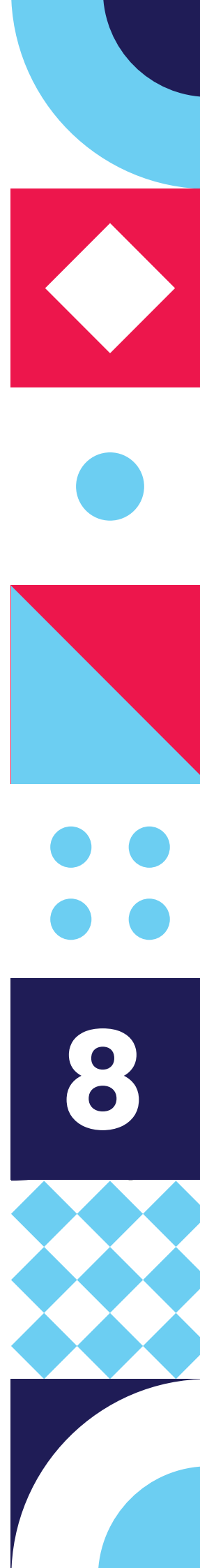




Advisory Note 8 • 24 February 2026

Transforming foundation phase learning outcomes: The Free State Literacy and Numeracy Strategy

ET Montso (FSDoE)



Executive Summary

Operation Tharollo is a strategic five-year provincial initiative (2025-2030) designed to address critical deficits in foundational literacy and numeracy among learners in Grades R through 3. The programme targets 433 schools in Quintiles 1-3, supporting approximately 3,557 educators and 113,651 learners. Funded in partnership with the FLOAT donor consortium, its core objective is to institutionalize a sustainable, evidence-based system of structured pedagogy, comprehensive teacher development, and enhanced instructional material provisioning within the Free State education framework.

1. Background and Context

South Africa is grappling with a severe literacy crisis, as evidenced by the majority of Grade 4 learners being unable to read for meaning. In the Free State, this national challenge is further compounded by systemic issues such as variability in teachers' pedagogical content knowledge and limited access to quality learning resources, resulting in persistently poor foundational outcomes.

To address these challenges, the province has implemented targeted strategies aimed at improving literacy in primary education. These include tracking learner performance in oral fluency and reading comprehension, as well as rolling out teacher support initiatives to strengthen content knowledge. Despite these efforts, financial constraints have hindered the ability to scale interventions to all schools.

Operation Tharollo has therefore been conceptualized as a comprehensive, evidence-based intervention designed to close these gaps. Leveraging a methodical, research-informed approach and supported by the strategic partnership with the FLOAT donor group, this initiative seeks to enhance teaching quality, improve learner outcomes, and ultimately mitigate the literacy crisis in the Free State.

The Free State has implemented a deliberate and structured Reading and Numeracy Strategy that focuses on strengthening foundational skills through systematic teaching, regular assessment cycles, and targeted teacher support. Operation Tharollo strengthens and scales this existing provincial strategy by introducing a coordinated, province-wide model that deepens structured pedagogy, expands access to high-quality learning materials including structured lesson plans and increases direct classroom support through Departmental Heads, Subject Advisors and trained coaches.

The selection of this model is intentional: structured pedagogy programmes, those that combine high-quality materials, focused teacher development, and ongoing coaching—have demonstrated the highest impact on improving foundational learning outcomes in contexts similar to the Free State. Operation Tharollo therefore aligns with national and international evidence, complements existing provincial systems, and is scalable and sustainable within the operational and human-resource capacity of the Free State Department of Education.

The Free State Department of Education already maintains a strong monitoring and assessment environment, including the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA), standardised comprehension assessments, and structured curriculum coverage tools. These mechanisms will continue to anchor Operation Tharollo. Insights from these assessments will guide programme refinement, inform targeted teacher support, and ensure that learner gaps are identified early and addressed systematically through evidence-driven planning and intervention.

2. Programme Overview

- **Scale & Reach:** 433 Quintile 1–3 schools; ~3,557 teachers; ~113,651 learners.
- **Languages of Instruction:** Sesotho (95%), Afrikaans (5%).
- **Duration:** Five-year phased rollout (2025 – 2030).
- **Key Partners:** Free State Department of Education (FSDoE), FLOAT Donor Group, Rhodes University, appointed external implementing partners.
- **Teacher Development:** Intensive 32-day training programme per teacher over two years, delivered through a co-teaching model with departmental Subject Advisors.
- **Instructional Materials:** Comprehensive, DBE-aligned resource packages for Home Language and Mathematics. The Home Language packages include DBE-aligned core resources, including learner Anthologies, Big Books and Graded readers. Teacher guides with structured lesson plans, Concept guides as well as a Teacher’s Guide for Parent Meetings (Grade R). The mathematics package includes Teacher Guides with structured lesson plans and manipulatives.
- **Monitoring & Evaluation:** Utilises Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA), standardised assessments, and curriculum coverage tracking tools.

3. Strategic Rollout Plan (2025–2030)

A phased, cumulative approach ensures manageable implementation and allows for progressive refinement.

Year	Key Activities & Focus Areas
2025	Programme planning, baseline assessments, material adaptation & versioning, train-the-trainer.
2026	Rollout of Home Language programme for Grades R and 1.
2027	Introduction of Mathematics for Grades R & 1; expansion of Home Language to Grade 2.
2028	Home Language expands to Grade 3; Mathematics expands to Grade 2.
2029	Sustainability Phase: Mathematics expands to Grade 3; commencement of institutional handover.
2030	Final handover and consolidation of sustainable, FSDoE-led programme management.

4. Governance Structure

A multi-tiered governance framework ensures strategic alignment, operational efficiency, and accountability.

- **Project Steering Committee (PSC):** Provides high-level strategic oversight, decision-making, and stakeholder coordination.
- **Technical Team:** Manages day-to-day implementation, technical quality assurance, and monitors the attainment of specific targets.
- **Project Personnel:** The project team comprises a Senior Project Manager and three Content Specialists, all based at the Free State Department of Education Provincial Headquarters in Bloemfontein. They are collectively responsible for providing strategic oversight, ensuring

effective implementation, and monitoring the overall progress of the project.

5. Budget and Funding Analysis

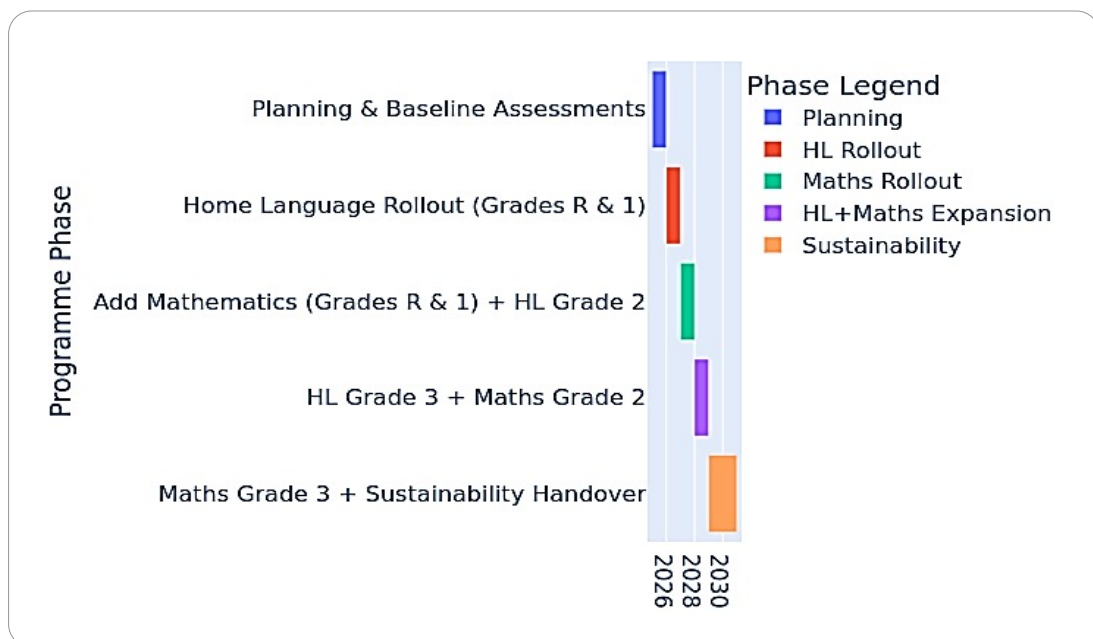
- **Total Programme Budget (2025-2030):** R82.3 million.
- **FLOAT Donor Contribution:** R75 million (covering core costs from 2025-2028).
- **FSDoE Contribution:** R7.3 million (in-kind for anthologies, training venues, and transport).
- **Expenditure Profile:**
 - » Teacher Development & Training: **42%**
 - » Material Printing & Distribution: **29%**
 - » Management, M&E, and Other Operational Costs: **29%**

6. Risk Register and Mitigation Strategies

Identified Risk	Proposed Mitigation Strategy
Delays in material readiness	Establish reference groups early for timely material review and approval.
Capacity constraints of Subject Advisors	Implement grade-phased rollout to manage workload; empower dedicated Project Manager for support.
Potential teacher resistance	Frame programme as core, non-negotiable FSDoE instructional strategy to ensure buy-in. Consultation with all stakeholders.
Long-term sustainability	Embed programme targets into Annual Performance Plans (APPs) and provincial budgets; plan for FSDoE-led refresher training by 2029.

7. Visual Overview and District Analysis

Figure 1: Programme Rollout Phasing (2025-2030)



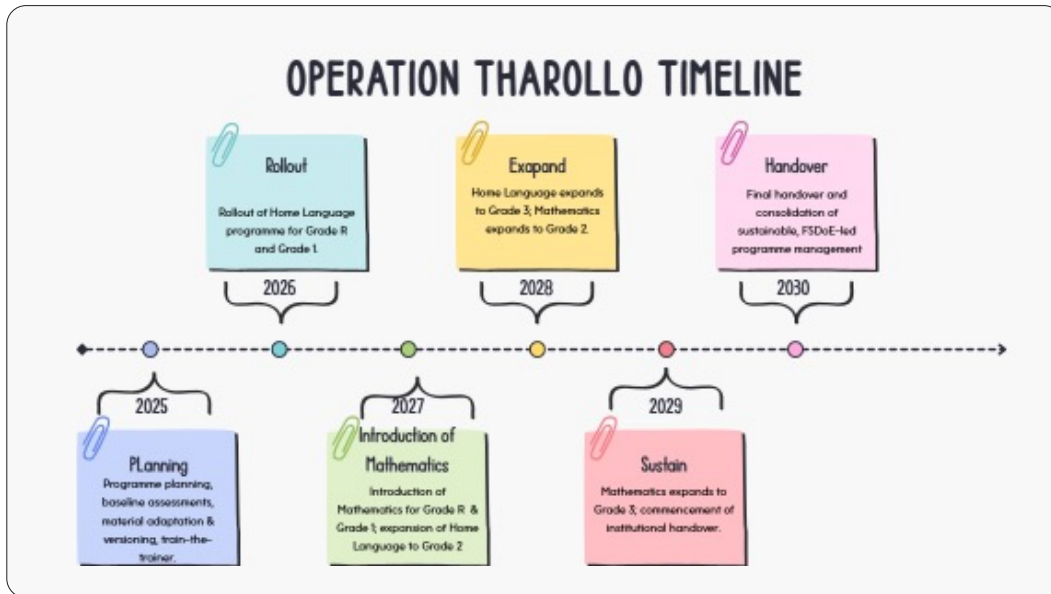


Figure 2: Budget Allocation by Category

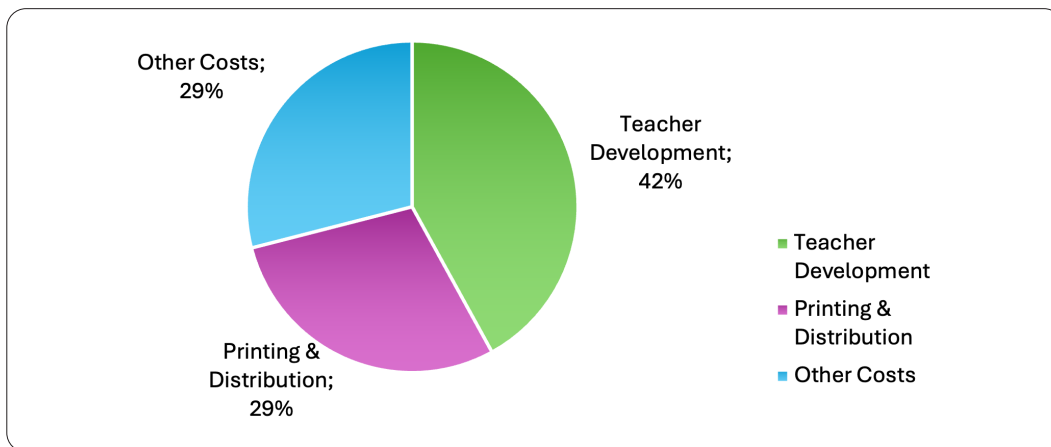
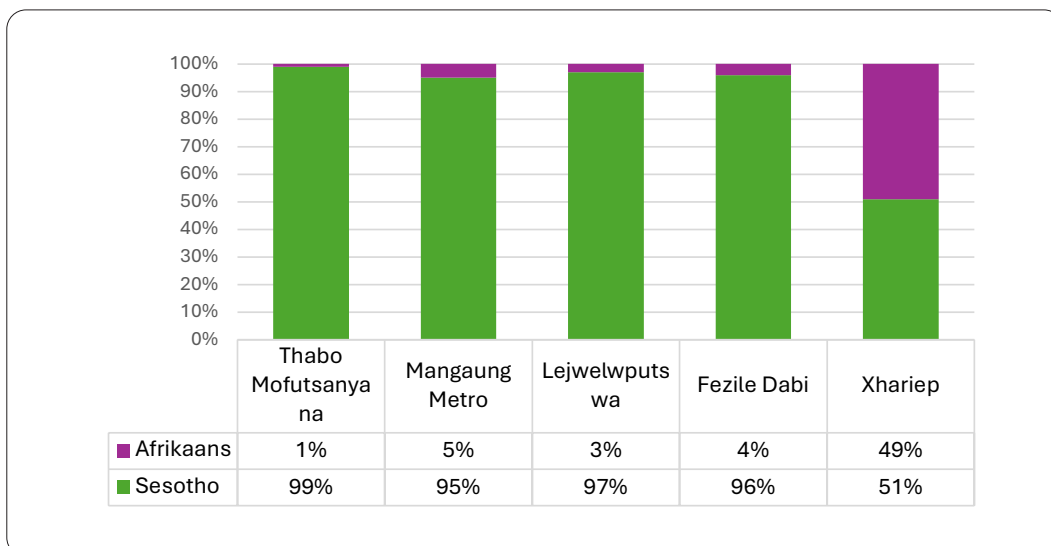


Figure 3: Distribution of target schools and the language composition



District-Level Coverage & Language Analysis:

This analysis details the distribution of target schools and the language composition of instruction across Free State districts.

District	Target Schools	Language Composition		Notes
		Sesotho	Afrikaans	
Thabo Mofutsanyana	151	99%	1%	Largest number of schools in the province; overwhelmingly Sesotho-speaking.
Mangaung Metro	90	95%	5%	Urban district with dense school clusters and high learner mobility.
Lejweleputswa	86	97%	3%	Second-highest Sesotho concentration after Thabo Mofutsanyana.
Fezile Dabi	69	96%	4%	Notable Afrikaans presence.
Xhariep	37	51%	49%	Highest relative Afrikaans share.

Insight: Sesotho is the predominant language of instruction across all districts. However, a significant Afrikaans-speaking learner population is evident, particularly in the Xhariep and Fezile Dabi districts, which must be carefully accommodated in material provisioning and training. Thabo Mofutsanyana represents the largest single cohort of schools and the most linguistically homogeneous (Sesotho).