

2024 Education Compass: The state of student learning in Botswana

Students in Botswana are proceeding through school but not meeting grade-level standards



February 2024



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While ministries of education set grade-level standards for student learning, it is common in sub-Saharan Africa for many students to struggle to meet these goals. This representative study of foundational skills in Botswana found that just 11 percent of standard 4 students met grade-level expectations, with substantial disparities across groups. Caregivers were largely uninformed about their children's learning levels – fewer than 1 in 4 could accurately report it. Recommendations include targeted instruction, better informing and coaching caregivers on how to support learning, and regular assessments to address these gaps and improve outcomes.



1984 students
assessed



1705 families
interviewed



60 schools



3 regions

Survey objectives:

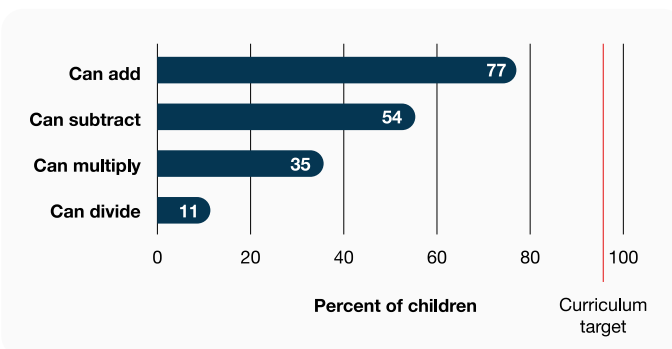
1. Collect data on standard 4 students' foundational mathematics skills and compare with national standards
2. Inform regional and national discussions about learning progress
3. Learn how to strengthen caregiver knowledge and engagement in their children's learning

In its Education and Training Sector Strategic Plan (ETSSP 2015-2020), Botswana's then Ministry of Education and Skills Development recognized the dire need to improve learning outcomes, making it one of 11 key strategic priorities. One starting point for improving learning is examining how student skill levels compare with curricular expectations and whether the system is meeting learning goals. Annual data that tracks students' progress in foundational skills can provide such an evidence base for education policymaking. The inaugural Education Compass survey in Botswana in 2024 assessed children and included interviews with their caregivers. This brief shares some key findings from the survey.

Finding 1: Nine out of 10 students are below grade level

The Education Compass survey focused on foundational numeracy skills—addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division—that students are expected to master by standard 3. These skills are critical for academic success, as students who do not master the basics in early grades will fall further behind and are likely to struggle later on, including in Botswana's primary school leaving exam in standard 7. As shown in Figure 1, only 11 percent of standard 4 students have mastered division, while roughly a quarter have not mastered any of the basic operations.

Figure 1: 9 out of 10 students do not meet grade level expectations in maths

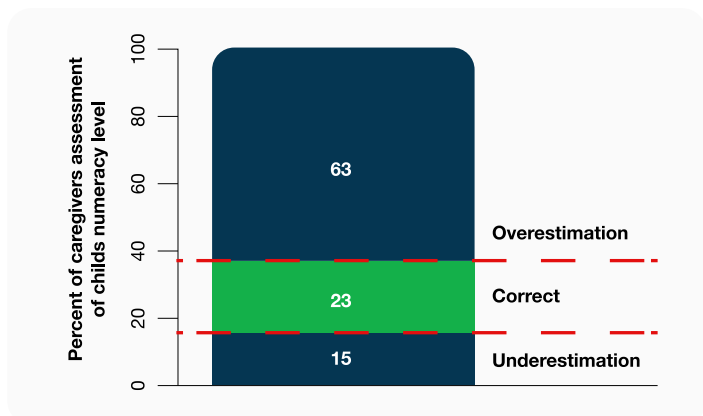


Finding 2: Less than 1 in 4 caregivers could accurately assess their child's numeracy level

In addition to carrying out academic assessments with students, the survey team interviewed caregivers to ask if they knew what skills their children had mastered and how they engage with their child's schooling. As shown in Figure 2, 23 percent of caregivers accurately reported whether their child

could add, subtract, multiply or divide. Just over 60 percent of caregivers overestimated their child's ability level and 15 percent underestimated it.

Figure 2: Less than 1 in 4 caregivers could accurately assess their child's numeracy level



Caregivers of lower-performing children are the least likely to accurately assess their child's ability. About 65 percent of caregivers of numerate children, defined as children who have mastered all basic operations including division, accurately assessed their child's numeracy level; this figure was just 12 percent among innumerate children, defined as not mastering any basic operations.

Why might caregivers lack accurate information?

1. Limited engage with homework. While over 85 percent of children had regular homework and nearly all who had it need daily help with it, over half of caregivers reported they found the content of their child's homework sometimes or always too difficult for them to assist with it. Caregivers may lack the skills or strategies to assess their child's understanding.
2. Limited contact with teachers. 70 percent of caregivers met with their child's teachers two or fewer times across the previous four school terms. These meetings could explain children's learning gaps and provide guidance for home support. Additionally, only 40 percent of schools have WhatsApp groups connecting teachers and caregivers, which could be used

to share class performance, lesson content, homework, and at-home support strategies.

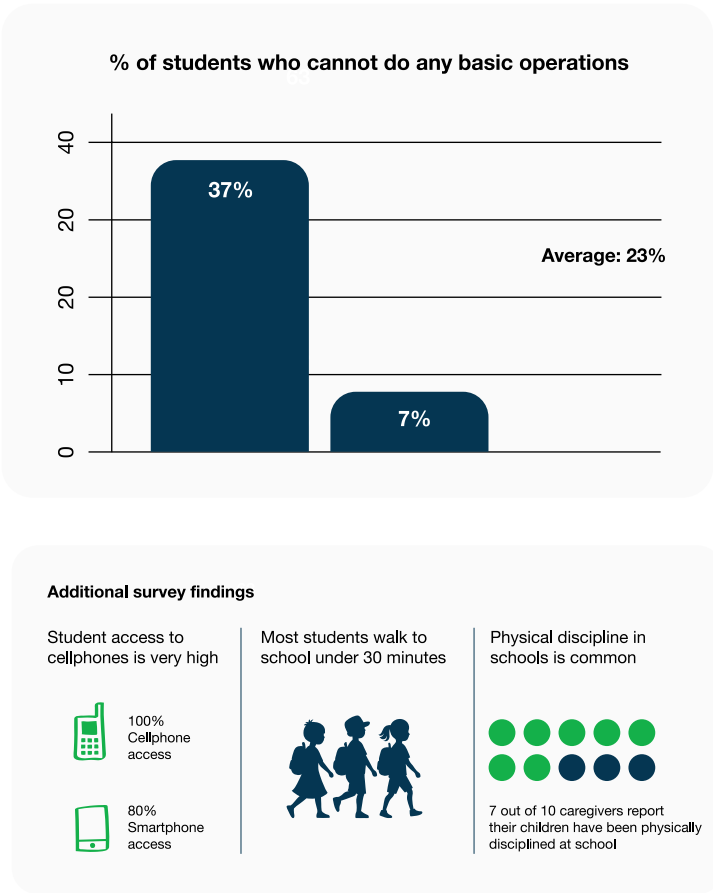
Finding 3: There is strong caregiver demand for more learning time and improving educational quality

The survey also explored what caregivers thought schools could do to improve learning. Caregivers most commonly reported two solutions. (1) increasing learning time and (2) improving teaching quality including ability grouping. The sentiment about learning time could be due to schools transitioning to a shift system in 2020 during the global pandemic. The survey found that about a quarter of schools still use a double shift system, with it being more common in Kweneng and North West than North East. On average, double shift school days were about 5.5 hours compared to 7 hours at schools that did not use a shift system. However, even a high share of parents in non-shifting schools called for more learning time, stressing they wanted extra lessons and tutoring. Parents also called for improved teacher training and higher quality teaching, including grouping children in different classes by ability, for example having two streams in mathematics (one more advanced and one less advanced).

Finding 4: There is a large disparity in performance among advantaged and disadvantaged groups

The most salient factors of disadvantage are gender, wealth, and location. Consistent with national trends, girls outperform boys, wealthier students outperform less wealthy students, and students in different regions perform differently. The most disadvantaged group found in the survey is boys in North West in the lowest wealth bracket: among this group 37 percent are innumerate, meaning they cannot perform any operation. For girls in North East in the highest wealth bracket, this figure is just seven percent. This shows a 30 percentage point difference in innumeracy among the most and least advantaged groups.

Figure 3: There is a large disparity in performance among advantaged and disadvantaged groups



Recommendations to improve learning

1. Incorporate targeted instruction approaches to strengthen foundational skills. Children who fail to learn foundational skills struggle to catch up and fall behind in school, because more advanced concepts depend on the basics. The Ministry of Child Welfare and Basic Education, supported by Youth Impact, is implementing the Teaching at the Right Level (TaRL) program. This includes a targeted instruction “rule of thumb” that 70 percent or more of the class should master a skill before moving onto a more advanced skill. For example, as shown in Table 1, 77 percent of standard 4 students mastered addition, indicating readiness for subtraction but not division or multiplication.

Table 1: Example of how targeted instruction works: a high shared of the class should master addition before moving to subtraction

As the Ministry updates the ETSSP, we recommend it considers including as explicit goals (1) teacher training related to targeted instruction, and (2) utilizing the “remedial hour” for targeted instruction approaches suited to remediation.

Operation	% of Std 4 learners who have mastered this skill
+	77
-	54
X	35
÷	11

Inform caregivers about children’s skill levels and help them support learning. When asked what strategies schools could use to improve learning, caregivers frequently suggested better communication about student results and strategies to improve them. Since most students need help with homework and over half of caregivers find homework content challenging, they could benefit from guidance on supporting their child’s learning. With over 80 percent of caregivers receiving PTA communication in 2024, PTAs could serve as a channel for sharing school-wide learning outcomes and strategies for home support. Additionally, we found that approximately 40 percent of caregivers reported being in a WhatsApp group with their child’s teacher, so these groups could also be used to share information about how to support learning at home.

Measure foundational learning periodically. Literacy and numeracy skills are the building blocks of any education system. Assessing these skills representatively over time helps identify the needs of students, caregivers, and educators. It also allows the system to better “right size” the curriculum to student capabilities and ensure more children achieve grade level proficiency, reducing learning gaps and leaving fewer children behind as they progress through school. The Education Compass survey aims to expand to more regions and competencies in 2024 and beyond.

About Youth Impact

Youth Impact is an evidence-based, youth-led organization based in Botswana that identifies, adapts, and scales health and education programs that work for young people. We use evidence to make them work even better and to help reach more young people in a more cost-effective way. We work hand in hand with governments to scale our programs through their systems. We share our findings widely to inform policies and evidence-based practices around the world.

We have two education programs in our portfolio, both of which focus on targeted instruction for foundational skills: Teaching at the Right Level, which is integrated into the school day, and ConnectEd, a remote tutoring program following the same principles.

About the Education Compass report

The Education Compass is Youth Impact's first annual report aimed at providing data on students' foundational skills in Botswana. Drawing on our research capacity developed through conducting rigorous program monitoring and evaluation, this survey seeks to inform regional and national discussions about learning progress and explore ways to enhance foundational education. Regular surveys such as this are essential for tracking educational trends over time and contributing to evidence-based policymaking to support improved learning outcomes.

We would like to thank the Ministry of Child Welfare and Basic Education for their support in conducting this survey, in particular the North East, North West and Kweneng regional offices.

Contact info@youth-impact.org for more information about this study.