

AUGUST 2020

# SUPPORTING UGANDA'S RURAL PRIMARY SCHOOLS DURING THE COVID-19 SHUTDOWN

FINDINGS FROM A SURVEY OF HEAD  
TEACHERS IN MUKONO DISTRICT, UGANDA

ELEVATE: PARTNERS FOR EDUCATION



# ABOUT ELEVATE

Elevate incubates and implements cost-effective, evidence-based solutions to improve the quality of primary education in Uganda. We work with government partners to identify critical bottlenecks across the education service delivery chain and develop practical, impactful solutions to unleash optimal systems functioning. Our current programs leverage mechanisms to increase accountability, improve the responsiveness of education service providers to local challenges, and catalyze sustainable systems change.

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# BACKGROUND

On March 18th President Yoweri Museveni announced that all Ugandan schools, universities and other learning institutions would close for thirty days to protect educators, pupils and their families from the novel coronavirus. Five months later, schools in Uganda still have not reopened despite growing pressure from some citizens and international organizations to do so. Over 9 million primary school children remain out of school, and there is increasing concern about the long-term effects of the extended school closure on learning outcomes and dropout rates, especially among female students.

# WHAT WE DID

At the onset of the pandemic, we began to investigate whether Elevate's Village TEACH program—which empowers communities to leverage local skills and expertise to improve school quality—might have additional benefits for rural communities during the COVID-19 school closures. Our recent impact evaluation indicates that Village TEACH reduces student dropout and transfer, and increases teachers' willingness to invest their own resources into the schools where they work—exciting results that our local partners believe are result of improved communication and cooperation between historically disharmonious groups in rural communities.

In early June, we interviewed 88 head- and deputy head teachers from Elevate's partner schools to explore their distance learning experience. Respondents came from three predominantly rural counties in Mukono District; forty-two respondents from our treatment schools and 46 from control schools.

Responses by Subcounty

<b>Subcounty</b>	<b>County</b>	<b>Number of Responses</b>
Kasawo*	Nakifuma	14
Nabaale	Nakifuma	17
Nagojje	Nakifuma	12
Nakisunga*	Mukono South	16
Ntenjeru	Mukono South	17
Nama*	Mukono North	12

\* Elevate programming is implemented in these subcounties

Mukono is located in North Central Uganda, one of the country's wealthier regions. The estimated GDP per capita in Mukono is \$1,738 compared to the national average of \$580. However, the World Bank finds that Mukono has some of Uganda's highest rates of childhood inequality, due to large part to wealth disparities between urban and rural areas. Thus, the insights that we uncovered can provide a glimpse into the experience of many rural Ugandan schools during the COVID-19 lockdown and elicit recommendations about how we can better-prepare schools for future crises.

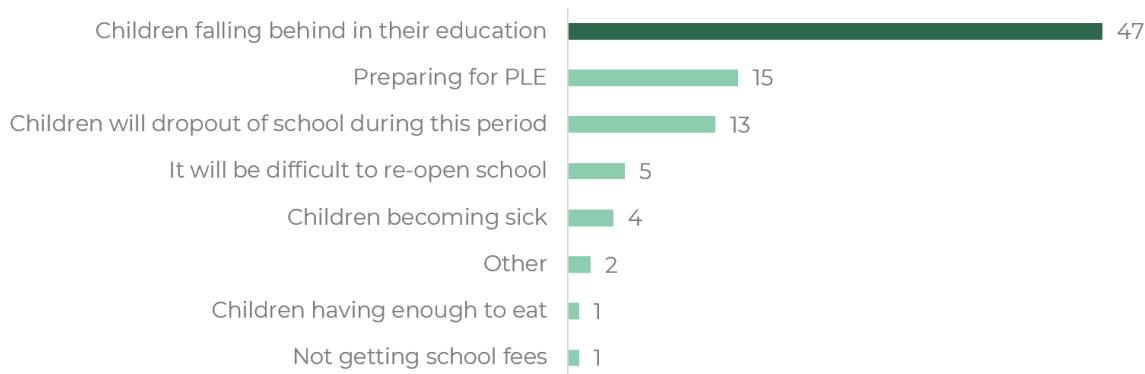
# WHAT WE LEARNED

The Ugandan Ministry of Education and Sports (MOES) has pursued four strategies to deliver educational materials to out-of-school children and youth: printed self-study materials, radio, television, and online lessons. However, the results of our survey indicate that these efforts are not adequately meeting the pupils' educational needs, especially in rural areas. We do find evidence that strong mechanisms for communication and collaboration—such as those established through Village TEACH—can mitigate some of the biggest challenges facing rural communities, by helping stakeholders share information and respond to the needs of pupils in real-time.

## Despite the existence of a national distance learning effort, head teachers are very concerned about children falling behind.

More than 50 percent of the head teachers we surveyed are primarily concerned about children falling behind in their education while schools remain closed. This is followed by the related concern of upper-level pupils being unprepared for the Primary Leaving Exam (PLE). These concerns are not surprising, particularly because technology-based distance learning initiatives are inaccessible to many households in rural Mukono.

### What is your biggest concern right now for your school as a result of the closures?



Just 16 percent of rural Mukono households have televisions and only 3 percent have a computer, according to the 2014 household census. Radio programming is more accessible; about 64 percent of rural households own a radio. However, even if a household has access to these technologies, it does not mean that pupils will be able to use them when they need them. Census data tells us that more than 60 percent of rural Mukono households rely on radio as their primary source of news and information. Thus, many learners who live in households with radios may not be able to use them due to competition for access with other household members.

Reports have also surfaced that printed study materials—which the MOES distributed through district and local government channels—are being photocopied and sold to families at high prices. At the time of our survey, several head teachers indicated that they were still waiting for the materials to arrive in their communities.

Of additional concern, the MOES acknowledges that the success of self-study materials “will depend on the support and participation of parents, guardians and other adults at home.” Yet in some parts of Mukono, 25 percent of adults are illiterate, and DHS data indicates that children from the poorest households are significantly more likely to be left at home without adult supervision. This puts these children at a disadvantage because they may not be able to rely on adults for help.

**"... pupils are struggling to learn since most of the parents are illiterate."**

HEAD TEACHER, MUKONO DISTRICT

#### Policy Takeaway

It is essential that parents—who must take a front seat to ensure that their children’s learning continues during school closures—understand what they can be doing and what resources are available to them. Because many adults in rural Uganda did not have access to schooling when they were young, it makes it very difficult for them to engage with their children’s schooling. They can feel incompetent or unworthy and because of this, often leave the tasks associated with education to teachers.

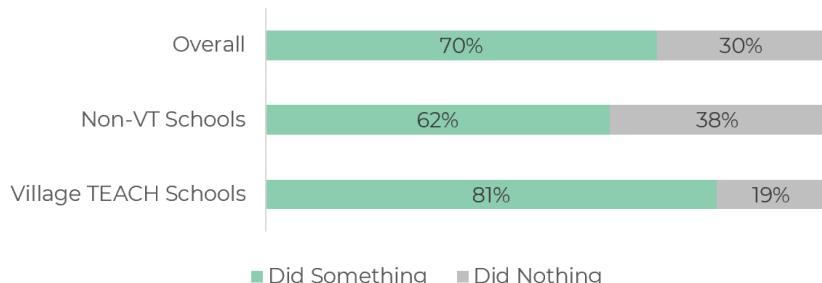
For this reason, many of the head teachers we surveyed recommended that the government focus on engaging parents, particularly by encouraging them to tune into lesson broadcasts on the radio. As our team members explained in a recent interview, most head teachers hold the trust of their local community, which puts them in a key position to support this effort. Head teachers should be leveraged to translate national policy directives into actionable, accessible information that parents can use to support their children.

#### Head teachers did not have adequate information about the national COVID-19 response plan when they needed it.

Uganda has a decentralized system of government. National policies are shared with the Chief Administrative Officer in each district, who informs the District Education Officer, who then communicates with head teachers. This multi-leveled system often means that information is slow to reach head teachers.

At the time of our survey, only 28 percent of head teachers had received information about the MOES’ COVID-19 response plan through formal government channels. By that time, schools had been closed for over a month and a half. The lack of clear and timely guidance inhibited many head teachers from responding to school closures effectively. Thirty percent of head teachers we surveyed reported that they did nothing to prepare for the lockdown, either because they did not have time or because they did not know what was happening.

**Did your school do anything when you heard of the recent school closure announcement but before you closed your school?**



Elevate's partner schools were slightly more likely to have taken preparatory action before schools closed. This may be due to the nature of the Village TEACH program model, which fosters communication between local stakeholders. Head teachers at Village TEACH schools did report that they were informed of the novel coronavirus by either a national or local government authority at a slightly higher frequency than their peers at control schools. Similarly, Village TEACH head teachers appear to trust local government officials as a source of information slightly more than other head teachers. However, neither of these differences are statistically significant.

#### **Policy Takeaway**

Strong communication mechanisms must be established in order to improve stakeholder coordination. This crisis has illuminated long-standing communication gaps between the MOES and the people implementing national education, namely head teachers. Closing those gaps is essential for improving the education system's ability to respond rapidly and effectively to future crises.

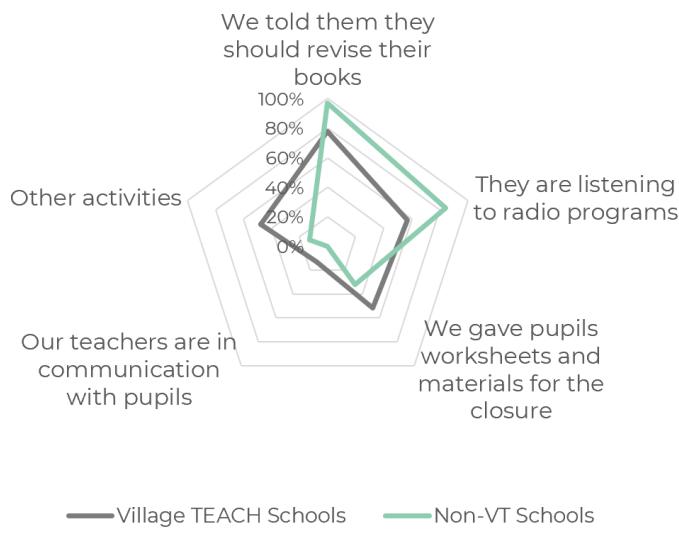
Programs like Village TEACH, are useful for facilitating communication and collaboration between local education officials, school leaders, and parents. However, information bottlenecks at higher levels of government are also of concern. For this reason, there should be a heightened focus on strengthening and streamlining mechanisms for communication across the whole system.

#### **Head teachers at Village TEACH schools are more actively promoting student learning than their peers.**

Our control schools were significantly more likely to report that they told pupils to revise books or listen to radio programs than our Village TEACH partner schools, which indicates a reliance on the Government's basic distance learning strategies, even though they are not ideal for their pupils.

However, Village TEACH schools were more likely to be supplementing textbook revision and radio programming with more active pupil engagement strategies. Thirteen percent of Village TEACH head teachers reported that their staff were in communication with pupils, compared with zero head teachers at control schools. Village TEACH head

What is your school doing to encourage pupil learning while schools are closed?



teachers were also more likely to share examples of how they were continuing to engage with students.

For example, one Village TEACH school created a parent-teacher WhatsApp group to distribute learning materials, share information, and answer questions about self-study materials. Head teachers at Village TEACH schools also responded that they gave pupils supplementary worksheets at a higher frequency, but the difference between Village TEACH and non-Village Teach schools is statistically insignificant.

**...one Village TEACH school created a parent-teacher WhatsApp group to distribute learning materials, share information, and answer questions about self-study materials.**

#### Policy Takeaway

Because of challenges inherent in the national education response strategy, the MOES and its development partners must employ supplementary initiatives to support rural communities. The concept of positive deviance contends that in every community, there are individuals or groups who have developed their own unique strategies and behaviors to address the challenges they face, using the resources that they already have on hand. Researchers at Harvard's Building State Capability Program have argued that "Finding these positive deviants, celebrating them, codifying them and broadly diffusing the core principles of their success is crucial." In Uganda, where funding for education was tight even before the crisis started, cost-effective and scalable positive deviance solutions would be revolutionary. The strategies employed by Village TEACH schools can provide a starting point.

**Student dropout is a looming concern across the board, but less so in Village TEACH schools, likely due to their higher levels of parental engagement.**

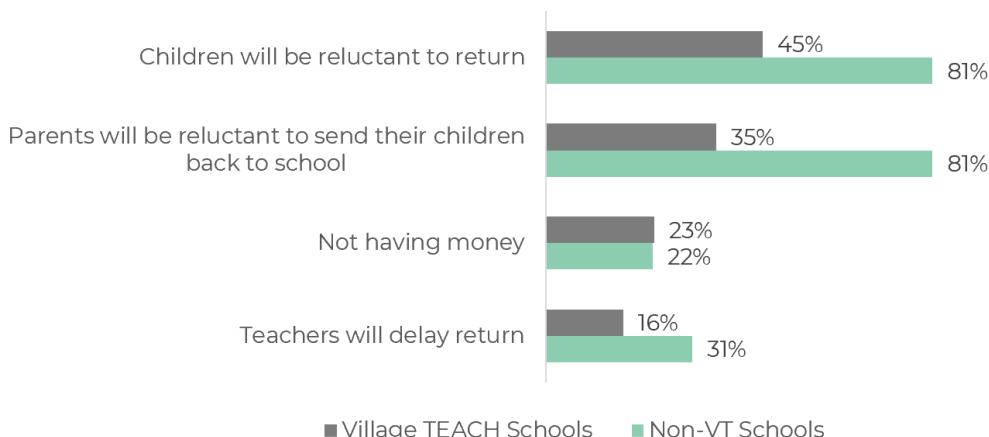
The head teachers we surveyed are primarily concerned about pupil dropout hindering the back-to-school transition once the COVID-19 health crisis passes. This is not an unreasonable fear in Uganda, where only 35.5 percent of children who enter primary

school actually graduate. Dropout is in large part a consequence of high youth engagement in income-generating activities (26% in Mukono), as well as underage pregnancy for female students.

However, head teachers at Village TEACH schools appear to be significantly less concerned about dropout than their counterparts at control schools. Twice as many head teachers at control schools are concerned about student dropout—either because of parent or student reluctance—than Village TEACH head teachers.

This maps onto the results of our impact evaluation which found that students in Village TEACH schools are half as likely to drop out of school as students in control schools, likely due to higher levels of parent engagement at Village TEACH schools. Parent engagement can help establish mutual trust between the school and community, and help parents to build a greater understanding of the value of education for their children.

#### What are your concerns for reopening your school when the time comes?



#### Policy Takeaway

Education leaders must engage with parents and the wider community to mitigate dropout. While the self-reported concerns of head teachers are not an accurate measurement of what student dropout will actually look like as a result of the coronavirus, this finding does highlight an important dynamic that will shape the reopening process. Several organizations, including [Save the Children](#) and the [Center for Global Development](#), have put out their own guides for reopening schools. Central to their recommendations are the need to engage the whole school community to build trust and mitigate fears, as well as leverage community involvement to facilitate the reopening process.

Now is the time to lean on head teachers and school leaders to reach out to parents, pupils, and the wider community to start setting plans in place to “build back better”.

# CONCLUSION

Schools in Uganda have been closed for five months due to the novel coronavirus. During this time, the MOES and its partners have been working to make sure that pupils do not fall behind in their education or dropout as result of the shutdown. While the MOES was able to rapidly deploy a distance learning strategy centered around pre-recorded lessons and self-study materials, this strategy falls short of adequately meeting the needs of students in rural communities.

To address the ongoing challenges faced by rural students and their families, it is essential to take additional policy steps to strengthen the national policy response from the grassroots level. This report specifically recommends:

- Educating parents and caregivers about national distance learning initiatives
- Improving mechanisms for communication between education stakeholders
- Leveraging the power of positive deviance to improve distance learning effectiveness, and
- Engaging parents and communities in school reopening plans

The national COVID-19 education response strategy was an essential first-step to getting students back on track with their education while schools remained closed. However, with school reopening plans largely uncertain for the 2021 school year, the education community must coordinate additional efforts to support rural students, starting with a focus on what is happening at the local level.