

## COVID-19 and the End of the School Year in Kenya

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### Abstract

COVID-19 ended the 2020 school year in Kenya. In July 2020, Kenya's Education Cabinet Secretary announced that "the 2020 school calendar year [is] considered lost due to COVID-19 restrictions." The Cabinet Secretary's 3-page report suspending learning created confusion and anxiety among students, parents, and educators. Shallow in breadth and scope, the report offered little guidance on the reopening process. Built on primary and secondary sources, this reflection interrogates this report and questions its central premise of virtual learning.

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"The 2020 school calendar year [is] considered lost due to COVID-19 restrictions" (Magoha, 2020, p. 3), Kenya's education Cabinet Secretary Professor George Magoha conceded in a brief report to the nation on July 6, 2020. Magoha's concession effectively made Kenya the first nation to give up an entire school year because of the government's inability to contain the virus, yet Kenyans suspended their everyday socioeconomic and political activities to create the space for rapid response and containment. Expected to guide parents, educators, and over 14 million children in primary and secondary schools, the report begins by revealing that President Uhuru Kenyatta had accepted its recommendations. It then hints at the involvement of "stakeholders" who constituted the committee without necessarily disclosing their identities. Those familiar with government reports in Kenya—and Africa—understand that "stakeholders" is a phrase commonly used to give the impression of an inclusive committee consisting of key players from disparate sectors. In the real sense, however, stakeholders are politicians and lobbyists who sit on committees to advance multiple interests and draw per diem.

Magoha's report outlines several "minimum reopening conditions" for the 2021 school year that include "reducing physical contact in learning institutions by having *fewer learners*" (ibid, p. 1). As the report's authors envisioned, a reduced student capacity "will have a great impact in reducing COVID-19 cases and fatalities associated with the reopening of learning institutions" (ibid, p. 1). This recommendation ends there, and it does not provide specific guidance about how best to realize this goal. It is unclear exactly what percentage constitutes "fewer learners" and who among the student population will miss the cut. What is clear is that students who will be excluded from the category of "fewer learners" will likely sit out two school years, and the government has not disclosed who holds the power to determine which child to deprive of the privilege to "discover" what Richard Shaull (1968, p. 15) characterized as "how to participate in the transformation of their world."

The report insists that the decision to reopen schools in January 2021 may "change based on the recommendation" from the Ministry of Health. The question is: change to what? It seems, at least from the hurriedly prepared report, the Ministry of Education has not imagined contingency

plans supposed to move the learning process forward if the “infection curve will not have flattened by December 2020.” The failure to imagine multiple scenarios is startling, given that the committee had four months to do so. On this score, Magoha’s sympathizers are likely to insist the report points out that “the Ministry of Education *will* enhance remote learning (online, distance and e-learning) and explore innovative approaches to promote equity” (emphasis added). By employing the term “will,” an auxiliary verb expressing futurity, Magoha acknowledged the country’s lack of an infrastructure to support remote learning and neither has Kenya explored novel approaches. This acknowledgment comes eight years after the ruling Jubilee Alliance promised to provide primary school children free laptops.

In 2013, the Jubilee Alliance launched a political manifesto that promised to “work with international partners to provide solar powered laptop computers equipped with relevant content for every school age child in Kenya.” The Digital Literacy Program, popularly known as the laptops project, was among President Uhuru Kenyatta’s pet projects when he assumed power in 2013 for which the government set aside KES 24.6 billion (USD 240 million). Along the way, Kenyatta’s administration scaled down the project’s budget by KES 5.5 billion, in spite of the manifesto calling for an “increase” in “education funding by 1% each year so that by 2018 it reaches 32% of Government spending.” This suggested the government had put the cart before the horse as officials kicked off the project by training 150,000 teachers. The government also hoped to train an additional 300,000 instructors before fixing broken infrastructure, ensuring electricity supply, and installing solar panels. This hasty approach revealed that the premature training took place before tender negotiations were finalized and the laptops procured. In fact, the project stalled because of the tender row between the Public Procurement Administrative Review Board and Olive Telecommunications PVT Ltd, the Indian firm that had been awarded the tender (Obara, 2019). Rather than identify another firm, fix dilapidated classrooms, supply schools with solar panels, and make good on its promise, the government quietly abandoned the laptop project. By the end of his first term in office, Kenyatta had not fulfilled his promise to children and he had been silent on the matter during his second and final term. To this point, Paulo Freire (1968, p. 80) taught us against saying one thing and doing the complete opposite. “To take one’s own word lightly,” Freire wrote in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, “cannot inspire trust.”

It is against the backdrop of a deficit of trust that Magoha’s report inspired little faith among Kenyans. Following the announcement, I held a virtual meeting with a group of high school students in Kenya to grasp their understanding of the report’s impact on their lives, especially the recommendation requiring them to “remain in their current classes in 2021” (Magoha, p. 3). A sophomore (interview, 2020, July) on the call remarked that the report “hasn’t hit me, but waah *nina maliza* when I am 19” (I will complete school at age 19). Collectively, the students expressed their frustration with the government’s inability to imagine a flexible school year that departs from the old format of January to December with three long breaks in between. One student (interview, 2020, July) lamented that a school year does not necessarily have to start in January. “If we changed the education model,” he added, “from 7-4-2-3 to 8-4-4 we can surely do the same with the calendar.” When asked what they would do if schools remained closed in January 2021, they unanimously endorsed remote learning, but expressed skepticism at the government’s pull it through. Another student (interview, 2020, July) captured the skepticism well by reminding us that “*tuko Nai na stima inasumbua*, how about *ocha?*” (we are in Nairobi and electricity is problematic, how about upcountry?). Efforts to collect their parents’ views yielded few results, but a parent (interview, 2020, July) I spoke with simply said “*tusaidieni jamani*” (please help us).

Magoha's report is a good starting point for a national conversation that considers the parents' plea for help and the fate of 14 million schoolchildren. Waving a white flag without a national conversation breeds anxiety and confusion. To lull the apprehension and inspire confidence, the government must first acknowledge that COVID-19 has upended the education system in Kenya. What is required now are innovative ideas that lead to reimagining a system that absorbs present and future shocks. As presently constituted, Kenya's education system cannot endure stress. Significantly, Magoha's committee of stakeholders should be reconfigured to include representatives from students, parents, and teachers. Furthermore, deliberations of committee sessions should be televised to inspire public trust, transparency, and a shared sense of commitment. Evidently, the top-down approach to this crisis has failed, and the failure has complicated the reopening process as teachers, parents, and students sit and wait for Magoha's directive.

### **Declaration of Interest Statement**

The authors declare no competing interests.

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