



## School Readiness Accountability Monitoring (SCREAM) Project Policy Brief



### National Monitoring of Implementation of Ministry of General Education (MoGE) COVID-19 Guidelines in Schools

#### Zambia National Education Coalition

##### Abstract

This policy brief conveys findings of the School Readiness Accountability Monitoring (SCREAM) Project commissioned to monitor the adequacy of Coronavirus 19 (COVID-19) prevention measures in 501 schools across Zambia’s ten provinces. The findings show that while provinces differ in their experiences, there is consistency in practices and structural constraints in responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. The findings strongly support continued implementation of COVID-19 guidelines with close monitoring and coordination with local authorities (health, education and local government). The findings cover areas of policy interest that include COVID-19 policy access, implementation, learning continuity for non-exam classes, school feeding, engaging communities and monitoring and evaluation. The report also draws on emerging global consensus on COVID-19, frameworks and practices as countries work towards reopening of schools.

##### Introduction

The Ministry of General Education (MoGE) faces a critical decision point to fully and safely reopen schools in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The MoGE provided guidelines for a limited reopening of schools on 1 June 2020. The Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) and Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS), with financial support from UNICEF, commissioned the SCREAM to determine the extent of adherence of schools to the COVID-19 guidelines.

The monitoring exercise also probed the availability of feeding in schools and reach of learning continuity strategies for children in non-examination classes. This policy brief provides insight into health and learning continuity strategies occurring across the ten provinces since schools partially reopened.

The findings of the monitoring exercise were also used to inform policymakers’ and education administrators’ decision to fully and safely reopen Zambian schools.

## I. Purpose of COVID-19 SCREAM Policy Monitoring

ZANEC is a network of civil society organisations (CSOs) supporting the government in the delivery of education. ZANEC currently has 75 member organisations (MOs) comprising community based organisations (CBOs), faith based organisations (FBOs), non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and teacher trade unions. In view of the government's decision to close and partially reopen schools, ZANEC, collaborating with the Zambia Open Community Schools (ZOCS) organisation and funded by UNICEF, commissioned the SCREAM Project to monitor the adequacy of COVID-19 prevention measures in schools. The Project targeted 501 schools drawn from three districts per 10 provinces. The Terms of Reference (TOR) for the SCREAM Project focuses on assessing two key aspects namely:

- Adherence of schools to the COVID-19 guidelines<sup>1</sup> that the MoGE provided in readiness for the partial reopening of examination classes (primary and secondary) on 1<sup>st</sup> June 2020; and
- The reach of the alternative learning modes being implemented by the MoGE to provide continuity of learning at home.

The additional objectives of the SCREAM policy review are to:

- Consider the adequacy of the COVID-19 prevention and control measures put in place for reopening examination classes;
- Assess the extent to which government has taken a rights-based approach for its COVID-19 response including support to public, private, grant-aided and community schools; and
- Generate evidence that will be used to engage government on the COVID-19 response and beyond.

The SCREAM is specifically designed to establish how the MoGE's COVID-19 guidelines<sup>2</sup> are shaping the response of schools to the pandemic. The guidelines are pragmatic, borrow from global practices and provide actionable direction for safe operation through prevention, early detection, and control of COVID-19 in schools and other educational facilities. The guidelines are school-based and strategically focus on leveraging learners as advocates for COVID-19 prevention at home, in school, and in their communities. The guidelines also ensure that as potential vectors for the transmission of COVID-19, schools are safely operated to promote effective public health.

Specifically, the objectives of the COVID-19 guidelines are to:

- a. Guide provincial education offices, district education offices and administrators of primary and secondary schools on measures for preventing the spread of COVID-19 among learners, teachers, support staff and parents/guardians;
- b. Promote and sustain a safe and healthy learning environment;
- c. Help schools to understand and follow measures for managing suspected and confirmed cases of COVID-19;
- d. Promote capacity building among stakeholders on the implementation of the COVID-19 prevention and control provisions as well as other school health activities; and
- e. Improve collaboration among line ministries in planning and implementation of COVID-19 prevention and control provisions in schools.

## II. Methodology of SCREAM Project COVID-19 Policy Monitoring

Given the scope and policy background, the methodology for SCREAM took a strategic approach positioning the Directorate of Standards at MoGE headquarters to lead the initiative. By letting the MoGE lead<sup>3</sup>, educational

---

<sup>1</sup> COVID-19 Guidelines for Schools Ministry of General Education May 2020.

<sup>2</sup> The guidelines are an adaptation of the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) guidelines. Reopening Guidance for Cleaning and Disinfecting Public Spaces, Workplaces, Businesses, Schools, and Homes. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/reopen-guidance.html>

<sup>3</sup> The collaboration was necessary to ensure ownership of findings by the MoGE and ZANEC.

authorities got first-hand information on the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines and the initiatives taking place in schools to enable continuity of learning. The Directorate of Standards worked with the Provincial Educational Officers (PEO) to select the districts and schools that SCREAM provincial monitoring teams targeted. Importantly, the selection decision avoided targeting schools that the Minister of General Education and his team had visited prior to the reopening of schools. The MoGE Permanent Secretary (PS) in charge of Administration provided specific guidance for the SCREAM monitoring teams to avoid overlap with schools that had been monitored by the Minister.

The SCREAM monitoring teams comprised senior MoGE officials and ZANEC’s member organisations (MOs). For expanded coverage and MoGE involvement, the SCREAM project leveraged the 30 District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) offices to administer questionnaires in schools. As the teams conducted the policy monitoring in a pandemic environment, the SCREAM Project took precaution to minimise contacts and limit collection of information to provincial, district and school authorities only. The SCREAM teams did not directly target interactions with children or communities since their members were coming from Lusaka; a COVID-19 hotspot. Indeed, concerns with teams spreading COVID-19 to unaffected areas (and children in particular), including time constraints, were the most significant constraints for the SCREAM exercise.

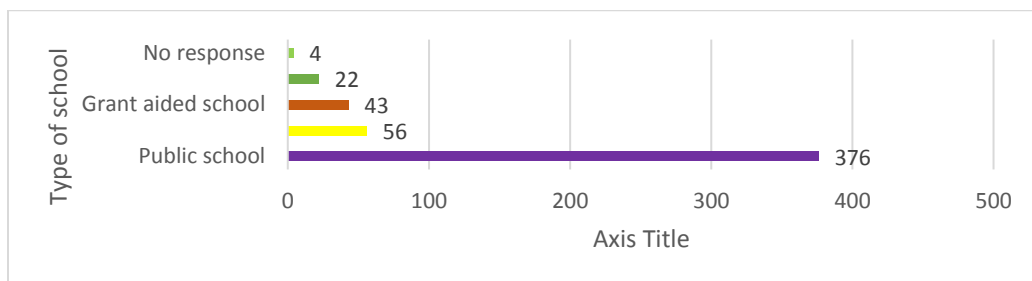
Supporting the provincial teams, the SCREAM national monitoring coordinating team developed an Excel template (attached to a dashboard) for inputting and analysing the data collected covering the 50 schools in each province. The SCREAM teams used the dashboard results to write their provincial reports. All provincial teams, except for Southern Province where the team used SPSS to analyse their data, followed this process. The analysis and reports the SCREAM teams produced enabled immediate dissemination of findings of the COVID-19 policy monitoring to educational authorities at the provincial level. The goal of the SCREAM Project’s dissemination approach was to counter sentiment that the information collected was principally for the consumption of central education authorities and donors supporting the initiatives. This also meant that the information was immediately able to inform local actions long before the eventual publication of the overall findings.

The SCREAM project engaged a consultant to develop a national report based on the aggregate findings of the provincial reports and data analysed from the two main questionnaires (see main report for complete data presentation). For context, the consultant joined the SCREAM policy monitoring team for Lusaka Province. The consultant was also hired to bring a global perspective to the final recommendations of the SCREAM project policy monitoring initiative. As a policy implementation monitoring exercise, the information gathered by the SCREAM Project is principally observational and therefore does affirm causality. The information does, however, provide a basis for more detailed investigation on issues regarding learning outcomes and the socioeconomic impact of COVID-19 on vulnerable groups.

### Schools Sampled

The SCREAM policy monitoring sampled 501 schools across the ten provinces including primary, secondary, combined schools, special education and Early Childhood Education (ECE). As Figure 1 shows, the school types included public (75%), private (11%), grant-aided and community (4%) with a marginal non-response (1%)<sup>4</sup>.

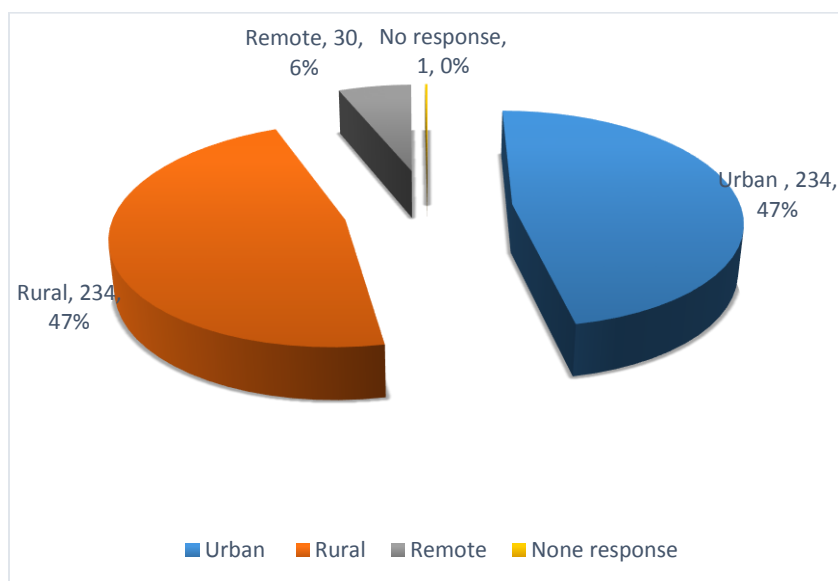
Figure 1: Type of School



<sup>4</sup> No response, represents responses that are unclear what school type because the school name is not complete on whether it is a primary or secondary.

Figure 2 shows an even sample for rural (47%) and urban (47%) and remote (6%). The smaller number of remote schools reached is due to the time and resource limitations of the monitoring exercise. It was not practical to reach more remote schools in the short time (eight days).

**Figure 2: Geographic Location**



### III. Findings of SCREAM Project

Designed as a rapid assessment of school adherence to COVID-19 guidelines, the SCREAM Project’s prime objective is to provide information to advise the government and other stakeholders in the education sector on the experience with the partial reopening of schools. The information gathered has already helped inform decisions on the full reopening of schools and provided important findings on the impacts (loss of learning and social risks) of the actions taken during the COVID 19 pandemic. Because schools have closed for a prolonged period since the first term, the losses of learning are serious. During normal times, as a 2018 Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) found, only 15.27% of Grade 2 learners (14.45% for boys and 16.09 % for girls) achieved desired reading competencies<sup>5</sup>. Against such assessment, and the fact of memory loss, it is fair to argue that the 2020 academic year is lost particularly for the early grade learners<sup>6</sup>. Other countries too are faced with a similar predicament. For example, the United States of America (USA) has estimated a seven-month lag in learning due to COVID-19, potentially exacerbating existing learning achievement gaps among minority groups<sup>7</sup>.

Indeed, like most systems around the world, Zambia’s education sector is not built to deal with severe health shocks such as created by the COVID-19 pandemic. While the SCREAM monitoring project found efforts by teachers to provide some continuity of learning, these are inconsequential and unlikely to provide the quality of education delivered in the classroom. Even among high income families, as anecdotal accounts reveal, parents of children in private schools are feeling the burden of provide learning support at home without the requisite skills of a trained

<sup>5</sup> USAID Education Data Activity Zambia Early-Grade Reading Assessment 2018 Baseline Report: Summary

<sup>6</sup> There is need for the MoGE, working with the Examination Council of Zambia (ECZ), to urgently conduct a formal assessment to determine a baseline on the status of learning achievement upon return especially for the early grades. The findings of such assessment will inform remediation action.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-student-learning-in-the-united-states-the-hurt-could-last-a-lifetime#>

teacher. The socialising function of schools too that supports cognitive development is also lacking in home environments. Accordingly, given the global evidence that children are moderately at risk of serious illness from COVID-19<sup>8</sup>, the moral dilemma of a full reopening of schools during a pandemic may be moderated.

**Table 1: Summary of COVID-19, Learning Continuity and School Feeding Practices across Provinces**

|                       | COVID-19 Policy access | Social distancing in class | Hand washing in school | Masking in school | Learning continuity for non-exam classes | School feeding | Engaging community |
|-----------------------|------------------------|----------------------------|------------------------|-------------------|--|----------------|--------------------|
| Central Province      | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Inconsistent      | Inconsequential                          | None           | None               |
| Copperbelt Province   | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Inconsistent      | Inconsequential                          | None           | None               |
| Eastern Province      | Modest                 | Inadequate                 | Significant            | Inconsistent      | Inconsequential                          | Modest         | None               |
| Luapula Province      | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Significant       | None                                     | Modest         | None               |
| Lusaka Province       | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Inconsistent      | Inconsequential                          | None           | None               |
| Muchinga Province     | Significant            | Significant                | Modest                 | Significant       | None                                     | Modest         | None               |
| Northern Province     | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Significant       | Inconsequential                          | Minor          | None               |
| Northwestern Province | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Significant       | Inconsequential                          | None           | None               |
| Southern Province     | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Nothing reported  | Inconsequential                          | Modest         | None               |
| Western Province      | Significant            | Significant                | Significant            | Significant       | Inconsequential                          | Modest         | None               |

The summary table (Table 1) provides an overview picture of the findings across the ten provinces. Because the implementation of COVID-19 measures was directed at the highest level of authority and schools could only open after satisfying requirements<sup>9</sup>, the SCREAM teams found mostly significant compliance by all 501 schools with health measures. To the contract, all heads of the ten provinces, 30 districts and 501 schools monitored acknowledged the gap in continuity of learning for non-examination classes. Besides, education administrators and schools did not anticipate the prolonged closure of schools. All schools targeted reported having given take home school work in the expectation that schools would reopen without significant loss of learning time.

The greater concern is that prolonged closure of schools will lead to a generational loss as thousands of children drop out of the education system diminishing their quality of life and putting them at risk of future pandemics. The urgency to reopen is amplified by the fact that while the MoGE has done relatively well (see Table 1 summary) in mobilising schools to provide safe learning environments, it has failed to provide continuity of learning for non-examination classes. In fact, the SCREAM findings show that the school system lacks the capacity to pivot to alternative delivery modes at scale. The expanded accounts under each theme monitored by the SCREAM project show consistency of findings across schools, districts and provinces. Structural constraints around the space needed to achieve physical distancing and the risk of putting the country's over 110,000 teachers at risk of COVID-19 infection remain the obstinate challenges to the full reopening of schools.

#### IV. School COVID-19 Preparedness for Re-Opening

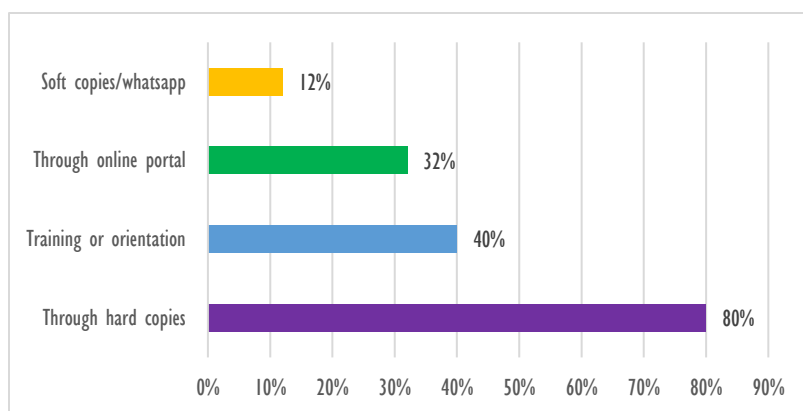
<sup>8</sup> United Nations, Policy Brief: The Impact of COVID-19 on children April 2020. Available at: [https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420\\_Covid\\_Children\\_Policy\\_Brief.pdf](https://unsdg.un.org/sites/default/files/2020-04/160420_Covid_Children_Policy_Brief.pdf)

<sup>9</sup> Even though the authorisation approach varied, with some schools receiving certificates from district task force teams or local health authorities, opening had to be sanctioned.

## Policy Dissemination

The SCREAM monitoring teams assessed the extent to which administrators in the 501 target schools were aware of the COVID-19 guidelines. The findings show that while schools did not always have hard copies of guidelines, others used electronic copies circulated through WhatsApp. Moreover, schools were well versed with requirements because the implementation of COVID-19 measures was directed at the district level by taskforce teams. As Figure 3 shows, responses to the question: ***“Do schools and district offices have access to hard copies of COVID-19 guidelines and how do they access them?”*** The majority of respondents (88%) affirmed having hard copies of guidelines while 12% had soft copies shared through WhatsApp.

Figure 3: Access to COVID-19 Guidelines



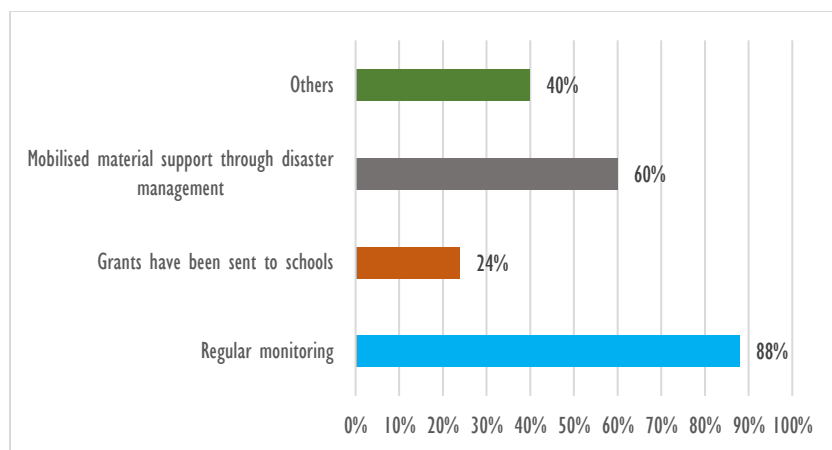
With the guidelines and coordinated actions of taskforce teams at the district level, schools took steps to address the requirements of the COVID-19 guidelines. Certainly, as noted earlier, schools could only open after satisfying the requirements of the COVID-19 guidelines. The authorisation requirement and regular monitoring of schools by various groups including the DMMU, District Task Force teams, DC, PEO and DEBS standards officers, local authorities and Ministry of Health (MoH) officials ensured adherence. Schools also received orientation outreach through Zonal Schools which assured compliance with guideline requirements.

In fact, leading up to 1 June, the date of reopening of schools, the MoH public awareness drive on COVID-19 had provided guidance on the social and health practices needed to mitigate the pandemic publicly. Notably, the Lusaka PEO management team proactively used the information to devise interim guidelines in anticipation of the President’s directive to reopen schools. Head teachers also reported using the MoH information to organise the school COVID-19 responses. The work of health centres in school localities has also bolstered school readiness and adherence to the guidelines. Schools reported engaging with and getting health guidance from nearby health facilities.

Figure 4 below shows that in terms of resource mobilisation, the MoGE leveraged various support mechanisms for schools including providing materials, grants and conducting monitoring visits to track COVID-19 policy adherence. PEOs and DEBS have worked closely to ensure that schools create safe learning environments. This effort is especially exemplified by timely action by districts to disburse grants in the lead up to reopening on 1 June and subsequently, that enabled schools to purchase requisites such as drums, water buckets, sanitizers and face masks for creating safe learning environments. The Ministry of Finance also disbursed funds to secondary schools to enable acquisition of disinfectants and protective clothing. The key challenge is that the funds disbursed are inadequate to purchase costly supplies and support a sustained response.

Figure 4: COVID-19 Support Mechanisms





For the category ‘others’ (40%) in Figure 4, this relates to the support of stakeholders in and outside the education sector including support from the private sector. Typically, the category of ‘others’ represents localised actions of stakeholders. Indeed, the implementation of COVID-19 guidelines was quicker in schools receiving existing support from other stakeholders. For example, 20 schools supported by Child Fund<sup>10</sup> in Luangwa District got a head start with regard to securing masks. The schools used sewing machines that Child Fund has provided for functional literacy classes to make face masks for teachers and learners. Child Fund also provided thermometers to all schools in the district although there are challenges with replenishing batteries. In Northern Province, World Vision Zambia (WVZ) provided masks for all teachers and learners. WVZ similarly provided hand washing facilities, chlorine, thermal scanners to the 105 schools in the province. The HID, a Catholic organisation, also donated hand washing facilities and hand sanitisers to schools in Northern Province.

In Lusaka, a recently established NGO, Healthy Learners<sup>11</sup>, that is working to improve capacity of schools to act as first responders on learners’ health helped significantly with preparedness of reopening schools. For example, the Deputy Head Teacher of Zonal School, Yotam Muleya, that partners with Healthy Learners indicated that their collaboration helped to meet the required conditions for reopening in advance of the MoGE COVID-19 guidelines. Healthy Learners have also helped with readiness by providing material assistance and awareness creation through ongoing programmes.

In North Western Province, the Solon Foundation of Switzerland provided hand washing buckets and basins for 165 schools and also supported production of Information and Education Communication (IEC) materials in English and the local languages. Solon Foundation, funded the proposal for IEC materials for MoGE in Southern Province. Others, for example the Trident Foundation, provided 5,700 face masks and 40 buckets to the DEBS in Kalumbila District. The DEBS also received support from organisation linked to mining industry such as Barrick Lumwana (donated 230 bars of soap and 20) and Lumwana Community Trust (donated 7,000 face masks, 50 litres of Pynol disinfectant and 87 tanks with a capacity of 1000 litres). Members of Parliament (MPs) have also donated masks and drums to schools in their constituencies.

Despite clear success observed in mobilising schools to adhere to COVID-19 guidelines, local communities continue to speculate on veracity of the pandemic. The typical sentiment among rural communities especially is that COVID-19 affects mostly wealthy people in towns. For schools, an overall critical issue is that sustained funding would enable more local control of the measures taken to address COVID-19. The initial steps taken to quickly provide some funding assumed that a one-time action would be sufficient to resolve COVID-19 challenges. The prolonged impact of the disease requires urgent budget discussions by the MoGE.

<sup>10</sup> Child Fund has had a long presence in Luangwa district supporting vulnerable children.

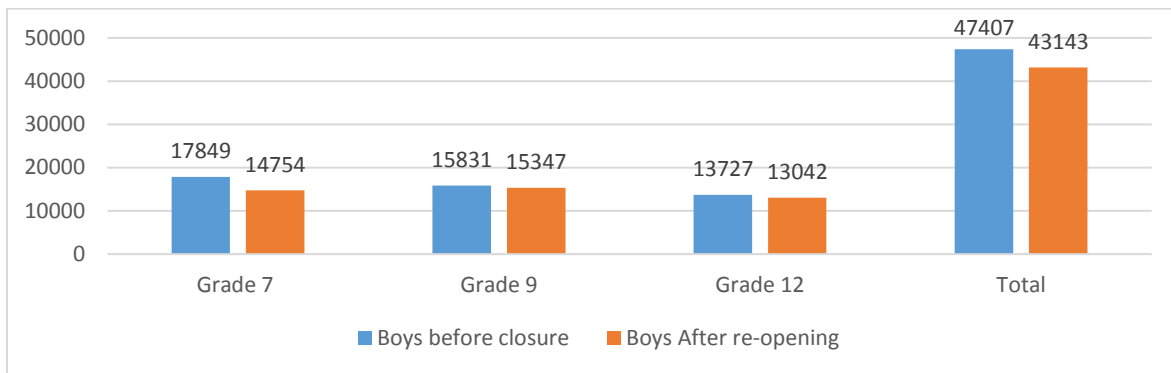
<sup>11</sup> Healthy Learners is only operating in Lusaka.

## V. Status of Re-Opening for Examination Classes

All schools targeted for the monitoring exercise had partially reopened for continuation of learning for examination classes (grades 7, 9 and 12). The SCREAM monitoring teams found that having met the requirements of the COVID-19 guidelines, schools were conducting lessons as required. The SCREAM monitoring teams assessed the extent of return of learners in examination classes for boys and girls.

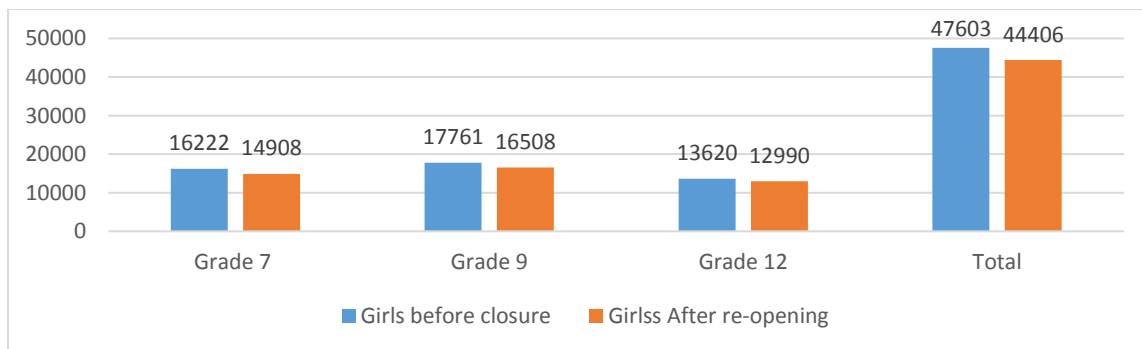
Figure 5 below shows that the enrolment of boys in examination classes is lower than when schools closed. This is especially notable for learners in Grade 7 whose non-return proportion is at 17.3%. The non-return proportions for Grade 9 and Grade 12 are lower (3% and 5% respectively). The national non-return proportion for boys across all examination classes is 9%.

**Figure 5: Enrolment Before After Reopening - Boys**



For girls, Figure 6 shows that the enrolment of girls in examination classes is also lower than pre-closure. Unlike the situation for boys, the non-return proportion is relatively low for Grade 7, Grade 9 and Grade 12 (8%, 7% and 4.6% respectively). The national non-return proportion for girls across all examination classes is 6.7%.

**Figure 6: Enrolment Before After Reopening - Girls**



What is notable, however, is that the non-return is high for Grade 7 learners who attend what is supposed to be free education. The findings for Northern Province were most prominent with 6% of the learners in the examination classes not reporting back to school.

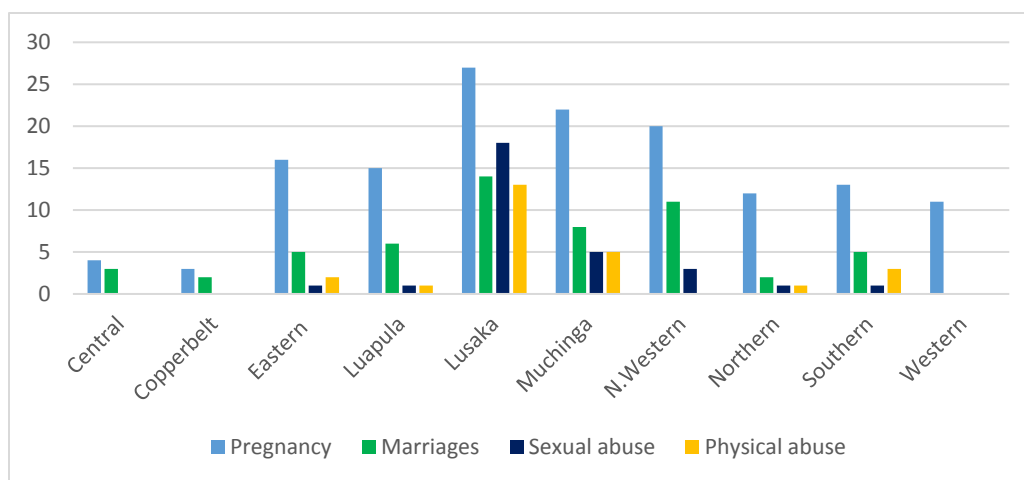


Generally, however, the non-return of children must be tracked at different points of the school year to affirm dropout. It may also be that because of the pandemic environment, children have been discouraged from returning to school (teams were unable to establish reasons for non-return). Accordingly, the MoGE should implement activities to promote the return of all children to school (e.g. communication campaign, incentives for vulnerable children or reintegration of pregnant girls). Particular attention must be given to already vulnerable groups, who may face added risks.

### Risks to Children

While the findings are consistent on reasons for non-return, it is not clear, however, that this is a departure from the norm. Typically, when schools reopen, not all learners report back to school for reasons that include non-payment of fees, loss of interest in school, pregnancies, marriage, relocation of parents or guardians and engagement in economic activities such as farming. Figure 7 shows responses to the questions: *“Have you received any reports of children regarding risks to children?”* The risks outlined in Figure 7 were reported by 51% of respondents.

Figure 7: Risks to Learners by Province



Typically, pregnancies account for a large proportion (29%) of risks to children being out of school. Accordingly, there is an urgent need to engage children in school as prolonged pandemic approach can cause uncertainty in the education system and also put learners out of the school system at risk of harm and engaging in vices. Moreover, children are anxious to return to school. For example, as a teacher at John Laing Primary School in Lusaka shared, learners in non-examination classes keep asking when they would be allowed back for fear of becoming ‘junkies’ (or drug users).

## VI. Creating COVID-19 Aware School Communities

### COVID-19 Awareness Among Teachers and Learners

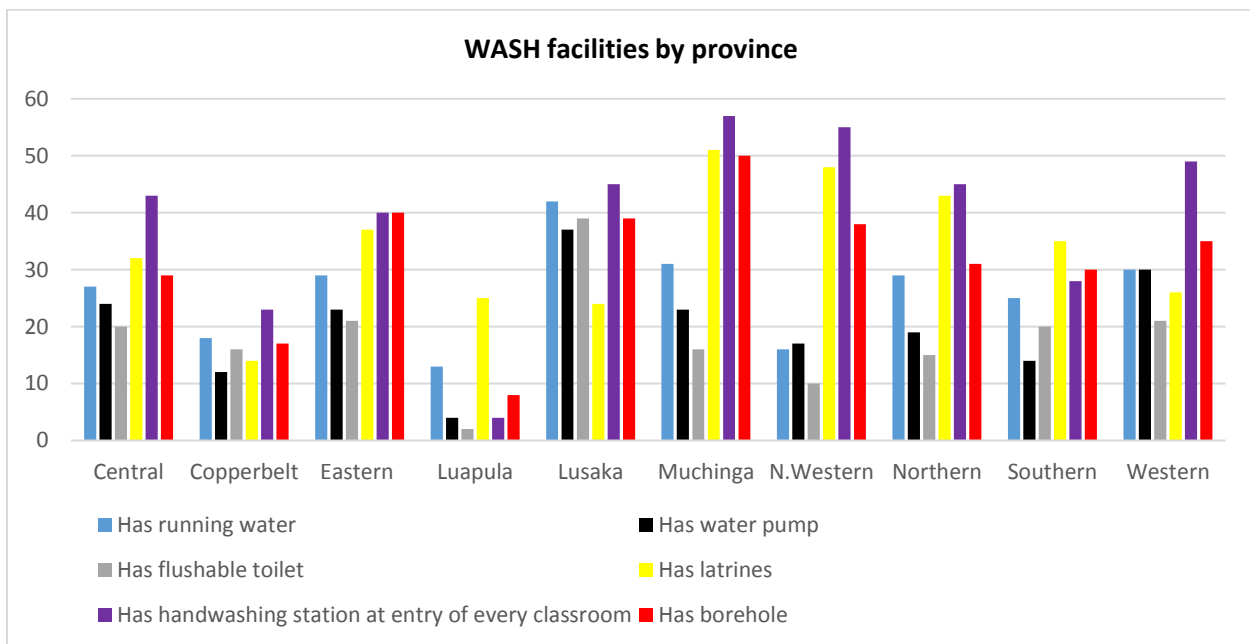
The majority of schools indicated having received orientation on guidelines (65%), having a hard copy (62%), and having soft copies (48%). A small number (6%) indicated not having access to COVID-19 guidelines. As earlier noted, however, the NO responses do not mean that the schools are not implementing required guidelines because compliance is a requirement for reopening of schools. The actions schools took on COVID-19 show consistency with the responses of PEOs and DEBS.

## Hygiene maintenance

The requirement to wash hands is a key measure for mitigating COVID-19 through Water and Sanitation Hygiene (WASH). The concerted COVID-19 response made by the MoGE, MoH and other stakeholders has prioritised safeguarding learners and teachers through improved hygiene. The review found that most schools reopened on the directive of district taskforce teams and local authorities upon meeting the specified requirements (drums, water buckets, sanitizers, face masks and social distancing).

As Figure 8 shows, responses to the question: *“Do you have sufficient WASH facilities?”* the majority of responses (78%) indicated having hand washing stations at every classroom. The responses also show relatively high availability of boreholes (63%). Additionally, responses show that schools have running water (52%) with flushable toilets in use (36%) and others using latrines (67%).

Figure 8: WASH Facilities Across Provinces



The status on WASH conveyed in Figure 8 is complemented with heightened surveillance, schools disinfecting regularly, regular monitoring of COVID-19 compliance, installing hand washing facilities in accessible areas in schools, setting up committees in charge of COVID-19 prevention, not allowing vending on school premises, and ensuring availability of soap and water and to sanitise.

Despite the relatively positive picture on WASH as Figure 8 shows for ten provinces (except for Copperbelt and Luapula provinces), the SCREAM teams found that learners typically did not know how to hand wash with water and soap as recommended by World Health Organisation (a minimum of 20 seconds). There is clearly need for more sensitisation for schools at large working with SHN focal points. Washing hands thoroughly also heightens the need for schools to have good WASH facilities.

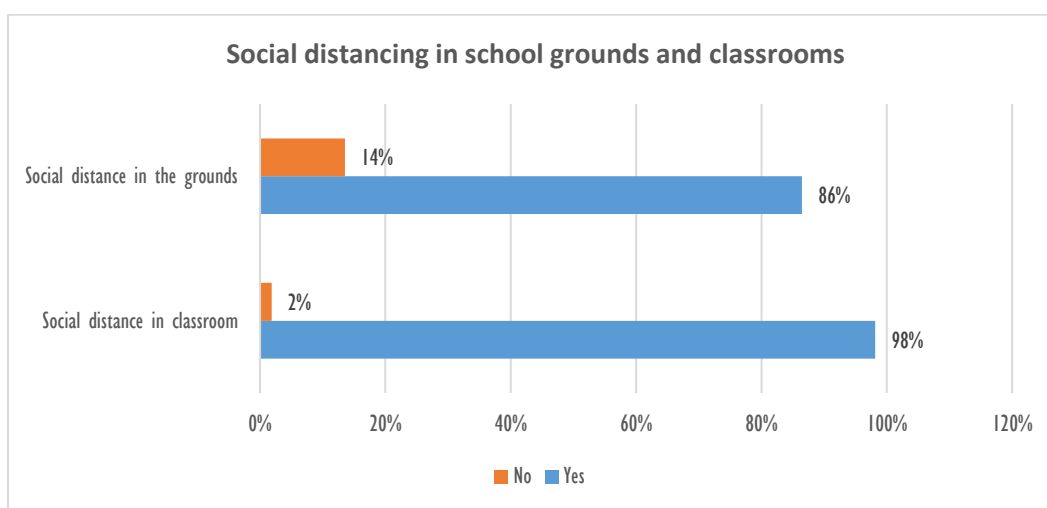
## Physical Distancing in Classrooms

Physical distancing in schools is the most demanding requirement of the COVID-19 policy guidelines because of the social and structural constraints needed to achieve it. As stated in the MoGE COVID-19 guidelines, physical distancing (or social distancing), refers to maintaining physical space between people to prevent the spread of disease. Physical distancing is a key measure to prevent the spread of COVID-19. An essential aspect of physical distancing

in school is reducing the number of learners in classrooms. Schools are accomplishing social distancing by reducing class sizes, assigning desk sitting, cancelling gatherings such as assemblies and sporting events, and using staggered school sessions so that fewer students attend school at the same time.

As Figure 9 shows, responses to the question: *“Is the school practicing physical distancing in and outside classrooms?”* The majority of responses (98%) indicated physical distancing in classrooms while 86% of responses indicated social distancing in school grounds.

**Figure 9: Physical Distancing in School**



As schools are social arenas, physical distancing is a challenge for learners. The SCREAM monitoring teams observed that while learners were physical distancing in school they carried on with normal social behaviour and removed masks when not being supervised or outside the school environment. Moreover, school authorities do not have control over what happens beyond their gates. For example, schools such as John Laing Primary School in Lusaka’s John Laing Compound that are very large (approximately 4,300 learners with a quarter in examination classes) and located in densely populated and unplanned areas have negligible influence in terms of managing social interactions in their local communities.

With 1.14 million learners nationally in examination classes (of approximately total enrolment of 4.5 million learners)<sup>12</sup> returning to school, the SCREAM teams found that schools had maxed out on classroom space. All schools targeted noted the challenge of space although none have opted to use outdoor learning as is currently practiced by countries such as Norway that have reopened schools. The schools monitored largely adhered to the one child per desk requirement (or between 25 to 28 children per class). The strategy used by big schools such as John Laing is to break, for example, an 80-pupil class size into three classes (i.e., 12A1, 12A2 and 12A3) of 25 to 28 and teach them over three sessions. Alongside the constraint of classroom space, schools reported shortages of desks as limiting physical distancing.

By default, the social distancing measure has created ideal teaching class sizes even though some teachers felt that it is repetitious to teach the same lesson three times. The ideal class sizes should enable specialised teaching attention to the examination classes. The SCREAM team did, however, encounter negative sentiment from teachers about learners that are considered ‘chaff’ or hard to teach. Such sentiment may cause the limited opening of schools to be a lost opportunity as educators carry on ‘business as usual’ complaining about the quality of learners picked during the selection processes. Furthermore, while some educators were confident that they would recover learning time when schools fully reopened, poor education outcomes indicate that the education system needs to devise innovative catch-

<sup>12</sup> COVID-19 Guidelines for Schools Ministry of General Education May 2020.

up strategies. The long-term responses, however, require significant investments in the education sector focused on expanding space in order to meet the difficult demands of social distancing in learning institutions.

## VII. Learning Continuity in Pandemic Environment

### Reaching Non-Examination Classes

The nationwide extended closure of schools has no historical precedent in Zambia. In contrast to previous disease outbreaks (Cholera), school closures have been imposed locally. The school system is unprepared for this kind of situation hence the losses in learning are serious and long-term. The SCREAM policy review found that schools had taken steps to ensure some continuity of learning. It is important to be clear that such actions are typically localised and small scale mostly driven by enthusiastic teachers in secondary schools (focusing on a few subjects). Most schools had taken the initiative to provide take home school work in anticipation of a quick reopening. With prolonged closure, schools are extending their efforts to reach learners.

Such initiatives, however, do not apply to ECE and primary learners who are difficult to reach in the manner used for secondary school learners. It is also important to note that the actions taken at the national level to enable continuity of learning have focused on supply side considerations without addressing demand side challenges especially related to access and ensuring learning support across different levels of learning (ECE, primary and secondary). The SCREAM team also observed a lack of consideration of the impact of remote learning on households especially with regards to guiding children (and feedback loops) and the economic impact of COVID-19. Given the unprecedented impact of the pandemic socially and economically, it is unrealistic to expect households to substitute for schools in a meaningful way. The situation is even more impractical for children with special education needs.

In terms of reaching learners in non-examination classes, Figure 10 shows responses to the question: *“Is there any type of learning offered to students during closure?”*

Figure 10: Learning Support During Closure

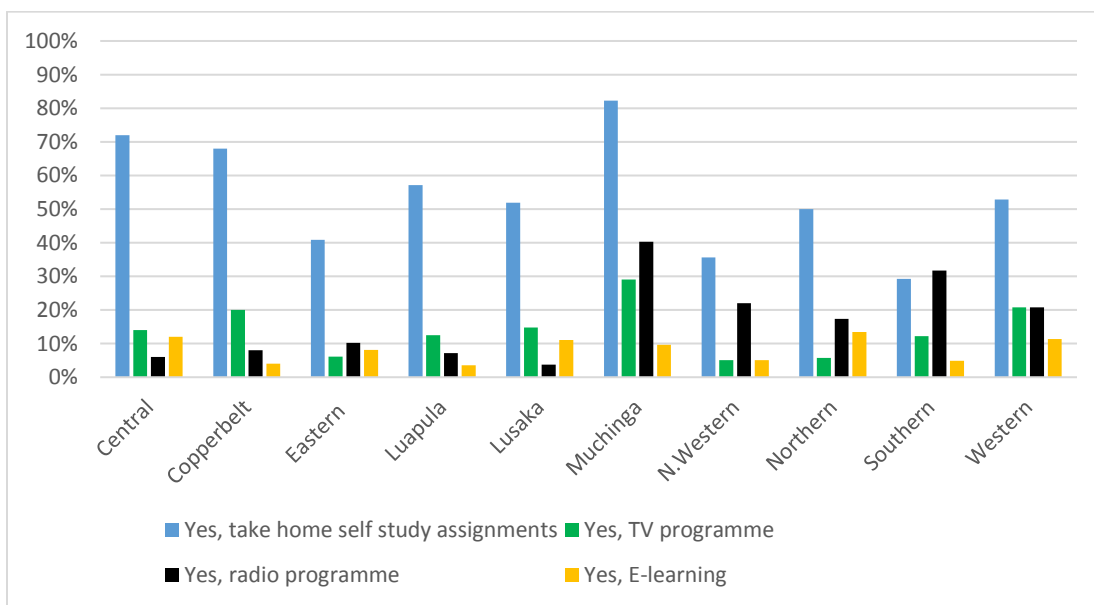


Figure 10 shows a range of methods used by schools for enabling continuity of learning intended for non-examination classes. Across all ten provinces, the most dominant method used by schools to enable continuity of learning are take home self-study assignments. The depth and breadth of learning enabled through the methods identified could not, however, be substantiated due to limitations of the COVID-19 policy monitoring exercise. Accordingly, what Figure 10 is conveying are opportunities respondents mentioned for enabling continuity of learning rather than represents organised efforts to reach children.

Substantively, educators have not pivoted to alternative platforms for learning because they are only becoming aware, limited by the significant constraints of reaching all children equitably. For example, educators in public schools pointed towards disconnectedness as a constraint in organising learning using remote learning solutions. They specifically noted the constraints around providing guided learning support. Other schools did not offer such support because of poor sensitisation as parents were afraid of their children contracting COVID-19. Such schools have been unable to reach out to help learners.

In other words, none of the methods identified can be assessed against, for example, grade level learning that is supported commensurately with teaching and learning resources and feedback processes. For example, none of the methods identified are reaching learners in ECE or primary or those with special education needs. It is also not possible to determine the extent and quality of reach given gender and other considerations such as household income and place of residence (rural or urban). What is consistent across all schools as a practice is that of providing self-study take home assignments. This wide practice is adopted as a stop-gap measure and does not include active teacher learner interactions.

The reality is that despite the initial investments made, Zambia's distance learning platforms and other remote solutions are in their nascent phase and are not readily available to children from low income households and remote schools (see access to ICT infrastructure). For example, while the MoGE has invested in online learning solutions the portal that is available is still under development<sup>13</sup>. The MoGE E-learning portal still has 'coming soon' for ECE, Primary and Senior Secondary sections of learning with just a few hundred learners enrolled in the subjects offered for grades 8 and 9.

Clearly, the E-learning is inconsequential presently and is likely to remain beyond the reach of millions of learners. Besides the cost of accessing internet-based learning resources, the K5 enrolment requirement for each subject will rule out most disadvantaged learners who, as SCREAM teams found, could not even pay that amount for face masks. Children living in rural areas who have no access to internet are principally left out. Also, children with disabilities and special needs are especially hard to serve through distance programmes. With prolonged closure, however, more schools are seeking alternative means including the use of WhatsApp and YouTube.

As the consequence of dealing with a lost academic year (and backlog) have become imminent, some local private schools are developing online learning portals (for example Rhodes Park School) and others are leveraging global resources such as Google Classroom, Zoom and WhatsApp to support learning. But such initiatives lack a substantive shift in instructional methods as teachers are yet to be trained to handle this approach to learning. Globally, too, there is consensus that remote learning is impractical to sustain meaningfully for children in the formative phases (ECE, primary and up to Grade 8) where close supervised learning is essential. Further, the shift towards homes as delivery points for learning is not supported with any teaching and learning resources. Households are just expected to take on the responsibility of supporting children's learning. Clearly, parents and guardians are unable to substitute for teachers without learning support guidance and being present at home to ensure that children are doing their work.

Beyond issues of access, there are concerns with the quality of alternative learning modes. For example, the SCREAM policy review team covering Luangwa District came across a group of 15 external Grade 9 learners (boys and girls) at Mwavi Primary School who pointed out that they did not find the TV learning channels engaging and the teaching approach did not adapt to remote mode (just talking as usual using flip charts). One grant-aided school committed to using YouTube as a teaching resource, planning to buy phones for teachers for that specific purpose. The team also came across organisations such as Edulation that use solar powered tablets for after school instruction of mathematics using local alumni instructors. The diversity of solutions entail that the MoGE needs to methodically assess current initiatives and explore low cost alternatives to centralised driven remote learning. Indeed, interruptions caused by rolling electricity power cuts make remote learning following a timetable challenging.

---

<sup>13</sup>. The MoGE E-learning portal (<https://elearning.co.zm/moge-all-classes/>)

## Involvement of Parents in Students Learning at Home

As the closure of schools is prolonged, parents and homes have become the focus in terms of continuity of learning for learners in non-examination classes. While SCREAM findings show positive outreach of teachers to parents, the frequency and depth of interaction is modest. The reality is that there are minimal interactions between teachers and parents because of social distancing requirements and other challenges (mostly inequities of resources). It is also the case that because school closures seemed temporary in the beginning, there was the expectation that the situation would normalise and learners would return to school.

Additionally, given the particular levels of learning involved, for example ECE and primary, teacher outreach to parents is impractical without organised learning happening. It is also important to note that expectations that parents will support children's distancing learning at home is especially difficult and demanding because the scale of supervising required is heightened and competes with household needs to engage in economic activity. Furthermore, as noted earlier, parents and guardians are not trained to supervise learning beyond the minimal engagement in supporting homework.

Overall, the nature of reaching out to schools by parents tends to be basic. For the most part, as some respondents noted, very few parents approach schools to ask for support. This is true for urban and rural settings as well given that parents do not always engage schools, an issue that NGOs<sup>14</sup> working in the education sector are trying to change to improve accountability in the delivery of education services.

## VIII. Facilities Available at School to Support Learning

The capacity of schools to support learning includes considerations such as access to power, availability of ICT infrastructure, and access to ICT geographically. SCREAM findings show that of the 501 schools visited, 374 were connected to the national grid, 27 used solar, 7 connected to other power sources and 6 are without any power. Although most schools visited are connected to the national grid, the high cost of paying electricity bills may diminish access since school grants are never sufficient to support the budget of running schools. Even for schools that are able to mobilise resources to cover electricity costs, the current load shedding is proving disruptive.

In terms of access to ICT, urban schools demonstrated the most access (over 180 schools with ICT access and 22 without), rural schools second (about 110 schools with ICT access and about 90 without) and the least for remote schools (about 12 schools with ICT access and about 17 without). It is important to note however, that the ICT query may have been overly restrictive given the fact that smart phones are now providing easy access to internet-based resources. As noted earlier, school administrators had received the COVID-19 guidelines through WhatsApp.

## IX. School Health and Nutrition (SHN) Programme

The School Health and Nutrition (SHN) programme is a specific initiative that is supported only in some parts of the country and typically for primary schools. SHN has also become more closely associated with school feeding even in the MoGE's budgeting. In response to the questions: ***“Does the school have a school feeding programme?”*** ***“If yes, can you name the partner supporting the school feeding?”*** While 43% of respondents said YES to the query, the notion of school feeding is varied in terms of size and implementation approach. Multiple stakeholders support school feeding across the country.

The SCREAM monitoring teams found that school feeding is not widespread and is initiative driven. School feeding is conducted prominently in regions such as Eastern Province supported by the government, in collaboration with World Food Programme and the Food Reserve Agency (FRA) and NGOs. Outside of the government/WFP supported initiative, Mary's Meals in Eastern Province has the largest programme (14 of the 50 schools visited indicated

---

<sup>14</sup> ZANEC and its member organisations have supported social accountability programming to improve the delivery of education services especially among disadvantaged communities.

receiving support). Mary's Meals has continued to provide food portions for children in non-examination classes reaching them through their parents and guardians taking meal portions home. Outside of such initiatives are localised efforts supported by volunteer organisations, for example Peace Corps, and religious organisations such as Brethren in Christ (3 of the 50 schools visited indicated receiving support) in Southern Province. Private firms such as Kansanshi Mines (cited by two schools in North-Western Province) are also supporting school feeding. The positive views of respondents regarding how to strengthen SHN generally point to a strategic positioning of health in the education sector. The MoGE can revitalise the SHN programme to ensure that all schools in country are actively engaged in health promotion.

## X. Zambia and Global Perspectives on Reopening of Schools

The decision to reopen schools is a big issue for all, but a few countries around the world. Zambia's reopening of schools for the examination classes is a test case for approaches that may help to provide continuity of learning. Other countries such as Norway opened schools when the pandemic was brought under control. Norway followed a staged approach beginning with Grade 1-4 because they are the ones who least benefit from remote learning solutions. Norway also opened practical education schools because it is hard to learn to learn vocation skills remotely. The country then opened all higher education classes so that students could do their exams and subsequently opened up schools entirely while monitoring very carefully. Other countries that did not close schools such as Sweden, intensified COVID-19 prevention measures which authorities say have helped to even reduce influenza.

Accordingly, the MoGE's COVID-19 policy guidance needs to evolve to address contextual realities and shift away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach. Importantly, there is need for the MoGE and MoH to formulate an exit strategy beyond the need to enable business continuity in the education sector. A critical task, particularly for the MoH, is to close the information gaps in terms of explaining why COVID-19 spread is low in Zambia compared with countries most affected such as the United States of America and Brazil. Indeed, the cataclysmic impact of COVID-19 in developed countries is driving the policy initiative rather than national information through testing. A dynamic policy approach, including a move towards localising the national level directives will pave way for a COVID-19 policy exit strategy. The MoH must, however, expand testing beyond the incidence driven and contact tracing strategy currently in use for addressing COVID-19.

Empowered with tailored information, the provincial and district levels would continue communicating expectations to schools about how to respond to COVID-19 relying on contextual realities to secure the cooperation of local populations. The SCREAM monitoring team observed that learners carried on with normal social behaviour and removed masks when not being supervised or outside the school environment. Accordingly, there is need to tangibly demonstrate the COVID-19 threat using context based information. Additionally, COVID-19 responses must communicate the challenges posed by the many unknowns of the virus so that the public is made aware that the threat posed by the disease does not have an end date. Certainly, at the national level, it is important for the MoGE and MoH to start pivoting from the emergency response to the so called 'new normal' a move that requires strengthened multi-sectoral coordination and immediately enhancing budget lines for school health activities and WASH. The long-term responses, however, require significant investments in the education focused on expanding space in order to meet the difficult demands of social distancing in learning institutions.

## XI. Engaging communities

The SCREAM policy monitoring found that the focus of COVID-19 policy implementation has been schools. It is the case that public health messaging on COVID-19 is well communicated in communities where schools are located. Additionally, the guidelines target learners as influencers in the communities on COVID-19 prevention. However, there is need for schools to work with communities directly for prevention and creating further awareness. Despite clear success observed in ensuring adherence to guidelines, the absence of reported COVID-19 cases several months since the reopening of schools will likely undermine adherence as schools and local communities continue to speculate on veracity of the pandemic. Based on the 14-day quarantining requirements, the absence of reported cases questions, contextually challenges the relevance of social distancing.



## XII. Monitoring and Evaluation

### COVID-19 Monitoring

The SCREAM policy monitoring exercise found that education offices (PEO and DEBS) have conducted multiple visits to ensure compliance to COVID-19 guidelines. The frequency of visits, however, varied driven by various factors. Typically, the visits covered different schools meaning the frequency to individual learning institutions was inconsistent. As respondents explained, most schools reported being visited twice, once for preparedness and subsequently for authorisation to open upon conforming to COVID-19 guidelines. Some of the challenges respondents highlighted that constrained operational issues include:

- Inadequate resources (human and financial);
- Lack of transport to allow zonal heads to monitor on behalf of DEBS;
- Inadequate grants, which some schools used buy costly equipment (e.g. thermometers); and
- Lack of transport to distribute COVID-19 supplies donated by DMMU and other stakeholders.

Despite clear success observed in ensuring adherence to guidelines, the absence of reported COVID-19 cases in school several months since the reopening will likely undermine adherence as schools and local communities continue to speculate on COVID-19. Additionally, surging national COVID-19 cases suggest that the government needs to proactively test teachers and learners that have been in school to verify the success of the measures taken so far.

Additionally, the MoGE needs to use this opportunity to established a robust system for collection of health data in schools collaborating particularly with the MoH. The MOGE needs to develop indicators to track the implementation of COVID-19 interventions. Sectorally, the MoH collects data for the school health services provided at the facility level. This data, however, is not fed back to the schools. Schools are typically unaware of the information gathered by the MoH for the health services implemented it implements.

## XIII. Conclusion and Policy Recommendations

Countries around the world, including Zambia, are faced with the critical decision of reopening schools safely. As COVID-19 has heightened public health concerns, the extended closure of schools is raising fear about significant losses of learning and other risks associated with children staying home especially in marginal communities. The extended closure of schools has no historical precedent in Zambia. In contrast to previous disease outbreaks (Cholera), school closures have been imposed locally. The potential losses in learning are therefore serious. The SCREAM policy review found, however, that school administrators had significant concerns over reopening of schools.

The findings of the policy monitoring exercise show that Zambia's partial reopening of schools for examination classes has enabled continuity of learning without reported cases of COVID-19 in schools. All schools reopened following the guidelines that the MoGE developed prior to 1 June 2020. Close monitoring by various groups including provincial and district task force teams, the PEOs and DEBS has ensured that schools have mobilized and established safe conditions for learning.

Based on these findings, the SCREAM project recommends the following key decision points for the government:

- a. Given the current absence of suspected cases within the school system, the government undertakes a cautious reopening of schools for non-examination classes beginning with limited school days or class time or shorter sessions with intensified COVID-19 monitoring and testing. The government can open schools in a staggered way sharing the week between the early grades and upper grades (early grades turning up Monday to half-day Wednesday and upper grades half day Wednesday to Friday). Weather and other conditions permitting, schools can conduct outdoor learning as well;

- b. Adopt a decentralised approach allowing parts of the country without reported cases of COVID-19 to reopen fully notwithstanding concerns of national uniformity of learning;
- c. If full opening is considered not feasible, the government should continue the limited opening of schools given the difficult challenges of achieving social distancing in normal operation of schools. This effectively would require ending the school year for the non-examination classes. This decision would, however, have significant socioeconomic and cost implications for the school system, families and country at large;
- d. Pivot to a 'new normal' with decisive investments in remote learning initiatives particularly for lower grades and disadvantaged groups. This includes training teachers in remote learning instruction and managing learning support. It should be noted though that world over, remote learning solutions are typically not viable for early learning and children in primary school;
- e. Embrace a balanced investment approach for enabling continuity of learning on the supply and demand side of remote learning solutioning;
- f. Implement activities to promote the return of all children to school (i.e. communication campaign, incentives for vulnerable children or reintegration of pregnant girls). Particular attention must be given to already vulnerable groups, who may face added risks;
- g. Devise innovative catch-up strategies in order to recover learning time;
- h. Commission further investigations to determine the extent of impact of the school closure on risks to children;
- i. Develop guidelines and code of conduct for teachers interacting with learners outside of the school environment for child protection purposes;
- j. Revitalise SHN as a long-term strategic health response in all learning institutions (primary, secondary and tertiary);
- k. Develop a long-term pandemic response requiring significant investments in the education sector focused on expanding space in order to meet the difficult demands of social distancing in learning institutions;
- l. Explore a diversity of solutions to methodically explore low cost alternatives to centralised driven remote learning;
- m. Develop a strategy to guide business continuity in the education sector in the event of another disease occurring;
- n. Adopt a dynamic policy approach, to address contextual realities and shift away from a 'one-size-fits-all' approach, including a move towards localising the national level directives to pave the way for a COVID-19 policy exit strategy;
- o. Expand testing beyond the incidence driven and contact tracing strategy currently in use for addressing COVID-19;
- p. Start pivoting from the emergency response to the so called 'new normal' a move that requires strengthened multi-sectoral coordination and immediately enhancing budget lines for school health activities and WASH;
- q. Proactively test teachers and learners that have been in school to verify the success of the measures taken so far; and
- r. Established a robust system for collection of health data in schools. The MoGE and MoH need to develop indicators to track the implementation of COVID-19 interventions.
- s. MoGE should consider establishing partnerships with Mobile Network Operators that will enable free access to the E-learning portal for all learners at ECE, primary and secondary levels.

The decision points are cast knowing that a prolonged pandemic approach can cause uncertainty in the education system and also put learners out of the school system at risk of harm and engaging in negative behaviours.



## **WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE STAND FOR**

The Zambia National Education Coalition (ZANEC) is a Coalition of non-state actors working in the Education and Skills Sector. It is a recognized institution advocating for improved access to quality education by all citizens. The organisation is involved in research, advocacy and member capacity enhancement on different aspects of Education and Skills Sector in Zambia.

### **Vision**

“A sustainable and inclusive education system that responds to national aspirations and fosters an environment for self-fulfillment”.

### **Mission**

“ZANEC is a coalition of education organisations promoting quality and inclusive education for all, through influencing of policy, building consensus, holding duty bearers accountable and strengthening the capacities of stakeholders in the education sector”.

### **CONTACTS**

Zambia National Education Coalition  
Baptist Fellowship Building  
Plot No. 3061, Makishi Road  
P.O Box 30774, Lusaka, Zambia  
[Tel:+260 211 226422/226490](tel:+260211226422226490)  
Email: [director@zanec.org.zm](mailto:director@zanec.org.zm)  
Website: [www.zanec.org.zm](http://www.zanec.org.zm)

Facebook: <https://www.facebook.com/Zambia-National-Education-Coalition-621828931225604/?ref=bookmarks>  
Twitter: [@ZANEC\\_Official](https://twitter.com/ZANEC_Official)

Supported by:

