



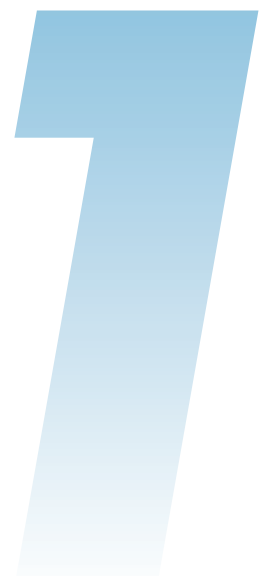
Advisory Note 1

Piloting the use of grade 1 and 3 assessments to improve early-grade reading outcomes



Eastern Cape Department of Education

25 February 2025



1. Background and Introduction

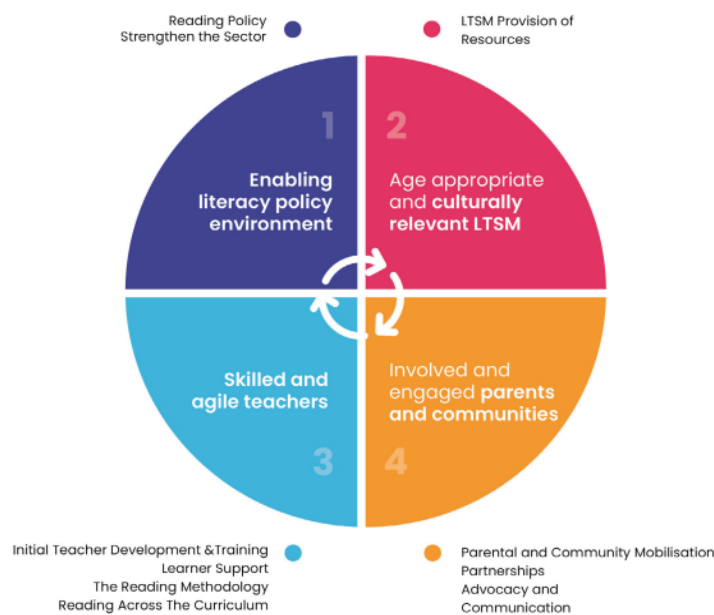
South Africa has participated in external international assessments in Grades 1 to 9, including the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS), the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), and Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality (SEACMEQ). More recently, the South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE) has been introduced. However, Each of these assessments are implemented in 5-7-year cycles. The time lag between these large-scale assessments and the limited sampling do not provide timely, actionable data to support effective remedial interventions at the learner, teacher, school, or district level.

In response, several provincial education departments, Higher Education Institutions, and NGOs have piloted early-grade reading instruments to gain more immediate insights into literacy levels in primary schools and to evaluate the effectiveness of various interventions.

To address ongoing challenges in reading performance, the Eastern Cape Department of Education (ECDoE) developed a Reading Strategy and Campaign: Improve Reading to Improve Learning (2022–2030). Aligned with the Department of Basic Education’s (DBE) national reading and literacy strategy, the ECDoE’s approach comprises four core pillars (see Figure 1). An essential component of the strategy’s success is the ability to accurately measure improvements in learner reading outcomes.

Building on the efforts of existing institutions and provinces, in 2024, the ECDoE decided to pilot external assessments in grades 1 and 3. By doing so, the Department aims to obtain more timely information on the impact of its reading strategy and to intervene early where necessary, directing additional resources, targeted teacher training, and focused support to improve reading outcomes.

Figure 1: DBE National Reading Strategy Pillars



2. The Assessments

The main aim of the pilot was to test the feasibility of conducting annual assessments of learners in the foundation phase. Two independent consultants were brought in to run the assessments, with the grade 1 and 3 ORF data collected by a data collection agency and the grade 3 data collected by unemployed youth, most of which were former teaching assistants.

As this was a pilot to determine feasibility, schools were not randomly selected, and the sample consisted of all public schools¹ with between 20 and 80 grade 3 learners. The written assessment consisted of all learners present at the school on the day, and the grade 1 and 3 ORF had a target of 30 learners per grade, with a total 9 146 learners writing the writing assessment and 6 642 grade 1 and 3 learners taking part in the grade 1 assessment and grade 3 ORF. Grade 3 learners wrote a written assessment that tested three CAPS-defined areas: reading and viewing, thinking and reasoning, and writing. The grade 1 and grade 3 ORF assessments were designed to provide a snapshot of a particular early-grade reading skill at each grade for as many learners as possible. Data collection involved administering one-on-one assessments of letter recognition with grade 1 learners and oral reading fluency with grade 3 learners. Both tasks were limited to one minute. All learners wrote the written assessment, and a sample of 30 learners per grade was the target for the grade 1 assessment and grade 3 ORF.²

Table 1: Overview of assessments

	Grade 1 letter sound and 3 ORF	Grade 3 written
Districts	3	3
Schools	199	200
Learners	6 642	9 146
Languages	English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa HL	English, Afrikaans, isiXhosa HL

3. Impact – Possible Use Cases

The pilot aimed to assess the feasibility of implementing standardised assessments and to develop recommendations for scaling, a process currently underway by the implementation team. As such, the results should not be interpreted as representative of learner performance at a district level or across different languages. Beyond feasibility, the pilot also sought to identify the types of data the province could leverage to improve reporting mechanisms that would inform resource allocation and targeted school-level support. This is especially critical given the constraints of limited resources and the capacity challenges faced by subject advisors.

¹ This included 100 full service schools, 13 combined schools and 177 ordinary primary schools
² Due to high absenteeism, four schools did not meet this threshold.

a. Disaggregation at a district, school and learner level.

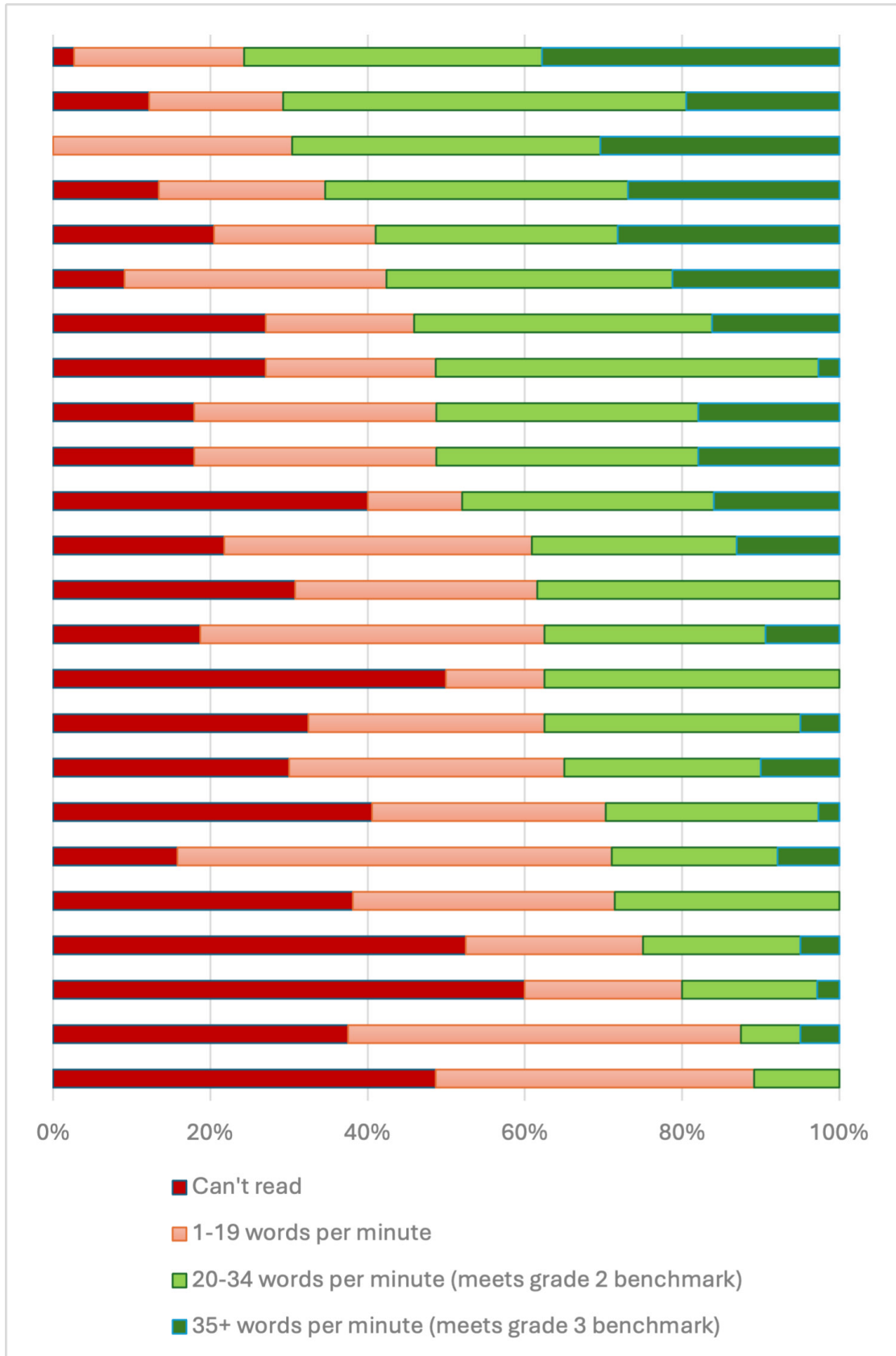
The sample size for both the written and grade 1 and 3 ORF lends itself to results at a school and a learner level. This level of detail moves beyond a broad statement that learners “cannot read with comprehension.” Instead, it highlights specific areas of reading skills that learners have mastered or are struggling with. Such granular information is particularly valuable for teachers, as it points to the precise skills and competencies needing targeted instruction. With these data, district officials and school leaders can direct resources more effectively, tailor teacher training programmes, and provide more focused support to ensure all learners progress toward grade-level reading comprehension

b. Alignment with DBE grade-level benchmarks

Over the last five years, the DBE has developed language-specific benchmarks for Home Languages and EFAL in grades 1-7. While these benchmarks are gaining traction and are now better understood within the system, none of the current assessments used in South Africa align directly with them. Each existing assessment uses different performance descriptors and largely focuses on comprehension. By contrast, the use of the grade 1 and 3 ORF assessments allows measurement and targeting against these benchmarks.

Figure 2 below illustrates the performance of schools within a single district, revealing substantial variation both within individual schools and across the district. The highest-performing schools appear at the top, while the lowest-performing schools are at the bottom. Regardless of a school's overall standing, every school displays considerable variation in learner performance. Notably, even those schools with a large proportion of learners reaching the Grade 3 benchmark (indicated in dark green) also have many learners performing at Grade 1 and 2 benchmark levels (orange and light green).

Figure 2: Performance of grade 3 learners in a given district relative to reading benchmarks



c. Targeting and allocation of support

Finally, these results will allow the province and districts to decide on thresholds for categorising schools and allocating resources and support. Table 2 below provides an example of such targeting. The thresholds in table 2 below could be utilised to categorise “red zone” schools i.e. schools with too many learners performing below grade-level and require intense support.

Table 2. Percentage of isiXhosa schools falling into illustrative “red zone” categories

	District 1	District 2
Greater than 20% of learners unable to read a word	34%	48%
Less than half of learners reaching grade 2 benchmark	55%	46%
Less than a third of learners reaching grade 2 benchmark	15%	8%

4. Next steps and way forward

The research and implementation teams are currently finalising reports and recommendations to be presented to the ECDOE for consideration and decisions on next steps.