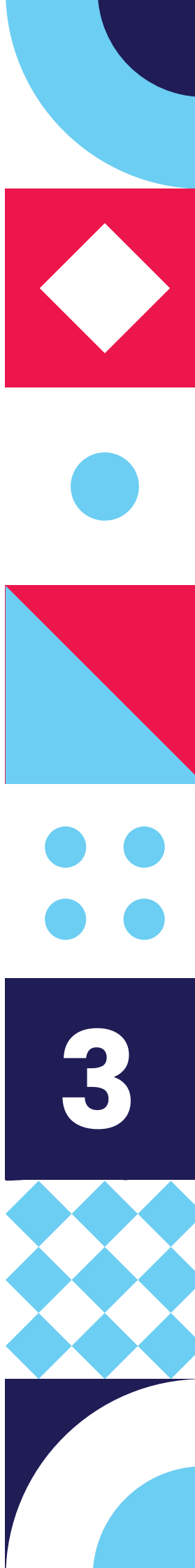




**Advisory Note 3** • 24 February 2026

# Partnering to advance foundational literacy

Float



## 1. Overview

Float is a large, multi-donor initiative working in close alignment with government priorities to strengthen early literacy and numeracy for children across South Africa. Its goal is to ensure that every child can read, write, and work confidently with numbers by the age of 10.

Float focuses on embedding proven, evidence-based approaches within the public education system to achieve lasting, system-wide change. The programme works closely with national and provincial education departments, with a particular focus on the Foundation Phase (Grades R–3). Float is committed to supporting sustained improvement over time.

Float is a collaboration of international and local donors. By the end of 2025, eight founding donor organisations committed R300 million for the 2026–2028 period. A non-profit organisation serves as the custodian of Float’s identity and is responsible for governance, accountability, audits, and external evaluation. Programme delivery is supported by a Project Management Office, JET Education Services. Government is the lead partner in this collaboration, co-funding the initiative, providing personnel, and participating in joint decision-making at both national and provincial levels.

## 2. Programme Design

### Provinces

Implementation in the provinces of Eastern Cape, Free State and Gauteng, commences in 2026. The initiative through these three provinces will reach 15 districts, 2 504 schools and over 10 000 teachers. The programme model is built upon a **Structured Pedagogical Learning Approach** that includes:

- **Teacher Training:** A rigorous “dosage” of 8 days per subject (literacy and/or numeracy) per year for two years (totalling 16 days), effectively creating a 3-year intervention cycle.
- **Classroom Resources:** Provision of necessary educational materials
- Use of standardized lesson plans and learner activity books.

All provincial programmes are strictly aligned with the CAPS curriculum, Annual Teaching Plans (ATP’s), and guidelines for Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education (MTBbE). An external evaluation of implementation fidelity and impact will be conducted including a tracking of changes in teacher classroom practice and improvement in learning outcomes. The table below summarizes the intervention parameters and reach.

Table 1: Summary of provincial programme intervention parameters and reach

Feature	Eastern Cape	Free State	Gauteng
<b>Grade Focus</b>	R-3	R-3	Grade 3
<b>Districts</b>	4	5	7
<b>Schools</b>	1,652	433	588
<b>Teachers</b>	5,473	3,557	2, 153
<b>Learners</b>	191,526	113,651	88, 239
<b>Languages</b>	isiXhosa, Sesotho	Home Language (Sesotho, Afrikaans), Math	isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana, isiXhosa, Xitsonga, Math, EFAL

### ***National Department of Basic Education (DBE) Initiative***

The DBE investment from Float will be utilised to strengthen South Africa’s Grade R curriculum. It will do this by equipping curriculum writers, particularly education specialists and teachers, to enhance Home Languages, Mathematics, Life Skills, and English First Additional Language (EFAL). Using a training-first, collaborative approach, the project will support the development of a coherent, developmentally appropriate, culturally affirming, and contextually relevant Grade R curriculum that responds to persistent challenges in early literacy and numeracy, especially in African languages and early mathematics.

By aligning curriculum content with the cognitive, linguistic, and cultural realities of young learners, the initiative will deepen subject knowledge, strengthen foundations for future learning, and provide teachers with practical, classroom-ready tools that translate policy into effective and inclusive practice. The project will include coordinated planning, collaborative curriculum strengthening, piloting in selected contexts, consultation and revision informed by feedback and public engagement, and the development of clear pedagogical guides to support classroom implementation. All materials will be versioned and translated into home languages to ensure equitable access and consistent implementation across all provinces. A key outcome will be the establishment of a national cohort of master trainers to support high-quality rollout and sustained implementation, directly contributing to the Department of Basic Education’s goal of improving foundational literacy and numeracy outcomes for all learners.

## **3. Lessons Learned**

### ***Working at scale***

A central lesson from Float’s work is that meaningful impact in education requires operating at a large scale working within, and with government addressing the structural constraints of the education system. Float’s core ambition has been to work in partnership with provincial education departments to translate reading and numeracy strategies into concrete, implementable interventions that are not only effective at the level of individual schools, but embedded systemically and are accessible to a sufficient number of schools to generate system-level learning. From the outset, Float was clear that scale and system embedding was a non-negotiable design principle. Interventions were required to reach a minimum threshold of approximately 250 schools and to be implemented within an entire district, rather than being dispersed across isolated sites. This approach was intentional. Working at this level of scale allows the operational, institutional, and capacity-related challenges of implementation to emerge in ways that more accurately reflect the realities of the education system.

Working at scale, however, is not without challenges. Provincial education departments operate within highly resource-constrained environments and are required to navigate a difficult trade-off between depth and reach, ensuring that interventions are sufficiently intensive to generate meaningful improvements in learning outcomes, while also extending support as widely as possible. Considerations of scale therefore need to be carefully balanced against the risk of dilution. Interventions cannot be spread so thinly across the system that the level of teacher support, resourcing, and implementation fidelity required to achieve impact is undermined. Meaningful scale, in this context, requires not only breadth, but sufficient depth to reasonably expect measurable and sustained learning improvements by the end of the programme. By moving away from small, stand-alone school-based interventions and instead prioritising district, or system-wide implementation, Float aims to generate insights not only into the impact of specific reading

and numeracy programmes, but also into how such programmes are embedding within existing government systems, structures, and incentives. This focus on meaningful scale is intended to strengthen the conditions for sustainability and institutionalisation, and to ensure that impact extends beyond individual schools to influence the education system as a whole.

### ***Evidence-led interventions***

Float's interventions are intentionally designed around key components that are strongly supported by a rigorous evidence base for improving early grade reading and numeracy learning outcomes. This evidence has been established in South Africa and in similar developing contexts through thorough evaluations. Rather than offering isolated inputs, provincial interventions aim to support learners and teachers through a coherent and integrated package of evidence-informed components. Positive impact emerges from coherence rather than from individual components. Float's effectiveness depends on implementing teacher guides, classroom resources, and sustained teacher support as a single, integrated package, not as stand-alone inputs. Implementation must therefore protect the connections between components and provide sufficient intensity of support to influence daily classroom practice. By providing learners and teachers with a coordinated package, rather than a collection of stand-alone materials, Float increases the likelihood that evidence-based practices are implemented with fidelity and sustained in classrooms, translating research into meaningful improvements in learning outcomes at scale.

### ***Emerging Lessons: Coherent implementation embedded within provincial systems***

Float is at an early stage of its implementation journey, with programme delivery commencing in 2026. As such, this is not yet a lesson derived from implementation experience, but rather an intentional design principle that reflects Float's approach to sustainability and systems change. Central to this approach is the principle that the programme is government-owned and government-led. Float is not positioned as an externally driven intervention, but as a mechanism to support provincial education departments to implement their own early grade reading and numeracy strategies more effectively.

This commitment to government ownership has important implications for programme design. Any elements developed or resourced through Float investment are required, from the outset, to demonstrate their potential for long-term sustainability within provincial systems. This includes alignment with provincial strategies and planning cycles, affordability within future departmental budgets, and the capacity of existing institutional structures and human resources to absorb and sustain programme components once external support tapers.

While these intentions have yet to be tested through implementation, Float has begun to establish concrete mechanisms to support embedding and institutionalisation.

Through memoranda of agreement with provincial departments, Float and its government partners are jointly defining clear embedding and institutionalisation plans. These plans aim to situate Float firmly within provincial strategic and operational agendas, and to create a shared understanding of how programme investments can be sustained over time, including through progressive integration into provincial budget frameworks.

A further focus of these early discussions is on strengthening institutional capacity within the system itself. In the first instance, this includes supporting subject advisors to lead and sustain curriculum-focused Foundation Phase programmes. Over time, attention is also being given to the role of leadership at provincial, district, and circuit levels in establishing a sustained and explicit

focus on Foundation Phase performance, reinforcing the importance of early learning as a critical lever for system-wide improvement.

As implementation progresses, Float expects these intentional mechanisms to generate important learning about what it takes to move from programme delivery to coherent, system-embedded implementation.

### ***Emerging lessons Leveraging NGO consortia to strengthen government-led implementation***

A further emerging lesson from Float's design approach is the intentional use of non-governmental organisations as an implementation arm to support government-led delivery of Foundation Phase literacy and numeracy strategies. At the heart of Float's thinking is the recognition that, while government sets policy direction and strategic intent, additional implementation capacity and targeted investment are often required to accelerate and deepen action in classrooms.

Within this model, NGOs contribute established implementation expertise, technical skills, and operational capacity to support provinces in rolling out large-scale programmes. Many bring deep experience in curriculum support, teacher development, and school-level implementation, positioning them as important partners in translating provincial strategies into effective classroom practice. Float also recognises that this expertise is not unlimited within the South African education sector. Rather than relying on a single service provider in each province, Float has therefore encouraged NGOs to work in consortia, pooling complementary skills, experience, and institutional capacity. Through this approach, provinces are supported by collaborative groupings of service providers rather than individual organisations working in isolation, increasing the breadth and depth of capacity available to the programme.

This model is still in its early stages and presents new challenges for participating NGOs, which are required to plan and deliver jointly, often across different organisational cultures and systems. Float must be attentive to the need for deliberate support, trust-building, and shared accountability to enable effective collaboration. By extending its emphasis on collaboration to include delivery partners themselves, Float is testing an approach that prioritises collective capacity over individual organisational visibility. As implementation progresses, this model is expected to generate learning about how collaborative delivery arrangements can strengthen government-led programmes and enable outcomes that would be difficult to achieve independently.

## **4. Conclusion**

Float's early journey has shown just how powerful a shared vision can be when it is built deliberately and held collectively. From the outset, eight funders committed to working around a common purpose rather than individual agendas, investing time upfront to agree on what Float would (and would not) be. That clarity, captured in a jointly owned Concept Note, has acted as a steady compass as the collaboration grew more complex. It helped prevent mission drift, strengthened accountability, and built trust across donors, government partners, and implementers. The experience also underscored a practical truth: even collaborations that aim to stay lean need some formal structure. Establishing Float as a light-touch, member-owned nonprofit provided the legal backbone needed to contract, manage funds, and protect partners, without losing the spirit of collaboration that defines the initiative.

Equally important have been the lessons from working deeply within the public system. Float was designed to support government priorities, not sit alongside them, and that commitment has

shaped every step, from inviting provinces to lead their own planning, to encouraging service providers to collaborate rather than compete. These choices took patience, compromise and goodwill, especially under tight timelines, but they paid off in stronger relationships and genuine shared ownership. Provinces, donors, and implementers have learned together (sometimes through necessary friction) how to balance urgency with inclusion, and structure with flexibility. Above all, Float has reinforced that trust is not a by-product of partnership; it is the work itself. As the initiative moves from set-up to delivery, its most enduring lesson may be that lasting systems change depends as much on *how* we collaborate as on *what* we fund.

Float is a new model for donor-government collaboration focused on systemic education reform. With its pooled funding, government ownership, and alignment to DBE priorities, Float is well positioned for long-term, transformative impact on early learning in South Africa.