



Advisory Note 2

# **The Free State's Use of Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Standardised Assessments to Improve Reading**



Free State Department of Education

25 February 2025



## 1. Background And Rationale

Education is a basic human right (UNESCO,2023). The Constitution of South Africa, unequivocally states that “Everyone has the right to a basic education, which the state through reasonable measures must make available and accessible.” Legally, this right is direct and non-negotiable.

In alignment with this notion, the country, through the Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF), made a deliberate intent to ensure that by 2030, all 10-year-olds would be able to read proficiently in the language of learning and teaching. However, the reality is that many South African learners are unable to read with comprehension by the age of 10 as evidenced in various international benchmarking studies (PIRLS Report, 2023). It is against this backdrop that the Free State Department of Education has responded to this mandate for the realisation of the MTSF injunction.

Reading proficiency is foundational to academic success, personal development and lifelong learning (Khoza, 2022). However, learners in Free State primary schools continue to struggle with fluency, accuracy, and comprehension. Consequently, their progress on learning is hindered by their inability to read effectively, particularly with comprehension. The Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and standardised reading comprehension assessments are essential tools employed by the Free State Department of Education to gain insights into the reading abilities of learners. Effective evaluation strategies identify key areas that require rigorous intervention.

EGRA assesses fundamental reading components, such as phonemic awareness, letter recognition, word reading, and oral reading fluency. When combined with standardised testing focused on comprehension and language conventions, these assessments provide a comprehensive view of learners’ reading capabilities.

By implementing EGRA in the Foundation Phase and standardised assessments in Grades 3-7 across multiple languages at Home Language (HL) and First Additional Language (FAL) levels (including English HL and FAL, Afrikaans HL and FAL, Sesotho HL, Setswana HL and IsiXhosa HL) teachers in the province are better equipped to identify learner deficiencies and take appropriate corrective measures to address these challenges. This approach not only nurtures reading development but also enhances overall learner performance. The insights gathered from these assessment strategies empower teachers to adopt effective teaching methodologies and inform resource allocation. Most importantly, the data set positions the curriculum and teacher development teams to continue to provide tailor made interventions on empowering teachers to teach reading.

## 2. Implementation

**Frequency:** The standardised reading comprehension assessments (Response to Texts) are developed by a collaborative team of teachers, Subject Advisors, and Provincial Subject Coordinators. These assessments are administered in term 1, 2 and 4 while EGRA assessments are conducted biannually to monitor progress in foundational reading skills.

The results are collated to provide a clear picture of the state of reading in the province, enabling the strategising and implementation of intervention measures.

**Languages:** EGRA is done in all Home Languages as well as English FAL. The Standardised Response to Text assessments (grades 3-7) are available in English HL and FAL, Afrikaans HL, Sesotho HL, Setswana HL, and IsiXhosa HL. This multilingual approach ensures inclusivity and cultural relevance, addressing the linguistic diversity of South African primary schools while promoting multilingualism within the province.

**Sample Size:** The EGRA is administered in all public primary schools by our language teachers. 150 identified schools are sampled by Foundation Phase Subject Advisors. The Response to Text standardised assessments are also made available to all primary schools of which 150 identified struggling schools' assessments are moderated by Subject Advisors on a quarterly basis (FSDoEMIS,2025).

In the Foundation Phase, 100 schools offering grade 3 are moderated. In the Intermediate Phase Provincial moderation, 6 learner scripts per grade per school are moderated (900 learners) per quarter. Subject Advisors also conduct an item and error analysis as well as an analysis of results to ensure the results are credible and can be generalised to the wider province.

### **Research Method:**

A mixed method research design was used to collect data. Quantitative data was collected using the standardized assessment, whereas qualitative data was collected using EGRA, that is, learners reading proficiency is assessed by a trained assessor. The mixed method ensures that the data collected is reliable and valid, especially when the results are triangulated.

Data Collection Methods: The data collection instruments are the EGRA and the standardised assessments.

- **EGRA:** Trained assessors (trained teachers and Subject Advisors) administer one-on-one evaluations to measure fluency, accuracy, and foundational reading skills.
- **Standardised Assessments:** Assessments are sent to schools electronically for printing by the schools. Learners complete assessments each term, which include comprehension and language assessments conducted under controlled conditions. Results are recorded using the SASAMS platform for centralised data analysis.
- **Additional Data:** To complement findings, information such as attendance rates, socio-economic factors, and teacher qualifications is collected to better understand external influences on reading performance. These contextual factors provide teachers with a comprehensive understanding of why learners may not be reading at an appropriate level.

### 3. Impact

Standardised assessments are essential for tracking learners' progress and pinpointing critical areas that require intervention, such as reading fluency and comprehension. Additionally, the data-driven approach allows the FSDoE to design focused teacher support and training programs to address these gaps effectively. Thus, the implementation of standardised assessments plays a crucial role in improving literacy outcomes by providing actionable insights for curriculum development and instructional improvements.

**Resource Allocation:** The results of these assessments inform decisions regarding resource allocation and distribution, including:

- Allocating additional reading materials and literacy resources to underperforming schools.
- Deploying Subject Advisors to support teachers in implementing effective reading strategies.
- Supporting schools that require intensive teacher training in language instruction.

By strategically allocating resources to areas of greatest need, the program maximizes its impact.

**Interventions:** EGRA: if a learner does not reach the benchmark in the 1<sup>st</sup> assessment the learner is supported and retested at a later stage to monitor progress.

Schools exhibiting low performance in the standardised response to text assessments receive tailored interventions, such as remedial reading activities and online support classes. Customised English, Afrikaans, Sesotho and Setswana Grades 4-7 teacher guides and learner workbooks are developed based on areas of difficulty identified in the assessments. Reading for enjoyment material is also developed in the 4 main languages offered in the Province (English, Afrikaans, Sesotho and Setswana).

**Monitoring and Accountability:** Monitoring of EGRA is conducted by Subject Advisors and Provincial Subject Coordinators each term. These coordinators are accountable for reporting on the assessments conducted. The results are analysed and used to develop targeted interventions to address identified gaps in learning. Regular assessment data enables schools to track progress over time, ensuring accountability in their improvement efforts. Schools can celebrate achievements and address ongoing challenges more effectively.

## 4. Cost

Implementing EGRA and standardised reading assessments requires careful budgeting to ensure sustainability. Key cost components include:

- **Assessment Development:** Designing and versioning test materials into multiple languages.
- **Training:** Providing training for assessors, teachers, and administrative staff on how to administer assessments and analyze results.
- **Logistics:** Printing, distributing, and collecting test materials across 300 schools.
- **Intervention Programs:** Funding literacy coaches, procuring resources, and implementing teacher development initiatives.

Estimated costs range from R5 million to R8 million annually, depending on the scale of implementation and the extent of interventions. However, such investment is justified by the long-term benefits of improved literacy rates, enhanced educational outcomes, and the broader societal impact of a more literate population.

## 5. Lessons And Challenges

### 5.1. Challenges identified:

- Setting standardised assessments in various languages while maintaining consistency and accuracy can be time consuming and is both resource and labour intensive.
- Effective administration of assessments and interventions requires teachers to be adequately trained. However, disparities in teacher skills and knowledge as well as access to training opportunities could hinder consistent implementation.
- Printing and distributing assessments across schools, as well as ensuring that all schools have the necessary infrastructure (e.g., computers and printers/ photocopy machines etc.), can be logistically challenging.
- Ensuring the credibility and accuracy of data collected from assessments, particularly when dealing with a large sample size is complex.
- Learners who consistently perform below the benchmark may become disengaged, leading to higher dropout rates.
- Sustaining the annual budget of R 5 million to R 8 million may be challenging given competing priorities within the education sector.

### 5.2. Lessons learned:

- Continuous professional development programs are essential, with a focus on equipping teachers with practical skills for administering assessments, analysing data, and implementing reading interventions.
- Incorporate community-based interventions and partnerships to address external barriers to reading proficiency.
- Learners who are exposed to reading in the early grades adapt with ease to learning.

## 6. Conclusion

The integration of EGRA and standardised reading assessments in Grades 3-7 provides a robust framework for diagnosing and addressing reading challenges in primary schools throughout the province. Through regular assessments, data-driven interventions, and strategic resource allocation, schools can significantly enhance the learners' reading proficiency, ultimately encouraging academic success and promoting lifelong learning.

## 7. References

- FSDoEMIS School Portal: <https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=http://www.fsdoe.fs.gov.za/EMISPortal/Account/Login.aspx-&ved=2ahUKewiLoLvFt5iLAXViXUEAHa3WCyQQFnoECAoQAQ&usg=AOvVaw34zQX-i2zAKwH1jGVwkuvzj> Accessed: 15 January 2025.
- Khosa, K. (2022). *The link between learner performance in early reading literacy and what is happening in Grade 1 classes*. *South African Journal of Childhood Education*, 12(1), 1-11. <<https://doi.org/10.4102/sajce.v12i1.1096>> Accessed: 10 January 2025
- PIRLS Report. 2023 <<https://pimg.org.za/committee.meeting/370/023/>>
- Republic of South Africa (Act 10), 1996. Government Printer. < [https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.justice.gov.za/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng.pdf&ved=2ahUKewirhJXPujiLAXVySkEAHQzvDLUQFnoECBMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1no\\_bSixeqaGAJcWnqImRF](https://www.google.com/url?sa=t&source=web&rct=j&opi=89978449&url=https://www.justice.gov.za/constitution/SACConstitution-web-eng.pdf&ved=2ahUKewirhJXPujiLAXVySkEAHQzvDLUQFnoECBMQAQ&usg=AOvVaw1no_bSixeqaGAJcWnqImRF)>Accessed: 18 January 2025
- UNESCO. 2023 <UNESCO's action in education>Accessed: 18 March 2024
- DBE Dashboard: <https://app.powerbi.com/groups/me/apps/6b5b54c2-9a4d-4eca-a8f1-ccc14eebedb9/reports/ddce5785-8fa5-4469-8604-94393c026d31/ReportSectionf3a29e6897d6b7a9538b?ctid=a5b125d5-529c-4355-bf99-b85a12364cd0&experience=power-bi>