

Managing School Closures Amidst COVID-19 Pandemic: Lessons from other Countries and Options for Namibia



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Professional and Resource Development
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August 2020



National Institute for Educational Development



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA
Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture

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Acronyms

COVID-19	Coronavirus Disease of 2019
GCSE	General Certificate of Secondary Education
HIV/AIDS	Human Immunodeficiency Virus/Acquired Immune Deficiency Syndrome
UNAIDS	Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UNICEF	United Nations Children's Fund
USA	United States of America
USAID	United States Agency for International Development
WHO	World Health Organisation

1. Abstract

The primary task of this desktop study was to review what and how other countries adopted as measures in dealing with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on schooling. From the critical analysis done on past pandemics faced in comparison to COVID-19, lessons were drawn that were found to be viable in the Namibian context. Two options were identified, namely, the automatic promotion, and the deferral of the academic year. The pros and cons of each option and their subsequent measures were critically analysed and reviewed to inform the recommendation of the viable option thereof.

2. Introduction and background

The world has experienced numerous pandemics that ravaged human populations and changed history as early as 430 B.C. Among others, the top ones include Spanish Flu – 1918, Asian Flu – 1957, HIV/AIDS – 1981, SARS – 2003, H1N1 Swine Flu – 2009, West African Ebola – 2014 and Covid-19. COVID-19 is an emerging infectious disease which is contagious in nature and declared a very high-risk category of a pandemic by the World Health Organisation (WHO). According to Rodriguez-Morales et al. (2020), “the virus can be transmitted through respiratory droplets, tears, and body fluids if exposed to the mucous membranes of the eyes, mouth, or nose” (p. 2). The early symptoms of COVID-19 include fever, mild chills, dry cough, fatigue and shortness of breath, severe respiratory distress, and pulmonary pneumonia, which worsen if not timely diagnosed and not appropriately medicated (ibid). Literature reveals that few persons may remain asymptomatic carriers without manifesting any clinical symptoms of cold, fever, fatigue or lung pathology. To date, there is no cure for COVID-19, however, researchers are making a high effort to design and develop a suitable vaccine for COVID-19 (Rodriguez-Morales, et al., 2020). Reportedly, some vaccines are on trial in some countries, namely, Russia, the United States of America, and South Africa, amongst others. In the absence of a cure and vaccine, prevention and control measures are enforceable to contain further emergence (infection) and re-emergence (re-infection) of COVID-19. As it is in the epidemiological nature of pandemics, the infectivity of COVID-19 makes it appear and re-appear in several waves of infections. In this

study, the following pandemics will be studied in depth in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

3. Pandemics comparable to the COVID-19 pandemic

Severe pandemics have been faced across the globe even after 1900. Many of these pandemics have devastating effects that impacted human livelihood, world economic activities, health and consequently, schooling. Similarly, the effect of COVID-19 is also felt worldwide and has greatly impacted schooling. It is, therefore, worth analysing the impact of pandemics, their timeframes and the kind of interventions countries undertook to mitigate the effects of the pandemics on schooling. Some of these pandemics are presented in the table below:

Table 1: Pandemics comparable to COVID-19 pandemic

Pandemic	Timeframe	Impact on schooling	Intervention
Spanish Flu	1918-1920	- In total, 40 of the 43 cities closed schools at some point during the outbreak in the USA (Maher, 2020).	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Careful surveillance where students are probably better protected than those who are out of school and about the street and mixing indiscriminately with others. - Daily heavy school medical inspections in New York, Chicago and New Haven, USA. - Continuing sanitarian and bacteriological campaigns in New York, Chicago and New Haven. - Mandatory mask in the USA. - Investment in school nursing in the USA. - Partnering with other authorities (public healthcare, education officials, police personnel & political

			<p>leaders) in Los Angeles.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Tying education to other priorities (establishment of the school lunch programme, intensifying child healthcare) in the entire USA.
Asian Flu	1957-1958	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In Japan, 138 schools had been closed in Tokyo; about 500,000 children were affected by flu. - In Ireland, 75 teachers and 16,000 school children were absent in Belfast; two-thirds of pupils were absent with flu and the schools were closed in Buncrana, and 17 schools were closed in Dublin. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School closure
HIV/AIDS	1981-present	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - About 17 million children lost one or both parents to HIV/AIDS; 90% reside in Sub-Saharan Africa (USAID, 2016). - An estimated 3.4 million children under 15 years are currently living with HIV 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools as ‘acting centre points’ for disseminating information and education on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS, 2017). - Integration of HIV/AIDS prevention in schools’ curriculum. - Keeping many at-risk learners in school. - Drawing dropouts back into the system. - Providing them with access to

		<p>(USAID, 2016).</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A significant number of children with HIV-infected parents. - HIV-infected children mainly miss school days due to illness and medical appointments, and orphans mainly face financial problems and lack motivation in their education, while children with HIV-infected parents may have to take care of their sick parents, face stigma or financial problems that affect their education (USAID, 2016). 	<p>psychosocial support and counselling.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - HIV/AIDS prevention programmes (Coombe, 2002).
SARS	2002 –2003	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Schools closed in Hong Kong, some parts of China, Singapore, Canada and some parts of the world for about a week to 2 months. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Strengthening good public health measures at school to prevent infections (air ventilation, improving environmental hygiene). - Early intervention, prompt isolation and appropriate treatment. - Disinfection of contaminated environments (school premises) - Strengthening of body immunity - Educating parents and students on

			<p>maintaining good environmental hygiene.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Provision of opportunities to learn about infectious disease control as - Empowerment of schools and communities' readiness in dealing with other future pandemics - Use of ICT for continued teaching and learning - Study at home
H1N1 Swine Flu	2009-2010	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - A total number of 14 724 schools globally closed during the 2009 H1N1 influenza pandemic for a period ranging from 2 to 8 weeks. - Some schools remained open with safety measures in place 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School closure - Social distancing
West African Ebola	2014-2016	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In Sierra Leone, schools closed for 9 months, and thousands of learners were idle and out on the street leading to all levels of exploitation (teenage pregnancy increased). 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - In Sierra Leone, massive back-to-school campaigns (radio platform, community mobilisation pathways by UNICEF, door-to-door messaging, or community criers with loudspeakers). - Wavering school and examination fees for two years in Sierra Leone

4. Sampling procedures or criteria for the study

In cognisance of the various global responses and experiences, this study draws lessons and practices to arrest the ravaging effects of COVID-19, particularly in schools. This was done by selecting some countries as case studies, from a list of all countries worldwide showing the total number of confirmed COVID-19 positive cases and total deaths (Epidemic Statistics, 2020).

5. A case study of selected countries from the highest, the middle and lowest total number of confirmed COVID-19 positive cases

COVID-19 is currently a pandemic disturbing human lives including school disruptions and closure. School closures, even when temporary, are problematic for numerous reasons. Foremost, is a reduction in instructional time, which impacts learning achievement. When schools close, educational performance suffers. Disrupting schooling also leads to other harder-to-measure losses, including inconveniences to families and decreased economic productivity as parents struggle to balance work obligations with childcare. The closures also compound educational inequities; economically advantaged families tend to have higher levels of education and more resources to fill learning gaps and provide enrichment activities to children who cannot attend school (UNESCO, 2020a). Response to these disruptions and inconveniences differs from country to country due to the magnitude of the severity and prevalence of positive cases. The countries presented in Table 2 were randomly selected from the list of all countries globally with the highest, middle and lowest total number of confirmed COVID-19 positive cases.

Table 2: Selected countries from the highest, the middle and lowest total number of confirmed COVID-19 positive cases

Case studies	COVID-19 Prevalence	Intervention	Lessons and practices
USA	High	- Cancellation of federally mandated standardized tests in K-12 schools for	- Collaborative decision between parents, educators and administrators, whether students should be retained or advanced to the next grade (Stoops, 2020).

		the 2019-2020 school year and this grant waivers across the board (UNESCO, 2020b).	
China	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation of “School’s Out, But Class’s On” during the schools’ postponement period. - Provision of guidance services for students’ home study via the Internet was encouraged. - Taking precautionary sanitary measures (UNESCO, 2020b.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Suspension of classes without stopping learning. - Postponement of the 2020 spring semester by all types of schools.
India	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Protection of students in schools (Sidharth, 2020) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cancellation of the rest of the exams and declaration of having all learners passed. - Promotion of all students owing to the rising of COVID-19 cases (Sidharth, 2020)
Kenya	Middle	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cancellation of the rest of the school year and declaration of the entire school year a 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Grade repetition by students in 2021 (Dahir, 2020)

		<p>total washout.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Continued online classes and charging tuition by some private schools to help them to stay afloat, and afford to pay rent and the salaries of teachers, cooks, librarians and lab technicians (Dahir, 2020) 	
Ghana	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Decisions regarding the examination sessions are not the immediate priority (UNESCO, 2020b.) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - No full resumption of schools so long as the COVID-19 pandemic continues to spread. - Rescheduling the 2020-2021 academic year which normally begins in September to a later date (The Star, 2020).
Brazil	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Intensification of efforts to reduce the discontinuity of classes by introducing distance learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - School closures across the country due to COVID-19 prevalence. - Conduct both digital and paper format National High School Examination 2020 but the structure of the exam remains unchanged (UNESCO, 2020b).
United Kingdom	High	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Implementation of a proper and robust system to redress 2020 exam intakes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Cancellation of school exams including the General Certificate of Secondary Education (GCSEs) and A Levels that usually take place in May and June due to

		and ensure that pupils get the qualifications they need “in time” (UNESCO, 2020b).	the school closures (UNESCO, 2020b).
Eritrea	Low	- Maintaining 2019/2020 exams (UNESCO, 2020b)	- Continuation of academic activities relative to the National School Leaving Examination 2019/2020 across the country (UNESCO, 2020b)

From the interventions, lessons and practices presented in Table 2, it shows that most countries decided to cancel face-to-face teaching and learning. However, learners are continuing to learn from home using online learning or a blended-learning approach. It is also noted that most of the countries, either cancelled the exams and declared all learners passed (automatic promoted) or postponed the exams to a later stage while other countries such as Kenya cancelled the rest of the school year and declared grade repetition for all students in 2021.

6. The growth of the COVID-19 pandemic in Namibia and its death toll over the past months

The spread of COVID-19 continues to increase unabated, a situation that forced the government to suspend face-to-face teaching and learning and extend lockdown in some regions. The growth of COVID-19 in Namibia is illustrated in the figures that follow and is evident in the prevailing status quo.

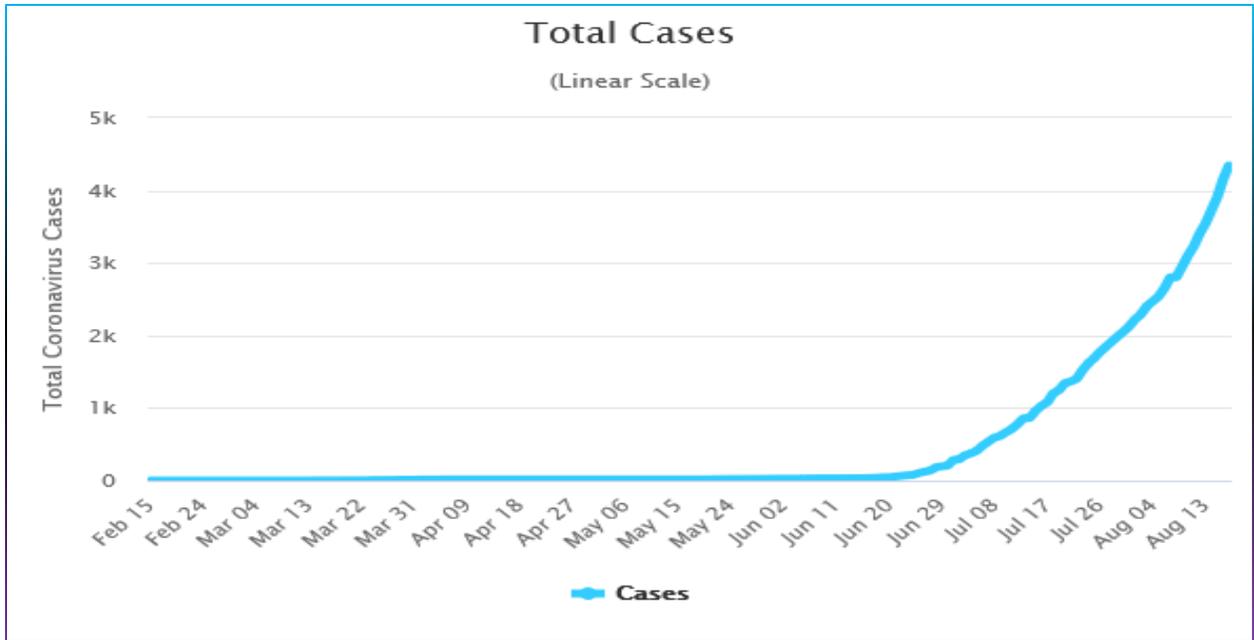


Figure 1: Cumulative Confirmed Positive COVID-19 Cases

Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/namibia/> on 17 August 2020

Figure 1 shows that a total number of 4 344 positive COVID-19 cases have been reported on 17 August 2020. A linear graph displayed above indicates the daily rapid increase of the pandemic in the country.

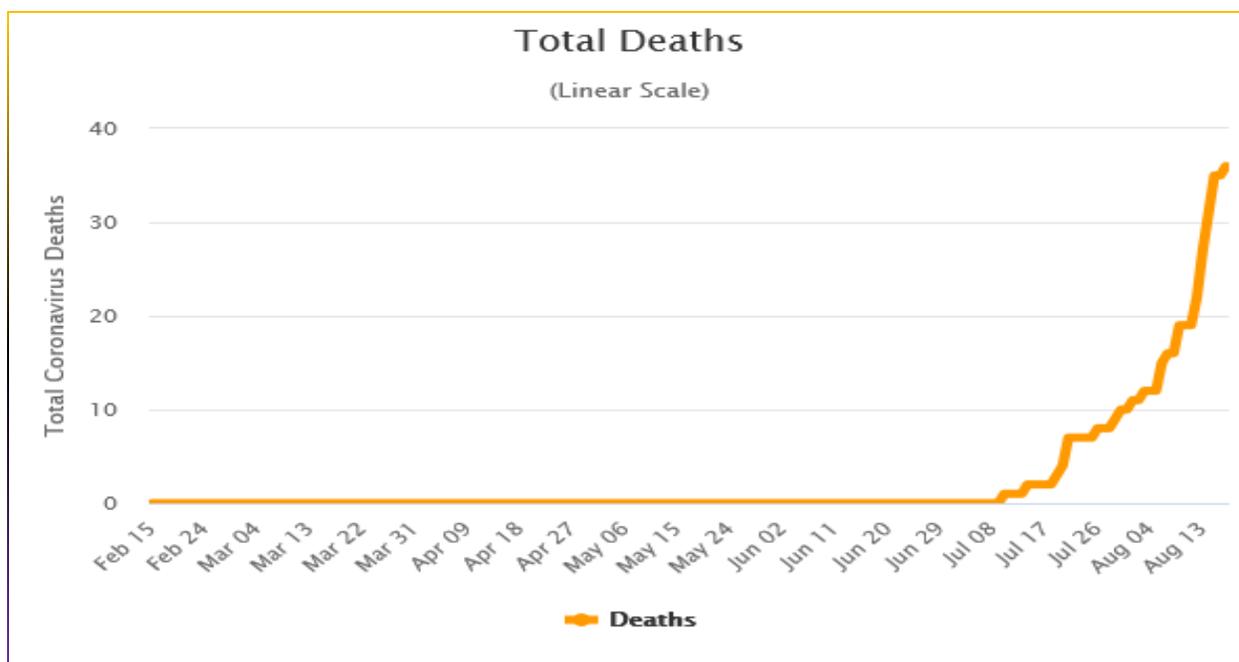


Figure 2: Cumulative Confirmed Covid-19 Death Cases

Retrieved from: <https://www.worldometers.info/coronavirus/country/namibia/> on 17 August 2020

Figure 2 shows that a total number of 36 COVID-19-related deaths have been reported on 17 August 2020. A linear graph displayed above indicates the daily rapid increase of death cases in the country.

The growth of the COVID-19 pandemic in Namibia and its death toll over the past months have negative unprecedented consequences on the education system. This situation requires the ministry to build resilience and strengthen responsiveness capacities in dealing with the challenges of the COVID-19 pandemic.

7. Namibia’s education response and challenges during COVID-19

The outcomes of this prevailing situation have implications for the government’s provisions of education in terms of its fundamental goals particularly that of access, equity and quality. In fulfilling its obligations, the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture has been inundated by a variant of inevitable challenges that continue to haunt and disrupt teaching and learning. Amongst these, are:

- Disparities in school resumption whereby some learners are staying home in fear of contracting the virus at school, other learners resumed face-to-face learning and other grades never resumed face-to-face classes;
- Schools' inability to resume teaching and learning due to various reasons ranging from class size versus space, poor functional sanitation facilities and limited hostel accommodation;
- Continuing disruption of teaching and learning, and temporary school closure due to confirmed cases of COVID-19 among teachers, support staff members and learners;
- On-going renovations and constructions of school facilities and amenities in some schools to meet the compliance standards for the operation of schools during the COVID-19 pandemic. Notably, some schools never resumed face-to-face classes; other schools resumed but had to halt face-to-face classes while ongoing renovations and constructions in other schools ran parallel with face-to-face classes;
- Applying platoon system/time-based cohort and distributed or combined groups approaches/models to ensure physical distancing. These disruptions affect learner engagement, reduce teaching and learning time, intensify teacher workload and have an impact on the completion of the rationalised curriculum;
- Disparities in schooling in the Erongo Region where some schools resumed face-to-face classes but schools in the local authorities of Walvis Bay, Swakopmund and Arandis were still on lockdown. Even when the cohort of schools that were on prolonged lockdown resumed classes, disruptions were experienced that forced them to temporarily close again;
- The rationalised curriculum presents some challenges to both teachers and learners such as the omission of some competencies and learning objectives, crucial to the learner's conceptual understanding of key concepts, skills and values; and
- E-learning disparities due to internet connectivity challenges and lack of ICT devices/gadgets to support continued learning at home.

8. 2021: promotion of learners or grade repetition for all – which way?

In line with the prevailing situation discussed above, Namibia seems to be left with only two options: either to cancel the exams and pass all learners or opt to defer the entire 2020 academic

year and let learners repeat the grade they are currently in. However, in opting for a conclusive decision, consideration has to be given to the pros and cons of these available options as outlined in Tables 3 and 4.

8.1 Option 1: Promotion of all learners

In this option, the ministry should cancel all formal assessments and examinations for the 2020 academic year for Pre-primary to Grade 9 and promote all learners to the next grade. In promoting learners, the government should also consider the pros and cons of this option as presented in Table 3 below.

Table 3: The pros and cons of the promotion of all learners’ option

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Curriculum progression and cohesion (rationalised curriculum) • Lessen financial demand/pressure on the education system (new infrastructures, teacher recruitment). • Maintaining and renovating existing infrastructures (ablution facilities). • Continuing with online teaching and learning. • Blended-learning approach 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pressure in the integration of subject content of the previous grade and current grade (rationalised curriculum). • Psychological effects on teachers and learners in dealing with a rationalised curriculum (compressed subject contents). • Burnout, workload and stress among teachers. • Impact of class size versus physical distancing (halving of classes). • Budgetary limitation (constraints) • Inaccessibility of online learning • Lack of parental involvement amongst parents with poor economic background (stress due to job losses or salary cuts). • Overwhelmed internet connectivity (slow speed, inaccessible, congestion). • A gap in learning among learners from

	different economic backgrounds.
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8.1.1 Measures to consider for the promotion of all learners’ option

- The ministry should maintain access to learning and ensure that learners retain knowledge and skills (i.e., through temporary remote, alternative or distance learning programmes);
- This means the ministry should devise a mandatory catch-up/remedial strategy plan for learners who have lagged behind or had a break in their education to re-join their level of schooling and competency; and
- Furthermore, there is a need for education systems to be set up with contingency capacities to mitigate and manage risks in the future. In order to make education more meaningful to all learners, the ministry should make education more accessible and equitable.

8.2 Option 2: Deferral of 2020 academic year

In this option, the ministry should cancel the 2020 academic year for Pre-primary to Grade 9 and let learners repeat the grade in the 2021 academic year. In deferring the 2020 academic year, the government should also consider the pros and cons of this option as presented in Table 4 below.

Table 4: The pros and cons of the deferral of the 2020 academic year option

Pros	Cons
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Optimal attainment of the subject content. • The high retention rate in the system. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Legal implications (obligation of the GRN and child’s rights to education). • Lack of system capacity to accommodate new intakes of Pre-primary and/or Grade 1. • No Grade 11 (given current status quo). • Increase in infrastructure (classrooms, portable water and ablution facilities). • Teachers’ recruitment (supply and demand).

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Financial implications. • Psychological/emotional implications. • Economic impact (retrenchments, stress) • Private school (burden on parents' financial obligation, incentive/subsidy for parents, relaxation of conditions of establishing private schools). • Re-visit promotional policy requirements (repetition in a phase policy). • Demoralizing of learners (Higher rate of dropout). • High poverty rate (Child labour, increased teenage pregnancy, increased GBV cases). • Compromised health and nutrition of learners from poor economic backgrounds (no School Feeding Programme). • Impact on part-time institutions such as NAMCOL.
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8.2.1 Measures to consider for the deferral of the current academic year option

- The ministry should devise a preparedness and responsive plan to deal with class and hostel space, teacher demand and supply, and universal primary and secondary education funds;
- The ministry should intensify socio-psychological support to learners to overcome traumatic experiences from exposure to delayed academic progression, societal ills, child labour, etc.;
- The ministry should advance the provision of protection and safety of all learners from harm by unruly behaving learners (these are issues such as bullying, stealing, fighting, vandalism, and graffiti, amongst others).
- The ministry should ensure that the most at-risk learners return to schools unhindered;

- The ministry should create a stimulus package for private schools to stay afloat, ease parents' financial burden and relax the conditions of establishing private schools;
- The ministry should put in place measures of response to possible legal summon from stakeholders emanating from what can be perceived as a failure in fulfilling its mandatory obligation towards the provision of education and constitutional rights of a child to education;
- The ministry should prepare a contingency plan to arrest a situation that will arise resulting in a grade gap for grades 10 and 11 consecutively; creating an imbalance in the teacher demand and supply at the senior secondary phase which will require re-assigning teachers to adequately comply with the staffing norms. Re-assigning teachers temporarily to new duty stations has cost implications as per Public Service Act; and
- The ministry should strengthen the provision of the Namibia School Feeding Programme (NSFP) by increasing the supply ratio of food and boosting a healthy diet for learners who might have been deprived of adequate food supply during the school closure, particularly learners from poor economic backgrounds.

In cognisance of the new reality of learning where face-to-face teaching and learning is not viable; whatever option is to be considered, the government should ensure that various processes of strengthening learning support and parental support are taken into account. In addition, in ensuring preparedness for any future eventualities and/or disruptions of teaching and learning due to the COVID-19 pandemic wave or re-infections, the ministry should make contingency plans including the rationalised curriculum and extended school calendar for 2021. This would mean compressing curriculum contents to a certain percentage and reducing the length of school holidays to make the implementation of the curriculum flexible. In so doing, the ministry would be in a better position to mitigate challenges experienced and establish favourable conditions for continued learning to take place unhindered.

9. The challenges, opportunities and way forward per grade

When considering the measures discussed under the two options above; it is evidently noted that the COVID-19 pandemic has caused some challenges and opportunities to the Namibia

education system which cannot be ignored. The cons of Option 2 (the deferral of the 2020 academic year) outweigh the pros and its measures would require massive efforts from the government. On the other hand, Option 1 (the automatic promotion) is suggested as the viable option considering its relatively demanding required efforts. Thus, Table 5 presents the challenges and opportunities per grade which craft the roadmap as a way forward to ensure that teaching and learning continue in whatever possible way.

Table 5: The challenges, opportunities and way forward per grade

Grade/Phase	Challenges	Opportunities	Way Forward
Pre-primary- Grade 3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No face-to-face-learning • No End-Year Assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued learning - Learning from home (centrally distributed printed learning materials for assessment) - E-learning - Continuous assessment tasks/activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically promoted /transferred to the next grades in 2021
Grade 4-6 & 8	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No face-to-face-learning • No End-Year Assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued learning - Learning from/at home (school-based distributed printed learning materials) - E-learning - Continuous assessment tasks/activities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically promoted /transferred to the next grades in 2021
Grade 7 & 9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No face-to-face-learning • No End-Year Assessments 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Continued learning - Learning from/at home (school-based distributed printed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically promoted /transferred to the next grades in 2021

		learning materials) - E-learning - Continuous assessment tasks/activities	
Grade 10	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Limited timeframe to cover curriculum • Some learners still have no access to face-to-face learning. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face-learning in most schools • Examination exemptions • NSSCO is a two-year programme covered in Grade 10-11 with the opportunity for contextual strategies to cover lost time. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Automatically promoted /transferred to the next grades in 2021
Grade 11 - 12	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Some learners still have no access to face-to-face learning (David Sheehama, Onesi, Leevi Hakusembe, etc.). • Continued disruption of face-to-face learning due to exposure to confirmed cases at some schools. • Limited timeframe to cover the curriculum for 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Face-to-face-learning. • Examination writing. • Progression to AS/further studies. • Strengthen the online support system for affected schools. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Maintaining examinations for learners who attended schools uninterrupted and have covered the rationalised syllabus. • Postponement/Rescheduling of the examination for learners who experienced disruption of face-to-face learning and could not completely cover the syllabus. • Postponement/Resche

	schools in Walvis Bay, Swakopmund & Arandis.		duling of the examination depending on the evolution of COVID-19.
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Therefore, Option 1 (the automatic promotion) is highly recommended as the viable option for mapping the way forward.

10. Conclusion

In cognisance of the Namibian contextual challenges and opportunities, this study recommends that Pre-primary to Grade 10 learners, for equity reasons, be automatically transferred to the next grade. Whereas, Grade 11 and 12 learners who had an opportunity of face-to-face learning can write examinations as scheduled; while the examinations for the Grade 11 and 12 learners who experienced disruptions of face-to-face learning can be rescheduled at a fair suitable date.

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