits and pieces together?”*

*“There is currently “no education”, context is province dependent, nothing can help because it will just scratch the surface: The system is too big and bureaucratic, and differences become formalized. Empire building supersedes real change...The process takes too long, provincial agreements don't happen at district level, we need to learn how to work with departments”*

### **2.3.2 Collaboration between stakeholders**

As mentioned, one main concern that came out of the different interviews we conducted was the lack of collaboration between the various stakeholders in the education sector. While all existing organisations and government departments are making their own efforts to address the various issues affecting the sector, there is no shared understanding about the nature of the problems they are

trying to address and there is no shared vision. This is a major concern that many hold regarding how to address the learning backlogs faced by learners. The prevalence of the concern shows that it is imperative for investment to be made towards creating more collaboration and alignment within the system.

## 2.4 Mistrust in the system

One of the factors that is hindering the collaborative efforts in the education sector is that there is mistrust in the system towards the DBE. This is one of the major concerns that also came out of the interviews we conducted. The mistrust lies in the perception that the Department is not decisive and has not taken on the leadership role to address the issues affecting learners in South Africa. There are also heightened concerns that the DBE and other bigger and more well-resourced stakeholders will exclude the more grassroots organisations working in communities to address the problems faced by learners.

*“Personal agendas and personality clashes result in lack of progress “don’t touch my kingdom”, particularly since changes in mathematics impact other subjects.”*

## 2.5 Need for government leadership

### 2.5.1 Government and leadership

There are present tensions in the system that reflect that there has been a breakdown in trust and communication between the government and other ecosystem stakeholders. There was also an overwhelming desire and energy for collaboration with the government, be it from sharing expertise, research, resources to data.

*“The DBE has to lead in that respect, we are not doing enough to advocate for the call, we have started to bring different players and work intimately with them. These include teacher development, curriculum and assessment. The recovery plan will be a product of these 3 sectors within broader education. The next step would be broader research within the community that is not working intimately with the DBE. We can use this as a framework for further advice and recommendations. Is it easy? I don’t know. Some institutions prefer to be slightly on the outside for whatever reason. So we are convincing people to come on board, the DBE is open and concerned about learning loss and recovery. People should approach the DBE.”*

*“We need a concerted effort to lobby the Department of Basic Education, they need to be held accountable for their ‘business as usual stance’”*

*“The Department can’t provide the basics like space, infrastructure and water so how will they face a large, systemic issue like this?”*

*“Our union always has a disjuncture with the Department, we are not cosy. We are affable and try to be on the same side but there is always disagreement because teachers would know better.”*

This mistrust also has some stakeholders questioning their capabilities to address the learning backlogs. The Department’s failures to address longstanding infrastructural issues that predate the Covid 19, means that there is less confidence about their ability to effectively address learning backlogs.

Some stakeholders believe that more efforts should be made by non-government stakeholders to collaborate with the DBE on their existing interventions. In one of the interviews, the sentiment that the Department is open and willing to work with stakeholders in the system was emphasised.

*“Energy and support has to be centred around the DBE’s recovery plan and its 5 pillars. We need to consolidate a roadmap that can be agreed to by the sector, unions, provincial government, researchers who can then feed in to and support the learning plan; rather than the individual research institutions providing their take about what does help: if Stellenbosch comes with something, then UCT or JET with another approach. People are not working with DBE, there are isolated pockets who go to the media and cause a media frenzy on their perspective on learning loss”*

Some stakeholders were unsure about the contribution of this report to efforts in the system. It was indicated that in previous years research and reports have not led to any constructive changes. Furthermore, the DBE’s own internal issues seem to be influencing their ability to address the learning crisis in the country.

*“Who is going to read this report? We need to put energy and pressure into the system to respond. The Department is just making political manoeuvres. I can’t tell you how many reports have been written which have a balanced view of their work. “*

*“Personality clashes in the Department of Education are concerning”*

The DBE is largely perceived to have been silent on the issue of backlogs. Stakeholders are keen to engage them on the issues and work together, however they have no insight into what interventions are being discussed or the type of the support the DBE needs or

would welcome. Stakeholders further recognise that without the DBE, some of the interventions that other stakeholders are trying to establish in the sector might be difficult to implement effectively.

*“What is the plan from the Department of Education? There has been no communication and previous plans were ill-suited to address the backlogs?”*

The organisations working at this intersection of civil society and government, have an understanding that some interventions require government sponsorship and leadership. An example of this is the work the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) is doing nationally to provide reading and training materials for teachers, learners and their parents and caregivers. Given the required resources to ensure these materials are distributed effectively nationally, the NECT is working collaboratively with the DBE. However, some stakeholders shared some concerns about NECT’s role which has grown in influence and seems to be doing the work of the DBE.

*“State capture will pass and we will see education capture. There cannot be a shadow Department, doing the role of the Department and afraid to hand back projects to the Department.”*

In some of our interviews, the stakeholders mentioned their impressions about Zenex taking the leading role in coordinating this work. The position of Zenex as a neutral stakeholder was seen as a positive thing in the efforts to address the issue of learning backlogs.

*“Zenex has made a lot of effort to convene, I respect them for that. It is a good idea to have a neutral independent body to do this, then we don’t ask if it’s just Gail’s friends”*

### **2.5.2 Decision-making structures**

In the interviews we conducted, we were also able to ascertain some of the varying perceptions about what factors are driving the situation. Key amongst these was the lack of decisive leadership from the DBE which has exacerbated the situation. The lack of decisiveness around appropriate interventions to address the issues faced by students nationally has led many stakeholders to mistrust the Department. Chief amongst the stakeholders’ concerns was how this strategic instability impacts learners, who often have to face the brunt of the ongoing changes through additional sacrifices to their wellbeing.

*“We have an incoherent strategy which is confusing to students”*

*“Unilaterally cancelling school holidays.”*

*“Expecting children to work until 7pm or on weekends.”*

## **2.6 Varying interpretations of the problem of backlogs**

The contention around terminology of what the current crisis facing the education system is a common theme, with stakeholders operating in different spaces within the education system, which present different perspectives on the areas of priority. Many stakeholders hold the view that a common framing of the issue is critical to addressing it, whilst others believe that it is normal to have differing definitions of systemic issues and that the solution is communicating one’s own definition in each conversation.

*“We need to be clearer on the framing of the problem and what relates to Covid and is general.”*

*“We had internal debates about how to define this as organization.”*

*“I don’t mind what word you use, just be clear on what you mean”*

*“A big mistake in social science is to look for a common language. Much like I discovered when looking at decolonization, everyone has a different perspective. Don’t look for consistent definitions, rather continue to clarify what each stakeholders means”*

Learning backlogs have been defined as the gaps in a learner’s building blocks which prevent them from moving forward in their learning. This includes fundamental literacy, numeracy and cognitive skills. These are general skills that are required across various subjects. An additional definition of backlog states that it is a cumulative impact of various factors on the education system that existed prior to the Covid 19 pandemic and have made catching up in the system difficult, in the last two years. Prior to the pandemic, these backlogs were defined according to the bimodal education system which included physical and virtual/distance learning spaces. In the context of South Africa, this referred to fee vs non-fee-paying schools who received the same number of days of education but produced different outcomes.

*“What we have to catch up is: Junior primary-reading becomes a permanent loss. The ability to read can never be allowed to be a loss, it is fundamental to learning. When you compare it to History - will a child’s life change or will they be robbed of future chances? If not, then it is not important or recoverable. Are pre-Covid backlogs not a loss?”*

*“They are all the same backlogs: Virtual education is racist, there is no real interaction with students because teachers can’t monitor what’s happening, and closing schools was pointless.*”

Learning losses are sometimes seen as the prelude to learning backlogs. According to some of the stakeholders we interviewed, the learning and contact time lost leads to backlogs. Therefore, while seeming like distinct problems, learning losses and backlogs may be related and interconnected. The stakeholders who prefer to use the word ‘losses’ argue that the learners have already lost out on contact time and learning time which impacts their level of skills for the grade they are in. The term loss assumes that this time cannot be accounted for anymore and the ability to make gains or recover this lost time is impossible.

*“It is clear that there is a backlog, this is measured by where people are in the curriculum. This the equivalent of closing the door once the horse has bolted”*

*“Backlogs are the pre-Covid gaps in a learner's building blocks, preventing them from moving forward. These include fundamental maths gaps for high school learners and other historic schooling deficits. Learning loss relates to missed content. Learners lost over 50% of teaching time. The combination of these 2 has led to this crisis.”*

The choice by some stakeholders to use the term ‘backlogs’ is because they believe that the learners that are behind in skills and knowledge which their present grades can still be brought up to speed and adequately catered for to ensure that they catch up with their predicted reading and learning levels. Ultimately, these differing perspectives on terminology are central to how the stakeholders in the system view the problem and the possible interventions to address it.

### **2.6.1 Describing the issue**

Another driving force that is contributing to the uncertainty in the sector is the lack of shared understanding about the jargon to address the problem. There is little literature available that succinctly unpacks and names the learning backlogs issue.

*“There is contention about the definition of terminology to identify the problems faced in the system. The little literature that has emerged on this aspect of the impact of Covid on the education sector, shows that there are increased problems in the system as a result of the pandemic. It exasperated existing problems that the system had been trying to address.”*

*“We need to know the number of backlogs and the extent of it. Teachers can’t make accurate judgements of their learners’ backlogs. There is just a generalized sense of the backlog, snapshots and samples but no universal testing to intervene.”*

*“What are the fundamentals: We need a top-down approach asking what do you need to reach the end? If we do it bottom up, the focus can be completely different and result in a mismatch with the top”*

Therefore, every stakeholder perceives and names the problem in their own way. This means across the system, various stakeholders might be working towards addressing similar issues but because of the shared understanding about the jargon, the opportunities to collaborate and work together are not being utilised effectively.

*“Backlogs are the pre-Covid gaps in a learner's building blocks, preventing them from moving forward. These include fundamental maths gaps for high school learners and other historic schooling deficits. Learning loss relates to missed content. Learners lost over 50% of teaching time. The combination of these 2 has led to this crisis.”*

Additionally, the contention around the jargon has also resulted in there being different ideas about when the backlog started. Knowing when the issue of learners falling behind started would help stakeholders in how they conceptualise interventions. Having a common understanding of when the problem started would mean that the different interventions are impactful to everyone affected by the problems in the system and that no children are left behind.

*“We were screwing up before the pandemic.”*

### **2.7 Expansive curriculum and contact classroom time**

One widely held opinion is that learners in South Africa have always and continue to lose out on valuable contact learning time and as a result, continue to fall behind in their curricula. This emerged as a prevalent issue that has been present in South Africa before the Covid 19 pandemic. It has been a result of various social, economic and psycho-social factors that affect learners and effectively impact their ability to learn and get good grades. A common theme is that learners do not have the requisite skills and knowledge required to access the grade level curriculum and this is cumulative. There is consensus amongst interviewees that is at the heart of the issue, however there is disparity around what can be termed ‘learning losses’ and what can be termed a ‘learning backlog’.

*“Backlogs are the pre-Covid gaps in a learner's building blocks, preventing them from moving forward. These include fundamental maths gaps for high school learners and other historic schooling deficits. Learning loss relates to missed content. Learners lost over 50% of teaching time. The combination of these 2 has led to this crisis.”*



*“Losses are what you would have acquired had there been no disruptive event”*

Learning losses have been defined by most, as days of teaching time lost and thus lost content by learners. The combination of these two losses is what many believe has led to the crises at hand. In the last two years, schools were closed and eventually opened for rotational attendance. Learners are not able to learn at the same rate if they are attending school part-time.

### *2.7.1 Curriculum*

The stakeholders we interviewed shared some concerns about the current curriculum. The current volume of the curriculum is seen as a potential impediment to successful interventions. According to the stakeholders we interviewed, the curriculum is too vast and the system has failed to prioritise what is important to teach in schools.

*“What are the crucial concepts in mathematics and what can be left out as we address the backlogs? In this catastrophic environment we need to know what the bare minimum is.”*

Some believe that the curriculum needs to be transformed to factor in the different skills and interests of learners. For example, the continued emphasis on mathematics underserved students who do not have strong numeracy skills and have interests in more practical vocational subjects.

*“We need the introduction of another maths stream so that we have differentiation between: Literacy, Technical, Math.”*

*“When we have streamed incorrectly my frustration is that a child battles with a bad matric result and decides to go into plumbing then they have to do pure maths for plumbing? Why? The system needs to adjust to the needs, children are not trained properly.”*

The curriculum places greater emphasis on the academic aspect of the Three Stream Model while neglecting vocational and occupational oriented learning. There is concern that if the curriculum is not redesigned to cater to the various needs and interests of learners, we will continue to report on poor performances in schools.

### *2.7.2 Lack of classroom time*

The lack of classroom time in the last two years has raised some concerns within the system. As aforementioned, the immediate response to the pandemic was to close schools followed by a phased reopening and the introduction of rotational school attendance. The loss of classroom time is contributing significantly to exasperating the losses and backlogs faced by learners.

*“What do we need to put in place to bring students back to school? It is so difficult for single parent headed households to hold home learning, they carry the burden and have no resources. Interventions like TV/ Radio /Street activators also work well”*

*“The issue of closure of schools: I think that it was an overreaction but we worked based on what we and the world knew at the time. I am concerned the long term impact, it needs to be addressed immediately”*

*“We need learners back at school everyday”*

*“The biggest challenge is normalising the system- getting kids back in school. The quantity of teaching has dropped because of the rotational approach. 2022-2024 are decisive years that the system can use to bring kids up to speed. We need to actively start working on fixing the system in 2022.”*

*“First fix school and daily attendance of school which is a bigger factor than the backlog debate”*

The loss in contact time in classrooms is a contributing factor to some of the concerns held by the stakeholders in the sector. In the last two years, learners only had an estimated 40% of their time in the classroom. The major concern is that some foundational learning requires students to have face to face contact with their teachers and peers.

*“The grades where foundational skills (Grade 8 and Grade 10 especially, which are important at a high school level) have significantly been impacted [by Covid].”*

*“We need to start in the foundation phase. In KZN, they passed children without reference to their level of understanding, we can't blame a child in a rural area. We have a duty to the child to ensure that learning is accounted for, the people who are making these decisions are not in the same classroom and they frankly don't care. If they cared, they would have taken action. There is going to be a long-term impact from the foundation phase to PHD”*

There needs to be sound interventions to address the amount of classroom time that learners have lost in the last two years as a result of the pandemic. Some stakeholders expressed that they believe considerations to be made for the foundational skills to be taught in compressed classroom time and this is something that all stakeholders need to determine in their efforts to address learning losses and learning backlogs.

## 2.8 Mental health of learners and teachers

A lot of concern was raised around providing support for the mental health of learners and teachers. The current system has not made a significant impact in incorporating mental health considerations effectively in schools. The impact of the Covid 19 pandemic has shown how necessary it is to provide mental health interventions for learners and teachers. The many losses suffered as a result of the pandemic have a direct impact on their performance in schools.

*“We need to provide social support, trauma-informed responses, a stronger and clear partnership between the DSD and DBE, we need to position support for teachers in a way that doesn’t mean a 2-year waiting list for children to be assessed. We need to act faster because it is demoralizing for teachers”.*

*“Because of the overarching economic, psycho-social impacts of the pandemic, there is a need for interventions to be both academic and mental health interventions. The losses felt by learners go beyond what they have lost in the classroom. This has been a time of several losses; loss of teaching time (contact time) and loss of learning.”*

*“Mental health is an issue - the emotional and psychological state of teachers and students. It has been an incredibly stressful period since March 2020. In the long-term you can’t just switch it on and off. If we can’t even do the basics how can we expect a child in a rural area to go to emotional counselling? That is the tragedy of South Africa.”*

The pandemic has created a new mental health crisis that was sparked by the continued instability, loss of household income, increases in GBV in the homes of teachers and students, increased dropout rates, abrupt disruptions to normalcy in the form of hard restrictions and lockdowns, hospitalisations and even loss of lives. Learners and teachers have had to attend to their academics while equally juggling their personal experience of these impacts of the pandemic. There is a concern that if the education sector neglects this aspect, there might be continued negative results seen in the performance of learners and teachers.

## 2.9 Multiple interventions

South Africa’s education system has for years been plagued with divergent and intersecting issues that continue to have an impact on the likely negative outcomes for learners. These long-standing issues continue to be addressed by disparate stakeholders in separate capacities which are mostly uncoordinated.

### 2.9.1 Short-sighted interventions

A resounding concern shared by our interviewees is how interventions to help learners catch up have mostly focused on assisting the exam classes (i.e., Grade 7 and Grade 12 classes), where public measurement happens. These interventions are seen as short-sighted and most likely to create more learning backlogs for current learners in the school system. This particular intervention has left the lower, foundational grades neglected. The concern raised is that, while school leavers require rigorous interventions to ensure they move to the next level in their education, the younger grades require the same attention because they have not received the intense foundational teaching that gives them strong reading, writing and math skills. If these lower grades are neglected, this means that many years from now the country will continue to face an educational crisis particularly resulting in many learners falling behind and not being trained adequately to graduate to the next level in their education. The system therefore needs to go back to the drawing board and create interventions that ensure that all learners at different levels are not neglected.

The magnitude of this issue has also meant that solutions have avoided addressing the matter at a systemic, deep level because of the economic, social and political implications.

*“The grades where foundational skills are taught (Grade 8 and Grade 10 especially, which are important at a high school level) have significantly been impacted [by Covid].“*

*“Which grades come back? The Department made an error in elevating Grade 7 over Grade 1 & 2 who lose their foundation and will not battle going forward. I spoke to the ministers and Director General (DG).”*

*“The scale of the problem is challenging- wholesale repair is required rather than smaller remedial work”*

*“We have to start from the beginning and go back, there is too much missing content from the previous years. It is not sustainable to catch up all the grades- this is an economic argument not remediation. Students currently need to achieve 90% in maths in matric to pass university maths”*

*“Political frustration increases the pressure to take short cuts. What is the answer? We did it before in 1965. White Afrikaans men sitting in positions of power, we must not repeat that”*

## 2.9.2 No shared consensus on entry level for interventions

*"We should be teaching students at the level that they are at, proximal learning"*

An additional concern raised is that, there is no shared consensus about which level to start introducing the interventions to ensure that learning backlogs are effectively addressed. Some stakeholders believe that the systemic issue needs to be addressed from Early Childhood Development (ECD) level onwards. Some contest that school leaving grades need more focus because a backlog at this grade means that they are not able to transition to the next school phase between primary and secondary to tertiary level. Another competing perception is that focusing on school leaving classes without equally paying attention to the lower grades will result in many learners left behind. This will also affect the number of learners who transition to the school leaving grades.

## 3. Enabling factors to address backlogs

A few enabling factors which will support the system's responsiveness to learning backlogs were explicitly identified by the stakeholders we interviewed. These factors are important to highlight because they start to create an image of what the vision of the future is from their perspective.

### 3.1 Enhanced system responsiveness

The first factor would be an improved education system that is adequately prepared to respond to any disruptions the size and scale of the Covid-19 pandemic or even smaller. The shared sentiment is that the system has failed to effectively address the main problems faced by learners and teachers and the other stakeholders in the system.

*"How can we get back to the trajectory we were on and move the country forward in the next 10 years? Addressing this question is important because our system cannot be found unprepared."*

The historical and longstanding failure to have sustainable ways to support learners is why the DBE struggled to adjust and respond appropriately to the instability caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Some of the interviewees expressed that if the system works to create interventions that are not only responsive to the problems at hand but have a forward looking approach that also tries to mitigate any future problems that will impact the education sector in South Africa.

*"DGs in education come and go and they are not specialists in education. We need to project forward the losses and assess its meaning for the future. We don't see the effects immediately especially when it comes to subjects with cumulative learning like mathematics. Fewer and fewer students will pass maths, which will have knock-on effects over many years: from the foundation phase to PHD level."*

*"The system scrambled because it was caught unawares. The DBE's initial response was to focus on rolling out TV programmes to help learners. The system was not equipped to manage the health and safety measures required in public spaces therefore schools had to close down. Currently, unions are saying children should return to school. This is an important time for the government to take leadership."*

### 3.2 Improved collaboration and coordination

*"How can we coordinate as an ecosystem to come up with a workable intervention as a matter of urgency and priority?"*

*"What is the DBE's long-term approach?"*

*"What is the data we can use to inform our approach?"*

The second enabling factor we identified from the interviews is improved collaboration and coordination. If stakeholders make coordinated efforts and collaborate on various interventions already existing, better progress can be made in addressing backlogs. The shared sentiment from our interviewees is that investing in working together better will ensure that all stakeholders are addressing the problems affecting learners in South Africa effectively in their different spaces and can collaborate similar efforts to have better impact.

*“There is a need for collaboration with other actors in the system such as parents and caregivers. We cannot leave them behind and need to equally utilise them through the use of platforms like Whatsapp to be active and involved.”*

*“We are stronger working together with partners who can also do extended research which we do not have the time to grapple with in depth”*

We identified various niches and interventions in the system all focused on addressing learning backlogs therefore the system already holds potential to address backlogs effectively.

### **3.3 Create support networks**

*“Ensure educators and support caregivers understand the intervention and account for the trauma. We need trauma-informed responses across the board. We look back and glean the relevant lessons, Rethink how we look at education”*

Another enabling factor to addressing learning backlogs that we identified across the interviews is the creation of support networks. Interventions and efforts to address the learning backlogs need to result in the creation of strong support systems for both learners and teachers. There are various economic and psycho-social factors that influence the performance of learners. Interventions need to be cognisant of these various factors and this can be an area where smaller, community-based organisations can take a leading role.

*“We need to look after the mental health of teachers, it is sorely lacking and the mental health of the children. Children have been traumatized, especially township children. You know everyone in your township, it is not like the suburbs. Your neighbour is your aunt or uncle. What have we done to address the death all around them, they know so many more people. We can't make the same mistake we did in violence. There was no national program of healing and we must not make that same mistake.”*

Smaller, grassroots organisations have the capacity to be in contact with communities and learners in their communities. Additionally, this means they are likely to have more knowledge on the different issues facing learners in those communities. This means with adequate resources and support from the DBE, larger organisations and funders, they can create programmes that are targeted and intentional in addressing learners' stagnancy and the intersecting factors that contribute to this.

In our interviews, we included questions that sought to understand which interventions or areas of innovation are possible to implement.

Some interviewees highlighted that interventions required to ensure learners do not fall behind need to also be cognisant of the potential role that communities can play in the education of learners. There is an opportunity for complimentary support systems to be empowered to step in and support learners in the event that there are large scale disruptions such as another pandemic. Education is more than schooling and there is an opportunity for learners to engage with knowledge and skills outside of the classroom.

*“Education is more than schooling, it involves a community , attitude to education and family interventions. Interventions that have worked well have focussed on family engagement collectively on learning. These include time at home. 70% of learning happens outside of the school. We need a larger ecosystem...The best performing schools have parental involvement, we need to mirror this in under-resourced communities.”*

This means interventions that equip families and caregiving networks need investment. For learners who have easy access to online resources and fast internet access, this means working with their family structures to ensure that their learning continues beyond the prescribed curriculums. Interventions on how to engage learners who are underprivileged and possibly lack support systems at home or in the community also need to be considered. Some stakeholders shared suggestions of how older students in the communities can be useful in filling these gaps through peer support groups, homework clubs and tutoring clubs. This will fill the gap for learners who might not have regular access to online learning and resources.

*“Learners can also be supported to create peer groups that they can utilize to support each other and learn together.”*

This has highlighted that the education ecosystem goes beyond the government, non-profit organisations, unions and teachers. The ecosystem is larger and can be mobilized around effective and impactful education that continues even beyond the classroom.

### **3.4 Contextualised interventions**

Another prominent theme that came out of the interviews with the stakeholders is that, taking into consideration that there is no 'one size fits all' approach interventions to learning backlogs, having contextualised interventions would enable the system to work better in effectively addressing the backlogs . No classroom is homogeneous in terms of background, skill, socio-economic level or interest. Teachers therefore often face the dilemma of talking at the level of the top learners (and hoping this encourages growth in the rest of

the classroom) or talking at the level of the poorer student (and hoping this does not result in apathy, boredom and disruption from the top students). Additionally, some students have vocational, academic or professional aspirations and the needs of these future paths will naturally differ.

*“We need to stop ‘one size fits all’ and we should try using the things already in place in the market.”*

*“Before the pandemic, some students were not where they should have been and the pandemic made the gap bigger. The goal is to find out where learners are. Teachers now need to bring the students who are behind up to speed and the use of formative assessments can support this.”*

*“There is evidence-based intervention & accountability in the system to make it a priority over the next 2 years”*

Factors that impact learners and their school performance differ from community to community because of various factors such as socioeconomic status, family background and the presence or absence of adequate support systems.

*“There is currently “no education”, context is province dependent, nothing can help because it will just scratch the surface.”*

*“We don’t know the complexity of why certain schools fail. If you are a school in a gang infested area, your safety and protection takes precedence. Yet you are being judged from an office.”*

There is potential to innovate community specific interventions that adequately address issues faced by learners. This is an area where smaller community-based organisations can contribute significantly without undoing their efforts and the contributions they have already made in the communities they support. With collaboration and better trust in the system, there is a potential for the smaller organisations to significantly contribute to more regional interventions in collaboration with the DBE.

## **5. Possible futures and questions for the future**

Thinking about the future and envisioning what it might look is central to how Reos approaches systems change. In the interviews we conducted, we asked the interviewees questions about how they perceive the aims for the future and some areas of innovation to address the problem effectively.

### **5.1 A good future**

*“Transparency in decision making procedures”*

*“There is evidence-based intervention & accountability in the system to make it a priority over the next 2 years”*

*“An urgent response which has sustained energy and is a concerted effort to address this foundational phase.” “Learners pass matric and they are barely literate, they are passing through rote learning”*

*“Ensure educators and support caregivers understand the intervention and account for the trauma. We need trauma-informed responses across the board. We look back and glean the relevant lessons, Rethink how we look at education”*

*“Transition to English in Grade 6, with competent English teachers. More time for practice in grade 4 & 5”*

### **5.2 A bad future**

*“Ongoing rotational learning; More of the same, a narrow view of education system - society needs to be called to their obligation; We don’t learn from what we have done before; Reliance on technology as solution to everything whilst we forego the human aspect, even when EQ is the increasingly the lead indicator for success , it is increasingly difficult to achieve this online; Everyone wants to do their own thing and we are all shooting in different directions.”*

*“Expecting children to work until 7pm or on weekends.”*

*“English is the language of instruction from Grade 1 and as an issue not addressed, learners have to transition without sedimenting their knowledge.”*

*“Unilaterally cancelling school holidays.”*

We also asked our interviewees to share some key questions they hold about the future of education in South Africa. The following questions were raised:

### 5.3 Coordinating approaches

*“How can we coordinate as an ecosystem to come up with a workable intervention as a matter of urgency and priority?”*

*“What is the DBE’s long-term approach?”*

*“What is the data we can use to inform our approach?”*

### 5.4 Supporting learners and teachers

*“What is the minimum curriculum required to give students the education needed for them to have a promising future?”*

*“What are the interventions needed to support and train teachers to address backlogs?”*

*“How can we holistically support and motivate students and teachers from a psycho-social and economic perspective?”*

*“How can we maintain brain fitness when daily engagement is disrupted?”*

*“How do we institutionalise capacity building to function with teaching and learning interventions?”*

### 5.5 Returning to the classroom

*“What do we need to put in place to bring students back to school?”*

### 5.6 Motivation

*“What do we need to put in place to incentivize and motivate learners to read more outside the classroom?”*

### 5.7 Understanding the problem

*“Do the people impacted by the problem understand it?”*

## 4. Emerging Recommendations

In addition to sharing their sentiments about the current system and their perceptions of the issue of learning backlogs, its causes and factors to address in the education system, interviewees also expressed some insight into how they envision the problem being addressed. Throughout the interviews we conducted, some recommendations on how to address learning backlogs were shared. Some of the recommendations that were shared speak to the work that these stakeholders are already currently doing to address learning backlogs.

There was a resounding call among stakeholders for some form of measurement and diagnostic tool to assess the extent of the backlog issue.

*“We need to know the number of backlogs and the extent of it. Teachers can’t make accurate judgements of their learners’ backlogs. There is just a generalized sense of the backlog, snapshots and samples but no universal testing to intervene.”*

*“There are no measures of learning other than matric and ANA. We don’t have our own diagnostic tool.”*

*“We need to give teachers a simple tool to test children’s developmental levels”*

### 4.1 Policy

Policy interventions would be a significant way to approach making changes in the education system that could strengthen the support for learners and equally influence better coordination and collaboration across the system.

*“The goal is to realise a useful policy option.”*

The DBE has the capacity and jurisdiction to create national and regional policies that can directly impact the efforts of various stakeholders operating at different scales and in different communities. Some sentiment was shared by some of our interviewees that the government and the DBE generally has sound policies in response to issues affecting the country. However, the main concern has been the lack of effective implementation of the policies to effect the change they are created to influence.

*“With senior students the Three Stream Model is a particular frustration. There is nothing on paper or in policy, it is just in someone’s head and changes as the wind blows.”*

This is a significant aspect that has impacted the stakeholders and their trust in the DBE to take on a leadership role to address the stagnancy faced by learners. To achieve the aims listed above, trust needs to be nurtured between the stakeholders in the education sector. Once this is done, there might be a potential for there to be significant changes in policy that will ensure these aims are achieved strategically and systematically.

The language policy and how it is implemented in schools, was specifically identified as an area that could result in progressive intervention. The sentiment is that some of the reasons why learners fall behind is because they do not understand the main medium of instruction which is English. The concern is that learners spend more time trying to understand what they are learning because there are no considerations for their mother tongue. The suggestion is that by addressing the language policy and how it is implemented, the education system could make significant progress in ensuring learners not only understand what they are taught but also do not continue to fall behind. There is room for existing policies enacted by the DBE to play a role in coordinating the various efforts in the system and provide legitimacy for them.

#### **4.2 Curriculum coverage**

Another area where our stakeholders shared energy for innovation is in reimagining effective ways to ensure that curriculums are covered in more succinct timelines. Finding innovative ways to cover the curriculum ensures that both learners and teachers are able to stay on track in spite of possible interruptions to the school calendars. Some significant ideas were already presented in some of the interviews we conducted.

*“There is a need for collaboration with other actors in the system such as parents and caregivers. We cannot leave them behind and need to equally utilise them through the use of platforms like Whatsapp to be active and involved. “*

There is a shared sentiment that with support from parents and caregivers, teachers can collaborate with them to ensure that learners are still continuing with their learning at home in the event of any external disruptions. This can be significantly addressed by utilising available and affordable resources such as Whatsapp or online platforms accessible without mobile data. If curriculums are easily accessible in this way, it allows for quick transitions for both teachers and learners in the event that there are disruptions that significantly impact contact learning time in schools. Curriculum coverage interventions can potentially ensure that students do not fall behind and learning continues even in difficult circumstances.

Teachers play a significant role in addressing the issues faced by learners because they operate at the grassroots level and have more insight on what issues their learners face on a daily basis. The close relationship with learners is important in feeding information into the system about some of the concerns that learners have.

*“Teachers can be supported by identifying the gaps and their capabilities in supporting learners.”*

While teachers might understand some of the contributing factors leading to learners’ stagnancy, they might not have the right tools and skills to translate this knowledge into effective interventions to address the issues raised. Innovating teacher development would mean ensuring that teachers are equipped to respond to learners falling behind in their grades and effectively implementing interventions in the classroom that ensure that the problem does not escalate.

*“We need to train teachers in blended learning competency at all levels. Universities have not rethought teacher education and teacher training is a huge issue.”*

*“We need a much better development program. I have had to learn slowly and arduously; young teachers are thrown in the deep end and have to sink or swim. Fundamentally, new teachers do not understand, they have to learn through experience. We need mentors who are willing to teach, it doesn’t just come naturally.”*

Developing teachers’ skills also means they are able to identify the problems faced by learners appropriately and can respond to them in a timely manner. Some organisations are already working in collaboration with the DBE to facilitate teacher training in testing students appropriately to identify where they are falling behind. One major concern raised during the interviews is the weakness in the system in conducting formative assessments. Formative assessments are better suited to help teachers identify where learners are falling behind. This is a potential avenue for innovation that could positively impact the system to ensure it responds appropriately to stagnancies faced and experienced by learners.

#### **4.3 Education recovery programmes**

*“Transition to English in Grade 6, with competent English teachers. More time for practice in grade 4 & 5”*

*“English is the language of instruction from Grade 1 and as an issue not addressed, learners have to transition without sedimenting their knowledge.”*

While finding innovative ways to ensure that curriculum coverage is achieved, there is also a great need to ensure that there are adequate education recovery programmes in the event that curriculum coverage is not achieved for various reasons. Recovery programmes need to be an ongoing practice that is normalised in the system.

*“Recovery is acquiring the knowledge lost due to a disruption, and this is addressed through a catch-up.”*

This is because at various stages, many learners will potentially face significant challenges. If recovery programmes are normalised and institutionalised effectively, this ensures that learners are continuously supported and do not fall behind. Institutionalising education recovery programmes would also potentially ensure that the number of learners who dropout or fall behind decreases in the near future.

*“Energy and support has to be centred around the DBE’s recovery plan and its 5 pillars. We need to consolidate a roadmap that can be agreed to by the sector, unions, provincial government, researchers who can then feed in to and support the learning plan; rather than the individual research institutions providing their take about what does help.”*

*“Learners need to find a balance between managing the learning loss and managing the recovery. These need to be done in tandem with each other. This will feed into the development of a framework for learning recoveries including implementation of the recovery plan, monitoring & evaluation amongst the other 5 pillars.”*

## **6. Conclusion**

This initial process of engaging with the stakeholders has shown us that there is passion and determination by key stakeholders to address the issues of learning backlogs in South Africa. What this process has also shown us is that there is both mistrust and misunderstandings within the system. Stakeholders are each engaging with the issue of learning backlogs in various ways but are operating in silos. There is inadequate collaboration and coordination. Many stakeholders believe that this is an opportune moment for the DBE to step up.

The mistrust and lack of collaboration has also shown that there is a need to engage all stakeholders in a process to come to a shared understanding about how to define the problem, which will inform important responses. The contention around jargon and nuance, be it be across subjects, sectors or areas of focus, has been central in the different perceptions of the problem which impacts how each stakeholder has chosen to address the problems learners are facing regarding their education.

Although this report highlights alignment and misalignment of perceptions of the problem and possible solutions, it doesn’t yet offer conclusive proposals for a way forward. Our hope is that this report will open up, and continue a meaningful dialogue to collectively address these interconnected challenges of learning backlogs.