

# A historic shock to parental engagement in education

*Parent perspectives in Botswana  
during COVID-19*

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# A historic shock to parental engagement in education: Parent perspectives in Botswana during COVID-19

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When schools closed in Botswana on April 2, 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic, education administrators, teachers, and ultimately parents were faced with difficult decisions about how to help children continue learning without setting foot inside a classroom. In-person classes returned on June 17, 2020, though a second school closure occurred for two weeks beginning July 30 in greater Gaborone.

Like almost all the other 189 countries that closed their schools, the education community in Botswana had to rapidly pivot to remote learning strategies. Policymakers, school leaders, educators and education nonprofits quickly began to innovate with new ways of helping children learn. Television and radio lessons are just some of the ways the Botswana government and its partners attempted to reach children.

At the center of many of these strategies are parents.<sup>1</sup> With children at home, Botswana’s parents suddenly became a central arbiter connecting education to their children. Like many countries around the world, this meant developing new forms of collaboration between schools and families. In Botswana, the average parent has opportunities to engage with his or her child’s school administration through periodic parent-teacher association meetings in the school where teachers share information on students’ performance or through school improvement projects where community members help improve the school infrastructure and collect report cards at the end of every term. But rarely are parents directly engaged in the heart of the teaching and learning process—what educationalists refer to as the “instructional core”—namely the interactions between content, students, and educators.

The COVID-19 pandemic has provided a historic shock to education systems worldwide, necessitating parents to join the frontlines of the teaching-learning process. Research on education innovations, including the Brookings publications “Leapfrogging Inequality: Remaking Education to Help Young People Thrive” and “Millions Learning: Scaling Education in Developing Countries,” has shown that new approaches born out of adversity can scale and become a better

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<sup>1</sup> We use the term “parent” throughout this policy brief to refer to a student’s primary caregiver. This person is the adult who assumes the most responsibility in caring for the health and well-being of the child and thus can be a grandparent, aunt, uncle, or other family member.

way of doing things over the long term.<sup>12</sup> It is in this context that we are sharing data from recent research on parents in Botswana and seeking to shed light on a range of questions, including: What have been parents' experiences in relation to their children's education? What are parents' beliefs about what makes for a quality education for their child? What informs parents' beliefs about education at this time? What can the education community learn from the different parent engagement approaches used during COVID-19 that could be relevant long term?

As Botswana and the world face the possibility of cycles of school closures due to the ongoing nature of COVID-19, it will be important to build resiliency within education systems, including through learning more about how to effectively engage parents. Additionally, as a result of the COVID-19 school closures, parents have had unprecedented exposure to their children's education. This recent insight into their children's learning may have changed parents' beliefs about what makes for a good quality education, and thus could ultimately serve as a new driver for education reform. This will serve schools well even after the novel coronavirus is over—both because there may be other times when school is disrupted (e.g., natural disasters on the rise due to climate change) but also because to reveal useful, new strategies for helping children learn even in stable times.

# The research

The Center for Universal Education (CUE) at Brookings, a policy-oriented research organization located in the United States, has collaborated with Young 1ove, a youth-focused nonprofit in Botswana, to better understand how new, interactive, and differentiated approaches to teaching and learning can scale and improve education. CUE is leading the Real-Time Scaling Lab in Botswana, in which a coalition of partners (e.g., Young 1ove, Ministry of Basic Education, UNICEF, Teaching at the Right Level Africa, Jameel Poverty Action Lab (J-PAL), Pratham, and USAID) are implementing and evaluating a “Teaching at the Right Level” (TaRL) numeracy intervention that uses differentiated instruction and interactive pedagogical approaches. Because developing relationships with families and parents is an integral part of the programmatic approach, Young 1ove is also taking part in CUE’s Family Engagement in Education Network that works with jurisdictions around the world to understand how to improve family-school partnerships. Hence, this policy brief draws data from two recent studies undertaken by Young 1ove and their partners.

From June 23 to July 31, 2020, CUE and Young 1ove surveyed 1,051 parents with children enrolled in pre-school through secondary school (i.e., early childhood through Form 5) in Botswana. The survey was administered via Facebook and WhatsApp in both English and Setswana. The parents responding to the survey came from all 10 regions in the country and reflected its socioeconomic diversity, with 27 percent of respondents having completed secondary school as their highest level of education, 15 percent having less than a secondary school degree, and 19 percent having completed a bachelor's degree.<sup>2</sup> Mothers took part in the survey more often than fathers, though, as 64 percent of respondents were female.

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<sup>2</sup> On the survey, parents reported their highest level of education attained as a proxy measure for socioeconomic status. There was a significant difference in the distribution of parents' highest level of education attained by the grade level of their oldest school-aged child:  $F(3, 1047) = 3.86, p = .009$ .

At the same time as this survey was underway, Young 1ove provided remote learning support delivered directly to parents of schoolchildren via SMS messages and phone calls. The home learning strategy was evaluated by academics at J-PAL, Columbia University, and University of Oxford using a rigorous rapid cycle trial called Stemming Learning Loss During the Pandemic, which provided some of the first experimental evidence on strategies to minimize the fallout of the pandemic on education.<sup>3</sup> The study evaluated two low-tech interventions to substitute schooling during this period: SMS text messages and direct phone calls. The rapid trial in Botswana aimed to inform real-time policy responses collecting data at four- to six-week intervals. Early results showed that both interventions result in cost-effective learning gains of 0.16 to 0.29 standard deviations, translating to a reduction in innumeracy of up to 52 percent. Additionally, the research shows increased parental engagement in children's education and more accurate parent perceptions of their child's learning. This approach to rapid iteration and learning by Young 1ove and its partners embodies many of the principles of a Real-Time Scaling Lab.

# The context

The Republic of Botswana is an upper-middle income country with—prior to the pandemic—one of the fastest growing economies in the world. It invests heavily in education, setting aside almost 27 percent of the government’s budget for schooling. It is noted for transforming from one of the poorest countries in the world five decades ago to being one of the most prosperous on the continent with some of the lowest levels of corruption and is currently Africa’s oldest continuous democracy. A small country of 2.3 million people, Botswana is sparsely populated with the majority of people living in rural areas. The government’s recent education sector plan articulates a vision for Botswana to transform into a knowledge economy, as currently the economy is mainly powered by mining, cattle, and tourism.<sup>4</sup>

The vast majority of children attend primary school with a gross enrollment ratio of 103 percent and a transition rate from primary to junior secondary school of 97 percent, according to UNESCO’s Institute of Statistics. The education system typically includes early childhood development for children younger than 5 years old, primary school runs standard 1 through 7, junior secondary through Form 1 through 3, and senior secondary includes form 4 and 5. However, the country has struggled to deliver quality learning. The most recent Southern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Education Quality (SACMEQ) report revealed that Botswana trailed behind regional neighbors on learning outcomes. A 2017 situational analysis of basic literacy and numeracy in the Chobe and Kgatleng regions found gaps in learning, with 90 percent of standard 5 students unable to do basic division and 40 percent of students unable to read a simple story.<sup>5</sup> These reports reveal that students in Botswana are not acquiring basic foundational skills and are falling behind grade-level expectations. Despite striking gaps in learning, net enrollment rates are high throughout the country at over 90 percent. Moreover, Botswana has the resources, strategies, and political will to implement programs that improve learning. The national education policy, the Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP), calls for the country to improve quality education, remedial education, and learner-focused and competency-based education approaches.

# The Findings

This study presents one of, if not the only, recent survey of parent perspectives about children’s education. While there is much to learn from parents’ responses, we present three main findings that have implications for education policymakers, administrators, educators, and civil society partners.

## **Finding 1: Parents have high but declining levels of satisfaction with their children’s education**

Parents overall report being broadly happy with their child’s education. This is true both before the pandemic hit, where only 7 percent of parents surveyed rated their child’s education as “poor” or “not so good,” and during the school closures, where only 10 percent said they were “not” or only “slightly” satisfied with their children’s education.

Overall, while many parents report being satisfied with their child’s education, there appears to be a reduction in satisfaction levels from before to after the pandemic. Before the COVID-19 crisis, over 70 percent of parents reported that the education their children received was either “excellent” (33 percent) or “pretty good” (38 percent). After the onset of the pandemic, almost 50 percent of parents still reported being satisfied with their child’s education, with parents saying they were “extremely satisfied” (13 percent) or “very satisfied” (36 percent) with their child’s education; Approximately a quarter of the population is neither extremely happy nor extremely unhappy. Prior to the pandemic, 22 percent reported that their child’s education is “just OK” and afterward, 29 percent reported feeling “neutral,” meaning neither satisfied nor dissatisfied with their child’s education; Figure 1 shows the distribution of parents’ satisfaction ratings.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Different, but analogous, rating categories were used for the survey item “Question 7: Before schools closed, how would you rate the education that your children are getting from their school?” and “Question 9:



This distribution of satisfaction with children’s education is similar across education levels except for parents of children in junior secondary school who were significantly less satisfied. For example, only 22 percent of form 1-3 parents rated their child’s education as “excellent” before the pandemic, compared to between 34 and 36 percent of parents from all the other levels that rated their child’s education as “excellent.” Similarly, after the pandemic, junior secondary school parents were much more likely (9 percent) to be “not at all” satisfied with their child’s education, versus only 1 percent of parents of children in early childhood development and 5 percent of primary school parents.

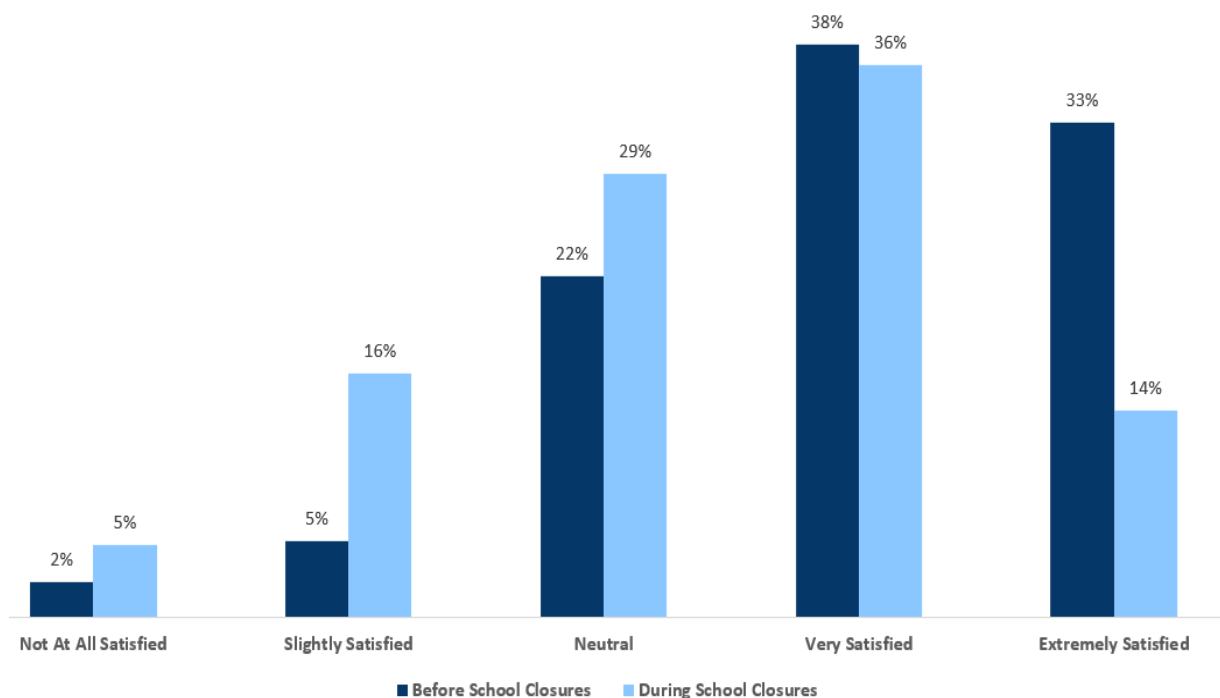
Interestingly, less educated parents showed the greatest shift in their levels of satisfaction before and after school closures compared to college-educated parents. Before the pandemic, all parents were generally quite satisfied with their children’s education, with less educated parents reporting greater satisfaction compared to parents with bachelor’s degrees. However, following the COVID-19 school closures, parent satisfaction decreased such that less educated parents reported feeling less satisfied than parents with bachelor’s degrees.

One other dimension of note was the difference in satisfaction levels between parents who before and after the pandemic had children participating in Young Love’s low-tech interventions to substitute schooling during the school closures. Of the parents surveyed, approximately 20 percent were participating in this intervention, and they reported greater satisfaction with their children’s education both before and after the COVID-19 school closures compared to parents who were not participating. Of the parents who participated in the low-tech interventions, 60 percent reported that they were either “very satisfied” or “extremely satisfied” with their children’s education after the school closures, while only 47 percent of parents who did not participate in the interventions indicated the same degree of satisfaction.

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At the time of this survey, how satisfied are you with your child’s education?” In order to compare parents’ satisfaction ratings before and during the COVID-19 school closures—specifically for the purpose of the figures presented—the rating categories for question 7 were adjusted to match the categories of question 9. Thus, a rating of “poor” became “not satisfied at all,” “not so good” became “slightly satisfied,” “just okay” became “neutral,” “pretty good” became “very satisfied,” and “excellent” became “extremely satisfied.”

**Figure 1. Parents' satisfaction with their child's education before and during the COVID-19 school closures**



It is not unusual in education satisfaction surveys for parents to report being satisfied with the education their children are receiving. In the United States, for example, parents regularly report that they are satisfied with the school their children attend but are not satisfied with education delivery broadly across the nation.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, satisfaction levels do not necessarily correspond to how well schools teach children central academic skills like reading, writing, and mathematics. Many parents in the U.S. who report being satisfied with their children's school do so despite the school's poor performance on standardized literacy and numeracy assessments. There are various explanations for this, and some U.S. experts argue that parents do not receive clear information about their child's academic achievement levels.<sup>7</sup> Similarly, across several countries in Asia and Africa, citizen-led assessment efforts such as ASER and UWEZO argue that data transparency on learning outcomes is a crucial piece of the solution for activating parent demand for change.

While parents' lack of familiarity with their children's true academic competence may help explain high satisfaction levels, it is also likely that there are a range of

other factors at play. As we have seen recently with the school closures across the globe, schools provide a wide range of non-academic support to families—from freeing parents of child care burdens so they may work to providing another caring adult in children’s lives to supplementing nutrition and other health supports. Botswana parents, as we will see below, have a great deal of respect for the views of teachers and education leaders, and they likely appreciate all the work educators put into guiding their children, which in turn may be reflected in their satisfaction levels.

## **Finding 2: Parents want schools to teach a breadth of academic and non-academic competencies and skills but believe their children’s teachers primarily value academic skills**

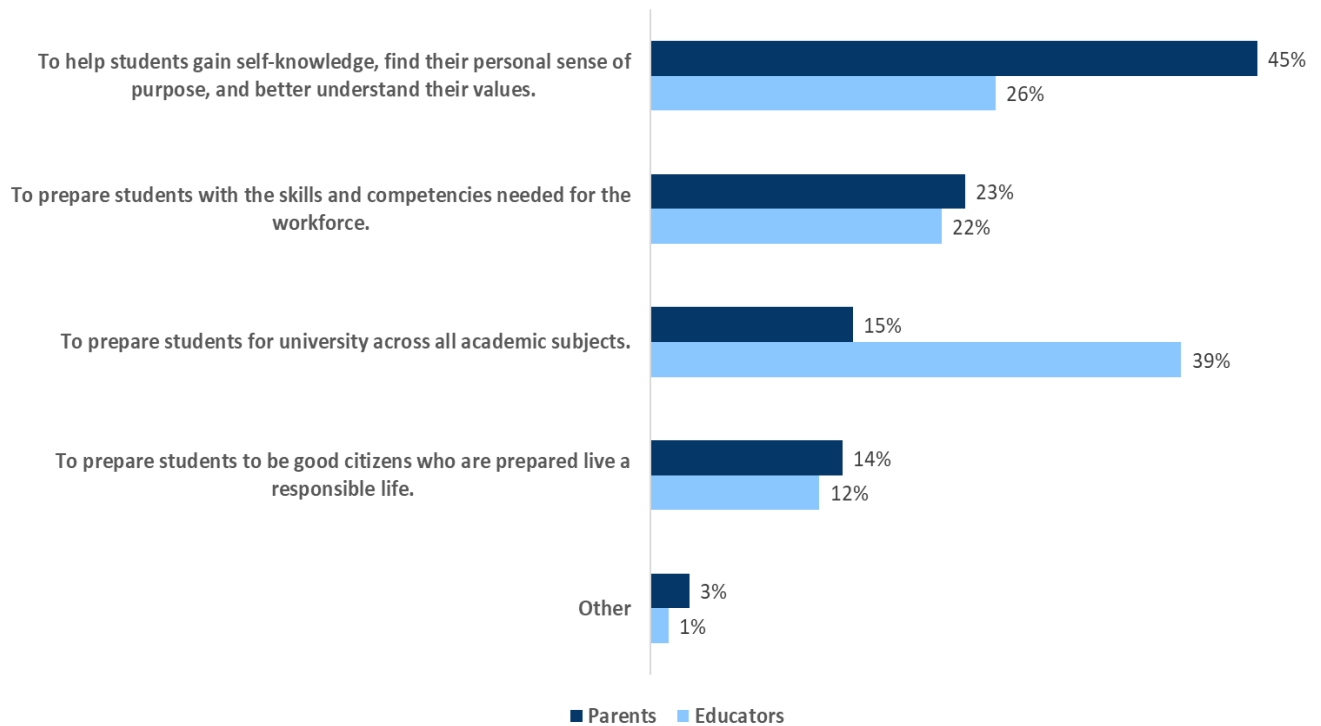
For the vast majority of parents in Botswana, the reason they send their children to school is not to master academic subjects in preparation for university but rather to develop a wider range of skills, competencies, and values for work. Only 15 percent of parents responded that they believe school’s purpose is for academic preparation for university, whereas 82 percent of parents believe its purpose lays outside this—from children finding “their sense of purpose” and developing “self-knowledge” (45 percent) to developing “skills needed for the workforce” (23 percent) to preparing to “live a responsible life” and be “a good citizen” (14 percent). These views are held consistently regardless if parents have children in primary, junior, or senior secondary school.

Interestingly, when asked if parents believed educators shared their views of the purpose of schooling, many said they did not. Almost 40 percent of parents believe that school administrators and teachers think that the primary function of school is to prepare students for university across all academic subjects, whereas only 26 percent believe administrators and educators think the purpose of school is to help children “develop self-knowledge.” This perceived misalignment in the purpose of schooling can be seen in Figure 2 below and was fairly consistent regardless of the age of parents’ children. Overall, only 33 percent of parents reported that their beliefs about the most important purpose of schooling aligned with what they believe educators consider the most important purpose. Thus, for most parents—67 percent—there is misalignment

between their reasons for schooling versus what they think their children's educators think is most important.

This misalignment between parents and teachers merits further investigation. The school curriculum *does* include a component of life skills. Although there is limited data on how teachers translate the curriculum into practice in the classroom, the data that does exist, including assessments for the TaRL program, indicate that instruction is often heavily didactic with limited interactivity. Decades of research from the learning sciences demonstrate that many non-academic skills such as student agency, confidence, and self-awareness require interactive, experiential teaching and learning experiences.<sup>8</sup> This finding could indicate that teachers are helping children develop non-academic skills of which parents are unaware. It could alternatively indicate that teachers are either not prioritizing non-academic skills development, or if they are prioritizing it, not deploying effective pedagogical strategies. Moreover, parent prioritization of non-academic skills might suggest that they are unaware that many students lack foundational literacy and numeracy skills, and hence prioritize life skills over academics, assuming the basic academic building blocks have been attained, which would be consistent with parent perceptions that education is relatively high quality. Ultimately, it is likely that parents are not seeing their children develop non-academic skills and may get most school or teacher communication around their child's academic progression.

**Figure 2. Comparison of parents’ beliefs about the most important purpose of school and parents’ perceptions of educators’ beliefs about the most important purpose of school**



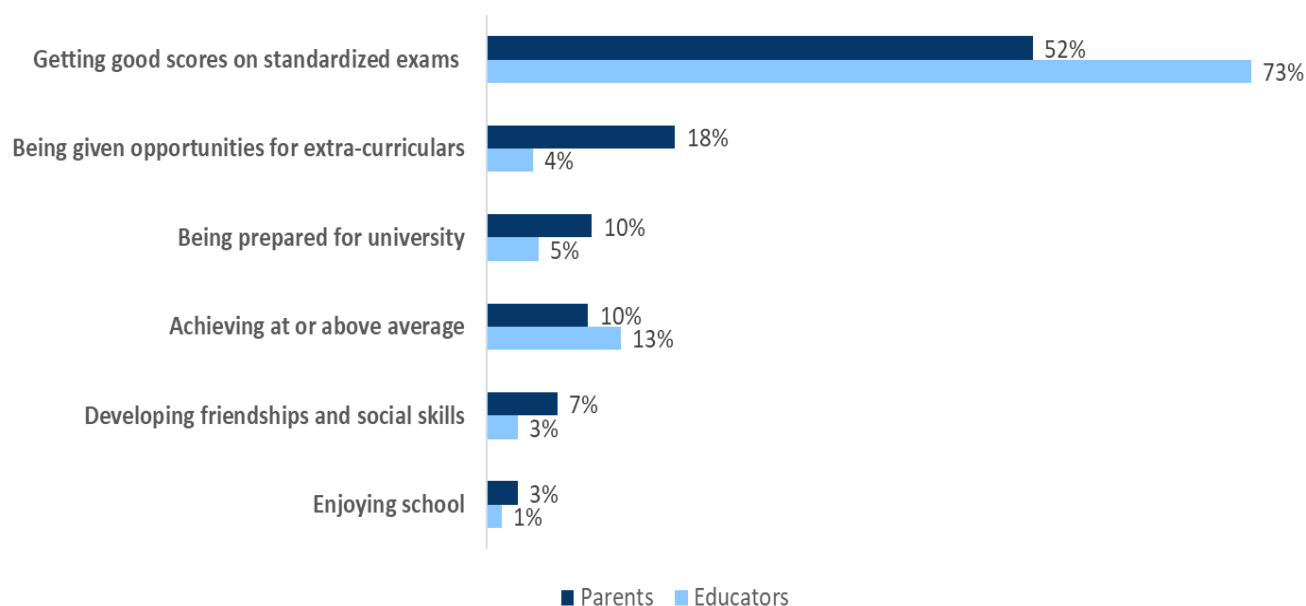
**Finding 3: Despite prioritizing non-academic skills, parents rely heavily on academic exams to indicate a good quality education**

When asked what indicators parents most rely on to assess if their child is getting a good education, over half (52 percent) chose “getting good scores on standardized exams” as the most important. Passing the high-stakes exams—from Primary School Leaving Examinations (PSLE) to Junior Certificate Examinations (JCE) to the Botswana General Certificate of Secondary Education (BGCSE)—were far more important to parents than other signs of academic achievement, such as achieving at or above grade level (10 percent) or being prepared for university (10 percent). Interestingly, almost one in five parents felt that extra-curricular opportunities that align with students’ interests were more important than getting good exam scores. Very few parents reported that developing social skills (7 percent) or enjoying school (3 percent) was important to their assessment of their child’s education.

Parents' assessment of their child's education appears to counter their aspiration for the purpose of school. This likely highlights the practical realities of what passing the primary, junior secondary, and senior secondary exams can mean for the opportunities afforded to their children. Although parents may desire that schools help their children learn a breadth of skills, in a system where high-stakes academic exams are gatekeepers of opportunity for progressing in education and employment, it is quite possible that parents are pragmatists. It is also possible that parents are either missing or not aware of feedback loops that could indicate how their children are faring in relation to developing "self-knowledge" and "sense of purpose," which if available to parents, could be an important indicator of quality education.

Parents may also be influenced by the teachers and administrators at their children's school. Parents have a high level of respect and deference to teachers and administrators and overwhelmingly turn to them for guidance and information about their child's education. Eighty-one percent of parents indicated that their opinions of what makes for a good quality education are informed predominately by the opinions of their child's educators and believe educators judge their students' education primarily through exam scores. A large majority (73 percent) of parents believe their child's educators are most satisfied when students score well on their high-stakes exams, which is shown below in Figure 3.

**Figure 3. Aspects of school parents are most satisfied with and believe that educators are most satisfied with**



#### **Finding 4: Parents of all education levels are interested and capable of helping their children learn**

Results regarding remote learning from one of the first randomized trials during the pandemic showed that parents could effectively support their children’s learning during the school closures. Angrist et al. (2020) find that parents who were supported with weekly SMS text messages and 20-minute phone calls curbed innumeracy in their children relative to the control group by 52 percent.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, simple one-way bulk SMS only to parents enabled them to curb innumeracy by 34 percent.

Angrist et al. (2020) find that parent engagement directly through phone calls and SMS does not crowd out other parental support (such as radio or TV educational content engagement).<sup>10</sup> Rather, this initial engagement catalyzes *additional* engagement: Parents are 7 to 12 percentage points more likely to engage in their child’s education overall, and their child is up to twice as likely to tune into educational radio content.

Data from the parent survey in this study shows that average age of parents or caregivers participating in the randomized trial was 35, ranging from 20 to 80 years in age, and that 68 percent of parents were female and 32 percent male. In addition, 25 percent of parents completed the survey in this study in Setswana, rather than English, suggesting content in the SMS intervention which was provided in English could still be useful for parents who preferred another language. Moreover, data reveal that many of the parents in the randomized trial had relative low literacy.<sup>4</sup> Thirty-two percent had only completed Form 5, which means they did not attend university. The next highest share at 18 percent were those who started university but did not finish, and 16 percent did not finish Form 5 and thus did not complete a high school degree. To this end, the sample of parents in the trial appears to have relative low literacy and, in addition, is broadly similar to the entire sample of parents surveyed in this study.

One of the features of the low-tech phone and SMS parent-support intervention is it brings parents into the “instructional core,” or namely the heart of the teaching and learning process. Evidence from other parts of the world show that bringing parents into this process can have beneficial impacts on children’s learning. For example, in the U.K., a mobile phone intervention called [\*Easy Peasy\*](#) helps low-income parents develop socioemotional skills in their young children at home. In [“Beyond Reopening: How education can emerge stronger than before COVID-19?”](#) CUE scholars highlight long-standing evidence that shows that new education approaches that do not change the interaction between learning material, educators, students, and now parents rarely have lasting success.<sup>11</sup> Parents traditionally are asked to engage in ways that are outside the active, daily work of teaching and learning in the average Botswana school.

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<sup>4</sup> The parent survey partially intersects with the sample of the randomized trial with 200 overlapping parents. This sample is not strictly representative of the entire cohort of parents in the randomized trial but provides an indication of likely literacy levels.



# Recommendations

As many countries turn their attention to investing in human capital, engaging parents appears to be one lever ripe for activation.<sup>12</sup> In this spirit, we suggest that education leaders in government and civil society organizations should consider the following three recommendations:

## 1. Lean-in on *active* parent engagement strategies in the teaching-learning process

- Begin to use active parent engagement strategies that enable and support parents to take part in the heart of the teaching and learning process. It will be important to find strategies that can easily fit into parent's busy lives and that engage both parents with limited levels of education and access to technology and those with high levels of education and access to robust technology.
- To do this, leverage simple, low-tech approaches to engage parents and provide real-time feedback loops on learning through mobile phones, including smart and flip phones. Simple weekly phone calls and SMS nudges by teachers to parents can facilitate school and parent linkages and help students learn.
- These forms of engagement also have the potential to develop stronger parent-teacher and family-school relationships, which can be leveraged for a range of future strategies on improving education. Increasing this active engagement also can help mediate against declining levels of parent satisfaction, since those parents with children who participate in low-tech mobile phone engagement did not have their satisfaction go down during school closures.

## **2. Open a dialogue between parents, teachers, and schools to align beliefs and goals**

- Initiate an open dialogue between parents and families on the one-hand and teachers and school leaders on the other.
- Focus listening or discussion sessions on why parents send their children to school, what they see as the main purpose of school, and what they most hope school helps their children learn and do.
- Engage in a family-school dialogue about the types of skills and competencies that are most important from the standpoint of education leaders, school heads, and teachers, as well as the ones most desired by families to help align and support the broad range of skills needed to help Botswana transition to a knowledge economy. This could have implications for what is taught in school and how ministries approach education in the future.

## **3. Investigate new feedback loops for parents to understand their child's education**

- Out of the open dialogue between families and schools, identify areas where parents may need new feedback loops from teachers and schools. For example, do parents need new ways of understanding if their children are making adequate academic progress? If so, consider more frequent, low-stakes diagnostic assessments to ensure parents have an accurate picture of their child's achievement and can serve as an effective accountability and support mechanism for schools and teachers.
- Do parents and teachers need to develop new feedback loops to help track students' non-academic competencies, such as student agency, self-reflection, learning how to learn, all of which are important for developing self-knowledge and thriving in a new knowledge economy? If so, consider feasible ways for assessing and sharing back with parents on students' development.

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<sup>8</sup> Pellegrino, James and Margaret Hilton, eds. "Education for Life and Work: Developing Transferable Knowledge and Skills in the 21st Century." National Research Council, 2012.

<sup>9</sup> Angrist et al. 2020

<sup>10</sup> Angrist et al. 2020

<sup>11</sup> Vegas, Emiliana and Rebecca Winthrop. "Beyond reopening schools: How education can emerge stronger than before Covid-19." The Center for Universal Education at the Brookings Institution, 2020. <https://www.brookings.edu/research/beyond-reopening-schools-how-education-can-emerge-stronger-than-before-covid-19/>.

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<sup>12</sup> World Bank. "Pandemic Threatens Human Capital Gains of the Past Decade, New Report Says." 2020. <https://www.worldbank.org/en/news/press-release/2020/09/16/pandemic-threatens-human-capital-gains-of-the-past-decade-new-report-says>.

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