

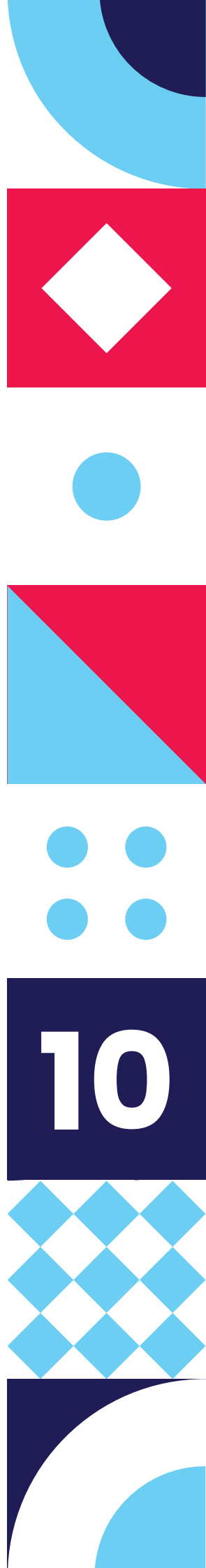


**Advisory Note 10** • 24 February 2026

# **Mabafunde Bonke: Improving grade R–3 reading outcomes in the Eastern Cape**

(Eastern Cape Department of Education, in collaboration with Float and partners)

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## 1. Introduction

The Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) has prioritised foundational literacy as a critical lever for improving learner outcomes across the schooling system. Mabafunde Bonke is a province-led Grade R–3 reading intervention that forms a core component of the ECDoE Reading Strategy (2022–2030). The programme brings together structured teaching and learning materials, sustained teacher training, strengthened instructional leadership, and independent assessment into a single, coherent intervention implemented at scale.

The intervention will be launched from 2026 in partnership with the Float consortium and supporting service providers, and is embedded within existing provincial curriculum, teacher development, and monitoring structures.

## 2. Background and context

Despite sustained investment in reading initiatives over the past decade, learner performance data continue to show that many Eastern Cape learners exit the Foundation Phase without adequate reading proficiency. Results from PIRLS and provincial assessments point to persistent challenges related to early decoding, fluency, and comprehension, particularly in rural and under-resourced districts.

In response, the ECDoE adopted a comprehensive Reading Strategy (2022–2030), structured around four pillars:

1. enabling policy and accountability,
2. teacher preparation and development,
3. provision of appropriate learning and teaching support materials (LTSM), and
4. parental and community engagement, supported by assessment, monitoring and evaluation.

Since 2019, the province has made significant progress under this strategy, including the large-scale rollout of graded readers and anthologies, the training of thousands of Foundation Phase teachers, and the introduction of school reading policies. Mabafunde Bonke builds on this foundation by consolidating these elements into a focused, multi-year intervention designed to achieve measurable improvements in early reading outcomes.

## 3. High-level theory of change

The programme is underpinned by the assumption that sustained improvements in early reading outcomes require aligned action across materials, training, leadership, and assessment.

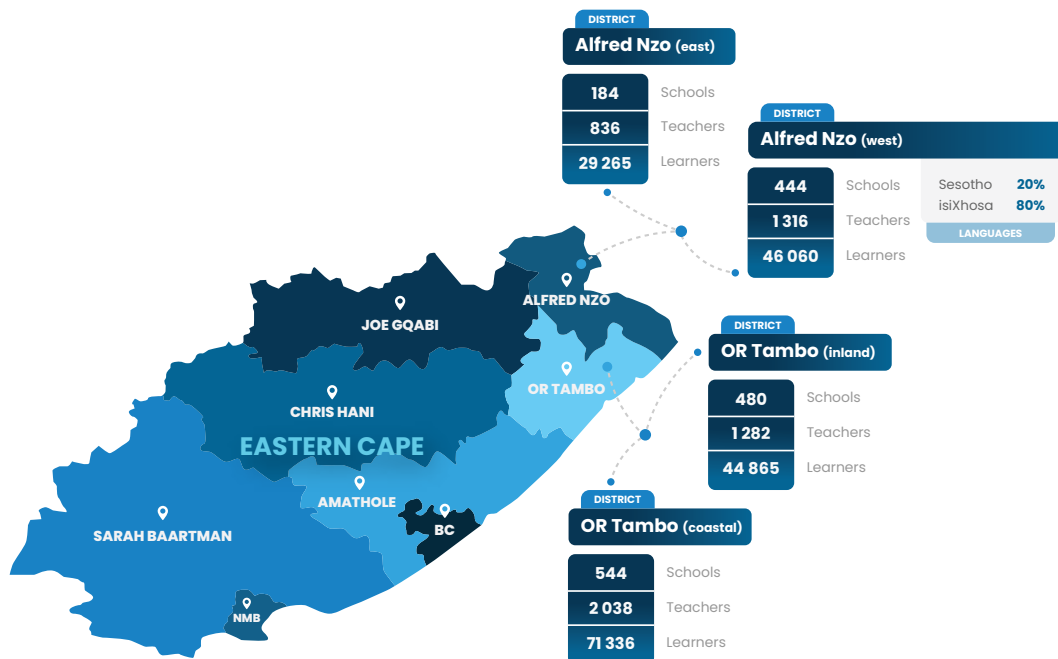
- If Foundation Phase teachers have access to high-quality, language-appropriate teaching and learning materials aligned to structured lesson plans;
- and if teachers receive sustained, practice-focused training on how to use these materials effectively;
- and if Departmental Heads and Subject Advisors are capacitated to support and monitor classroom implementation;
- and if reliable learner assessment data are generated and used to guide instructional support,
- then teaching practice will improve, differentiated instruction will increase, and learner reading outcomes in Grades R–3 will improve, particularly in home language instruction.

## 4. Focus of the project

Mabafunde Bonke focuses on Foundation Phase Home Language literacy (isiXhosa and Sesotho) in 1,652 quintile 1–3 primary schools across four districts: Alfred Nzo East, Alfred Nzo West, OR Tambo Coastal, and OR Tambo Inland.

The programme reaches 5 473 teachers and more than 191,526 learners, with a phased rollout across Grades R–3.

Implementation is structured over a five-year period (2026–2030), with confirmed Float funding supporting the first three years (2026–2028). The phased approach allows for system readiness, training capacity, and progressive consolidation within provincial structures.



## 5. Programme design

The programme consists of four integrated components:

### Teaching and learning materials

All participating classrooms receive a DBE-aligned minimum package of Home Language literacy materials, including structured teacher guides, graded readers, big books, phonics and vocabulary resources, and Vula Bula anthologies. Materials are aligned across grades to support instructional coherence, with anthologies provided annually and other resources provided as once-off classroom investments.

### Teacher training

Teachers receive sustained, termly training over multiple years, amounting to approximately **16/17 days per teacher over three years**, depending on grade. Training focuses on structured pedagogy, effective use of materials, differentiated instruction, and the teaching of reading in home languages. A co-training model pairs external experts with ECDoE subject advisors to strengthen district capacity and support sustainability.

### Instructional leadership and classroom support

Departmental Heads and Subject Advisors will be capacitated to support implementation, monitor classroom practice, and use assessment data to guide instructional support. Where and when available, teacher assistants funded through national employment initiatives will be trained to provide targeted learner support aligned to the programme.

### Monitoring and evaluation

The Eastern Cape collected baseline data in November 2025 which included grade 1 and 3 assessments (letter-sound knowledge and oral reading fluency) in a representative sample of schools, and classroom observations (materials usage and curriculum coverage). Assessment data will continue to be collected and used to measure impact and to inform ongoing teacher development and district-level support.

*Training Dosage and Logistics*

	2026				2027				2028				Total
	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	T1	T2	T3	T4	
Grade R				3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1		16
Grade 1	1	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1				17
Grade 2				3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1		16
Grade 3	1	3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1				17
MG				3	3	3	3	1	1	1	1		16

## 6. Implementation partners and roles

The programme is led by the ECDoE, which serves as custodian and is responsible for strategic direction, integration into provincial systems, and long-term sustainability. Float provides catalytic funding for the initial implementation period. JET Education Services supports programme management and coordination. The Consortium: Specialist service providers support material development, training delivery, and technical assistance, working alongside ECDoE officials to build system capacity.

## 7. Costing and funding

The total cost of Mabafunde Bonke (2026-228) is ~R90 Million. Mabafunde Bonke is financed through a blended funding model, with 16% funded by the province and the remainder the Float initiative. Float funding supports core programme costs during the first three years, including material development, training support, programme management, and independent assessment. The ECDoE funds ongoing teacher training within the provincial training cycle, the annual procurement of learner anthologies, subject advisor participation, and governance structures.

Where national programmes such as the Basic Education Employment Initiative are confirmed, they will be leveraged to provide further in-classroom support to learners and teachers.

This financing approach ensures strong government ownership and provides a clear pathway to sustainability beyond external funding.

## 8. Sustainability and system integration

From inception, Mabafunde Bonke has been designed as a province-led intervention embedded within ECDDoE policy, planning, and budgeting frameworks. Subject advisors are co-trained to lead future training, materials are aligned to national catalogues, and assessment practices are integrated into provincial monitoring systems. These features position the programme for continued implementation and expansion beyond the donor-funded period.