DIGITAL

2030 READING PANEL

BACKGROUND REPORT

FEBRUARY 2025

www.readingpanel.co.za

2023 READING PANEL

BACKGROUND REPORT

Published:
25 February 2025
Johannesburg

2030 READING PANEL

The former Deputy President of South Africa Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka has convened the annual '2030 Reading Panel' to bring together respected South African leaders to ask: "What needs to change for us to ensure that all children learn to read by 2030?" The panel will meet annually until 2030.

The panel comprises the following members: André Gaum, Colin Coleman, Kentse Radebe, Noncedo Madubedube, Prof. Njabulo Ndebele, Prof. Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Prof. Sizwe Mabizela, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, Prof. Veronica McKay Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Hulisani Ravele, Prof. Michael Sachs, Judy Sikuza, Elinor Sisulu, and Dr Faranaaz Veriava. More information is available at readingpanel.co.za

This Background Report was prepared by Sipumelele Lucwaba at the request of the Chair of the 2030 Reading Panel. The views and opinions expressed in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of individual Panel members or the sponsors of the Reading Panel. Recommended citation: Lucwaba. S. (2025) 2025 Background Report for the 2030 Reading Panel. Johannesburg.

25 February 2025

Table of content

Click section title to navigate

Abbreviations and acronyms

ANAs	Annual National Assessments
BEd	Bachelor of Education
BoT	Back-on-Track
CAPS	Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements
CEPT	Centre for Educational Testing and Placement
CPD	continuous professional development
DBE	Department of Basic Education
ECD	early childhood development
ECDoE	Eastern Cape Department of Education
EFAL	English first additional language
EGMA	Early Grade Mathematics Assessment
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EGRS	Early Grade Reading Study
ELNA	Early Learning National Assessment
FFLC	Foundations for Learning Campaign
FSDoE	Free State Department of Education
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
ITE	initial teacher education
LOLT	language of learning and teaching
LTSM	learning and teaching support material
MTbBE	mother tongue-based bilingual education
NCDoE	Northern Cape Department of Education
NDP	National Development Plan
NECT	National Education Collaboration Trust
ORF	oral reading fluency
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PISA	Programme for International Student Assessment
PSRIP	Primary School Reading Improvement Programme
SASE	South African Systemic Evaluation
SEACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality
SIRP	Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project
WCED	Westen Cape Education Department

Executive summary

1. How many learners can read for meaning?

Consistent with PIRLS, 80% of grade 3 learners cannot read with comprehension in any language.

In 2024, two new reports measuring reading outcomes in primary schools were released: the South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE) and the fifth report of the Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ V). SASE, which measures learner reading and maths outcomes in Grade 3, affirms the results of the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021, namely that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, with only 20% of grade 3 learners performing at grade level or above in their home language (HL). By Grade 6, when learners' proficiency in the language of learning and teaching (LOLT) – either Afrikaans or English – is measured, almost 70% of learners have not developed grade-level reading skills.

2. What do we know about teacher knowledge?

Large improvements in teacher reading competencies, concerning declines in maths competencies

SEACMEQ V, which mainly measures reading and maths outcomes of learners and teachers at Grade 6 level, provides evidence of significant increases in teacher reading knowledge between 2013 and 2021. During this time, the proportion of Grade 6 teachers performing at the highest level of reading competency increased from 64% to 94%. The majority of remaining teachers ranked in the second-highest level, still displaying advanced reading competencies. Concerningly, there were declines in maths knowledge among Grade 6 teachers. The proportion of teachers showing only basic maths knowledge increased from 1.4% in 2013 to 7.3% in 2021. In addition, only 32% of teachers reached the highest maths competency levels. In three provinces, the Free State, Western Cape and Limpopo, less than 20% of teachers reached this level, raising concerns about their ability to support learners in reaching higher levels. These results, however, are unexpected and unexplained, in particular in light of the large improvements in teacher reading scores and require further investigation.

3. Proactive provinces

Four provinces are investing in reading assessments to complement existing national, regional and international assessments

Four provinces are at different stages of implementing assessments at primary schools to measure learner outcomes and allocate resources accordingly. The Western Cape's systemic tests were first implemented in 2006 and measure learner maths and language outcomes of all Grades 3, 6 and 9 through a written assessment. The Eastern Cape recently piloted assessments in Grades 1 and 3 to measure foundational skills and comprehension, with plans to use the data to categorise schools for differentiated support and allocate resources at a school level. The Free State collects Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) data from a sample of 150 schools in HL and English first additional language (EFAL) each year. The province also prepares termly standardised written assessments which are made available for all schools for Grades 3-7. Gauteng implements an ORF assessment with a sample of grade 3 learners in 458 schools every 2-3 years.

At a cost of R600 000 per annum, largely driven down by the use of provincial and district officials to collect data, Gauteng's model has significant potential for scale in under-resourced provinces interested in understanding foundational learner reading competencies. Combined, these provincial assessments will provide a good mix of sample-based and in some cases, universal assessments, that will make it possible to measure system-level progress at a national level and to make more informed decisions about the allocation of resources and support at a school level. Importantly, these developments indicate that officials, teachers and unions have regained some trust in externally administered assessments, and that provinces appreciate the need to invest in reasonably frequent assessments that can be disaggregated at a school level in order to determine and allocate targeted support.

4. New evidence on reading outcomes

Home language mastery positively impacts performance in EFAL and grade repetition

A recent study highlights the importance of HL reading proficiency by the end of Grade 3 as a predictor of Grade 4 repetition and higher EFAL outcomes. This adds to the body of knowledge on positive linguistic transfer, in particular, the work of the EGRS which demonstrates investment in the HL in the foundation phase has positive spillover effects on the second language (in this case EFAL). In addition, longitudinal data from the EGRS provides some of the first evidence on sustained impacts on learner performance, including decreased repetition, after an effective HL intervention in the foundation phase.

Grade 1 repetition, failing Grade 1 maths, and condonation at the end of Grade 3 were also found to be predictive of Grade 4 repetition. However, repetition of Grade 1, which is often used as a system-wide remediation tool, has mixed effects, with evidence of initial negative impacts on reading fluency often offset by long-term gains. Age-related factors, such as starting school too early or being overaged for a specific grade, can also negatively affect performance. These findings indicate that repetition policies, especially in the foundation phase, must be carefully considered to ensure they are delivering the intended benefits of improved learning outcomes.

5. Promising programmes

The Western Cape's Back-on Track programme shows potential for a targeted, system-level response to learner backlogs

In 2023, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) rolled out its three-year R1.2 billion Back-on-Track (BoT) programme to address COVID-19-related learning losses. The programme focuses on maths and language and involves extended maths and language lessons in the foundation phase, teacher training, as well as Saturday and holiday classes for learners in Grades 4, 7, 8, 10 and 12. An evaluation of the first phase of the programme found it difficult to distinguish between the expected post-COVID-19 bounce-back and the effects of the programme. Nonetheless, the results are promising. Positive effects on learner outcomes in Grade 4 were observed after just five Saturday sessions, with learners attending up to nine sessions. Effect sizes on Grade 4 language ranged between 70 and 195 days (almost a full year) of learning. The largest effect sizes were recorded in Grade 7 maths: up to 225 days of learning. Despite these substantial effect sizes, in 2023, none of the cohorts were performing at pre-COVID-19 levels, illustrating the long-term impact of COVID-19 on learner outcomes.

6. System-level constraints

Expected budget cuts and unfunded mandates continue to place pressure on provinces

Expected budget constraints will not affect all provinces in the same way. Even though budgets are expected to be decreasing across the board, teacher wages are increasing more in some provinces, or decreasing at a slower rate than the overall budget. In these cases, teacher wages are expected to consequently take up a bigger piece of the overall budget. Provinces are also increasingly feeling the pressure to deliver on important but unfunded mandates. Nationally, the compulsory Grade R year is projected to require an additional R18 billion. The cost of running a registered, fully compliant early childhood development (ECD) programme is projected to cost nearly five times the current subsidy. These initiatives are undoubtedly important and deserving of public funding. However, without a clear roadmap of how they will be prioritised, funded and capacitated, they risk overwhelming an already strained education system that lacks a plan and budget to tackle existing challenges such as poor learning outcomes.

7. Teacher supply and demand

Half the number of Foundation Phase BEd graduates are being produced, with as little as 20% in the required LOLT

It is now widely understood that the upcoming wave of teacher retirements in 2030 will not result in an overall shortage of teachers. Nonetheless, there is a critical need to ensure that the right number of teachers are trained for the appropriate phases and languages. Currently, the system is producing twice the required secondary school teachers, while producing only half the required number of foundation phase teachers. Additionally, only three African languages in the foundation phase – Tshivenda, siSwati and isiNdebele – are meeting the required teacher supply. Some languages are severely underrepresented, with as few as 20% of the necessary LOLT-specific teachers being produced.

8. National promises

Public rhetoric signals positive shifts in focus, but has yet to translate into action

South Africa's seventh administration appears to have renewed its focus on foundational literacy and numeracy. However, this commitment currently remains mainly at the level of public declarations and has yet to translate into concrete action. Encouragingly, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has made some notable shifts in their approach to improving reading outcomes. These include releasing a revised draft of the National Reading Strategy and launching a new initiative to update the national catalogue with a "minimum package of materials" for foundation phase classrooms, which includes reference to the DBE's reading benchmarks. Although these developments are far from the required focused policy change, they do suggest that some of the evidence-based insights – particularly those emanating from the DBE's own research unit – are beginning to influence core DBE programmes. That said, a lack of planning remains a critical barrier. Foundational literacy and numeracy are recognised as key to achieving the National Development Plan (NDP) goals; yet, the National Planning Commission persistently highlights weak planning capacity and poor accountability as significant constraints to improving learning outcomes.

9. Recommendations

Greater consolidation and more focused planning at national and provincial levels are required

At a provincial level, there has been notable progress in implementing reading interventions and early-grade assessments, as highlighted in this report. At a national level, there has been some movement, but these efforts have not yet reached the level of robust planning and implementation needed to signal meaningful change. Although the 2030 Reading Panel's recommendations remain broadly unchanged, there is now greater emphasis on better consolidation and more focused planning. For example, the planned audit of Bachelor of Education (BEd) programmes at universities must ensure that programme content aligns with the development of minimum knowledge standards for teachers.

Advisory notes

In addition to this Background Report, there are several short advisory notes included in the references. The authors of these notes are listed alphabetically by surname below:

1. ECDoE (Eastern Cape Department of Education). 2025. Piloting the use of Grade 1 and 3 assessments in the Eastern Cape.
2. FSDoE (Free State Department of Education). 2025. The Free State's use of Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and standardised assessments to improve reading.
3. GDE (Gauteng Department of Education). 2025. Oral Reading Fluency Assessment in Grade 3 Learners Across Gauteng Public Primary Schools.
4. Gustafsson, M. 2025. Asking the right questions about the initial training of foundation phase teachers.
5. Khosa, G. 2025. Reflections on the role and significance of in-house capacity to improve literacy.
6. Metcalfe, M. 2025. NPC advisory: Basic education priorities for the MTDP, 2024-29: Improving planning to improve literacy and numeracy.
7. Makaluza, N. 2025. What does the South African Systemic Evaluation tell us about learner reading proficiencies?
8. WCED (Western Cape Education Department). 2025. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) Systemic Testing Programme.

Introduction

> "We will focus on **ensuring that every child can read for meaning** in the foundation phase to set them up for success in later years.
>
> To achieve this, we are **implementing mother tongue-based bilingual education** to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, and rolling out lesson plans, reading books and other interventions that have been proven to work.
>
> The Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme will continue to **prioritise students who want to pursue a teaching career** in the foundation phase."
>
> **President Cyril Ramaphosa**, State of the Nation Address, 2025

We prepared this fourth edition of the 2030 Reading Panel Background Report in light of new commitments from the seventh administration to prioritise foundation phase reading in order to ensure that all Grade 4 learners can read for meaning by 2030. Unfortunately, there is still no clear evidence of a significant improvement in learning outcomes since the panel's inception in 2021.

This year's report takes stock of new data on learner reading outcomes and explores recent evidence of strategies that are proving to be effective in improving those outcomes. We also highlight several provinces that are implementing large-scale interventions, discuss system-wide constraints, and examine emerging political and administrative shifts that point towards positive, albeit gradual, momentum.

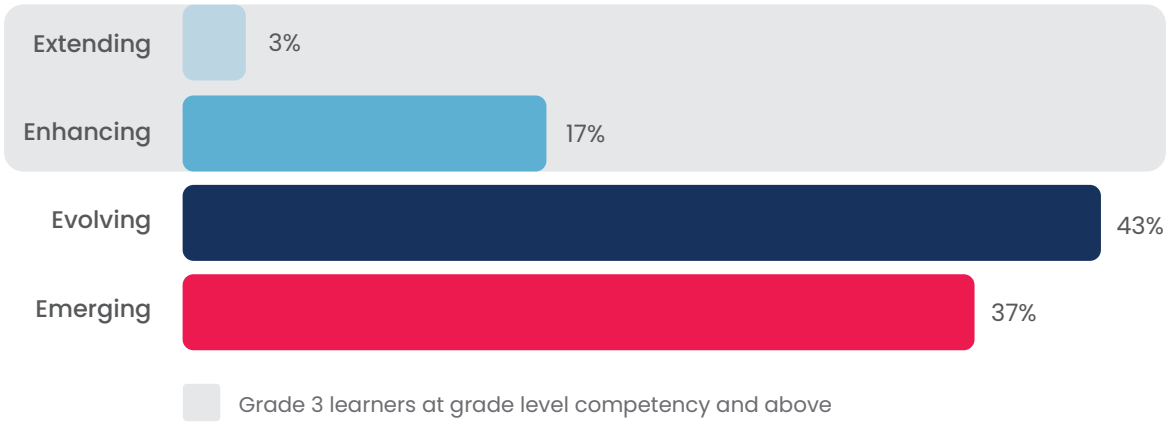
Although the overall situation remains sobering, there is evidence of notable changes at both a provincial and national level, as the cogs of change continue to turn slowly but steadily. As in previous editions, we present recommendations for achieving the reading-for-meaning goal by 2030. That said, we must emphasise once again that without a concrete, well-funded plan that includes clear responsibilities, timelines and milestones, we will not be able to accelerate progress towards the 2030 goal.

1. How many learners can read for meaning?

Towards the end of 2024, the DBE released two reports that measure the reading outcomes of South African learners: SEACMEQ V (2021) and SASE (2022). SEACMEQ is a regional assessment that measures reading and maths outcomes of both learners and teachers at a Grade 6 level[1]. South Africa has been taking part in SEACMEQ (previously SACMEQ) since 2000. SASE measures reading and maths outcomes in Grades 3, 6 and 9. This systemic evaluation[2] is the long-awaited alternative to the Annual National Assessments (ANAs), which were last conducted in 2014. (One major difference is that the ANAs were universal whereas SASE is sample-based.)

Only 20% of South African Grade 3 learners are meeting grade-level reading requirements (DBE, 2024b). SASE does not tell us anything radically new – it essentially affirms the findings of PIRLS 2021. PIRLS reported that 81% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, and that socio-economic and language lines define these low reading outcomes. The SASE diagnostic report comprises four proficiency bands (shown in Table 1): emerging, evolving, enhancing and extending (ranked from lowest to highest). To be described as "reading with comprehension" and performing at grade level, South African Grade 3 learners are expected to be at the 'enhancing' level. SASE finds that only 20% of Grade 3 learners perform at grade level or above expectations. As with PIRLS, the results are defined along socio-economic and language lines, with English and Afrikaans LOLT learners outperforming African language LOLT learners[3]. As Makaluza (2025) notes in their advisory note, six African languages (Setswana, Sepedi, Xitsonga, isiNdebele, Sesotho and Tshivenda) are of particular concern, with more than 40% of Grade 3 learners only reaching the 'emerging' performance level. These languages are predominantly spoken in the four lowest-performing provinces, i.e. the Northern Cape, Mpumalanga, North West, and Limpopo.

Figure 1: Percentage of Grade 3 learners by performance levels



Source: DBE (2024b)

[1] SEACMEQ also measures learners' knowledge of HIV/Aids and other health matters.
[2] South Africa implemented systemic evaluations in the foundation phase twice before – in 2000 and 2007.
[3] See Background note by Makaluza for a discussion on this.

Table 1: Performance levels for reading proficiency used in SASE

Level	Definition	Grade 3 descriptor	Implications for teaching
Extending **(3% of Grade 3 learners)**	• Demonstrates advanced understanding of knowledge and skills • Applies skills in innovative and creative ways in complex contexts • Able to learn independently	• Identify and use information from different sources appropriately • Read a variety of unfamiliar texts, using reading skills learnt • Read a complex/ difficult text independently • Analyse texts for socio-cultural values, attitudes and assumptions • Draw advanced conclusions from texts read	• Challenge learners to do more independent exploration and self-assessment • Focus on fostering creativity to apply knowledge and skills in novel and challenging contexts
Enhancing **(17% of Grade 3 learners)**	• Demonstrates the required grade-level knowledge and skills • Applies knowledge and skills in authentic contexts • Moving towards independent learning	• Read phonics (including complex phonics patterns) learnt so far and decode any unfamiliar words • Read and comment on a simple story, recognise the plot, and identify key details • Read from a variety of complex texts • Draw basic conclusions from texts read	• Provide tasks that encourage critical thinking and problem solving • Support the application of knowledge and skills in real-world contexts
80% of Grade 3 learners have not achieved grade-level proficiency			
Evolving **(43% of Grade 3 learners)**	• Constructs the required grade-level knowledge and skills • Adapts their understanding and application of knowledge and skills through interactions with teachers and peers	• Read single and double sounds learnt so far • Read and comment on a simple story • Read a simple text independently and identify key details in the text	• Build on existing knowledge and skills • Address specific areas of weakness • Provide additional opportunities to practice applying knowledge in a real-world context
Emerging **(37% of Grade 3 learners)**	• Is beginning to develop grade-level foundational knowledge and skills • Works with teachers and peers to construct new knowledge and skills	• Knowledge of basic, single sounds learnt so far • Read a simple text or short story with the teacher's help	• Focus on building foundational skills • Provide scaffolded instruction and detailed feedback • Offer ample opportunities to apply knowledge in a real-world context

Source: DBE (2024b)

Which skills have South African Grade 3 learners attained?

The majority (80%) of South African Grade 3 learners fall into the 'emerging' (level 1) and 'evolving' (level 2) categories. Based on the level definitions provided in Table 1, this may – at first glance – give the impression that learners are beginning to develop grade-level competencies. However, closer investigation is needed. The first clue is the descriptor for the 'emerging' level: "Knowledge of basic, single sounds learnt so far". According to two Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) documents, English Home Language and isiXhosa Home Language, learners should master single and double consonants in Grades 1 and 2 (DBE, 2011, 2011a). Notably, the 'enhancing' level, which precedes grade-level proficiency, includes the ability to read single and double sounds learnt so far. This may indicate that the categories are quite broad and include learners who are up to two grades below grade level and who lack basic foundational skills, as well as those who are beginning to grasp the competencies required in Grade 3.

By Grade 6, almost 70% of learners are reading below grade level (DBE, 2024b). However, these results should be viewed in light of the fact that Grade 3 learners are tested in their LOLT, with the majority of learners' LOLT in the foundation phase being either their HL or a language they are familiar with. In Grade 4, most African LOLT learners switch to English or Afrikaans as their LOLT. Consequently, the Grade 6 tests are only written in English or Afrikaans. The additional challenges experienced by learners who switch from their HL in Grade 4 are well understood and are a significant driver of the DBE's decision to extend the use of mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) to Grade 6 from 2025[4]. Although we support MTbBE based on a growing evidence base showing the benefits of its implementation, the solution is not as simple, i.e. MTbBE alone will not improve learner outcomes. It plays a significant role, but essentially, the wheels come off in the foundation phase. English and Afrikaans learners do not only do better because their entire education is in their mother tongue – the quality of their education and strong language foundations in the foundation phase are also contributing factors. These learners are essentially reaping cumulative education benefits, whereas the challenges faced by African LOLT learners compound from Grade 1.

2. What do we know about teacher knowledge?

Teacher reading competencies have improved significantly since SEACMEQ IV. SEACMEQ reading competencies are classified according to eight reading levels, with levels 1-4 reflecting basic reading skills and levels 5-8 advanced reading skills. According to SEACMEQ V, 94% of Grade 6 teachers are classified as having level 8 competencies – known as 'critical readers' – in English and Afrikaans (DBE, 2024). This is a substantial increase in the proportion of level 8 readers reported in SEACMEQ IV, which was 64%. Notably, all Grade 6 teachers in Mpumalanga are critical readers[5], whereas the figure is only 74% in KwaZulu-Natal. The majority of remaining teachers are classified as level 7 readers, i.e. 'analytical readers'[6]. Unfortunately, it is difficult to determine whether these considerable improvements in teacher reading competencies have translated into improvements in learning outcomes, as the Grade 6 learners who wrote SEACMEQ V would have also been affected by COVID-19-related school closures.

[4] Government to introduce mother-tongue bilingual education from Grade 4 next year (Daily Maverick)
[5] Critical reader competencies are defined as follows: "Reads from various parts of the text so as to infer and evaluate what the writer has assumed about both the topic and the characteristics of the reader."
[6] Analytical reader competencies are defined as follows: "Locates information in longer texts (narrative, document or expository) in order to combine information from various parts of the text so as to infer the writer's personal beliefs (value systems, prejudices and biases).

Additionally, having a grasp of the language is only one element – translating this knowledge into improved pedagogic practices is equally, if not more important.

The decline in maths content knowledge is concerning, unexpected and unexplained. Although the 2030 Reading Panel does not focus on maths learning outcomes, we think it is important to highlight the decline in Grade 6 teacher performance in maths. As shown in Table 2, the proportion of teachers performing at the advanced levels (5-8) declined from 98% to 92%. Compared to teacher reading competencies, there is a more even spread across the advanced skill levels in maths, with 67% of teachers performing at levels 7-8 and 26% at levels 5-6. Overall, only 32% of teachers reached the highest competency level in 2021. The proportion of teachers performing at the basic skills levels increased from 1.4% in 2013 to 7.3% in 2021. This is largely driven by the North West, Gauteng and the Western Cape, with 17%, 14% and 13% of teachers at these levels respectively. While a small proportion, we note with great concern that 7.8% of teachers in Gauteng are described as having pre-numeracy skills: "applies single-step addition and subtraction". These trends are worrying and, in many ways, also peculiar. One would not expect any impact on teacher knowledge as a result of COVID-19-related school closures as teacher knowledge should not be dependent on time on task. In addition, it is unexpected to see such large gains in the overall teacher reading scores and declines in maths performance. For example, mean reading scores increased by 103 and 30 points in Gauteng and the Western Cape, but the mean maths scores decreased by 77 and 141 points, respectively. These declines do raise the question of whether there is sufficient focus on upskilling primary school maths teachers, as most maths interventions focus on secondary school learners and teachers. Additonally, as researchers often lament, one cannot expect teachers with low maths competencies who have not mastered the grade-level content themselves to be able to support learners to reach higher competencies (Taylor, forthcoming). However, in the main, these trends are surprising and unexplained, and we would suggest further investigation to understand them.

Teacher maths scores are unexpected and require further investigation. For example, mean reading scores increased by 103 and 30 points in Gauteng and the Western Cape, but the mean maths scores decreased by 77 and 141 points, respectively.

Table 2: Descriptors and competencies of maths skill levels in SEACMEQ

	Level	Descriptor	Competencies	% of Gr 6 teachers	
				2013	2021
Basic maths skills	1	Pre-numeracy	Applies single-step addition and subtraction	0%	1.4%
	2	Emergent numeracy	Applies a two-step addition and subtraction involving carrying	0%	0%
	3	Basic numeracy	Translates verbal information into arithmetic operations	0%	1.6%
	4	Beginner numeracy	Translates verbal or graphic information into simple arithmetic problems	1.4%	4.3%
Advanced maths skills	5	Competent numeracy	Translates verbal, graphic, or tabular information into an arithmetic form to solve a problem	7.20%	6.2%
	6	Mathematically skilled	Solves multiple operation problems (using the correct order) involving fractions, ratios and decimals	23.4%	19.5%
	7	Concrete problem solving	Extracts and converts information from tables, charts and other symbolic presentations to identify and then solve multi-step problems	32.4%	34.8%
	8	Abstract problem solving	Identifies the nature of an unstated mathematical problem embedded within verbal or graphic information and then translates this into symbolic, algebraic or equation form to solve a problem	35.4%	32.2%

Source: DBE (2024)

3. Proactive provinces

National assessments are not providing the insights provinces need

Commendably, South Africa participates in a range of international and regional assessments which provide an important indicator of system-level progress. It is because of the DBE's commitment to participation, no matter how bad the results, that we are able to understand learner reading outcomes, and this should not be taken for granted. South Africa has not, however, implemented a universal standardised assessment that measures learner reading competencies in primary schools since the ANAs were jettisoned in 2014. SASE was positioned as a replacement of the ANAs and is an encouraging step; however, SASE is a sample-based assessment and does not provide provinces with details on how to respond at a school or district level. Table 3 provides a summary of current reading competency assessments in primary schools.

Table 3: Current learner reading competency assessments in primary schools[7]

Assessment name	Type	What it measures	Frequency
PIRLS	International, sample-based	Reading comprehension of Grade 4 learners in all 11 languages	Every 5 years
SEACMEQ	Regional, sample-based	• Maths and reading proficiency of Grade 6 teachers and learners • HIV/Aids and health knowledge of Grade 6 learners in their LOLT	Every 7-8 years
SASE	National, sample-based	• Reading comprehension of Grade 3 learners in all 11 languages • Reading comprehension of Grade 6 and 9 learners in their LOLT	TBC (proposed as every 3 years)
Early Learning National Assessment (ELNA)	National, sample-based	School readiness for Grades R and 1	TBC (proposed as every 3 years)

While we applaud the DBE on the release of the systemic results, these came out two years after the data was collected. Likewise, SEACMEQ V results were collected in 2021 and only released in 2024. With such delays, it is unfortunately not possible to formulate a system-level response. Furthermore, while the new categories in SASE provide some insights into learner performance that takes us a few steps further than PIRLS, another system-level assessment does little to assist provinces, districts and schools in understanding how to respond and provide support. In addition, the DBE went to great pains to emphasise that the new assessments are in no way comparable with any of the other assessments in which South Africa participates.

[7] South African learners do participate in other assessments, e.g. the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study in Grades 5 and 9 for maths and Thrive by Five for the reception years, but these assessments are not relevant to this discussion.

Even more disappointing is the fact that, although the DBE has created reading fluency benchmarks, no effort has been made to align assessments with these benchmarks. Multiple sets of data that communicate learners' inability to read do little to move provinces forward.

> "The ideal national assessment system is diverse, comprising a combination of sample-based assessments (useful for system-level reporting and accountability pressure, with high stakes for policy-makers and low stakes for individual schools) and universal assessments (useful for school-level accountability pressure and communication and for mobilising improvement, with relatively high stakes for learners, school personnel, and parents)."
>
> **Nuga Deliwe & Van der Berg, 2022**

Considering this context, we next review promising new and existing provincial assessments that will provide South Africa with a good mix of assessments that include both sample-based assessments to measure system-level progress, and in some cases, universal school-level assessments that can guide the allocation of resources and support.

Which provinces are implementing their own standardised, school-level assessments? The WCED systemic assessments are well-known and have been in place for the longest time. Encouragingly, three other provinces are piloting or rolling out cost-effective alternatives to measuring learning outcomes in the foundation phase. This is an important development: it indicates that officials', teachers' and unions' trust in externally administered assessments has been restored and that provinces understand the need to invest in reasonably frequent assessments that can be disaggregated at a school level to formulate a targeted support strategy. Table 5 provides a summary of each of these assessments.

The Western Cape systemic assessments measure language and maths learner outcomes in Grades 3, 6 and 9 in all 1 412 public schools in the province. The WCED first implemented its systemic assessments in 2006. The assessments are designed and implemented by an external service provider. At a cost of about R145 million per year, it signifies a significant investment for the province. The assessment results have been important not only for the Western Cape, but also for better understanding learning outcomes across the country. The 2021 systemics were used to project learning losses before the release of the PIRLS 2021 results[8]. In this report, they form the basis of new evidence of a post-COVID-19 bounce-back in some instances, the lack of bounce-back in other cases, and the potential challenges South African learners may face without a targeted, system-level catch-up programme. Additionally, the WCED systemics serve as a critical tool for understanding the reliability of school-based assessments. Within the province, the assessments are used to detect literacy and numeracy challenges, determine phase readiness, and allocate resources effectively.

[8] See van der Berg et al. (2022).

In 2024, the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) piloted the use of assessments in Grades 1 and 3 to track the effectiveness of their reading strategy. The pilot was implemented in 200 isiXhosa, Afrikaans and English LOLT schools. Learners in Grade 1 were tested on letter-sound knowledge, whereas Grade 3 learners were tested on oral reading fluency (ORF) and written comprehension. The province used a data collection company for the Grade 1 letter-sound assessment and Grade 3 ORF assessment, and former teaching assistants (unemployed youth) to administer and mark the Grade 3 written assessment. The purpose of the pilot was to understand the potential cost and logistical implications of implementing such assessments at scale. Since the pilot was not representative of all schools in each of the three districts in the province, actual learner outcomes were not the main focus. However, potential opportunities for using the data in future are promising. For example, learner performance in the Grade 1 assessment and the Grade 3 ORF assessment is reported against the DBE benchmarks. Given that the data collected is representative at a school level, the province is already exploring one use case relating to ORF (see Table 4) for setting thresholds for identifying and classifying low performing districts and schools in order to allocate support effectively. The pilot costs ~R3M, with no projections available yet for scale.

Table 4: Potential use case for Grade 3 ORF assessment: % of isiXhosa learners falling into illustrative "red zone" categories in the Eastern Cape

	District A	District B
Schools with more than 20% of learners unable to read a word	34%	48%
Schools with less than half of learners reaching the Grade 2 benchmark	55%	46%
Schools with less than a third of learners reaching the Grade 2 benchmark	15%	8%

Source: ECDOE (2025)

The Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) develops standardised tests for all schools and collects EGRA data from a sample of 150 schools annually. Standardised written assessments are developed collaboratively by a team of teachers, subject advisors and provincial subject coordinators and administered quarterly by schools. The written assessments are targeted at learners in Grades 3-7 and are available in English HL and EFAL, Afrikaans HL, Sesotho HL, Setswana HL, and IsiXhosa HL. In grade 3, scripts from the 100 most struggling schools are moderated, and in the intermediate phase six learner scripts per grade per school (900 learners in total) are moderated every quarter to ensure consistency. As noted by Nuga Deliwe & Van der Berg (2022), these kinds of common assessments are an important avenue for strengthening assessments and accountability at school and provincial levels, and an opportunity for data-driven resource allocation. Finally, EGRAs with Grade 3 learners are conducted by subject advisors in a sample of 150 primary schools in all HLs and EFAL. By measuring fluency, accuracy and foundational reading skills (e.g. letter sounds), the province has used the EGRAs to gauge how learners are performing in relation to the DBE reading benchmarks. The assessments cost the province approximately R5-8 million per year.

In 2019, the GDE piloted the use of an ORF assessment with grade 3 learners in EFAL, which has now been extended to include Sesotho, Setswana, Sepedi and IsiZulu. In 2024, the sample included 458 primary schools offering African home languages and a total of 7 000 randomly selected learners. The assessments are administered by district officials, which is a significant driver of low costs at around R600 000 per annum, which mostly goes towards training. The assessment also includes a basic demographic profile of the learners. Interestingly, because the province implemented the first round of assessments before COVID-19, while they have been limited to EFAL and would have been a smaller sample, they are able to note some level of post COVID-19 bounce back or lack thereof. The assessment, similar to the ECDOE's pilot, cannot provide an accurate comparison between languages as it was not stratified by language. Nonetheless, there are some interesting insights available based on the individual languages. All the models being implemented by the different provinces bring unique and different levels of value for provincial departments. However, given fiscal constraints, the Gauteng model may be best option for cash strapped provinces who would like school-level insights into foundational reading skills.

Table 5: How provinces use data at scale to address learning outcomes

	Western Cape	Free State	Gauteng	Eastern Cape (pilot)
Target grade(s)	3, 6 and 9	3, 4-7	3	1 and 3
Sample size	1 412 schools	150 schools	458 schools	200 schools
Languages	isiXhosa HL, Afrikaans HL and English HL	English HL and FAL, Afrikaans HL, Sesotho HL, Setswana HL, and isiXhosa HL	Sesotho HL, Setswana HL, Sepedi HL, isiZulu HL, and EFAL	isiXhosa HL , Afrikaans HL and English HL
Test type	Written assessment	• Grade 3: EGRA • Grades 4-7: standardised assessment	EGRA	EGRA and written assessment
Frequency	Annual	• EGRA: Annual • Standardised: Termly (3 terms only)	Every 2-3 years	N/A
Assessors	Data collection agency	Provincial and district officials	Provincial and district officials	Unemployed youth and data collection agency
Cost per year	~R145M	~R5-8M	~R600k	~R3M

Case study: Assessments in Brazil[9]

Sobral is a municipality in the state of Ceará in Brazil. In 2001, 40% of its Grade 3 learners were unable to read a single word. Less than 20 years later, over 80% of Grade 3s could read for meaning, and the municipality continues to maintain almost universal literacy rates. Although Sobral is a small municipality of about 34 primary schools, the interventions were scaled to the state of Ceará, where there are 3 558 primary schools. As a result, Ceará has registered some of the largest increases in education quality nationally, with 10 of its municipalities ranked in the top 20 in Brazil, and some outperforming the average private school in São Paulo.[10]

In Sobral, assessments are used to plan interventions, train teachers, support schools, and monitor system progress (Luna-Bazaldua & Cruz 2004). Table 6 provides an overview of the country's assessments of reading and maths skills from a classroom to a national level. At a national level, learners are tested every second year, at a provincial level they are tested annually, and at a municipal level, assessments are conducted twice a year. As Table 6 shows, the assessments vary in purpose and complexity. For example, at a municipal level, assessments act as a diagnostic tool and provide inputs on learner readiness. At a state level, the focus is on providing information on the overall progress of municipalities to guide budget allocations and the prioritisation of interventions. The outcomes of these assessments are then used to tailor support at a school and teacher level, including designing school-specific curricula supported by continuous teacher training. In South Africa's case, it may be more useful for provinces to understand annual learner-level results at a grade level (e.g. letter sounds and ORF) to identify priority schools or districts and to intervene. Nationally, insights into the performance of the system may be most useful. Such insights can be gathered using a sample-based assessment focused on comprehension that is conducted less frequently (e.g. every three years).

Table 6: Learner assessments in Brazil, from classroom to national level

Assessment features	Classroom	Municipality/District	State/Provincial	National
Purpose	Provide immediate feedback to inform classroom instruction	Provide diagnostic and summative information on the achievement of grade-level learning goals	Monitor quality in the state and set priorities for each municipality, including providing financial incentives to schools and municipalities and implementing remedial programmes at schools	Monitor quality at a national level and promote school accountability with respect to the common core learning standards
Frequency	Daily as part of the classroom practice	Twice per academic year	Once per academic year	Every second year
Learners tested	All learners	Preschool to Grade 9	Grades 2, 5, 9 and 12	Grades 2, 5, 9 and 12
Format	Varies from observation and questioning to quizzes and group activities	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade	Multiple-choice and short-answer questions, depending on the subject and grade
Subject areas covered	All subject areas	Literacy, language and maths	Literacy, language and maths	Literacy, language, maths, natural sciences and human sciences
Scoring	Informal and simple	Informal and simple for literacy and sophisticated statistical techniques for language and maths	Sophisticated statistical techniques to monitor learning over time	Sophisticated statistical techniques to monitor learning over time

Source: Luna-Bazaldua & Cruz (2004)

[9] For a more detailed discussion of the relevance of Sobral , see Lucwaba (2024): *2024 Briefing Note for the 2030 Reading Panel: The challenges and opportunities in foundation phase reading – towards all Grade 4 learners reading for meaning by 2030.* https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/0429e7_88c93728f04444f5873bbb5dc6674ca0.pdf

[10] See Cruz, L and Loureiro A. 2020. *Achieving world-class education in adverse socio-economic conditions: the case of Sobral in Brazil.* https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/143291593675433703/pdf/Achieving-World-Class-Education-in-Adverse-Socioeconomic-Conditions-The-Case-of-Sobral-in-Brazil.pdf

4. New evidence on reading outcomes

What do we know about Home Language mastery and its impact on early grade repetition?

Using school-based assessment data across six provinces from Data Driven Districts, van der Berg et al (2024) studied learner HL performance at the end of Grade 3 and the extent to which it predicts repetition rates in Grade 4 and EFAL performance. The study focuses specifically on learners' transition from their HL as LOLT to English as LOLT. The findings indicate that higher HL results in Grade 3 predict lower repetition rates in Grade 4 and better EFAL outcomes, with those who repeated Grade 4 scoring 20 percentage points lower in their HL in Grade 3. This contributes to the body of work regarding the significance of strong foundational skills in HL to facilitate the positive transfer of certain foundational literacy skills between HL and a second language. Ramadiro (2022), reflecting on the genesis of the development of the University of Fort Hare's multilingual BEd, notes that HL serves as a learner's primary linguistic resource, and once strong literacy skills are established in their home language, they can be transferred to English. From 2015 to 2020, the DBE implemented the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS). The first iteration focused on Home Language, while the second iteration addressed English First Additional Language (EFAL) in the foundation phase. Although it is now widely understood that the EGRS positively impacted the treatment group (see table 11), Mohohlwane et al (2023), utilising EGRS data, further demonstrate that interventions in the home language also positively affect learners' second language proficiency, indicating that decoding and other foundational skills are best taught in home languages. Furthermore, Stern et al (2024), through data tracking learners from grades 1 to 7, found long-term impacts in areas targeted by the EGRS - Setswana ORF and Setswana written comprehension - as well as in English written comprehension. Additionally, learners from the treatment group were nine percentage points less likely to repeat a grade and progress to 7.

Grade 1 repetition is predictive of Grade 4 repetition. To further understand the complexities of repetition we note in Table 7, learners who repeat Grade 1 are 22 percentage points more likely to repeat Grade 4. Those who met the policy level conditions to receive a condoned pass in Grade 3 were 31 percentage points more likely to repeat Grade 4 (van der Berg et al.,2024).

Table 7: Characteristics of learners who passed and those who failed grade 4 on the first attempt (2020-2023)

	Those who passed	Those who failed	Difference
Gr1 Mathematics	70.6%	53.8%	16.8%
Gr3 Home Language	70.5%	49.6%	20.6%
Repeated Gr1	11.2%	33.3%	-22.1%
Condoned pass in Gr3	4.2%	35.4%	-31.2%
Overage in Gr4	32.6%	66.7%	-34.1%

Source: van der Berg et al., (2024)

Learners' age, i.e. being too young or too old, is a possible reason for grade repetition. Wills (2024) suggests that repetition is sometimes used as a form of system-wide remediation, especially in cases where learners are not school-ready. Based on Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) Wave 1 data, almost 60% of learners in the North West sample who repeated Grade 1 could not sound a single letter correctly at the beginning of Grade 1, indicating a lack of school readiness. Age is often an indicator of school readiness. While policy states that learners may enter grade 1 if they are five turning six by June in the year of admission, repetition rates are as high as 31% (in the Eastern Cape) for boys entering school before the age of six, whereas only 15% when boys enter school at the age six-and-a-half years (van der Berg et al., 2024). There is also the question of overage learners who do not perform well historically, from the foundation phase all the way to matric (van der Berg et al., 2024). As such, van der Berg et al (2024) caution that age must be considered carefully, as there are negative effects associated with both underage and overage learners.

Given the prevalence of large class sizes in the foundation phase – to which South Africa's high repetition rate in this phase contributes – are there any advantages to foundation phase repetition? Using data from the EGRS, Wills (2024) finds evidence of initial negative effects on the reading fluency levels of learners who are repeating Grade 1. However, by the time these learners have completed their second year of Grade 1, they are reading 11 correct words per minute more than those learners who were condoned at the end of their Grade 1 year. There is also some evidence of misplaced repetition or condonation. Wills finds that in about half of the sample, learners were promoted despite not meeting Grade 1-3 benchmarks; on the flip side, 2%-7% of learners were retained even though they had met those benchmarks, indicating misplaced repetition.

The benefits of grade repetition are difficult to evaluate, mainly because it cannot be determined how poorly a learner would have performed had they not repeated the grade. Although Grade 1 repetition may offer some advantages, especially in cases of insufficient school readiness, this issue should ideally be addressed through the new compulsory grade R year or other effective remediation measures. However, until these measures are implemented, repetition could – to some degree – decrease heterogeneity within classes, easing the challenge of differentiated teaching.

Another question is at what stage repetition is most effective. In this regard, Wills (2024) finds that repetition in the foundation phase after Grade 1 is less effective. Condoned learners are also a cause for concern. Their poor performance in subsequent grades indicates the need for increased support, or a rethink of the policy that allows them to be pushed through to the next grade. Ideally, repetition should offer a second chance for learners to master grade-level skills without demoralising them or hindering their progress. Policy contemplates providing learners who have been progressed and are likely to be "retained again in the second phase for four years or more" with additional support (DBE, 2012). This will require well-capacitated teachers and effective and reliable assessments that support differentiated instruction, along with standardised measures, such as the DBE's benchmarks and early-grade remediation. Without these measures, repetition risks burdening the system unnecessarily – from both a learner outcome and financial point of view – while failing to deliver the intended benefits.

5. Promising programmes

What do we know about the post-COVID-19 recovery?

In 2023, the WCED implemented its BoT programme, which mainly targets improvements in maths and language learner outcomes in Grades 4, 7 and 8. The project was costed at R1.2 billion over three years. The BoT's objective is to address and reverse COVID-19-related learning losses. Table 8 provides an overview of the programme. In 2023, it targeted 310 000 learners in the foundation phase. The programme involved extending language and maths lesson times in the foundation phase, Saturday and holiday classes for learners in Grades 4, 7, 8, 10 and 12, and teacher training. For foundation phase teachers, training focused on the science of reading and the synthetic phonics approach.

The resultant effect sizes are encouraging. The evaluation study found that it was difficult to isolate the effects of the programme from the expected system-level bounce-back following COVID-19. Yet, van der Berg et al (2024a) find that for Grade 4 learners, the largest effect sizes were in Afrikaans LOLT schools, which gained up to 195[11] school days – almost a full year of learning. IsiXhosa LOLT learners gained up to 160 days in EFAL, and spillover effects of 130 days in isiXhosa HL. The smallest effect sizes were in English LOLT (70 school days). It should be noted that isiXhosa LOLT learners are classified as those learners who would have transitioned from isiXhosa to English or Afrikaans in Grade 4 and who would, as a result, be at a disadvantage compared to the English and Afrikaans LOLT learners. Grade 7 learners also saw large effect sizes of up to 175 schooling days in language. With regards to maths, the largest gains were observed among Grade 7 learners, with up to 205 days for isiXhosa LOLT learners and up to 225 days for Afrikaans LOLT learners (van der Berg et al., 2024a).

Even more encouraging is that this intervention included only nine Saturday classes, with effect sizes already evident when learners attended just five of these classes. Additionally, teacher training and support interventions in English LOLT schools were found to be effective at a school level. However, the link between teacher training and learner outcomes is not clear as the evaluators were unable to link teachers to particular learners. No teacher training effects were observed in Afrikaans and isiXhosa LOLT schools.

> Grade 4 learners in the Western Cape gained up to 195 days of learning in home languages after attending nine Saturday classes.

[11] A full school year is 200 days.

Even though the combination of the BoT programme and the expected COVID-19 bounce-back has led to considerable gains, in 2023, none of the cohorts were performing at pre-pandemic levels, with children in isiXhosa LOLT schools performing more than a year behind learners in 2019 (see Figure 1). The learners who would have been part of these interventions would have all experienced some level of COVID-19 school closures. Grade 3 learners would have been least affected, as they would have experienced only one year of COVID-19-related interruptions (in Grade 1), as opposed to two years.

The biggest concern, as per figure 2 below, is that Grade 6 language learner performance (with these learners now being in Grade 8), exhibited the smallest bounce-back (van der Berg, 2024a). There are also concerns with the slight declines in grade 6 maths performance. Although the 2030 Reading Panel focuses on the foundation phase, we want to highlight that the overall lack of bounce-back is worrying, considering that learners in other provinces have not experienced any large-scale remediation programmes, and would therefore be expected to be even worse off.

> In 2023, learners in isiXhosa LOLT schools were performing more than a year behind learners in 2019.

While van der Berg et al (2024a) note the difficulty of separating the effects of the BoT programme and the expected bounce back, the overall conclusion is that the programme has positively impacted learner outcomes and may indicate (1) system inefficiencies as relatively small dosage led to large effect sizes and (2) that appropriate and well implemented interventions at a provincial level present a promising approach to enhancing learning outcomes.

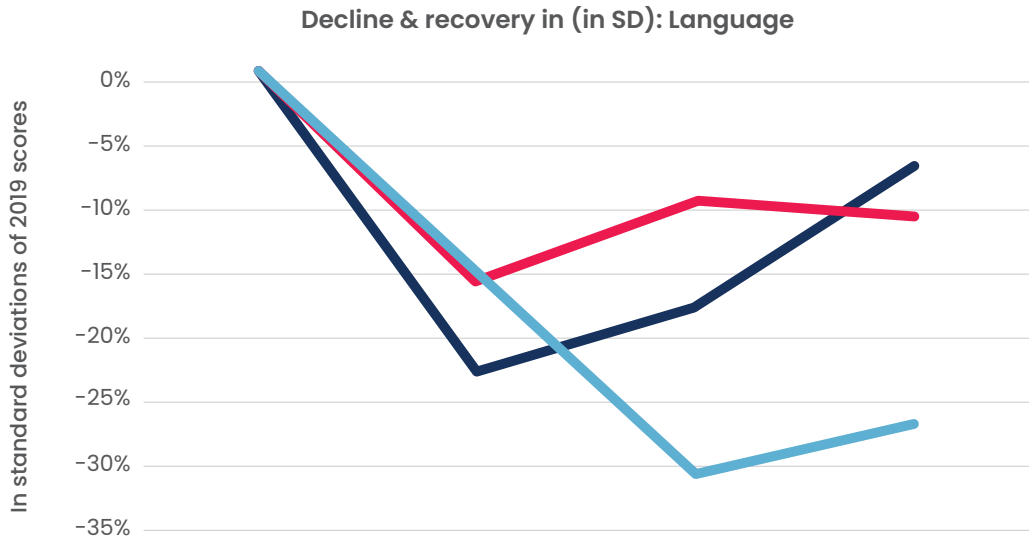
Table 8: Overview of the WCED BoT programme

Activities
Learners: • Language and maths interventions for Grades 1-3 • Saturday classes for Grades 4, 7 and 8 • Holiday classes for Grades 7 and 8 • Holiday residential camps for Grade 12 • After-school tutoring programmes • Subject-specific support for Grades 10 and 12 • eLearning platforms (e.g. the Maths Curriculum Online (MCO) programme) for foundation phase learners • Matric support booklets • Adjusted timetable to accommodate additional time for language and maths tuition • Teachers: • Training on the science of reading and the synthetic phonics approach in the foundation phase • Training on the MCO platform • Professional development programmes covering the entire curriculum in the intermediate and senior phases • Guidance on providing subject-specific support to Grade 10 and 12 learners **Teachers:** • Training on the science of reading and the synthetic phonics approach in the foundation phase • Training on the MCO platform • Professional development programmes covering the entire curriculum in the intermediate and senior phases • Guidance on providing subject-specific support to Grade 10 and 12 learners
Targeting
• **Learners**: Approximately 310 000 foundation phase learners and 126 000 learners in Grades 4, 7, 8, 10 and 12 • **Teachers:** Approximately 10 000 foundation phase teachers and 8 900 teachers in Grades 4, 7, 8, 10 and 12 • **Parents:** Approximately 28 000 parents

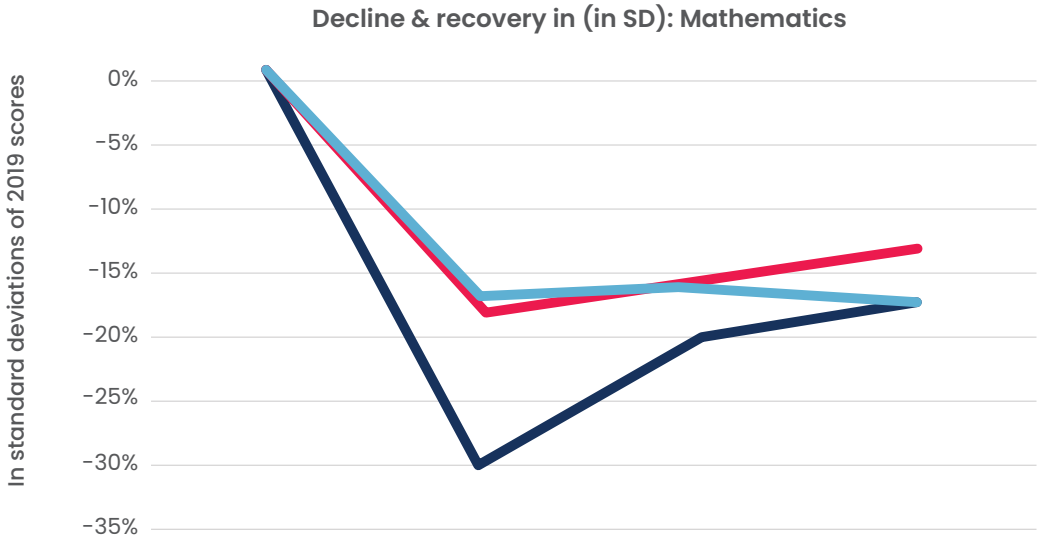
Grade 4	Grade 7	Grade 8
Schools targeted: 140 Teachers targeted: 800 Learners targeted: 4 000	Schools targeted: 152 Teachers targeted: 400 Learners targeted: 2 000	Schools targeted: 140 Teachers targeted: 800 Learners targeted: 4 000

Source: van der Berg et al.,(2024a)

Figure 2: Decline and recovery in language and maths learner outcomes in Western Cape Schools



	2019	2021	2022	2023
Gr3 Lang	0%	-23%	-18%	-7%
Gr6 Lang	0%	-15%	-31%	-27%
Gr9 Lang	0%	-16%	-10%	-11%



	2019	2021	2022	2023
Gr3 Maths	0%	-30%	-20%	-17%
Gr6 Maths	0%	-17%	-16%	-17%
Gr9 Maths	0%	-18%	-16%	-13%

Source: van der Berg et al.,(2024a)

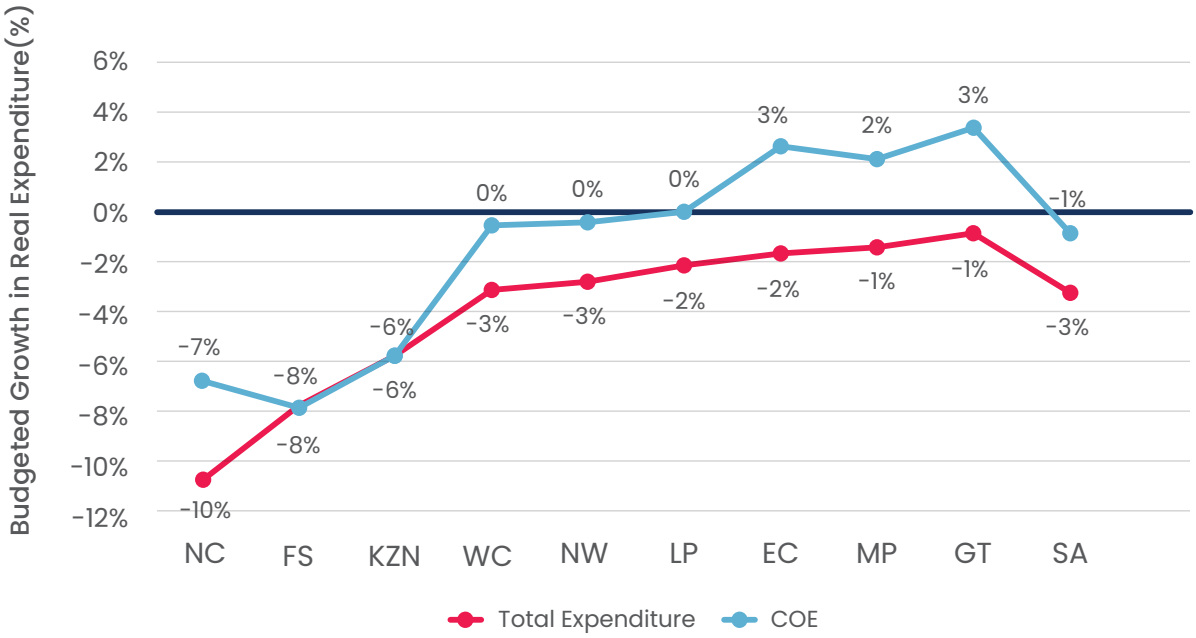
6. System-level constraints

What new information do we have about education budgets?

Provinces are responding differently to increased austerity. In last year's report, we relied on the work of the Wits Public Economy Project, which reported that real education spend per learner per year declined from R24 000 in 2020 and projected to be to R21 685 in 2025. Furthermore, the project estimated a R7 billion shortfall in the 2023/4 education budget as a result of the 2023 teacher wage deal (Sachs, 2024). At the end of last year, education budgets were in the news as provinces began to react to reduced spending. One province stated that it would not be renewing the contracts of 2 400 teachers (Bhakaria, 2024). Another claimed that, even though it would not be releasing teachers, it would be cutting spending on "certain educational programmes, school transportation, school nutrition, learning and teaching support material (LTSM) and other expenses" (Majadibodu, 2024) . In February 2025, 22 600 posts for principals, deputy principals, heads of departments and teachers at public schools were reported as vacant (DBE, 2025). It is important to note that there has been quite a debate about the difference between not filling posts, firing teachers, and not renewing contracts. Irrespective, in the end, the effect is the same. Teacher posts are calculated based on the number of learners in the system and the number of teachers required to serve these learners, as per norms and standards. Whether teachers' contracts are not renewed or whether they are being fired is not a useful point of contention – the bottom line is that there are not enough teachers in the system. Budget constraints will continue to place strain on the system's ability to fill these posts, with the use of vacant posts to balance the budget previously reported (Spaull & Ntaka, 2022).

In some instances, the cost of employment budget is declining at a slower rate than the overall budget. As shown in Figure 3, fiscal pressures are not impacting provinces at the same rate (Böhmer, 2024). In the Eastern Cape, Mpumalanga and Gauteng, the overall budget is expected to contract by 1%-2% from 2024 to 2025; yet, the cost of employment is expected to increase by 2%-3%. Even in provinces managing to maintain their expenditure on teachers, overall budgets are declining by 2%-3%. In the Northern Cape, overall expenditure is expected to decrease significantly (-10%), however teacher salaries are decreasing at a slower rate (-7%). With teacher salaries making up approximately 80% of education budgets, the concern here is that teacher salaries will eat into a bigger and bigger portion of the already stretched budgets. Conditional grants take up an additional 10% of the budget, and the remaining 10% is spent on items such as LTSM. The conclusion is not as simple as spending less on teacher salaries, especially considering that class sizes are already excessive. Without expressing a view on whether the 10% allocated for LTSM and other expenditures is sufficient, the fact is that if we deploy well-trained and supported teachers, with at least the minimum resources and a conducive teaching environment, learner outcomes should improve. Teachers are a necessary and substantial investment, so the real focus should be on ensuring that the 80% of the budget spent on them is used effectively. To achieve this would require improving teacher quality, timetabling, and allocating more teachers through tools such as the post provisioning norms, to the foundation phase to meet the demand.

Figure 3: Budgeted growth in real provincial education expenditure (2023/24-2024/25)



Source: Böhmer (2024)

Provinces are under increasing pressure to deliver on unfunded mandates. There is no shortage of good ideas in the system; however, the number of new and expensive mandates facing the system are extraordinary. Two of these will significantly shift the landscape: the introduction of a compulsory Grade R year and the inclusion of ECD. Spending on Grade R has gradually increased over the years – from R2.4 billion in 2013/14, it is projected to reach R7.0 billion in 2026/27. **Ensuring that all learners have access to the compulsory Grade R year is projected to require an additional R18 billion (Janari, 2024). In terms of ECD, the cost of running a fully registered early learning programme is estimated to cost more than three times the current per learner subsidy amount (R55.44 compared to R17.00 per day). The cost of running a fully compliant (as per norms and standards) registered programme is estimated to cost more than five times the current subsidy amount (Kika-Mistry & Wills, 2024).** An additional concern is system readiness. There is some very careful and commendable work being done by researchers such as Wills and Kika, organisations such as Ilifa labantwana and the DBE to ensure the system is prepared for the rollout of universal ECD. However, previous (and persisting) weaknesses in planning can be quite jarring and raise concerns about public statements and implementation e.g. the extension of MTbBE from as early as this year, announced in mid-2025 (DBE, 2024a). As it stands, we are yet to address the extremely low learning outcomes and undercapacitated teachers in the foundation phase, and all these new initiatives add similar and compounding challenges. Provinces are already reporting that they are too stretched financially and otherwise to implement focused interventions to improve reading outcomes. The need for and value of Grade R, ECD programmes and MTbBE is of course indisputable, and these initiatives are all deserving of funding. However, if we are not careful, we run the risk of defocusing the system and diluting all initiatives, despite having the best intentions of giving learners every opportunity to reach success. The following quote is relevant here:

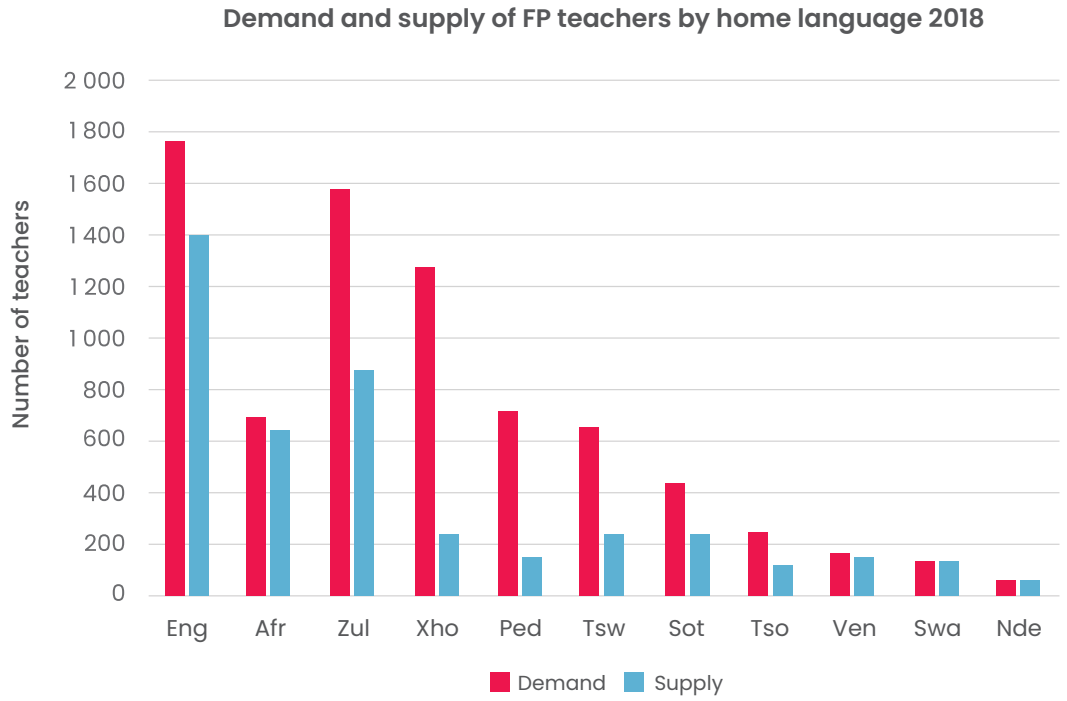
> "Two issues seem to stand out. On the one hand, it is possible that the very strong emphasis on ECD below Grade 1 emerging in South Africa and around the developing world in recent years could dilute attention away from Grades 1 to 3. Clearly, what occurs below Grade 1 is important and warrants public funding. However, the argument put forward by Akkari (2022), in UNESCO's premier academic journal, that today's rich countries ensuring they had functioning primary schools before they began large-scale public funding of pre-schooling, is worth taking into account. In 2024, the DBE formally committed itself to extending the use of MTbBE beyond Grade 3. While there are compelling reasons to do this, given the serious practical implications of this policy change, in particular for teacher training reform, this could divert attention from the change needed in the training of foundation phase teachers."
>
> **Gustafsson, 2025**

7. Teacher supply and demand

In previous reports, we have explored research done on the impending teacher retirement wave, with 50% of teachers over the age of 50 expected to retire by 2030. Research on teacher retirement has been largely led by the Teacher Demographic Dividend project, to whom we are immensely grateful. Initial modelling indicated that the system was underproducing the number of teachers required to meet the upcoming need. New data reveals that the most pressing issue is not an insufficient number of teachers being produced, but rather the need to produce the right quality of teachers for the correct phase and language (ReSEP, 2024). As a case in point, double the number of secondary school teachers than required are being produced, but only half the required foundation phase teachers (Gustafsson 2025a). Figure 4 illustrates the demand and supply of language-specific foundation phase teachers. Only three African languages (Tshivenda, siSwati and isiNdebele) are producing the required number of teachers. Some African languages are producing as little as 20% of the required number of LOLT-specific teachers (Gustafsson, 2025).

Universities are producing double the number of secondary school teachers and only half of the foundation phase teachers required. As little as 20% of the required language-specific teachers are being produced.

Figure 4: Foundation phase teacher demand and supply per language (2018)



Source: Gustafsson (2025)

Addressing the entire teacher production pipeline will require careful consideration and planning. As a new wave of teachers prepares to enter the system, Gustafsson's advisory note highlights several key considerations for foundation phase teachers: (1) the optimal manner of training for foundation phase teachers, i.e. face to face versus distance learning, (2) whether teachers are being provided with the necessary practical guidance, (3) effectively teaching maths in African languages, (4) their role in contributing to national development, and (5) whether the foundation phase is being prioritised enough given the focus on ECD and the introduction of a compulsory Grade R year.

The content of BEd degrees and challenges relating to the training of quality primary school teachers are critical issues going forward[12]. Firstly, many students entering BEd programmes have weak foundational skills in language and maths. A 2019 report by the Centre for Educational Testing and Placement (CEPT) on 80 000 candidates who wrote the National Benchmark Test found that, in terms of academic literacy, 29% of aspiring teachers had only basic language skills (described as "serious learning challenges identified") and 47% had low intermediate-level skills (CEPT, 2019). Secondly, the composition of BEd curricula has been found to be inadequate, with only 2%-10% of credits allocated to the pedagogical aspects of teaching reading (Reed, 2019). Many universities also do not focus on building foundational literacy skills, even when students lack reading abilities in any language (Taylor, forthcoming). Lastly, there is little improvement in teacher trainees' competencies over the course of their degree. A 2018 study revealed that final-year students only marginally outperformed first-year students in primary school-level maths (Bowie, Venkat & Askew, 2019). This lack of progress raises concerns about the effectiveness of BEd programmes in preparing teachers for foundational phase education.

[12] See Taylor (Forthcoming).

While Gustafsson (2025) notes the need for significant work to be done in the area of quality teacher training and, as outlined in Table 9, there are several higher education institutions (HEIs) and independent bodies that are either piloting or rolling out programmes to address the deficiencies in foundation phase teacher training. Unfortunately, none of these programmes have become a mainstream part of BEd degrees. Additionally, Pampallis (forthcoming) offers some recommendations for a more rigorous selection process of BEd students, including a stronger focus on academic competence, non-academic aptitude, and context-specific suitability. The opportunity for stricter admission requirements is made possible by the high demand for undergraduate courses, with one university reporting up to 57 applications for each place available (Pampallis, forthcoming).

Table 9: Summary of BEd curriculum initiatives (foundation and intermediate phase)

Programme	Focus	Development and pilot	Rollout	No. of HEIs	Literature references
Multilingual BEd	English, Afrikaans and isiXhosa	2016-18	2018	1	Ramadiro, 2022
Advanced Certificate in Foundation Phase Literacy Teaching	Reading pedagogy in English and isiXhosa	2019	2023	1	Taylor, 2021
Primary Teacher Education Project (PrimTEd) 3.0	Assessment instruments for BEd students	• Maths: 2016-18 • EFAL: 2017-18 • Sepedi and isiXhosa	• 2019-28 • 2019-28 • 2024	• 18 • 11 • 12	Alex & Roberts, 2019; Bowie et al., 2019; Roberts & Moloi, 2022; Roberts & Mort, 2023; Mort, 2023
Sesotho and isiZulu Reading Project (SIRP)	Reading pedagogy in Sesotho, isiZulu and EFAL	2019-2023	2024-26	12	SIRP, 2020; Land et al., 2023
Mathematics for Primary Teachers (M4PT)	Maths knowledge for primary school teachers	• Maths intensive 1st year • Updated course M4PT modules for B.Ed programmes	• 2019-20 • 2022 • 2023 • 2024	• 2 • 6 • 8 • 9	Roberts & Maseko, 2022
Mental Mathematics – Work Integrated Learning (MM-WIL)	Developing students' mental maths strategies and how to teach them	2021		9	Kumm & Graven, 2024
Maths in the BEd	BEd primary school maths curriculum	2018	2018	1	Essien et al., 2023
Teacher Choices in Action (TCiA)	Assessment of teaching practice	2020-21	2022	9	Rusznyak, 2020; Langsford & Rusznyak, 2024; Bertram & Rusznyak, 2024

Source: Taylor (forthcoming)

8. National promises

New presidential commitments

In 2019, Presidential Cyril Ramaphosa made the following statement: "Every 10-year-old needs to be able to read for meaning … over the next five years, we will focus our attention on … improving early grade reading." Unfortunately, very little progress has been made by way of new system-level responses since. In fact, reading was not mentioned again during President Ramaphosa's first term. In February 2025, however, the SONA provided a new commitment to improving foundation phase reading, with reference made to the rollout of lesson plans, reading books, and "other interventions that have proven to work". This harks back to the commitments made in the 2010 SONA: "In our 2010 programme, we want to improve the ability of our children to read, write and count in the foundation years … we will assist teachers by providing detailed daily lesson plans … to students, we will provide easy-to-use workbooks in all 11 languages. From this year onwards, all Grade 3, 6 and 9 students will write literacy and numeracy tests that are independently moderated" (SONA, 2010). These promises resulted in the rollout of the national workbooks programme, which still exists today and provides workbooks to all Grade 1-9 learners. At a cost of about R1 billion per year, the workbooks programme is one of the greatest system interventions, together with the ANAs (halted in 2014).

Given the evidence that the system is producing just half of the required number of foundation phase teachers, it was a welcome announcement in the 2025 SONA that the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme will prioritise foundation phase teachers. However, this is just one piece of this puzzle; it needs to be supported by improved BEd programme content and alignment with language-specific needs, and practical experience. There is also the question of a systemic response to upskilling the existing cohort of teachers. Additionally, no rigorously evaluated intervention in South Africa that was not linked to a structured learning programme in some way has delivered significant gains (with the exception of the provision of graded readers). Structured lesson plans are a welcome and long overdue intervention to support teaching and learning, given limited content and pedagogical knowledge.

A strong political will

Since taking office in July 2024, the new DBE leadership has reiterated that foundational literacy and numeracy is a priority, and that there will be a return to a culture of assessments, teacher training reform, the allocation of an increased number of teachers in the foundation phase through the PPN and curriculum reform (DBE,2024c). The new administration has gone as far as stating that they will embark on a strategic reorientation of the basic education system, placing foundational learning at the centre of the department's reform agenda.[13]

This is the first time since the Foundations for Learning Campaign (FFLC) launched in 2008 that a minister has made such a strong statement about foundational learning as a key priority. Although the implementation of the FFLC was flawed in many ways, it did move beyond only rhetoric, culminating in a policy that introduced some of the most comprehensive measures to address foundational skills, including the national workbooks programme and the ANAs.

[13] World Bank, "Keynote address by Minister Siviwe Gwarube at the launch of the South Africa Economic Update. Learning: Overdue Reforms and Emerging Priorities in Basic Education © World Bank," (18 February 2025 2025).

Notably, the campaign gazetted a minimum package of foundation phase learning materials, which in many ways has not changed until this day. Lessons from Brazil and Peru[14] remind us that political leadership is one of the most important elements of large-scale educational reform. Importantly, the role of political leadership is about much more than rhetoric – it is about working to reorient the entire system to meet relevant goals. The DBE's new administration has served in office for just over seven months, and only time will tell if these public statements will translate into more concrete actions.

Promising shifts in the air

In June 2024, the DBE issued a call for proposals to update the national catalogue. The terms of reference are for the minimum package of resources[15] for foundation phase classrooms. These include a teacher guide, graded readers, big books, and classroom resources (friezes, flashcards, posters and handwriting charts). The call also specifies that the reading programmes submitted should be designed in a way that ensures that learners will be able to meet reading benchmarks. This minimum package is in line with the DBE's directorate of Research, Monitoring and Evaluation's recommended minimum package, based on findings from the EGRS. As a reminder, in the second year of the EGRS's implementation, the materials only arm led to effect sizes of 19% of a schooling year (Cilliers et al., 2020). While we are still some way from a policy that mandates the provision of these materials in all foundation phase classrooms as well as the use of the DBE's reading benchmarks, a new language and standards are beginning to embed themselves at a national level and being cascaded into provinces. Of importance is the inclusion of teacher guides as part of the minimum package. There is a large body of research internationally, regionally and from the DBE (via the EGRS) on the importance of structured pedagogy programmes in supporting teaching practice and improving learning outcomes in a cost-effective manner. In addition, they are an important tool for providing a minimum floor for quality instruction at scale. In a forthcoming book, Taylor makes the following statement:

> "...[I]ndeed, [structured pedagogy programmes] appear to be the only way of assisting these teachers, so poor are their knowledge foundations. Culpability for leaving teachers without the knowledge required to make pedagogic judgements lies not with those who offer poorly educated teachers some means, however crude, for navigating the curriculum, but with those teacher educators who have in the past, and perhaps continue to do so, neglected to provide their students with the requisite knowledge and skills during their pre-service education."

Furthermore, the latest developments signal a welcome alignment between the DBE's research and curriculum teams, which have historically worked in silos. The DBE's research division produces some of the leading work on improving foundational literacy and numeracy, which the 2030 Reading Panel also draws on. It is encouraging to see these efforts coming together.

[14] When Jaime Saavedra was appointed as Minister of Education in Peru, he set an ambitious agenda for system-wide reform. The success of these reforms was driven by strong technocratic leadership in the education ministry, backed by multiple presidents, teacher unions and effective public communication strategies.

[15] See the draft invitation and terms of reference to submit materials for Grades 1-3 national catalogue.

In 2023, the DBE developed a revised National Literacy Strategy and Plan. The strategy consists of several interdependent pillars, shown in Figure 5. In contrast to the previous strategy, the DBE has consolidated the previous 10 thematic areas, with just short of 50 activities, to four pillars (teacher training, LTSM, parent and community engagement, and a reading and literacy policy framework) and three cross-cutting themes (assessment, advocacy and partnerships). In addition, we are encouraged to see that the DBE has produced a high-level implementation plan alongside the strategy (see highlights in Annexure A), which will go a long way in further refining the strategy and priorities. The plan has not yet been finalised and published, and although some priority areas have been identified, it remains quite vague – particularly in terms of responsibilities, implementation timelines and milestones, measurement, and funding mechanisms. Nevertheless, we are grateful for the generosity of the DBE in sharing the plan at this early stage. As such, it would be unfair to harshly critique the current strategy. However, as the DBE moves towards finalising the strategy, a few points are worth noting:

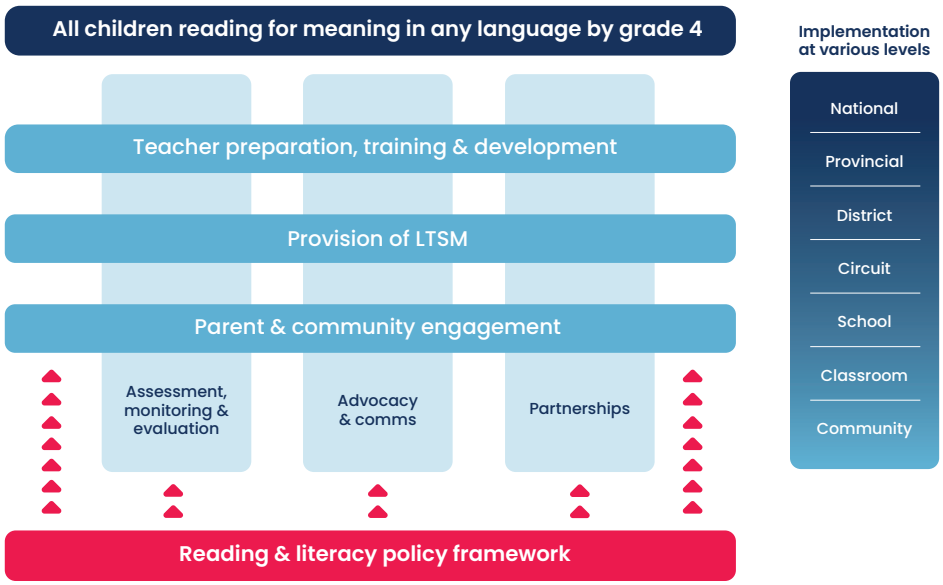
(1) The ultimate owner of the plan and the roles and responsibilities of the three tiers of the education system must be clear. While many aspects of the education system are handled as a concurrent responsibility, one of the key reasons why new plans and interventions do not gain momentum is a lack of clear accountability lines and an identified 'centre' to drive the reform.

(2) We are encouraged by increased recognition of the need for a minimum package of materials in foundation phase classrooms. However, **there must be a clear policy directive for this minimum package of materials, including who is responsible for the provision of such materials.**

(3) It is clear that the strategy only contemplates continuous professional development (CPD) of teachers. Although the supply of quality teachers from the Department of Higher Education and Training is core to responding to issues relating to teacher demand and supply, the DBE may have decided that the reading strategy may be the incorrect avenue through which to address this. However, **we would suggest that focusing purely on in-service training would leave the DBE constantly on the back foot,** caught up in an endless and unaffordable task of reskilling teachers instead of upskilling. That being said, **the CPD elements could be strengthened further through explicit mention of the quality and frequency of training** (history has shown that once-off training does not work), and linking this with the provision of the minimum package of materials, including lesson plans.

(4) There appears to be no mention of assessment in the implementation plan. Yet, we think the reading strategy could be a useful document to establish the importance of the DBE benchmarks and a national commitment to assess and report against them.

Figure 5: The pillars and themes of the DBE's New Literacy Framework



Source: DBE (2023)

Strengthening the system's ability to plan and implement reforms may be the most important intervention. Metcalfe (2025) provides a sobering note on the system's ability to plan. In essence, Metcalfe argues that the main vehicle for changing foundational learning outcomes is to improve the system's ability to plan, monitor and deliver: "This includes a deliberative focus on addressing inequities of resourcing that impact on performance and doing so within a rigorous planning framework so that the system achieves greater efficiencies, improved quality, and more equitable outcomes." Building on Metcalfe's perspective, to build the system's capacity to deliver, Khosa (2025) contends that districts should play a central role in improving literacy and numeracy outcomes. Districts, which are less influenced by electoral cycles, offer stability and a pool of future provincial and national expertise in supporting schools. Yet, echoing Metcalfe's concerns, the Khosa identifies three key factors that currently hinder districts from fully realising this role: (1) basic factors, including effective scheduling, prioritisation of foundational skills, structured professional development, and well-run meetings to ensure follow-through; (2) mid-level capabilities, including strong strategic and operational planning with clear priorities, aligned activities, and well-defined goals; and (3) higher-order systemic elements such as establishing high-performance frameworks and strengthening evaluation and feedback systems

9. Towards 2030: Are we coming or going?

Each year, new and interesting data on learner reading outcomes in the foundation phase is released, giving us fresh perspectives on the extent of the problem and viable solutions. Encouragingly, provinces are increasingly scaling evidence-based solutions and moving towards implementing more accountability measures, with standardised province-wide assessments in primary schools as an example.

The Western Cape's BoT programme is a promising example of focused remediation at scale and provides valuable lessons on using existing resources (e.g. the time available in the school day) to consolidate and focus on key areas such as reading and maths. We also look forward to the evaluation results of the provincial-level interventions that the 2030 Reading Panel reviewed previously: Gauteng's Grade R programme, the WCED's rollout of literacy materials, the ECDoE's reading strategy, and the Northern Cape's rollout of the EGRS. While we acknowledge that change takes time and that improvements in learner results won't be evident immediately, implementation lessons at scale are important if we are to implement an effective national response to reading.

In the week preceding the finalisation of this report, we were presented with new commitments at SONA 2025, which included the rollout of lesson plans, provision of reading materials, and the prioritisation of producing more foundation phase teachers via the Funza Lushaka Bursary Scheme. Although these commitments are encouraging, we must emphasise that effective planning remains a crucial constraint in the system. Consequently, we await the tabling of new budgets and implementation plans for each of these initiatives.

As 2030 nears, we are facing the reality of missed targets, similar to many of the NDP goals across other sectors. However, as shown in Table 11, South Africa has developed a rigorous evidence base on what works to improve reading outcomes, and the sector is supported by a strong civil society. Furthermore, the works referenced in this and preceding 2030 Reading Panel reports demonstrate that the country is home to ample academics, independent bodies and individuals who are committed to contributing to the required system reform. Now is the time for consolidation, careful planning and implementation of what we already know works. It will take us more than the five years left until 2030; yet, there is every reason to take this opportunity to own the problem, and to use existing evidence to accelerate gains towards all grade 4 learners reading for meaning by 2030. In this regard, it is apt to quote Peru's former education minister, Jaime Saavedra. Following a shock performance in international assessments, with Peru coming last out of 65 countries, the country achieved the largest global improvement in learning outcomes in the Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA) between 2012 and 2015, by implementing focused reforms.

> "The PISA results came out three weeks after I started, so those results were a baseline for us. Peru was last. Last of the 65 countries of PISA. Not bottom 10 percent. Last. And that was a shock. We could have decided to play the results down to say, 'But Peru has improved since 2009' (which it had), or 'But we are better than many countries that didn't even take PISA', or 'It is an OECD [Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development] examination that is alien to our culture and priorities'. But we didn't go down that route. Instead, we decided to own the problem, to use the results to say, 'Look, we're not in trouble. We're in deep trouble'"
>
> **Jaime Saavedra, former education minister of Peru**

Table 11: Evaluation results of early grade reading interventions in South Africa

Intervention	Effect size	Tested at scale	Source
Anthology of graded readers	20% of a schooling year	Yes, rolled out in the Eastern Cape in 2019, 2020 and 2024	Ardington & Spaull, 2022
LTSM (workbooks and teacher guides)	68% of a schooling year 25% of Grade 3 learners at grade level versus 15% in control schools	Yes, currently in the Western Cape	Ardington, 2024
Teacher coaching and LTSM (lessons plans + classroom resources	40% of a schooling year 44% of Grade 2 learners at grade level versus 37% in control schools	Yes, currently in Northern Cape and previously in Gauteng	Cilliers et al., 2020; Ardington & Meiring, 2020
Teaching assistants and LTSM (workbooks and teacher guides)	115% of a schooling year 32% of Grade 3 learners at grade level versus 15% in control schools	No	Ardington, 2024

Source: Lucwaba (2024)

10. Recommendations

The recommendations of the 2030 Reading Panel largely remain the same since our previous report, but with an increased emphasis on consolidation for all recommendations. Table 12 provides an overview of our recommendations. For years we have lamented the lack of assessments in the system. Although SASE provides provinces with useful information on the performance of the system, it is yet another national-level assessment that does not provide clarity to provinces on which interventions to focus on and how to allocate resources. In addition, adding another set of levels and descriptors into the system that are not readily comparable with any existing instrument increases the complexity rather than triggering the necessary action. In the same vein, the audit of education programmes at universities must align with the work being done on developing minimum knowledge standards for new teachers to ensure that the audit produces the correct outcomes. Finally, any plan is useless without a budget and assigned responsibilities with accountability mechanisms. If a national plan has no owner, the centre will not hold, and any steps taken will continue to take the form of unrelated projects. This will not amount to the focused reform we desperately need.

Table 12: Overview of the 2030 Reading Panel's recommendations

Recommendations (2022-2024)	Status	Comment
National: Measure what matters by implementing a universal, standardised assessment of reading proficiency at a primary school level	Minor progress	Currently, the only national assessment is SASE, which is meant to replace the ANAs (abolished in 2014). The results were presented two years after initial data collection – this significant delay renders any system-level response impossible. Furthermore, only a sample of schools participated, and the assessment is planned for every 3-4 years only. SASE does not fulfill the function of ensuring that all primary schools focus on improving reading. However, we do recognise the efforts made in implementing the systemic evaluation and the ELNAs.
Provincial: Measure what matters by implementing a universal, standardised assessment of reading proficiency at a primary school level	Notable progress	Three provinces – the Western Cape, Free State and Gauteng – have allocated significant resources to learner assessments in primary schools. In addition, the Eastern Cape is piloting a set of assessments that would be representative at a school level.
National: Move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful budgets to reading resources and interventions, instead of simply discussing these	No progress	Although SONA 2025 included renewed promises to roll out lesson plans and provide reading materials, the 2024 Medium Term Budget Policy Statement and the 2024 Budget revealed that there are no new national budgets for reading programmes or reading resources. The upcoming 2025 budget will be very telling in this regard.
Provincial: Move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful budgets to reading resources and interventions, instead of only discussing these	Notable progress	Four provinces have been implementing some form of reading intervention at scale. The WCED has allocated R111 million (2023-2025) to a foundation phase reading-for-meaning programme. The Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) has allocated R20 million to a Grade R programme (2022-2024), with an additional R80 million expected in donor funding. The project is now awaiting final evaluation reports. The ECDoE has allocated R24 million (2023-2024) to support the implementation of its reading strategy (with tentative amounts allocated for 2024/5), and the Northern Cape Department of Education (NCDoE) is scaling up the EGRS from 2024 with donor funding.
National: Provide a standard, minimum set of reading resources to all foundation phase classrooms (Grades R-3) as a matter of urgency	No progress	Although the DBE has included a minimum set of LTSM as part of the foundation phase catalogue, there is no clarity on responsibilities and budgets regarding the provision of LTSM.
Provincial: Provide a standard, minimum set of reading resources to all foundation phase classrooms (Grades R-3) as a matter of urgency	Notable progress	The Western Cape and Gauteng have rolled out programmes reaching all Grade R (GDE) and Grade 1 (WCED) teachers. The ECDoE has delivered graded readers to all Grade 1-3 learners, and the NCDoE is rolling out a programme (2024-2027) to provide teachers with lesson plans.
Conduct an audit of pre-service teacher education programmes at universities	Notable progress	In 2022, the CHE instituted an audit of BEd programmes. The first step of this, the development of a set of qualification standards, was completed in 2024 and published in February 2025.[16] It is envisioned that this will result in institutions developing self-evaluation reports which institutions will be monitored against (Taylor, forthcoming). Time will tell how effective these mechanisms are as Taylor suggests that this review will only be useful if it facilitates raising the quality of the BEd and appropriate action follows non-compliance. A critical issue in raising quality will be paying close to the curriculum aspects of the BEd, and ensuring some of the outcomes of the initiatives in table 9 are incorprated in broader BEd programmes.

[16] See CHE, 2024

11. References

Alex, J., & Roberts, N. 2019. The need for relevant initial teacher education for primary mathematics: Evidence from the Primary Teacher Education project in South Africa. Proceedings of the 27th Annual Conference of The Southern African Association for Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education (SAARMSTE). [Online] Available https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/resources/mathematics-resources-repository/alex-and-roberts-2019.pdf [2025, February 14]

Bertram, C., & Rusznyak, L. 2024. Navigating Tensions in Designing a Curriculum that Prepares Preservice Teachers for School-based Learning. Education as Change. 28(1): 1–23. [Online]. Available: https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/14677 [2025, February 14]

Bhakaria, U. 2024. Western Cape education says no teacher retrenchments despite loss of 2,400 jobs due to budget cuts. Mail & Guardian [Online], 3 September. Available: https://mg.co.za/education/2024-09-03-western-cape-education-says-no-teacher-retrenchments-despite-loss-of-2400-jobs-due-to-budget-cuts/ [2025, February 10]

Böhmer, B. 2024. Provincial differences in fiscal pressures: TDD Provincial Workshop. Stellenbosch University. Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP)

Bowie, L., Venkat, H. & Askew, M. 2019. Pre-service primary teachers' mathematical content knowledge: An exploratory study. African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education, 23(3): 286–297

CEPT (Centre for Educational Testing and Placement). 2019. The National Benchmark Tests National Report: 2019 Intake Cycle. [Cape Town]: Centre for Educational Testing and Placement at the University of Cape Town [Online]. Available: https://nbt.uct.ac.za/sites/default/files/NBT%20 National%20Report%202019.pdf [2025, February 4]

Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Prinsloo, C. & Taylor, D. 2020. How to improve teaching practice? An experimental comparison of centralized training and in-classroom coaching. Journal of Human Resources, 55(3): 926-962.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE). 2024. Qualification standards for initial teacher education: Bachelor of Education. [Online]. Available: https://www.che.ac.za/publications/standard-reviews/qualification-standards-initial-teacher-education-bachelor-education [2025, February 18]

Cruz, L & Loureiro A. 2020. Achieving world-class education in adverse socio-economic conditions: the case of Sobral in Brazil. Available: https://documents1.worldbank.org/curated/en/143291593675433703/pdf/Achieving-World-Class-Education-in-Adverse-Socioeconomic-Conditions-The-Case-of-Sobral-in-Brazil.pdf [2025, February, 17]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2011. Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS). Foundation Phase, Grades R-3. English Home Language [Online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/CD/National%20Curriculum%20Statements%20and%20Vocational/CAPS%20English%20HL%20GRADES%20R-3%20FS.pdf?ver=2015-01-27-154201-167 [2025, February 4]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2011a. Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS). Foundation Phase grades R-3. isiXhosa Home Language [Online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/CD/National%20Curriculum%20Statements%20and%20Vocational/CAPS%20isiXhosa%20HL%20%20GRADES%20R-3%20FS.pdf?ver=2015-01-27-154618-763 [2025, February 4]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2012. National policy pertaining to the programme and promotion requirements of the National Curriculum Statement Grades R-12, published as Government Notices No. 1115 and 1116 in Government Gazette No. 36042. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2023. South African National Literacy Strategy And Plan: 2024-2030.

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2023. Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021: South African Preliminary Highlights Report [Online]. Available: https://www.up.ac.za/media/shared/164/ZP_Files/2023/piirls-2021_highlights-report.zp235559.pdf [2025, February 4]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2024. SEACMEQ V South African Technical Report: A study of the conditions of schooling and the quality of education [Online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2024/SEACMEQ%20V.pdf?ver=2024-12-03-170622-000 [2025, February 14]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2024a. Keynote by the Basic Education Minister, Mrs Angie Motshekga, MP, at the Workshop on the Implementation of Mother Tongue-Based Bilingual Education, 21 May, Bloemfontein [Online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Media/Speeches/2024/Language%20and%20Literacy%20Workshop%2020%20May%202024.pdf?ver=2024-05-21-112502-760 [2025, February 10]

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2024b. South African Systemic Evaluation 2022: Analysis of Factors Influencing Learning Outcomes. Pretoria: Department of Basic Education.

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2024c. Speech by Minister of Basic Education, Ms. Siviwe Gwarube: Release of the Diagnostic Reports https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/minister-siviwe-gwarube-release-diagnostic-reports-04-dec-2024

DBE (Department of Basic Education). 2025. State-of-School Readiness for the new academic year, presentation to the Portfolio Committee on Basic Education, 4 February, virtual meeting.[Online]. Accessed: https://pmg.org.za/committee-meeting/40158/ [2025, February, 14]

ECDoE (Eastern Cape Department of Education). 2025. Piloting the use of Grade 1 and 3 assessments in the Eastern Cape. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Essien, A., Mathews, C., Tshesane, T., Weitz, M., Abdulhamid, L., Hoosen, T., & Lavans, L. 2023. Developing design principles to enhance preservice teachers' understanding of number structure and mathematical equivalence in early grade mathematics. African Journal of Research in Mathematics, Science and Technology Education.27(3): 239–254. [Online] https://doi.org/10.1080/18117295.2023.2216608

FSDoE (Free State Department of Education). 2025. The Free State's use of Early Grade Reading Assessments (EGRA) and standardised assessments to improve reading. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

GDE (Gauteng Department of Education). 2025. Oral Reading Fluency Assessment in Grade 3 Learners Across Gauteng Public Primary Schools. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Gustafsson, M. 2025. Asking the right questions about the initial training of foundation phase teachers. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Gustafsson, M. 2025a. Specialisation-specific teacher supply and employment in the 2019 to 2022 period. [Online]. Available: https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2025/Specialisation-specific%20supply%202025%2001%2015.pdf?ver=2025-02-12-201150-747 [2025, February 18]

Janari, S. 2024. Basic education budget and spending trends: A 10 year overview. Presentation at the Quantitative Education Research Conference. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP). Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/an-overview-of-the-8th-annual-qer-conference-21-22-august-2024/sample-post/ 21 August 2024.

Khosa, G. 2025. Reflections on the role and significance of in-house capacity to improve literacy. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources.

Kik-Mistry, J and Wills, G. 2024 Cost, Compliance and User Fees in the Early Childhood Care and Education Sector in South Africa: Update using the 2021 ECD Census and 2021 Thrive by Five Index and Baseline Assessment data. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP). Available: https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Ilifa-Cost-Compliance-and-User-Fees-in-the-Early-Childhood-Care-and-Education-Sector-in-South-Africa-FINAL.pdf [Accessed 2025, February, 14]

Kumm, M., & Graven, M. 2024. KExploring pre-service teachers' knowledge of efficient calculation strategies. South African Journal of Childhood Education. 14(1): 1–13.

Land, S., Lyster, E., & Thusi, Z. (2023). Evaluation of Sesotho and isiZulu reading project (SIRP). Report 2b on: SIRP Conference at Salt Rock: 8—9 September 2022. Unpublished report prepared for JET Education Services.

Langsford, D., & Rusznyak, L. 2024. Observing Complexity in Teachers' Choices: Preparing Preservice Teachers for Work-Integrated Learning. Education as Change. 28: 1-23. https://doi.org/10.25159/1947-9417/14676 [2025, February 14]

Luna-Bazaldua, D. & Cruz, L. 2024, April 2. When an assessment system works to improve learning: the case of Sobral. World Bank Group blog. Available: https://blogs.worldbank.org/en/education/when-an-assessment-system-works-to-improve-learning--the-case-of [2025, February 4].

Makaluza, N. 2025. What does the South African System Evaluation tell us about learner reading proficiencies? [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Majadibodu, S. 2024. Gauteng Education to cut transport and feeding schemes to save 3,400 teachers jobs amid R4.5 billion budget cut. IOL [Online], 16 September. Available https://www.iol.co.za/news/politics/gauteng-education-to-cut-transport-and-feeding-schemes-to-save-3400-teachers-jobs-amid-r45-billion-budget-cut-3f3890d1-268c-442f-a566-43b2e79c4680#:~:text=5%20billion%20budget%20cut,-Gauteng%20MEC%20of&text=Gauteng's%20Education%20MEC%20Matome%20Chiloane,5%20billion%20budget%20deficit [2025, February 10]

Metcalfe, M. 2025. NPC advisory: Basic education priorities for the MTDP, 2024-29. Improving planning to improve literacy and numeracy. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Nuga Deliwe, C. & Van der Berg, S. 2022. The role of assessment in foundation phase improvement: The annual national assessments and beyond, in H. Venkat & N. Roberts (eds). Early grade mathematics in South Africa. Cape Town: Oxford University Press.

Pampallis, I. Forthcoming. Selection for the Bachelor of Education, in N. Taylor (ed). School Foundations: The Role of Initial Teacher Education. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council.

Reed, Y. 2019. Foundation and Intermediate Phase BEd programmes at selected South African universities: language and literacies components. [Pretoria]: Department of Higher Education & Training via JET Education Services [Online]. Available: https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/resources/language-and-literacy-resources-repository/clwg-hei-audit-report-20190320.pdf/ [2025, February 14]

Republic of South Africa. 2025. State of the Nation Address (SONA), 6 February, Cape Town [Online]. Available: https://www.stateofthenation.gov.za/assets/downloads/SONA_2025_Speech.pdf [2025, February 14]

Republic of South Africa. 2010. State of the Nation Address (SONA), 11 February, Cape Town [Online]. Available: https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/state-nation-address-his-excellency-jg-zuma-president-republic-south-africa-11-feb [2025, February 14]

Research in Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP). Making sense of the teacher demographic dividend. 2024. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) [Online]. Available: https://tdd.sun.ac.za/downloads/notes/Synthesis- Note-01.pdf [2025, February 4].

Roberts, N., & Maseko, J. (2022). From measuring impact to informing course design: The second design trial of the Maths Intensive course. Journal of Education. Journal of Education 87:93-114. [Online]. Available: https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2520-98682022000200005 [2025, February 14]

Roberts, N., & Moloi, Q. 2022. The Quality of Primary Mathematics Teacher Preparation in SA: Findings from PrimTEd. [Stellenbosch: Research on Socio-Economic Policy [Online]. Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Note-11-Quality-of-Primary-Math-Teacher- Preparation-in-SA-TDD-1-Dec-2022_v3.pdf [2025, February 14]

Roberts, N., & Mort, T. 2023. Designing an English language and literacies knowledge and skills test for Initial Teacher Education students in South Africa. Journal of Education. 90: 32–48. [Online]. Available: https://www.scielo.org.za/scielo.php?script=sci_arttext&pid=S2520-98682023000100003 [2025, February 14]

Rusznyak, L. (2020). Teacher Choices in Action Resource Book. Dept of Higher Education & Training. Department of Higher Education and Training.

Sachs, M. (2024). Education and the 2023 Budget. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Sachs, M., Amra, R., Madonko, T., & Wilcox, O. 2023. Austerity without consolidation: Fiscal policy and spending choices in Budget 2023. Johannesburg: Wits Public Economy Project [Online]. Available: https://wiredspace.wits.ac.za/server/api/core/bitstreams/d7b51cba-da16-4deb-8190-f3732672cdf6/content [2025, February 14]

SIRP. (2020). Report on teaching reading in Sesotho and isiZulu at HEIs. JET Education Services. https://www.jet.org.za/clearinghouse/projects/primted/resources/language-and-literacy-resources-repository/sirp-hei-research-report-august-2019.pdf [2025, February 14]

Spaull, N., & Ntaka, P. 2022. To what extent are provinces freezing HOD and Deputy Principal posts to cope with budgetary pressures? Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) [Online]. Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/12/Note-3-Freezing-HOD-and-DP-positions-TDD-10-Nov-2022-v3.pdf [2025, February 14]

Taylor, N. 2021. Evaluation of the Advanced Certificate in Foundation Phase Literacy Teaching. Grahamstown: Rhodes University [Online]. Available: https://fundawande.org/img/cms/news/Rhodes_Evaluation%20of%20the%20Advanced%20Certificate%20in%20Foundation%20Phase%20Literacy%20Teaching.pdf [2025, February 14]

Taylor, N. Forthcoming. School Foundations: The Role of Initial Teacher Education. Cape Town: Human Sciences Research Council.

Ramadiro, B. 2022. Implementing Multilingual Teacher Education: Reflections on the University of Fort Hare's Bi/Multilingual Bachelor of Education Degree Programme. Education As Change. [Online]. Available: https://scielo.org.za/pdf/eac/v26n1/22.pdf. [2025, February 14]

Van der Berg, S., Hoadley, U., Galant, J., Van Wyk, C., & Böhmer, B. 2022. Learning Losses from COVID-19 in the Western Cape. Evidence from systemic tests. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) [Online]. Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2022/05/RESEP-WCED-Systemic-Tests-%E2%80%93-Report_WEB.pdf [2025, February 14]

Van der Berg, S., Van Wyk, C. & Gustafsson, M. 2024. What SA-SAMS and Lurits data tells us about education: New insights from administrative data. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) [Online]. Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/What-SA-SAMS-and-LURITS-data-tells-us-about-education-2024.pdf [2025, February 10]

Van der Berg, S., Van Wyk, C., & Van Biljon, C. 2024a. The Impact of the 2023 Back-On-Track Programme on learning: A Report to the Western Cape Education Department. Stellenbosch: Research on Socioeconomic Policy (ReSEP) [Online]. Available: https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/12/RESEP-Back-on-Track-Report.pdf [2025, February 14]

WCED (Western Cape Education Department). 2025. The Western Cape Education Department (WCED) Systemic Testing Programme. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2025 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: readingpanel.co.za/resources

Wills, G. 2024. Reflections on early grade repetition in South Africa. [South Africa]: 2030 Reading Panel, advisory note for the 2024 Reading Panel Background Report [Online]. Available: https://www.readingpanel.co.za/_files/ugd/b385b7_a316c4041ec04c74a2cbb83d08a1cc8e.pdf

Annexure A

Highlights from the South African National Literacy Strategy and Plan

Activity: Increase the production of reading materials in African languages (fiction and non-fiction)		
Targets	Linkages to other pillars/sectors	Resources required
ECD classrooms with learners in the reception years have 20 picture home language storybooks (fiction and non-fiction) with content and illustrations likely to engage young learners Foundation Phase classrooms in primary schools have: • 20 age appropriate home language titles for emergent literacy and reading for enjoyment per class. • 40 age appropriate home language titles for independent reading and reading for enjoyment. • Eight graded reading home language anthologies (basal readers) per class for learning to read for Grades 1 to 3.	Early grade classrooms in both primary schools and in ECD centres will receive the minimum requirement of reading resources. This will assist the DBE with the development of core reading resource packs.	Material developers and publishers National catalogue
Activity: Revise the national reading catalogue to incorporate the new strategy into the norms for materials developers (0-10 years readers in different languages)		
Targets	Linkages to other pillars/sectors	Resources required
The new catalogue is updated with materials showing a balance of genres and locally developed readers displaying: • Age appropriateness • Cultural relevance • ECD materials in African languages (e.g., wordless and one work picture books)	Literacy Policy	Materials developers in all languages Quality assurers

Activity: Enhancing teachers' pedagogical skills to teach reading as an integral part of the curriculum.		
Targets	Linkages to other plans/ Sectors	Resources required
Roll out the PSRIP programme to all primary school teachers (Grades 0-3) currently not reached by the national programme through: • Providing national training on reading methodologies. • Developing and revising Foundation Phase Home Language learning programmes, aligned to CAPS • Train ECD practitioners and/or teachers on pre-literacy.	LTSM Research, monitoring and evaluation	Skilled trainers
Activity: Build the capacity of principals and departmental heads so that they can effectively manage and support teachers in reading improvement.		
Targets	Linkage to other pillars/ sectors	Resources required
• Support primary school principals and departmental heads to more effectively utilise existing reading resources. • Subject advisors monitor the use of all reading resources in schools as a general practice	LTSM Research, monitoring and evaluation	Skilled teachers and training resources; Skilled subject advisors

2023 READING PANEL

BACKGROUND REPORT

Published:
25 February 2025
Johannesburg

www.readingpanel.co.za