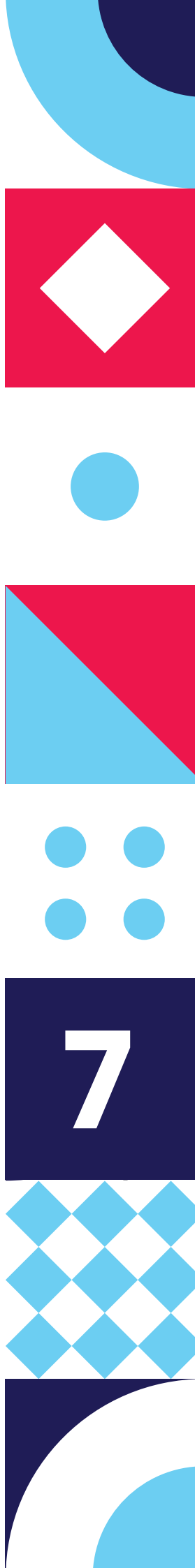




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A reflection on reading initiatives and efforts

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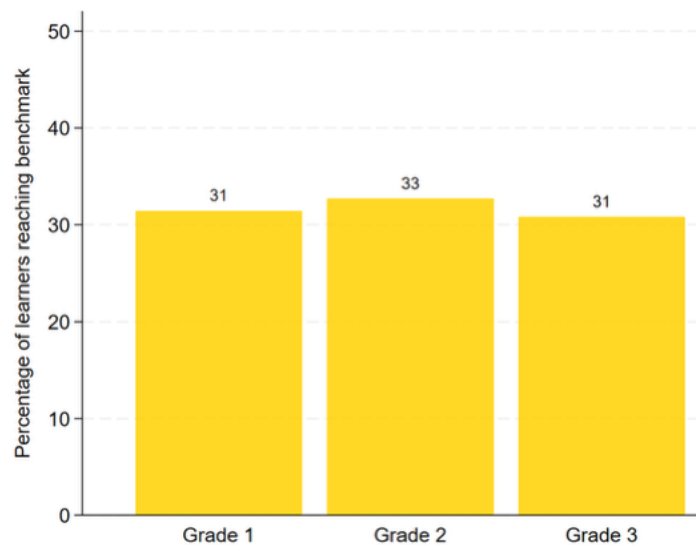
The Department of Basic Education has led several reading initiatives over the last several years. This note summarises some of the highlights:

1. Funda Uphumelele National Survey

Over the past seven years, the DBE led a multistakeholder collaboration to create reading fluency benchmarks in all 11 languages as Home Languages as well as English First Additional Language. These fluency benchmarks specify the required proficiency for learners in Grade 1, 2 and 3 in early skills such as letter-sound recognition and oral reading fluency.

In 2025 the DBE conducted and released the inaugural Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS), measuring the percentages of children reaching these critical reading benchmarks by the end of Grade 1, 2, and 3. FUNS assessed 27 800 learners across 710 schools and is representative nationally, provincially and of every language.

Figure1: Percentage of learners reaching Home Language Benchmarks



The results show that in Grade 1, only 31% of learners achieved the Home Language Reading Benchmark, defined as 40 correct letter sounds per minute across all languages. In Grades 2 and 3, just over 30% of learners met their respective Home Language Reading Benchmarks, which vary by language group and are based on oral reading fluency, measured in words correct per minute.

Gender gaps are also exceptionally large in favour of girls – in some languages girls are twice as likely to reach the benchmarks than boys. These inequalities in early learning are certainly contributing to the disparities we see later on in the system, where boys are more likely to drop out of school without completing secondary education.

The results of Funda Uphumelele complement the evidence from the Progress in Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the South Africa Systemic Evaluations (SASE). They confirm that we still face serious challenges in the early grades and show us why and where learning challenges appear in the Foundation Phase. They provide the system with clear areas of focus for teachers and the broader system, from Grade 1 rather than in the intermediate phase.

FUNS is both an investment in Home Languages, producing a rich dataset and measure to guide the sector, and it demonstrates the importance and contributions that are possible through collaboration. Funding partners include the Zenex Foundation, FEM Foundation, UNICEF, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Old Mutual Foundation, Optima Foundation, and the World Bank. Experts working on the development of the benchmarks and FUNS include language and literacy specialists from the University of Pretoria, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Venda, Rhodes University, Nelson Mandela Institute, University of Free State, University of Mpumalanga, University of South Africa, University of Stellenbosch, University of the Western Cape, Varsity College and University of KwaZulu-Natal, amongst others.

Figure 2: Benchmark uses

National and Provincial Administration	Mid-tier support (Districts and School Management)	Classrooms
Defines reading proficiency (benchmarks)	Use standardised tools to assess reading across schools	Standard against which to measure reading skills
Communicates benchmarks and targets	Identify schools and classrooms needing support	Identify early on learners at risk of not learning to read
Monitor progress	Provide targeted support to schools and teachers	Adapt instruction to learner needs

While FUNS marks a significant milestone, the survey itself is one aspect of the work. The integration and use of the benchmarks and findings to strengthen the education system is equally important. Efforts targeted at the three categories highlighted in Figure 2 are underway. This includes the inclusion of the benchmarks as a core consideration in the national Foundation Phase Minimum Resources Package; incorporating the benchmarks into the current revisions of the Annual Teaching Plans, as well as the creation of benchmark-aligned assessments for use by Subject Advisors and teachers through strengthening the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) toolkit.

2. National Foundation Phase Minimum Resources Package

Developing the skill and habit of reading are both necessary components to create fluent readers. Reading resources are a critical ingredient for developing and consolidating these skills. To enable this, the DBE has been leading work on creating a minimum standardised resource package for the Foundation Phase since 2023 based on the latest evidence and lessons from the original Foundation Phase catalogue of 2011. This includes access to at least 40 Home Language graded readers for each classroom, an anthology, a core reader per learner, 8 big books per grade, a teacher guide and other classroom resources including posters and flash cards. The composition of the resource package was informed by lessons from several interventions, including the DBE’s Early Grade Reading Studies and its associated classroom libraries work.

The purpose of the catalogue is to expand access to culturally relevant, high-quality materials for learners in line with the DBE’s national strategy for language and literacy. A public call for submission by publishers was issued in 2024 for Learning and Teaching Support Materials (LTSM) in all 11 official languages. Processes for Braille and Visually impaired learners will also be addressed. The minimum package is now being catalogued for release and procurement by provinces from the 2026/2027 financial year.

As with previous catalogues, provinces will be provided with an option for centralised procurement to leverage economies of scale. Previous experience shows that costs may be reduced by up to 50% through centralised procurement.

Management of the process will be guided by the DBE’s LTSM Sector Plan issued each year prior to the commencement of the school calendar. This is shared with all provinces, as a blueprint to guide them in procurement. It outlines key stages in the procurement and delivery process such as timeframes, roles and responsibilities and indicators. Provinces then customise their provincial version and submit it for oversight by the DBE, enabling key tracking and monitoring.

3. Systematic phonics and NHLRP and ATPs

While resources and data are important levers to enable the teaching of reading, they complement the curriculum and the lessons teachers deliver. As part of the efforts to support the teaching of decoding in African languages, the DBE and NEEDU have developed a phonics programme for African languages. The structured phonics programmes provide explicit, sequenced, and language-specific guidance on how to teach letter–sound relationships, blending, and word-building. This contributes to ensuring consistency

and standardisation, enhancing teacher preparedness and clearly communicating expectations across all languages. In the latter part of 2025, provinces began integrating the programmes into their own programmes. Furthermore, the phonics programme has been incorporated into the current revision of the Annual Teaching Plans (ATPs) being led by the DBE in collaboration with provinces. This integration into the ATPs will ensure that all teachers have access regardless of the province or languages they are working in.

Finally, in January 2026, the DBE in collaboration with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) began implementing the National Home Language Reading Programme (NHLRP). This initiative aims to strengthen Home Language reading instruction through a structured literacy model, drawing from lessons learned and evidence over time on effective programme design. It draws from research and evidence on effective approaches to teaching reading, as well as inputs from NGOs and other African language practitioners, drawing on their expertise in programme design, as well as how best to teach specific literacy skills.

The NHLRP provides teachers with lesson plans, teacher guides and LTSM, all intended to strengthen classroom practice. The NHLRP has also incorporated the reading fluency benchmarks as well as the importance of assessing Oral Reading fluency in the early years, drawing on lessons from FUNS. Finally, the DBE structured phonics programme has also been substantially integrated to ensure coherence in expectations and teaching.

The delivery model is based on using Subject Advisors and district coordinators as teacher trainers. In 2026, the model and programme will reach 8 provinces and 5000 teachers, with lessons drawn for strengthening and preparation for expansion.

4. Reading champions

The DBE collaborated with the NECT as part of Phase 5 of the Basic Education Employment Initiative. The programme had candidates allocated in two broad categories: Education Assistants and General School Assistants, reaching approximately 199 400 young people. The minimum qualifications for the categories differed, Education Assistants were required to have at least a Grade 12 qualification. Within the Education Assistants, allocations were made into Curriculum, e-Cadres and Reading Champions. A strategic decision in this phase was to prioritise the Foundation Phase, reaching all 75 districts and appointing more than 57 000 Reading Champions. This is the highest number to date, doubling the size of the cohort from the previous phase.

Training was coordinated nationally to ensure that all assistants received baseline orientation and role-appropriate training, however, delivery differed by province and district. Training was delivered in-person and/or virtually. One achievement was the strengthened Train-the-Trainer model, with district teams trained directly by partners and then training the Reading champions as the next part of the cascade. An evaluation of the training showed that more than 90% of district teams felt clear on the objective and purpose of the Reading Champions.

Phase 5 placed strong emphasis on ensuring that Reading Champions were adequately prepared and formally onboarded before commencing their roles in schools. Of the 58,00 appointed participants nationally, 50,470 completed the structured training programme, reflecting an overall training uptake of 86%. In addition, 48,872 trained Reading Champions registered on the digital chatbot platform, representing 97% of those trained. The training equipped participants with foundational knowledge and practical guidance to support reading activities effectively, while the digital registration process enabled ongoing communication, monitoring, and shared learning. Together, these high levels of participation demonstrate both strong engagement, ensuring that Reading Champions entered schools prepared and remained connected to a broader network of support throughout the implementation period.

Training on language and literacy was strengthened by including training in Home Language in addition to EFAL. This was delivered through the DBE's TeacherConnect platform with approximately 30 000 (49%) completing the online certification. Reading Champions were provided with guidance for weekly reading activities, encouragement to establish and manage reading clubs, and reading corners. In this phase the Reading Champions made a significant effort to celebrate Literacy month in September. Implementation was wrapped up through a leadership journey and reflection. The table below provides a summary of the implementation life-cycle.

Reading Champion Programme: 6-Month Implementation Cycle Plan

Phase	Timeline	Key Activities	Outputs / Milestones
Phase 1: Recruitment, Onboarding & Orientation	June 1 – June 15, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Recruit Reading Champions (RCs) Onboard Provincial Support Partners (PSPs) Allocate Provincial Support Partners to provinces Finalize district and school allocations Identify 15 partner-linked schools per province for close impact evaluation Orient RCs and Provincial Support Partners on programme design and expectations 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RCs recruited and onboarded PSPs oriented and allocated Partner-linked schools identified Orientation completed
Phase 2: Training & Platform Onboarding	June 16 – July 22, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct face-to-face training (2.5 days) for RCs Launch self-paced online course Equip Teacher Mentors and Principals Register RCs on chatbot Onboard RCs to WhatsApp groups 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Trainings completed Mentors and Principals briefed RCs connected to digital support
Phase 3: Mentorship Allocation & Baseline Setup	July 23 – August 10, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Assign Teacher Mentors Coordinate RC–Mentor–Principal interactions Complete baseline assessments Ensure readiness with tools and schedules Capture baseline data for partner-linked schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> RCs and Mentors matched Baseline data captured School readiness confirmed
Phase 4: Programme Activation	August 11 – September 30, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Activate weekly reading activities Facilitate RC–Mentor check-ins Maintain WhatsApp support Submit weekly activity and assessment tools Monitor partner-linked schools for early impact trends 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Weekly reading active Ongoing monitoring of engagement Partner school tracking in place
Phase 5: Monitoring, Support & Mid-cycle Review	October 1 – October 15, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Monitor RC activity and fidelity Conduct support visits Collect feedback Implement support adjustments Review interim outcomes from partner-linked schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mid-cycle review completed Implementation support refined Interim impact insights gathered
Phase 6: Closure & Exit Pathways	October 16 – November 15, 2025	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Conduct end-line assessments Celebrate achievements Introduce exit pathways (e.g., internships, community roles) Capture impact data from partner-linked schools 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> End-line results submitted Celebrations held Exit transitions supported Partner school impact documented

Phase 5 of the Reading Champions Programme was supported by a strong network of partners operating nationally and provincially to ensure effective implementation across all provinces. National and provincial education departments provided strategic direction and oversight, while provincial support partners played a central role in coordinating training, communication, and on-the-ground facilitation. Schools and district officials created enabling environments for Reading Champions to operate effectively, and digital platform partners supported the monitoring and reporting systems that strengthened accountability and connectivity. This collaborative, multi-stakeholder approach ensured that the programme was not delivered in isolation, but rather as a coordinated effort rooted within the broader public education ecosystem. The table below provides a summary:

Partner	Province(s)	Provincial Function	National Function
NECT & DBE (Reading Directorate with support from broader DBE BEEI team)	—	Training delivery; district activation in NECT-supported districts	Programme coordination, reading strategy alignment, national oversight
Room to Read	KZN, GP, Limpopo (to train across 9 provinces)	Training, digital support, demo school libraries	National training design and implementation support
The Learn Project	KZN	Training, digital support, school libraries	—
Funda Wandé	EC, WC	Chatbot training, digital support	Chatbot system operations; RC manual design
READ	FS	Training, digital support	—
Nal'ibali	EC, NW, KZN	Training, digital support, reading clubs	Content/training contributor to national platform
Penreach	MP	Training and digital support	—
Activate Leadership	NW, EC, Limpopo	Training, digital support	Exit-pathway contributor
A Better Africa Foundation	NC, WC	Training, digital support	Exit-pathway contributor

5. Lessons Learned

The implementation of Phase 5 of the Reading Champion Programme provides important insights into how large-scale reading support initiatives can be delivered effectively within public education systems.

One of the clearest lessons is that it is possible to mobilise and prepare large numbers of young people to support reading development when there is a clear structure and shared commitment across provinces. The high levels of training participation reflect strong collaboration between national and provincial stakeholders, and demonstrate that coordinated action can achieve reach at scale. This affirms the viability of national reading support interventions within diverse and complex contexts.

A second key lesson is that digital systems can successfully support public programmes when they are introduced with clarity and purpose. The strong uptake of the chatbot platform illustrates that young participants are willing and able to engage with digital tools that enable communication, reporting, and shared learning. Technology, when positioned as an enabler rather than an administrative burden, can strengthen connection, accountability, and responsiveness across a dispersed programme.

Another important lesson is the cumulative benefit of phased implementation. Over successive phases, the Reading Champion Programme has refined its systems, strengthened coordination mechanisms, and deepened institutional learning. Phase 5 reflects growing maturity in how training, communication, and monitoring are aligned. This progression demonstrates the value of sustained investment and iterative improvement in public programmes.

Finally, the programme underscores the importance of leadership and partnership at provincial level. Where collaboration and oversight were strong, outcomes were more consistent. This highlights the central role of shared ownership, communication, and local stewardship in achieving national goals.

Overall, Phase 5 demonstrates that structured, technology-enabled, and collaboratively led initiatives can deliver meaningful support at scale.