



2022 Reading Panel

BACKGROUND REPORT

The former Deputy President of South Africa Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka has convened the annual '2030 Reading Panel' to bring together respected South African leaders to ask: "What needs to change for us to ensure that all children learn to read by 2030?" The panel will meet once a year every year until 2030.

The panel consists of the following members (listed alphabetically): Colin Coleman, Commissioner André Gaum, Bobby Godsell, Prof Jonathan Jansen, Noncedo Madubedube, Nangamso Mtsatse, Jay Naidoo, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, Prof Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Prof Sizwe Mabizela, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Hulisani Ravele, Umunyana Rugege, Prof Michael Sachs, Judy Sikuza, Elinor Sisulu, Prof Nic Spaull, Prof Catherine Snow. More information is available at readingpanel.co.za

This background report was prepared by Nic Spaull at the request of the Chair of the 2030 Reading Panel. The views and opinions expressed in the document are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the official position of individual Panel members or the sponsors of the Reading Panel.

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1 February 2022.

Executive Summary

1. Introduction

How many children in South Africa can read for meaning?

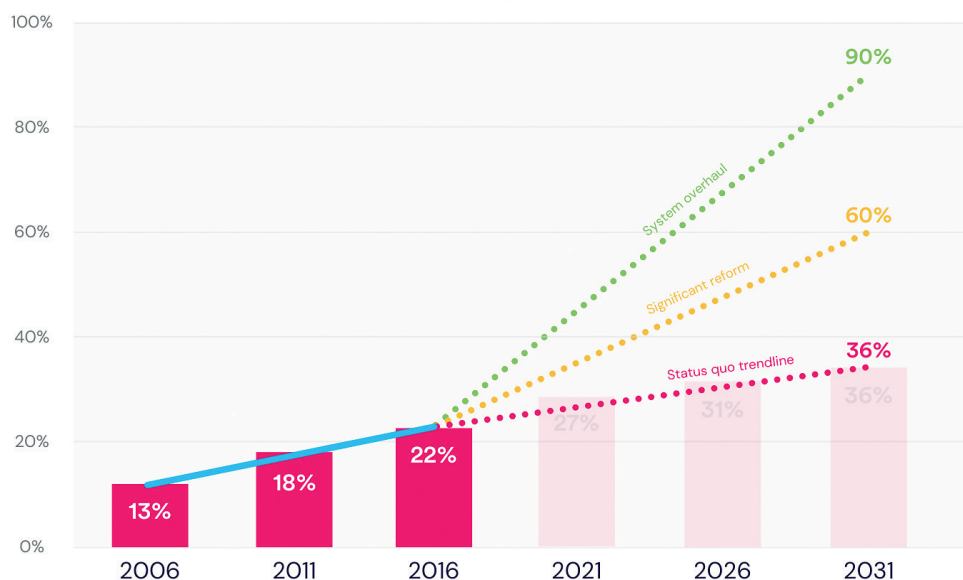
According to the 2016 PIRLS study, 78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language (all 11 languages were tested). That is to say that they cannot locate and retrieve explicitly stated information in a simple and easy text. This is not disputed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). Given that South Africa has participated in three rounds of PIRLS we can see that although the percentage of children that can read is very low, it has been improving over time from 13% (in 2006) to 18% (in 2011) to 22% (in 2016). The results of the PIRLS 2021 study will only be available in December 2022.

2. Trajectories to 2030

Are we on track to ensuring that by 2030 all children learn to read for meaning?

No, South Africa is not on track to ensure that all children can read by 2030. On our current trajectory of improvement we will only reach 95% of Grade 4s reading for meaning in 80 years time (the year 2098). Although it is true that reading outcomes are correlated with a country's overall level of wealth, and in wealthy countries all children learn to read; it is also true that for a given level of GDP-per-capita there are still large differences between countries. For example, Iran and South Africa have the same GDP-per-capita yet 65% of Grade 4s in Iran can read compared to 22% of Grade 4's in South Africa (using the same test translated into local languages). Similarly, the SACMEQ 2013 study showed that South African Grade 6 learners perform worse than Grade 6 learners in Kenya or Swaziland. While only a third of South African Grade 6 students (36%) could read and make inferences, this was much higher in Kenya (53%) and Swaziland (51%), despite them being much poorer than South Africa. On South Africa's current trajectory we will only reach 36% of Grade 4s reading by 2031. If we want to achieve a steeper gradient of improvement we will need to introduce either significant reforms (getting us to 60% of children reading by 2030) or a system overhaul (90% by 2030). Nothing short of a sustained countrywide overhaul of the education system would be likely to yield this result. It would require a complete restructuring of the way that teachers are recruited, trained, certified, supported and evaluated. As well as far-reaching reforms on education financing, accountability and the resourcing of schools. The entire education system would need to be re-oriented towards reading in the early years.

Percentage of Grade 4 learners who can read for meaning in South Africa



3. The impacts of COVID-19

What have been the impacts of the pandemic on reading outcomes?

The above trajectories illustrate the situation before the pandemic and it is possible that even the status quo line in the graph is optimistic. New data (released in January 2022) reveals that children have lost 1,3 years of learning in 2020 and 2021. The EGRS study tested Grade 3 learners in 2018 and, in order to measure the impacts of the pandemic, went back to these 206 schools and tested Grade 4 learners in the same schools in Term 3 of 2021. Those tests showed that looking at children in the same schools, the average 10 year old in 2021 knew less than the average 9 year old in 2018. As seen earlier, South Africa was on an upward trajectory since at least 2006, improving by about an extra 20% of a year of learning per year. Given that learners have lost about 1,3 years of learning due to rotational timetables and school closures, this is the equivalent of wiping out 6,5 years of learning progress in South Africa. Furthermore, reviewing the budget and statements by the Minister of Basic Education indicates that there is currently no credible or funded plan to catch up learning losses.

4. Dreams, hopes or plans?

Is it possible to drastically improve learning outcomes?

There are some respected researchers in South Africa that argue that South Africa has been improving at the international "speed-limit" of progress of around an extra 20% of a year of learning per year. This is based on reviewing international testing data and seeing how quickly other countries have improved. (Note that not all countries take part in international assessments). Yet this rate of progress would mean that only 36% of Grade 4 learners would read for meaning by 2031. This is morally and politically unacceptable. We are impelled to find new ways of improving faster. Reviewing the literature does reveal a few examples where countries and provinces have improved quite rapidly in the space of 10–15 years. These include the state of Sobral in Brazil, Puebla in Mexico and Kenya. The state of Ceará in Brazil is an especially interesting case since it was (and is) one of the poorest states in Brazil, yet since 2000 has managed to rapidly improve reading outcomes across the state and is now one of the top ranking states in the country in terms of literacy rates.

5. International & homegrown success

What are the existing examples of success in early grade reading?

The *Learning at Scale* report published in October 2021 studied eight of the most effective large-scale education programmes in Low and Middle-Income countries (in India, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal and Nigeria). The conclusions from this large, multi-country study are instructive for South Africa. They find that (1) Improving learning at scale requires better teaching than is typically the case, (2) In order to improve teachers' pedagogical methods, teachers need support, and (3) Education assistance programmes have the potential to improve learning at significant scale if the programmes are designed to support or align with the existing system in specific ways. A similar review finds that *"Programmes that link participation to career incentives, have a specific subject focus, incorporate lesson enactment in the training, and include initial face-to-face training tend to show higher student learning gains."* One of the most common recommendations is that teachers need ongoing in-classroom support from experts (teacher coaches) in order to consistently use improved reading materials. The evidence strongly suggests that trickle-down "train-the-trainer" models are ineffective. This "train-the-trainer" model is the primary method of at-scale light-touch interventions currently implemented in South Africa (largely due to cost constraints). Four South African programmes that have been rigorously evaluated and shown to improve reading outcomes are reviewed. Three of the programmes provided in-classroom coaching while the fourth programme provided a Teacher Assistant to every Grade 1 teacher for a full year. All programmes led to improvements of between 30%–110% of a year of learning.

6. Stated and revealed priorities

Is reading for meaning a priority for the South African government?

Although it has become commonplace for officials to say that “reading is an apex priority of government”, there is no evidence that these statements have translated into meaningful resources for reading. Most policies related to reading are more symbolic than anything else, with slogans such as “Read to Lead” and “Drop All and Read” but no allocation of books or other resources to all schools. The word reading does not appear in any of the 2021 budgets. There are negligible funds for reading in the current budget. The largest current reading project (PSRIP) working in thousands of schools has a budget of R37-million leading to a light-touch train-the-trainer approach that is unlikely to improve reading. This is less than 1% of 1% of the total budget for Basic Education (R255-billion in 2021).

7. Philanthropic involvement

What is the role of philanthropies and Corporate Social Investment?

Estimates of total philanthropic spending on education in South Africa in 2020 amount to R5,4-billion per year in contrast to the R249-billion spent on Basic Education by government in 2020. In order to solve the reading crisis, the philanthropic sector must accept that the best use of private money is influencing how public money is spent and that the best way to do this is to trial scalable, cost-effective and independently evaluated interventions to raise reading outcomes and improve initial teacher training.

8. Teacher retirements

What is the biggest trend that will affect the realisation of the 2030 goal?

Given that no education system can move beyond the quality of its teachers, arguably the biggest trend that will influence whether or not we reach the 2030 goal is how South Africa deals with the incoming wave of unprecedented teacher retirements, an underknown trend in South Africa. In the next 10 years 45% of publicly employed teachers will retire and need to be replaced. This means that universities will need to increase the number of teachers they graduate by at least 50% within 5 years and double current production by 2030. In 2018, universities in South Africa produced 26,000 teachers, but this will need to increase to 44,000 teachers per year by 2025 and 50,000 per year by 2030 to avoid large increases in class sizes or unqualified teachers being recruited to fill vacancies. This is also troubling because new and existing evidence calls into question the quality of existing initial teacher training at universities.

9. Recommendations for government

If South Africa is to reach the 2030 goal, what needs to happen in the next 1-2 years?

The report makes four recommendations for the next 2 years:

- 1. Establishing a universal external Grade 2 assessment of reading.** We need to measure what matters and currently there is no universal standardised reading assessment at the primary school level.
- 2. Moving from slogans to budgets:** We need to get serious about reading and stop playing around with slogans like “Read to Lead” or peripheral concerns like coding and robotics (in schools where children can’t read) or introducing new languages like Swahili when children cannot read in their home language or English. These are harmful distractions. The last well-funded large-scale reading initiative was GPLMS under MEC Barbara Creecy

in Gauteng from 2010–2014. This provided reading coaches and resources to half of all primary schools in the province. The annual GPLMS budget to intervene in 1000 of the province's 2000 schools was R298-million (in 2022 Rands). Using this as a benchmark, and assuming all no-fee schools (70% of all schools) require a similar intervention, this would amount to an *annual* budget of R3,4-billion for reading in primary schools (Grades R–7). If this was targeted only at the Foundation Phase (Grade R–3) it would be R1,7-billion per year.

- 3. Providing a standard minimum set of reading resources to all Foundation Phase classrooms (Grade R–3) as a matter of urgency.** The Department of Basic Education should be commended for providing the DBE Workbooks to all Grade R–9 children in South Africa. This is the only resource that is universally available in all schools and is used extensively by teachers in no-fee schools. Yet it is not enough to teach reading. Of the 10 recommended resources for teaching reading (according to the Foundation For Learning policy gazette by Minister Pandor in 2008) only one (the Workbooks) have been provided to all schools. The full package of resources needed to teach reading must be costed, sourced and supplied to all Foundation Phase schools. Using high-quality Open Access materials is preferable since costs are limited to print-costs only. For example the Vula Bula Anthologies of Graded Readers cost R10 per anthology. It would cost a mere R32-million per year to print one of these for every Foundation Phase child in every grade every year.
- 4. University audit of preservice teacher education programs.** It is now clear that, on the whole, faculties of education are not preparing incoming teachers to teach reading in the home language. After reviewing teacher training curricula the ITREP study has shown quite clearly that many B.Ed programs lack coherence around the fundamentals of teaching reading and mathematics at the primary school level. The Centre for Higher Education (CHE) and/or the Department of Higher Education and Training should implement a sector-wide audit of Foundation Phase programmes with ongoing certification contingent on meeting reasonable requirements regarding time allocated to the teaching of reading and mathematics.

Advisory Notes

In addition to this background report there are a number of 2-page advisory notes in the Appendix. The lead authors of these notes are, listed alphabetically by surname:

(1) Brahm Fleisch (Wits), (2) André Gaum (SAHRC), (3) Ursula Hoadley (UCT), (4) Godwin Khosa (NECT), (5) Janeli Kotze (DBE), (6) Noncedo Madubedube (EE), (7) Mary Metcalfe (PILO), (8) Nangamso Mtsatse (Funda Wandé), (9) Johan Muller (UCT), (10) Vuyokazi Nomlomo (UZ), (11) Lilli Pretorius (UNISA), (12) Nick Taylor (JET), (13) Servaas van der Berg (SU).

1. Introduction

How many children in South Africa can read for meaning?

Reading for meaning is the single most important thing children learn in primary school. All subsequent learning depends on this fundamental skill of being able to accurately and quickly match the sounds in spoken language with the print on the page. If children do not master the "learning-to-read" phase of schooling (Grades R–3), they will not master the "reading-to-learn" part of school either. Put differently, children's reading is the conduit through which all text-based learning must pass, and if their reading is slow, unreliable, or inaccurate so too will be their learning. For no fault of their own, weak readers end up becoming weak learners and as we will see below:

78% of South African Grade 4 children cannot read for meaning in any language.

South Africa is in the fortunate position of having a long series of comparable data on the percentage of young children that can read for meaning. This is largely thanks to the foresight of the Department of Basic Education who, for over two decades now, have recognized the value of participating in international studies that measure the reading and mathematics competencies of our children. These tests are nationally representative and comparable not only between countries, but also over time.

The two studies that test reading at the primary school level are the regional *Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality* (SACMEQ) with 15 participating countries, and the *Progress in International Reading Literacy Study* (PIRLS) with more than 50 participating countries. In each survey a random sample of approximately 300 South African primary schools is selected, with learners randomly selected from the tested grade in each school. The SACMEQ tests are at the Grade 6 level and are therefore only administered in English and Afrikaans (the languages of instruction at the Grade 6 level), while the PIRLS study is done at the Grade 4 level and is administered in all 11 official South African languages. More than 70% of South African children attend schools where the Language of Learning and Teaching (LOLT) in the first four years of school (Grades R–3) is an African language, prior to switching to English from Grade 4 onwards. Furthermore, 70% of Grade 1–3 learners in South Africa attend a primary school where at least 75% of the children in their school speak the LOLT as their home language¹. Given that the PIRLS test is administered in whatever the LOLT is in the school in Grades R–3, it makes the most sense to use the PIRLS Grade 4 results to determine what percentage of children in South Africa can read for meaning by the end of Grade 3.

Using the PIRLS framework of reading comprehension is also endorsed by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) as well as the South African Human Rights Commission's (SAHRC) Section 11 Subcommittee on the Right to Read and Write². Minister Motshekga herself stated the Department's agreement in her opening address at the launch of the Right to Read and Write at the Constitutional Court on the 24th of August 2021:

“ We agree on the need for a shared framework for understanding reading comprehension and how it can be measured. So the proposed shared framework supports the proposal that the conceptual framework used for reading comprehension should be based on the PIRLS Reading Literacy Framework. (Minister Motshekga, 2021)

¹ Spaull, N., & Pretorius, E (2019). Still falling at the first hurdle: Examining early grade reading in South Africa. In Spaull, N & Jansen, J (eds) 'South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality' Springer.

² South African Human Rights Commission (2021). The Right to Read and Write. Cape Town

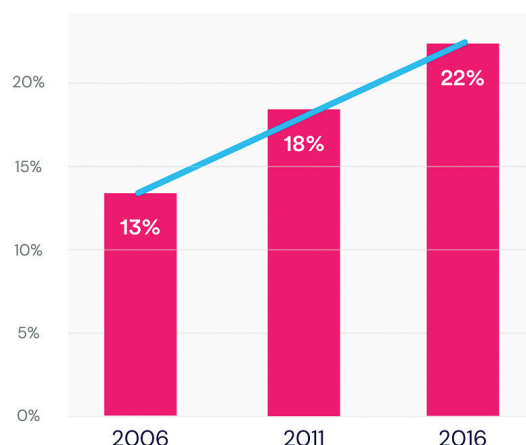
How many children can read?

Although the most recent PIRLS was conducted in 2021, that data is still being analysed by the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA) and the results will only be released in December 2022, forming the basis of the 2023 Reading Panel. Crucially PIRLS 2021 will reveal at least some of the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic and rotational timetables on learning. The most recent nationally representative and publicly-available survey of reading outcomes was PIRLS 2016. This showed that:

78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not reach the PIRLS Low International Benchmark³, a widely used threshold that is the lowest of four levels of reading recorded by PIRLS. That is to say that 78% of learners could not "locate and retrieve explicitly stated information or make straightforward inferences about events or reasons for actions". They could not read for meaning.

Therefore, one can say that only 1 in 5 children in South Africa (22%) had learnt how to read in any language in their first three years of school. For perspective, one finds considerably higher figures in countries such as Egypt (31%), Morocco (36%), and Iran (65%), not to mention Chile (87%), the United States (96%) or England (97%)⁴ where all children learn to read.

Figure 1: Percentage of Grade 4 learners in SA who can read for meaning (PIRLS Low International Benchmark (2006, 2011, 2016))



The graph shows the steady improvement⁵ in reading outcomes at the Grade 4 level, rising from 13% of Grade 4 learners that could read for meaning in 2006, to 18% in 2011, to 22% in 2016.

Despite these sobering statistics, it is also important to recognise that there have been consistent improvements in reading outcomes in South Africa since at least 2006. The PIRLS study has now been conducted four times in South Africa (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021). That South Africa's education system was improving, at least before the pandemic hit, is an underknown fact that is also supported by data from the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) as well as the SACMEQ studies⁶.

3 Howie, S., Van Staden, S., Tshele, M., Dowse, C., & Zimmerman, L. (2017). Progress in international reading literacy study 2016. South African children's reading literacy achievement. Summary Report. Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, Pretoria.

4 Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Foy, P., & Hooper, M. (2017). PIRLS 2016: International results in reading. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

5 For those who follow the technical literature closely, there was a previous reporting error by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) on the 2011 results (note, not the 2016 results). This 2011 error was identified by Prof Martin Gustafsson (see Gustafsson, 2020) and has subsequently been corrected in local and international reports on PIRLS. All figures used in this report use the corrected figures. For further references for these figures see Howie et al. (2008: p.26) for the 13% in 2006, and DBE (2020: p.69) for the 18% in 2011 and the 22% in 2016 (DBE, 2020: p.69). DBE. (2020). Action Plan to 2030. Department of Basic Education. (Online). Available: <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Publications/Sector%20plan%202019%2015%20Sep%202020.pdf?ver=2020-09-16-130709-860>

6 Van der Berg, S. & Gustafsson, M. (2019). Educational Outcomes in Post-apartheid South Africa: Signs of Progress Despite Great Inequality. Chapter in Spaull, N & Jansen, J (eds) 'South African Schooling: The Enigma of Inequality' Springer.; Reddy et al. (2019). TIMSS 2019: Highlights of South African Grade 5 Results in Mathematics and Science. Human Sciences Research Council. Pretoria.

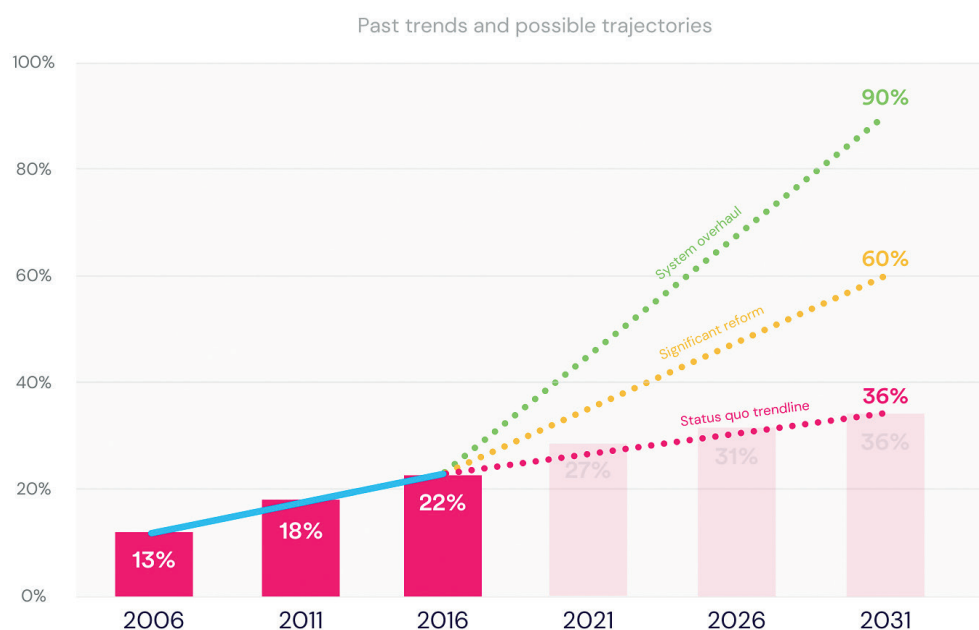
2. Trajectories to 2030

Are we on track to ensure that by 2030 all children learn to read for meaning?

The short answer to this question is "No, we are not on track". In other countries where virtually all children learn to read, one finds that 90–95% of children reach the PIRLS Low International Benchmark, with only 5% or so of the population experiencing severe learning barriers. In 35 of the 50 countries that participated in PIRLS 2016, at least 90% of children reached the PIRLS Low International Benchmark, compared to 22% in South Africa. It is true that most of these countries are high-income countries, and furthermore that there is a strong relationship between GDP-per-capita and educational outcomes. Yet it is also true that for a given level of economic development there are widely diverging educational outcomes across countries. Although Iran and South Africa have approximately the same GDP per capita (\$13,300/capita PPP), children in Iran are three times as likely to learn to read as in South Africa. While 22% of Grade 4s reach the PIRLS Low International Benchmark in South Africa, that figure is 65% in Iran⁷. Closer to home, the 2013 SACMEQ study (the latest year for which data is available) showed that South African Grade 6 learners perform worse than Grade 6 learners in Kenya or Swaziland. While only a third of South African Grade 6 students (36%) could read and make inferences, this was much higher in Kenya (53%) and Swaziland (51%)⁸, despite them being much poorer than South Africa.

Given that South Africa has participated in three rounds of PIRLS for which we have data, we can extrapolate the pre-pandemic trend and determine what percentage of children will be able to read for meaning by PIRLS 2031 if we continue on our current trajectory. **Figure 2** below shows both the historical trend in achievement, as well as three scenarios: The first of which 'Status quo trendline' can be considered the "business-as-usual" approach where we continue doing what we are currently doing, with slow but steady improvements over time. If we continue along the pre-pandemic trend (an optimistic assumption) then by 2031 only 36% of South African Grade 4 learners will be able to read for meaning. This is exceedingly far from the 2030 goal set by both President Ramaphosa and the Minister of Basic Education.

Figure 2: Percentage of Grade 4 learners who can read for meaning



⁷ Mullis, I. V. S., Martin, M. O., Foy, P., & Hooper, M. (2017). PIRLS 2016: International results in reading. Amsterdam: International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement.

⁸ Awich, M. (2021) SACMEQ IV International Report. Southern and Eastern African Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality. Online. Available: http://www.sacmeq.org/sites/default/files/sacmeq-reports/sacmeq-iv/international-reports/sacmeq_iv_international [19 January 2022]

On SA's current trajectory, it will take 80 years to get all children reading for meaning

If one extrapolates the pre-pandemic South African trendline to determine at which point it reaches 95% of Grade 4 children reading for meaning, it is the year 2098.

Raising our trajectory by introducing fundamental reforms: If South Africa manages to introduce significant and sustained educational reforms that lead to a much higher rate of improvement than we have seen historically, this would place us onto the second trend line 'Significant reform'. As discussed below, a small number of countries and subregions around the world have managed to achieve rates of improvement like this over the space of 10–15 years. Yet, even under this scenario, only 2 in every 3 children (60%) would learn to read for meaning by 2031. The final trajectory included in the graph is the 'System overhaul' line which reaches 90% by 2031. Nothing short of a sustained countrywide overhaul of the education system would be likely to yield this result. It would require a complete restructuring of the way that teachers are recruited, trained, certified, supported and evaluated. As well as far-reaching reforms on education financing and the resourcing of schools. The entire education system would need to be re-oriented towards reading in the early years. It should be noted that in the absence of considerable efforts to retrain the majority of Foundation Phase teachers, or to recruit new teachers who have been properly trained to teach reading, this trajectory is aspirational. Unless teachers know how to teach reading and are equipped with the resources to do so, as well as the support and accountability mechanisms to reach the goal, this trajectory will remain unattainable.

Impacts of COVID-19 on the 2030 trajectory. It must be noted that the 'status quo trendline' reported above is the pre-pandemic trend. As we will see below, the pandemic has been a huge setback for the education system and may mean that even the status quo trendline is optimistic.

3. The Impacts of COVID-19

What have been the impacts of the pandemic on reading outcomes?

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on all South Africans, but was especially devastating for young children of school-going age. Following the complete closure of schools in March 2020 (until May 2020), there was a phased reopening by grade from June 2020 with rotational timetables for all grades except matric and Grade 7. Given that no-fee schools (~70% of total schools) have larger class sizes, essentially all no-fee schools practiced rotational timetables in 2020 and for much of 2021. This is where half of children attend on one day and half on another (In Limpopo it was every third day in many schools).

New data shows that children have lost 1,3 years of learning

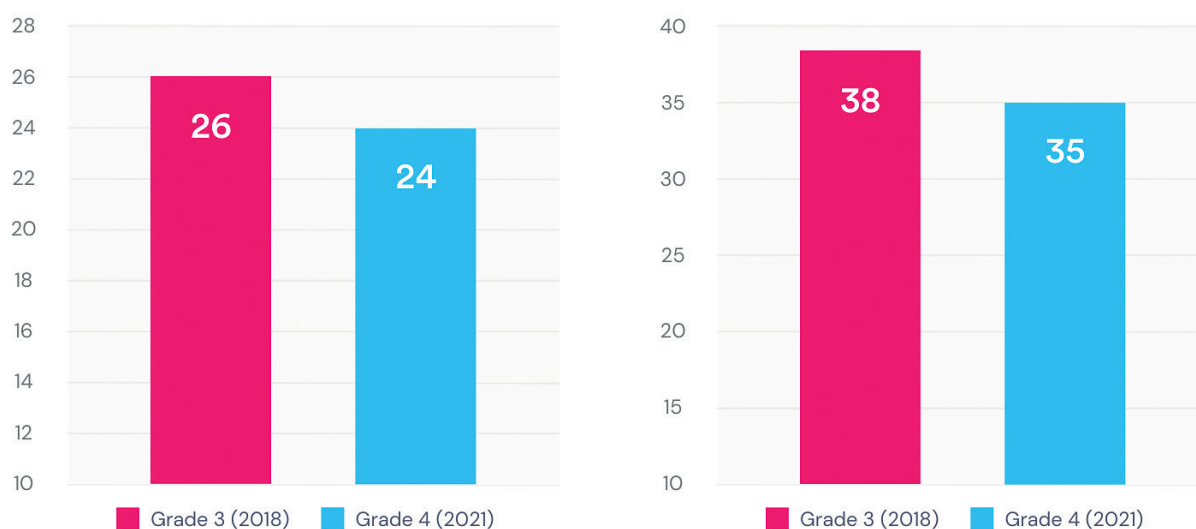
Previous estimates of learning losses among Grade 2 and Grade 4 learners showed that during 2020 these children lost approximately 70% of a year of learning⁹. Yet this is only an estimate for 2020 learning losses not 2021 where rotational attendance continued.

In January 2022 new evidence is now available of the combined effect of learning losses (i.e. 2020 and 2021). The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) is an initiative of the Department of Basic Education to improve reading outcomes in the North West province. It tested a large sample of Setswana home language Grade 3 students in 2018. To measure the impacts of the pandemic, they went back to the same 206 schools in Term 3 of 2021 and assessed the Grade 4 learners using approximately the same test. They found that the average Grade 4 student in 2021 knew less than the average

9 Ardington, C., Wills, G., & Kotze, J. COVID-19 learning losses: Early grade reading in South Africa. International Journal of Educational Development. Vol 86 (Oct 2021).

Grade 3 student in 2018. Put differently, **new data shows that the average 10-year-old in 2021 knows less than the average 9-year-old in 2018 before the pandemic.** The Advisory Note by Dr Janeli Kotze and her co-authors (see appendix) reports the number of Setswana words that children can read correctly in one minute. A very similar assessment was administered to Grade 3s in 2018 and Grade 4s in 2021 in the exact same schools. The figure below shows that while Grade 3 students in 2018 read 26 isolated words correctly in a minute, when Grade 4 learners from the same school were assessed in 2021, they could only read 24 words. The same trend is found for reading connected text (i.e. reading a paragraph).

Figure 3a and 3b: The number of isolated words (left-hand panel) and the number of words-in-connected-text (right-hand panel) that children read correctly in a minute in 2018 (Grade 3) and 2021 (Grade 4). The sample is the same 206 no-fee schools in the Early Grade Reading Study, EGRS, in the North West (Kotze et al. 2022).



Most children lost 118 school days (60%) in 2020 due to rotational timetables, which continued into 2021: Before the pandemic there were 198 school days scheduled for 2020, yet with rotational attendance the average primary school child could only attend school for a maximum of 80 days¹⁰. Rotational timetables continued throughout 2021 despite the explicit recommendation of the Ministerial Advisory Committee in July 2021 that all children return to school with full-time attendance: *"It is the opinion of the school working group that the harms of learners attending school on a rotational basis – specifically the severe cognitive, nutritional, and psychosocial costs – exceed the benefits of reduced COVID-19 infections from smaller class sizes."* Although there was in-principal support for this from DBE Minister Motshekga at the time, COGTA Minister Nkosazana Dlamini-Zuma chose not to amend Government Gazette No. 44911 of 30 July 2021 which required a one meter social distancing between learners in order for schools to return to full-attendance. As a result, there was continued rotational attendance in almost all no-fee schools for most of 2021. As of 22 January 2022, primary schools are meant to return to full attendance, but high schools are required to continue with rotational attendance.

Two years of school closures and rotational timetables have eroded the equivalent of 6,5 years of progress. Before the pandemic South Africa was on an upward trajectory of improvement and although we were starting from a low base, there had been a steady improvement of an extra 20% of a year of learning per year. Given that children have lost 1,3 years of learning outcomes, this is the equivalent of wiping out 6,5 years of progress in South Africa. The true extent of progress that has been erased will become evident when the PIRLS 2021 results are released in December 2022.

¹⁰ See Shepherd, D. et al. (2021) "The phased reopening of public schools and the implementation of rotational attendance timetables meant that learners in grades 1 to 5 lost an estimated 60% of a possible 198 school days"

¹¹ Ministerial Advisory Committee (MAC) on COVID-19 (22 July 2021) Schools Functioning At Full Capacity. Department of Health.

Two years of school closures and rotational timetables have eroded the equivalent of 6,5 years of progress.

As of January 2022, there are no credible plans for catching up learning losses. Reviewing the announcements and plans of the Department of Basic Education, there are currently no credible or funded plans for catching up learning losses. On the 24th of August 2021, the Minister of Basic Education together with the Deputy Minister of Basic Education reported to Parliament on the DBE's 2020/21 performance. To quote the Parliamentary Monitoring Group:

“ *The Committee heard that as the COVID-19 pandemic has adversely affected the basic education sector through temporary school closures to reduce the spread of the virus, various remote learning interventions had been implemented to mitigate the pandemic's impact on learning. DBE, in collaboration with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), provincial education departments and partners, has implemented Remote Learning Programmes which include: remote lessons via broadcasting (TV and radio) and online platforms; as well as, virtual classrooms. Benefits of the programme are an interactive online education platform for educators and learners leading to effective and efficient teaching and learning; it is accessible to teachers and learners anywhere and anytime using different web-enabled devices; it equips learners with 21st century skills for the workplace; and supports the emergence of a new type of school.*

This is not an accurate representation of the support available to most children or most schools. The presentation to parliament shows that only 17 schools were equipped with the Virtual Classroom Solution, the Woza Matrics YouTube Channel only had 6,300 subscribers. It is stated that the Tswelopele television programme targeted 1,2 – million learners and 50,000 teachers and parents yet there are 12,4-million children currently enrolled in 23,000 public schools in South Africa with more than 400,000 teachers. This one TV channel was meant to target 12 grades (Grades R-11), meaning there was less than 30-minutes of programming per grade per day. Similarly, scant time was available on radio given that local radio stations only allocated 1-2 hours for educational content (for all grades). Furthermore, there is no evidence that having “access” to zero-rated websites leads to learning without feedback and support. It should be noted that the General Household Survey of 2018 showed that only 9% of households with children had a household internet connection. Presumably access to these zero-rated websites is via parents' cell-phones. Again there is no evidence that this mode of learning (via zero-rated websites) was either used by more than 10% of children, or that even when it was used that it lead to learning.

In the 2021 Budget there were no real resources allocated for any catch-up programs. Perhaps the easiest way to determine if there are serious plans for catching up lost learning is to review the Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) and the DBE's budget. Currently there is no budget for any systematic catch-up plan. The closest to a large-scale initiative is the R6-billion allocated to the Basic Education Employment Initiative yet, as the name suggests, this is primarily an employment initiative rather than a COVID catch-up programme. For example, these assistants are only hired for five months from 1 November 2021 to 31 March 2022. Why they are hired and paid during the December and January holidays while schools are closed is unclear. This may rather be influenced by budget cycles and allocations that must be spent before the end of 2021/22 financial year, instead of any catch-up intentions.

It is not an overstatement to say that currently there is no credible plan to catch-up the large learning losses resulting from COVID-19 school closures and rotational timetables in South Africa.

4. Dreams, hopes or plans?

Is it possible to drastically improve learning outcomes?

Educational reform is not quick and rarely is it effective. The graveyard of well-meaning but ill-conceived or under-funded educational initiatives is large and growing. A number of respected researchers would argue that large improvements in learning outcomes are simply not possible at the national level, and that a wise approach would be to look at the rates of improvement around the world and aim for the highest we've seen historically. Those efforts suggest that the "speed limit" that systems of education can improve at is about an *extra 20% of a year of learning per year*¹². Given the very low base that South Africa is starting from, what this looks like in reality is sobering. Essentially, we are already on this trajectory and have been improving at about this rate since 2011. Some would therefore argue that we should continue what we are currently doing because faster progress is simply not possible. It would also mean that by 2030, at this "speed-limit" of improvement, only 36% of Grade 4 children would be able to read for meaning (the 'Status-quo trendline', and assuming no COVID-19 learning losses).

It is the view of the Reading Panel Secretariat that this is both morally and politically unacceptable. While we should give praise where it is due and acknowledge the real gains that have been made in South Africa to date, we are impelled to find new ways of improving faster. Reviewing the literature does reveal a few examples where countries and provinces have improved quite rapidly in the space of 10–15 years. These include the state of Sobral in Brazil, Puebla in Mexico and Kenya¹³.

Progress is possible: Very recent research¹⁴ has shown that in the last two decades the Brazilian state of Ceará has drastically improved literacy rates. To summarise the achievement:

"Eighty-four percent of students achieve adequate literacy scores by the end of third grade. Twenty years ago, two in every five students in third grade could not read a single word."

¹² In technical terms this is 0,08 standard deviations per year, and given that a year of learning in South Africa is approximately 0,4 standard deviations per year in South Africa, at least at the primary level (Gustafsson, 2017), this amounts to 20%. See Gustafsson, M (2019) How Fast Can Levels of Proficiency Improve: Examining Historical Trends to Inform SDG 4.1.1 Scenarios. UNESCO Information Paper No. 62. p.4

¹³ Crouch, L. (2020). Systems Implications for Core Instructional Support: Lessons from Sobral (Brazil), Puebla (Mexico), and Kenya. RISE Insights.

¹⁴ Evans, D & Loureiro, A. (2021) From Bad to Best: How One State and One Municipality in Brazil Are Eradicating Illiteracy and Innumeracy. World Bank.; Loureiro, A., Cruz, L., Lautharte, I., & Evans, D. (2020). The State of Ceara in Brazil is a Role Model for Reducing Learning Poverty. World Bank. Cruz, L & Loureiro, A. (2020) Achieving World-Class Education in Adverse Socioeconomic Conditions: The Case of Sobral in Brazil. World Bank.



Ceará is a poor state of around 9 million people, roughly the size of Austria or Papua New Guinea. It has few material resources: it is the fifth poorest of Brazil's 26 states. In the early 2000s, Ceará was unexceptional in its education system. It ranked in the bottom half of the states in student performance, and its policies were common to those in much of Brazil: low financing for education, few incentives for schools to perform, school principals selected for political reward rather than technical ability, and little measurement of educational outcomes... Everything has changed. Ceará has jumped to fourth place among all Brazil's states in the national ninth-grade assessment and sixth place in fifth grade. Its gains are pro-poor and pro-diversity: gains in the wake of education reforms have been largest for poorer students and students of color. Sobral, a mid-sized city, is now first among Brazil's more than 5,500 municipalities for measures in both fifth and ninth grade. Its public schools perform better than the private schools in Brazil's richest state, São Paulo.

How did a poorly performing, low-spending state achieve such a dramatic transformation? It began with political leadership. Ceará's government placed learning at the center of the education policy with a series of reforms under three categories. First, municipalities had incentives to achieve education outcomes. Ceará reorganized how the state consumption tax would be shared with municipalities so that municipalities would receive more resources if they made progress toward clear goals in education, health, and environmental policies, with education representing the largest share. The financing formula promotes equity by rewarding improvements among the lowest-performing students, and it discourages manipulation by penalizing student absenteeism from the exams. Second, schools run by municipalities receive extensive support from the state under its literacy program, including a standardized learning assessment, literacy materials, workshops, and rewards for top schools that help lower-performing schools. Third, Ceará regularly monitors results. Schools use an externally administered assessment to measure student literacy in second grade, and these results inform both targets and support through professional development for teachers. These incentives and support could only work because municipalities had autonomy—and consequently accountability—to deliver education. Almost all primary education is run by municipal governments"

(Evans & Loureiro, 2021).

5. International & homegrown success

What are the existing examples of success in early grade reading?

Given the renewed focus on foundational literacy and numeracy around the world, there have been a number of recent analyses of effective large-scale reading interventions. The Learning at Scale report¹⁵ published in October 2021 studied eight of the most effective large-scale education programmes in Low and Middle-Income countries (in India, Tanzania, Ghana, Kenya, Pakistan, Senegal and Nigeria). The conclusions from this large, multi-country study were as follows:

A. “What classroom ingredients (e.g. teaching practices, classroom environment) lead to learning in programs that are effective at scale?

- a. Teachers showed the relationship between sounds and letters through a strong focus on **phonics-based instruction**¹⁶
- b. Teachers used **systematic and explicit direct instruction** pedagogical approaches
- c. Programs increased the amount of **instructional time** available for reading
- d. The largest amount of instructional time within lessons was **dedicated to reading**
- e. Students consistently used **improved reading materials**
- f. Students were engaged through a variety of **instructional activities**
- g. Teachers were motivated by **active student engagement** and learning.”

Improving learning at scale requires better teaching than is typically the case.

B. “What methods of training and support lead to teachers adopting effective classroom practices in successful, large-scale literacy programs?

- a. Training focused on the use of **modeling and practice** of new instructional approaches
- b. Initial training was typically **face to face**
- c. Coaches were **provided structure** in how they supported teachers
- d. **Teacher guides** simplified the instructional process
- e. Students were provided **books at a 1:1 ratio**
- f. Teacher support was **positive and collaborative**
- g. Support focused on increasing **teacher confidence**
- h. Teacher support happened frequently and **helped teachers solve problems** they faced.”

In order to improve teachers’ pedagogical methods, teachers need support.

¹⁵ The findings reported in this section draws extensively on research conducted by RTI International researchers Dr Jonathan Stern, Dr Margaret Dubeck, Dr Matthew Jukes and Dr Benjamin Piper as part of the “Learning at Scale” research project for the Center for Global Development (CGD). Unless otherwise specified, all direct quotes in this section are drawn from this study. The interim report is available here: <https://shared.rti.org/sub-topic/scale-and-sustainability> with policy notes to be published in 2022.

¹⁶ Although there has historically been a debate between two ‘camps’ of reading researchers – one supporting a ‘phonics-based’ approach and one supporting a ‘whole-language’ approach, these ‘reading wars’ are now mostly resolved with the emergence of new neuroscience research and large-scale quantitative evaluations showing the importance of systematic and explicit phonics instruction. See Castles, Rastle & Nation (2018) “Ending the Reading Wars: Reading Acquisition From Novice to Expert” for an overview of the research <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1529100618772271>

C. “What system supports are required to deliver effective training and support to teachers and to promote effective classroom practices?”

- a. Programmes **established clear priorities** for the instructional changes that they were introducing
- b. Programme priorities were **aligned with existing government plans** and priorities
- c. Key ministry personnel at the district level were engaged to **communicate programme expectations down the system**, to support improved instruction
- d. Regular programme and **government monitoring** reinforced the focus on improved teaching and learning outcomes as priorities in the system
- e. **Capacity building efforts** led to gradual transfer of responsibility from implementing partners to education system actors and eventual ownership of [programme-supported changes].”

Education assistance programs have the potential to improve learning at significant scale if the programmes are designed to support or align with the existing system in specific ways.

In agreement with the above, a 2022 published review of 33 rigorously evaluated professional development programmes concluded as follows:



Programmes that link participation to career incentives, have a specific subject focus, incorporate lesson enactment in the training, and include initial face-to-face training tend to show higher student learning gains. In qualitative interviews, programme implementers also report follow-up visits as among the most effective characteristics of their professional development programs ... a sample of 139 government-funded, at-scale professional development programmes across 14 countries [shows that] the attributes of most at-scale teacher professional development programmes differ sharply from those of programmes that evidence suggests are effective, with fewer incentives to participate in professional development, fewer opportunities to practice new skills, and less follow-up once teachers return to their classrooms¹⁷.

Although international reviews of successful reading interventions in other developing countries are helpful and instructive, any analysis would be incomplete without a review of locally-implemented successful programmes. The exact social, economic and political context of South Africa means that interventions that have taken root and grown successfully in other countries may not flourish in South African soil.

Although there have been many interventions at the primary school level over the past 20 years in South Africa, few of these have been rigorously evaluated to determine if they had an impact. Of course, most implementers (whether government or the philanthropic sector) think their programmes are successful and often point to anecdotal evidence or qualitative non-causal reviews of programmes to determine if they were successful.

In his 2019 Nature¹⁸ review of evidence and evaluations around the world, Howard White summarises the situation particularly succinctly: “Most interventions don’t work, most interventions aren’t evaluated, and most evaluations are not used.”

Included in the table below is a list of South African interventions targeted at improving reading for which there are rigorous independent evaluations of a positive causal impact on reading

¹⁷ Popova, A., Evans, D., Breeding, M., & Arancibia, V. (2022). Teacher Professional Development Around the World: The Gap between Evidence and Practice. The World Bank Research Observer. Vol 37 (1)

¹⁸ White, H. (2019). The twenty-first century experimenting society: The four waves of the evidence revolution. Palgrave Communications. Nature. <https://doi.org/10.1057/s41599-019-0253-6>

outcomes. All evaluation reports are in the public domain. While there may be lessons to learn from interventions that lack rigorous evaluations, without reliable evidence on improvements in learning outcomes it is difficult to adjudicate which of hundreds of “successful programmes” should be replicated or expanded.

"Most interventions don't work, most interventions aren't evaluated, and most evaluations are not used."

Table 1: An overview of medium-scale interventions with rigorous evaluations showing causal improvements on reading outcomes in South Africa

| Programme and year of intervention | Sample in study | Type of intervention and main finding (0,4 standard deviations = 1 year of learning) | Reference |
|--|---------------------------------------|--|---|
| Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) 2010–2014 | ~ 915 no-fee schools in Gauteng | Government-led programme. Graded readers and reading resources, on-site coaching, lesson plans. Positive impact on reading outcomes although cannot say definitively the size of the impact. | Fleisch & Schoer (2014) ¹⁹ |
| Early grade Reading Study (EGRS 1) 2015–2016 | 180 no-fee schools in North West | Intervention implemented by Class Act (NGO) On behalf of DBE focusing on using lesson plans, graded readers and either (group 1) centralised training, or (group 2) on-site coaching. Positive impact on reading outcomes after two years. The impact was an extra 30% of a year of learning for the Centralised Training group, and an extra 60% of a year of learning for On-Site coaching group. | Cilliers, Fleisch, Prinsloo & Taylor (2020) ²⁰ |
| Funda Wandé Coaching Intervention 2019 | 60 no-fee schools in the Eastern Cape | Intervention implemented by Funda Wandé (NGO) focusing on using lesson plans, graded readers, on-site coaching & Rhodes Course for HODs. Positive impact on reading outcomes after one year. The impact was an extra 48% of a year of learning after only one year. | Ardington & Meiring (2020) ²¹ |
| Funda Wandé Teacher Assistant & Learner Workbook intervention 2021 | 120 no-fee schools in Limpopo | Intervention implemented by Funda Wandé (NGO) focusing on using 1:1 Teacher Assistant for every Grade 1 teacher with Learner Workbooks, Teacher Guides and Anthologies of Graded Readers. Positive impact on reading outcomes after one year. The impact was 110% of a year of learning after only one year. | Ardington & Henry (2021) ²² |

19 Fleisch, B., & Schöer, V. (2014). Large-scale instructional reform in the global South: Insights from the mid-point evaluation of the Gauteng primary language and mathematics strategy. *South African Journal of Education*, 34(3), 1–12

20 Cilliers, J., Fleisch, B., Prinsloo, C and Taylor, D. (2020). How to improve teaching practice? An experimental comparison of centralized training and in-classroom coaching. *Journal of Human Resources*. Vol 55 (3).

21 Ardington, C. & Meiring, T. (2020). Impact Evaluation of Funda Wandé Coaching Intervention Midline Findings. SALDRU. (Online). Available: <https://fundawande.org/img/cms/news/Impact%20Evaluation%20of%20Funda%20Wandé%20Coaching%20Intervention%20Midline%20Findings.pdf>

22 Ardington, C., & Henry, J. (2021). Funda Wandé Limpopo Evaluation Midline Report. SALDRU. (Online). Available: <https://fundawande.org/img/cms/news/Limpopo%20TA%20Evaluation%202021.pdf>

6. Stated and revealed priorities

Is reading for meaning a priority for the South African government?

It has become common practice in South Africa to say that early grade reading is "critical" and of "national importance". Yet we must interrogate what we mean when we say that reading is a "top priority". Does it mean that the government says it is a top priority? Or does it mean that there are objective indicators revealing that it is in fact a top priority, for example, that it is meaningfully reflected in the budget?

There is no doubt that President Ramaphosa and Minister Motshekga have stated that reading is a priority. In his 2019 State of the Nation Address (SONA) and subsequently in Presidency's Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF 2019–2024), President Ramaphosa explained that one of the 'five fundamental goals' of the MTSF 2019–2024 was to ensure that "Our schools will have better educational outcomes and every 10-year-old will be able to read for meaning." In fact, the MTSF document mentions 'reading' 24 times. Similarly in the main planning document of the Department of Basic Education (The 2020 Action Plan to 2024) it states that there are six priorities: *"These priorities are: (1) Foundational skills of numeracy and literacy, especially reading."*

One way of looking at this is to distinguish between "stated" and "revealed" priorities. As the name suggests, a stated priority is what one says, but a revealed priority is what one does. The most obvious reflection of the government's revealed priorities is the allocation of funds in the annual government budget. In the two most recent budgets, February's 2021 Budget Review and November's Medium Term Budget Policy Statement (MTBPS) 2021, the word "reading" does not appear once in 250-pages. There are no allocations for reading specifically in either of these documents, despite this being an "apex priority of government". So, while Presidency's MTSF might mention reading 24 times, the actual budget documents lack a similar focus and are in fact silent on this "critical priority."

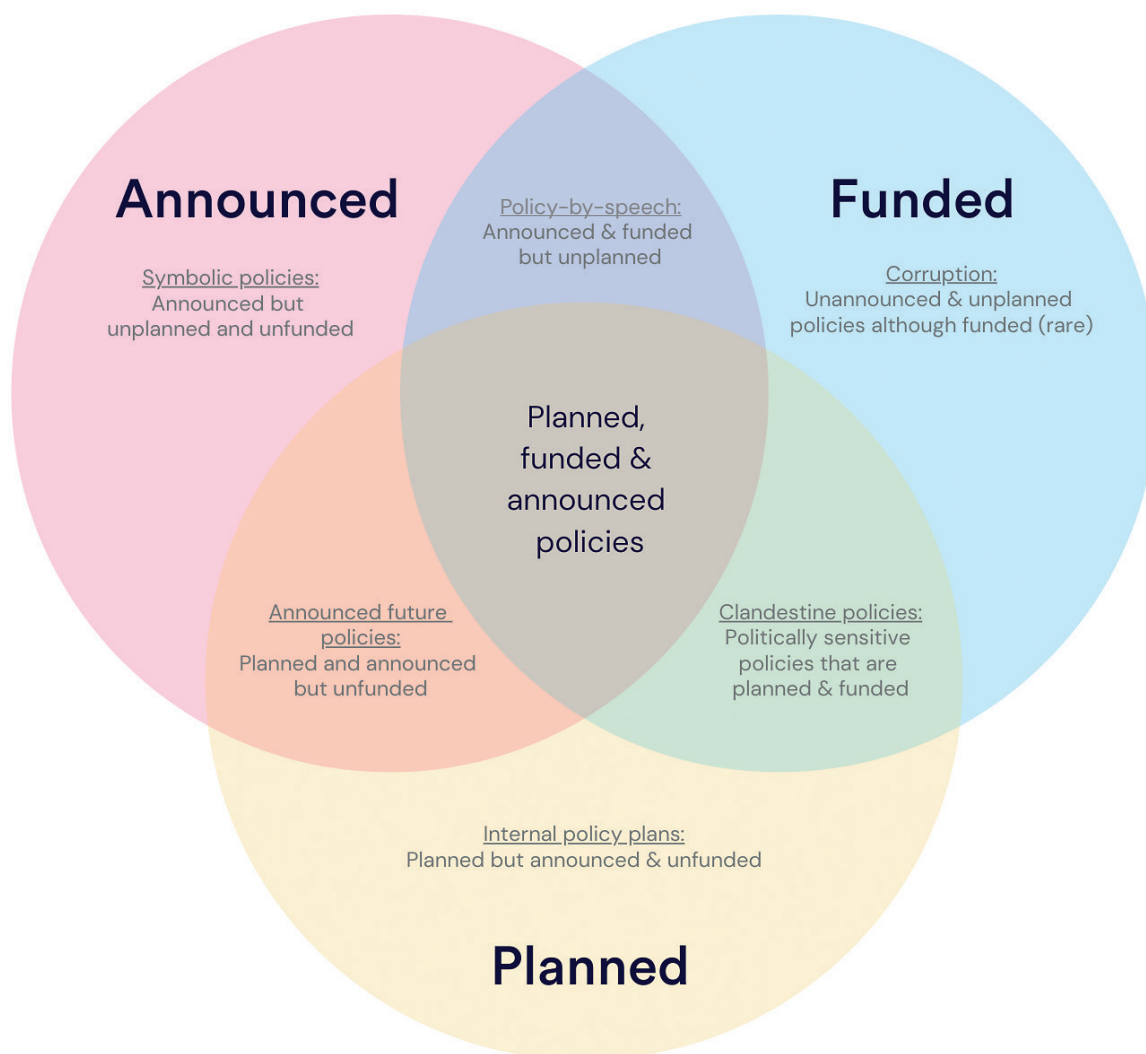
This is not because the budget documents are at too high a level of aggregation. The 2021 Budget Vote provides detailed information on the 2021/22 allocations to programs such as:

| | | |
|---|--|--------------|
| 1 | National Student Financial Aid Scheme, NSFAS | R37-billion |
| 2 | National School Nutrition Programme | R8-billion |
| 3 | Maths, Science and Technology Grant | R412-million |
| 4 | Learners with Profound Intellectual Disabilities Grant | R243-million |
| 5 | National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) | R118-million |

While it is true that some of the DBE's budget (around R249-billion) is spent on Learner and Teacher Support Material (such as the DBE Workbooks and stationery), this is something that has been true for over a decade now. While the DBE Workbooks are one of the few successful interventions by the DBE, without additional resources (like Graded readers, Big Books, Classroom libraries etc.) children will not learn to read. The DBE has not systematically provided any of these to Foundation Phase classrooms, despite recognising that they are needed to teach reading

This is not to say that there are not "programmes" or "policies" related to reading, only that they lack coherence, funding or both. (1) The figure below provides a useful language to speak about government policies. It distinguishes between three elements of a policy; whether it is announced, whether it is funded, and whether there was any planning that went into formulating the policy. For example, a policy such as the National School Nutrition Programme (NSNP), which is one of the most successful policies of the DBE was planned and announced with significant annual funds allocated to it (R8-billion per year)

Figure 4: A Typology of Government Policies.



Symbolic policies: By contrast almost all of the policies that have been introduced to improve reading outcomes can best be described as "symbolic policies" or slogans, i.e. ones that are announced but lack planning or funding. Reviewing the Basic Education Budget Vote and Speeches from 2017 to 2021 reveals that there are some examples of reading initiatives that are mentioned: (a) the Read to Lead Campaign, (b) the Drop All and Read Campaign, (c) the 1000 School Libraries Campaign, (d) the Book Flood Campaign, (e) Reading Clubs, (f) Spelling Bees, (g) Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) Training, (e) the President's Reading Circle. In each case there are no meaningful budgets attached to the realization of the goal (i.e. no budget to fund the libraries or the books children might read).

Negligible funding for reading in the current budget: Although the MTSF 2019–2024 lists "10-year-old learners enrolled in publicly funded schools read for meaning" as the core outcome for the Foundation Phase, there is only one intervention that is listed as having a budget implication for government and that is: "Rolling out the best practices such as lesson plans, graded reading books, individualised coaching of teachers learnt from Early Grade Reading Study for teaching reading and other innovations." Yet the budget for this in 2021/22 is R14-million (p76). It also lists "Professional teacher development provided for teaching reading and numeracy" with a budget of R54-million in 2018/19 coming from the ETDP-SETA. The DBE's budget for 2020 was R249-billion.

Unpublished Integrated Reading Sector Plan: More recently in a report to Parliament in May 2021, Minister Motshekga announced an "Integrated Reading Sector Plan" which has "informed the development and implementation of Reading Strategies in all provinces. Central to the Sector Plan, is the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP), which comprises 4 sub-

programmes; namely, the Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA), the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), the Read to Lead Campaign, and the National Reading Coalition (NRC).²³ There is currently very little information in the public domain on this and there are no documents on the DBE website.

PSRIP: As far as I am aware the only large-scale government initiative to improve reading outcomes is the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP) managed by the NECT on behalf of the DBE. The 2020 NECT Annual Report²⁴ indicates that the PSRIP is a “partnership with ETDP-SETA and DBE on a national training programme to capacitate the system in the teaching of reading” (p.67) and that the ETDP-SETA contributed R37-million for the programme in 2020. For comparison, the last large-scale reading intervention across a single province was the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy (GPLMS) in 2012 implemented under MEC Creecy. This was a well-funded, well-conceptualised programme that included a combination of resources, lesson plans and hiring 480 reading and mathematics coaches for primary schools in Gauteng²⁵. The budget for this intervention for a single province for one year was R298-million (in 2022 Rands)²⁶.

Given that the national government budget for Basic Education in 2020 was R249-billion, if this R37-million is the current annual budget for the PSRIP then it amounts to approximately 1% of 1% of the total budget for Basic Education. Given the budget (and even if it were double or triple this amount) the PSRIP is an understandably light-touch intervention that follows the “train-the-trainer” or “trickle-down” model where Subject Advisers are trained who then train HODs who then train teachers. This is a model that has been widely critiqued as ineffective and with no evidence of improvements in learning outcomes. The model is used because it is cost-effective and “possible” rather than because there is evidence that it leads to improvements in learning outcomes.

The Eastern Cape pioneered early grade reading reform, at least for a few years: Since the GPLMS study that ended in 2014, there have been almost no province-wide initiatives focusing on reading specifically, at least not where these have moved beyond plans and slogans and towards providing resources. The Eastern Cape is a rare exception to this. It is the first province to publish a reading plan (The ECDOE Reading Plan²⁷ 2019–2023) that is both evidence-based, well thought-out and realistic. It was launched by MEC Gade in 2019. Two practical components that have already been implemented are as follows:

- **Eliminating extreme class sizes:** The first two realisations were that teachers could not teach reading in extreme class sizes. To quote the ECDOE Reading Plan (p5) *“Over the next five years the ECDOE will eliminate extreme class sizes (>45) in the Foundation Phase. In 2019 the ECDOE began this process and re-allocated 1800 posts from high schools to schools with high numbers of Foundation Phase learners. Over the next five years we will continue this approach.”*
- **Anthologies of graded readers:** The second realisation was that most Grade 1–3 teachers in the Eastern Cape did not have levelled story books that increased in difficulty incrementally from words to sentences and eventually to paragraphs. This is a standard method of teaching reading and these “graded readers” are available in all well-resourced schools. As a result, in 2019 the ECDOE managed to print 824,365 anthologies of graded readers which were distributed to 463,276 Grade 1–3 learners across 4,365 primary schools. Forthcoming research shows that these anthologies led to an improvement in reading outcomes for learners they were given to, with affected cohorts reading 3 more isiXhosa words per minute, compared to the cohort in the same schools the year before (who did not receive the anthologies). By using Open Access Vula Bula anthologies (developed by Molteno), the cost of printing the books was incredibly low (~R15/anthology). Although the ECDOE managed to print and distribute these books for two years (2019 and 2020) it has now stopped printing them due to the prioritisation of other projects such as the R538-million for tablets for matric learners.

23 Motshekga, A. 2021. Address to parliament: <https://pmg.org.za/briefing/33004/>

24 https://nect.org.za/publications/annual-reports/nect_annual-report_2020_.pdf

25 De Clerq, F. (2014) Improving teachers’ practice in poorly performing primary schools: The trial of the GPLMS intervention in Gauteng. Education as Chance. Vol 18 (2).

26 <https://www.gov.za/gauteng-education-budget-vote-201213>

27 https://www.eccurriculum.co.za/Curriculum_Instructions/2020/G01%20of%202020%20plus%20Annexure.pdf

7. Philanthropic involvement

What is the role of philanthropies and Corporate Social Investment?

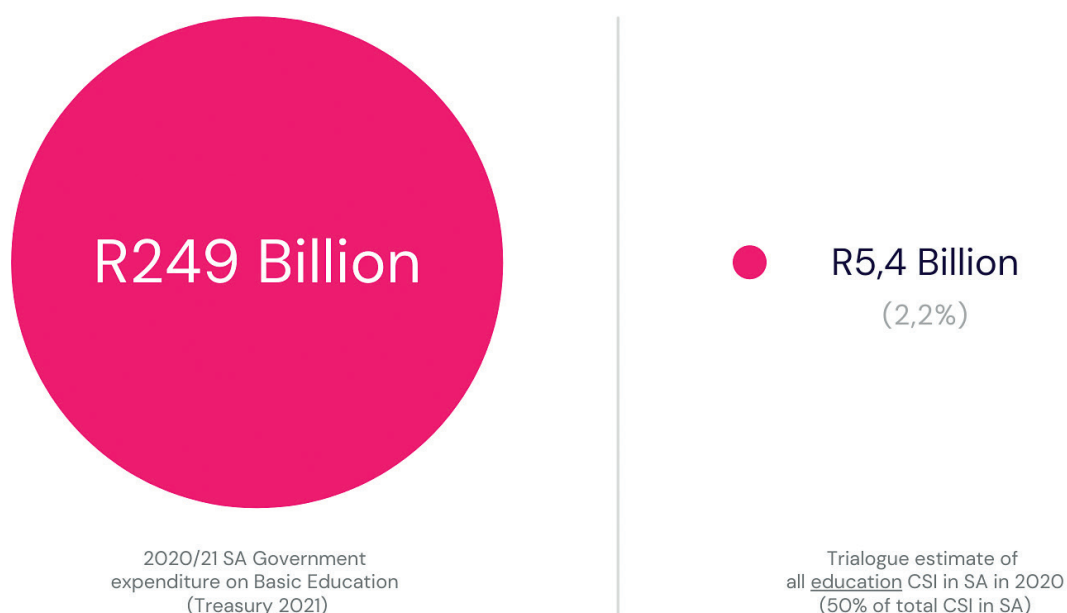
Education is an area that affects everyone and involves and affects both the public and private sectors, as parents, as employers and members of the public. It is also true that parents and families play an important role in their own children's education, including in learning to read. Yet we must acknowledge and accept that children learn how to read primarily through direct instruction from their teachers in their classroom.

It is not primarily the parent's responsibility to ensure that their child learns to read, but rather it is the responsibility of their school and specifically their Grade 1, 2 and 3 teachers. Yes, children do continue to learn at home and in their communities, but they also attend school for approximately 200 days a year for five hours a day (8am to 1pm) in Grades 1–3. Each year children are at school for about 1000 hours with 400 of those hours spent on Home Language and English First Additional Language (EFAL) teaching and learning. It is during those 1200 hours across Grades 1–3 that children are meant to learn how to read and write for meaning and pleasure.

The classroom is the primary site of learning, and it should be the primary focus of interventions aimed at improving learning outcomes.

The most important point to note when thinking about the role of the philanthropic sector in educational improvement, is that it is a very, very, small player when considering total expenditure on education. Trialogue estimates that in 2020 half of all philanthropic spending in South Africa was spent on education (Basic Education and Higher Education) and that this amounted to R5,4-billion for the year. By contrast, in the same year the government spent R249-billion on Basic Education. Put differently 97,8% of total expenditure on education is government spending, with only 2,2% coming from total philanthropic spending. Approximately 80% of the Basic Education budget is spent on teacher salaries.

Figure 5: Comparing government and philanthropic spending on education in South Africa in 2020



One of the key insights here is that the major challenges in education will not be solved with philanthropic giving alone. It is only if the comparatively small budgets of philanthropies can influence how the much larger government budget is spent that philanthropic endeavors can contribute meaningfully to educational improvement for the country as a whole. Arguably, the best use of private money is influencing how public money is spent.

The best use of private money is influencing how public money is spent.

That influence should be ethical and based on sound research and strong evidence. Using philanthropic money to implement and evaluate reading interventions to figure out 'what works' is an important step towards wider adoption and implementation.

Without rigorous, independent evaluations we do not know if interventions work. There is a common misconception in South Africa that any intervention will be helpful and lead to an improvement in reading outcomes. This is not true. A number of large-scale reviews of educational interventions has shown that most interventions do not actually lead to changes in learning outcomes.

Many strategic philanthropies use as a rule of thumb that they spend 5–10% of the value of their grants on independent evaluations as to whether not those grants achieved their stated outcomes. This seems both prudent and wise. Firstly, it seems an obvious point, but is still important to state, for evaluations to be impartial they must be commissioned and paid for by someone other than the implementing agent that is being evaluated. Secondly, not all evaluations aim to achieve the same thing. If an evaluation aims to determine whether the intervention caused an improvement in learning outcomes, then an impact evaluation is required that actually measures learning outcomes in the intervention schools and has a plausible comparison group (a control group) to compare them to. If the evaluation aims to understand the mechanisms at work within the program, then a more in-depth qualitative evaluation is needed.

To summarize briefly, the role of philanthropic social spending is to experiment with scalable interventions to figure out what can be implemented at scale with a strong chance of improving learning outcomes. To do that they should draw on the best available research about 'what works' and be independently evaluated to determine whether or not they do in fact work. If there are evidence-based, scalable models of improving reading outcomes – and, critically, ones for which there is strong local evidence – then there is an onus on government to explain why it is not implementing those interventions at scale.

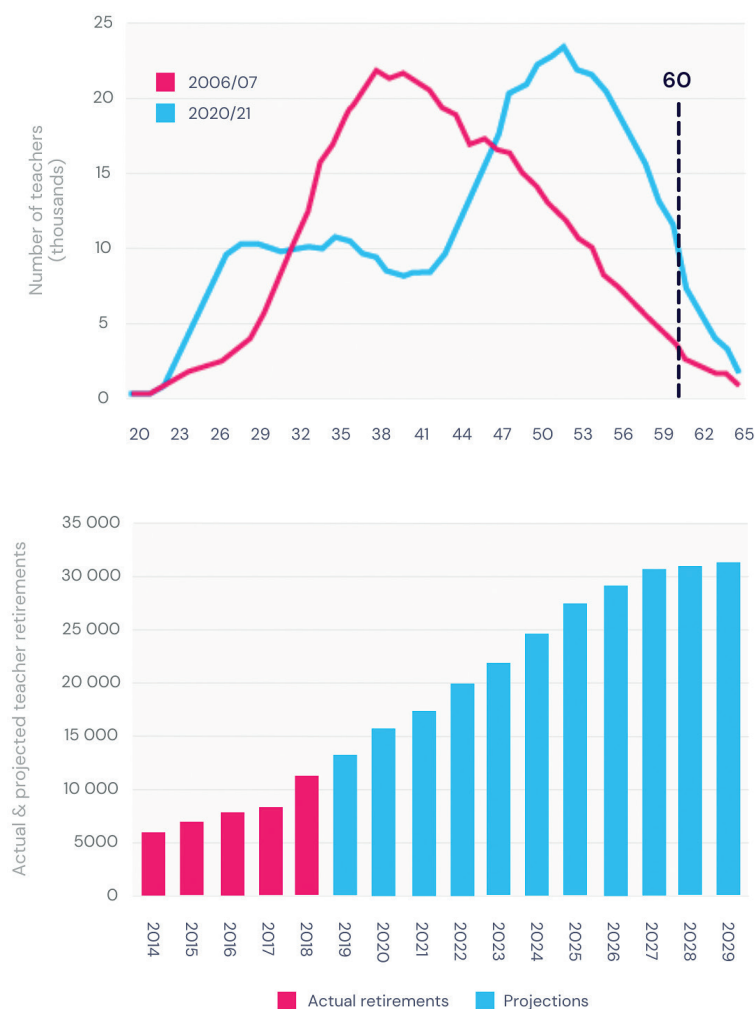
8. Teacher retirements

What is the biggest trend that will affect the realization of the 2030 goal?

Incoming wave of teacher retirements: Given that no education system can move beyond the quality of its teachers, arguably the biggest trend that will influence whether or not we reach the 2030 goal is how South Africa deals with the incoming wave of teacher retirements, an underknown trend in South Africa. This is crucial not only for improving reading outcomes in the Foundation Phase but for the quality of education throughout the system. Although it has been known in technical policy-making circles for some time now, the teacher workforce has been steadily aging over time, with a critical mass approaching retirement age in the next decade (see Figure 6). To be specific, the National Treasury²⁸ reports that nearly half (45%) of all publicly employed teachers in 2020/21 were 50 years or older and will therefore retire in the next 10 years. This is an unprecedented development and there is currently no systematic plan to address it.

Nearly half (45%) of all publicly employed teachers will retire in the next 10 years. This is an unprecedented development and there is currently no systematic plan to address it.

Figure 6: The age and distribution of publicly employed teachers in South Africa and retirements from 2014–2030



28 National Treasury, 2021. Medium Term Budget Policy Statement 2021. p.63

Increasing teacher production by at least 50% within 5 years, and doubling by 2030: Preliminary estimates²⁹ suggest that teacher retirements are set to double in the next 5 years. To keep up with these retirements, universities will need to drastically increase the number of teachers they produce. In 2018 universities in South Africa produced 26,000 teachers, but this will need to increase to 44,000 teachers per year by 2025 and 50,000 per year by 2030 to avoid large increases in class sizes or unqualified teachers being recruited to fill vacancies.

New and existing evidence calls into question the quality of existing initial teacher training at universities. The above trends show that universities will need to produce many more teachers in the coming years to replace retiring teachers. Yet there are also large questions about the quality of initial teacher education at universities. Already in 2014, the Joint Education Trust (JET) published a report on the Initial Teacher Education Research Project (ITERP) which examined aspects of initial teacher education curricula at five higher education institutions. Its conclusion was sobering:



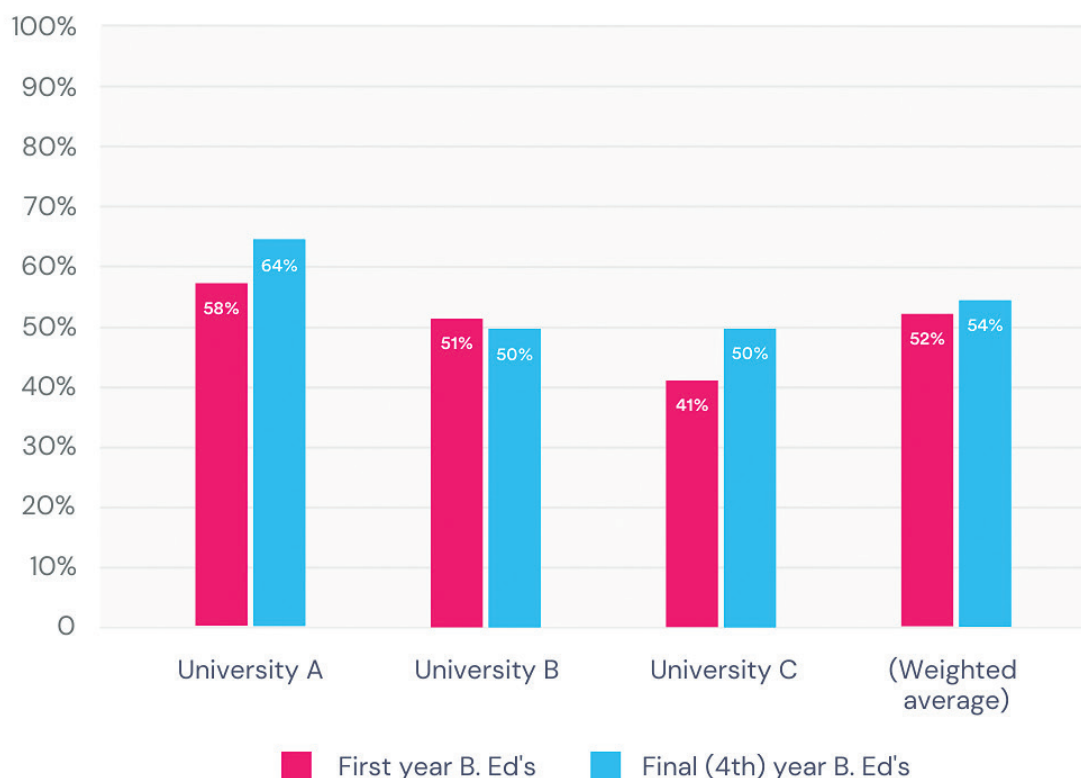
The findings of the research study described above reveal a very wide variation in all dimensions of the curricula examined. And while there are some excellent practices, it is clear that, as a whole, none of the five institutions studied is rising fully to the challenge posed by the country's low quality school system.

Extremely low levels of content knowledge, even for younger newer teachers: More recent research looking at initial teacher education for mathematics is especially concerning. Although the focus of the Panel is on reading, in primary school, teachers are required to be able to teach both languages and mathematics. In the Foundation Phase it is the same teacher who teaches all subjects. The trends in mathematics are indicative of wider problems in terms of who is recruited into teaching (incoming B.Ed students have the lowest average entry requirements and matric points of all degrees), and what is accomplished during four years of full-time training. The latest research shows that these newly graduated teachers are performing incredibly weakly on tests their students should be able to master. Earlier research showed that in a nationally representative sample of teachers in 2007, 79% of Grade 6 mathematics teachers could not pass tests aimed at their Grade 6 students (Venkat & Spaull, 2015). More recent research shows that this problem has not gone away since 2007, and if anything, more evidence has emerged pointing to serious inadequacies in teacher training at universities. In 2018, Bowie et al. (2019) tested a sample of 488 first year B.Ed students and 282 final year B.Ed students from three typical universities. The test was aimed to assess primary school mathematics knowledge and included 43 questions drawn from the Grade 1–7 curriculum (i.e. only primary school mathematics content). They found that most B.Ed students lacked a proper understanding of even primary school mathematics, and secondly there was not much growth in mathematics knowledge over the four years of the B.Ed program (**Figure 7**).

The average score for first year B.Ed's was only 52% despite it being a primary school mathematics test and, even more worrying, the average score for final-year B.Ed students on the same test was virtually the same, 54%, after four years of full-time study.

29 Van der Berg, S & Gustafsson, M (2022) Preliminary estimates for the Teacher Demographic Dividend Project.

Figure 7: First-Year and Final-Year B.Ed scores on a primary school mathematics test (2018) (Bowie et al. 2019)



As Taylor (2021)³⁰ notes:



Tests based on the school curriculum indicate that final-year B.Ed students are quite unprepared to teach mathematics in primary schools, revealing very significant shortcomings in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curricula. Continuous Professional Development (CPD), where it is well designed and rigorously evaluated, has been shown to have small effects on both teacher knowledge and learner performance. However, unless ITE is reformed at the same time, CPD becomes a never-ending task of making marginal differences to the shortcomings of each successive cohort of qualified but incompetent teachers emerging from the universities.

Tests based on the school curriculum reveal very significant shortcomings in Initial Teacher Education (ITE) curricula.

The need for reforming the teacher education system has been well known for a long time and little meaningful action has been taken to address the challenges to date. Furthermore, the current demographic changes to the teacher workforce make this lack of reform all the more urgent. Without significant reforms to how teachers are recruited, trained, managed and supported, the incoming wave of new teachers, will still not take us to the 2030 goal of ensuring that all children learn to read for meaning by age 10.

30 Taylor, N. 2021. The dream of Sisyphus: Mathematics education in South Africa. South African Journal of Childhood Education 11(1)

9. Recommendations for government

If South Africa is to reach the 2030 goal, what needs to happen in the next 1-2 years?

Although there are many reforms that are needed to reach the 2030 goal, and many of these reforms require integrated and sustained plans that take time to implement, included below are four immediately realizable recommendations that would take South Africa much closer to the 2030 goal. These can all be implemented within the next 2 years, and in some cases before the end of 2022. These are the four goals that will be reviewed at the 2023 Reading Panel.

- 1. Measuring what matters: Implementing a universal standardized assessment of reading at the primary school level:** Currently there is no universal standardized assessment at the primary school level in South Africa. The last time a standardized assessment was conducted in all primary schools was in 2014 with the Annual National Assessment (ANA). As Servaas Van der Berg outlines in his Advisory Note, currently we have no systematic measurement of how many children can read in individual primary schools. Without this information teachers often have incorrect judgements about how many children in their classrooms can actually read and at the right level, parents do not know how their children are doing, government officials do not know which schools to target for greater support and greater monitoring and accountability. The DBE (or individual provinces) should plan, budget for, and implement an independently-administered systemic assessment that tests all grade 2 children on reading proficiency in the language of learning and teaching of the Foundation Phase.
- 2. Moving from slogans to budgets.** As a country we need to move beyond slogans like “Read to Lead”, “Drop All and Read” and purely symbolic campaigns like the “President’s Virtual Reading Circle.” We need to get serious about reading, with a costed and budgeted plan that recognizes that fixing the reading crisis in South Africa will require (a) serious increases in government capacity (at both head office and school level), (b) instituting accountability measures for non-performance (at both head office and school levels), and (c) serious budgets for reading with dated implementation plans that are monitored for key milestones. The annual GPLMS budget to intervene in 1000 of the province’s 2000 schools was R298-million (in 2022 Rands). Using this as a benchmark, and assuming all no-fee schools (70% of all schools) require a similar intervention this would amount to an annual budget of R3,4-billion³¹ for reading in primary schools (Grades R-7). If this was targeted only at the Foundation Phase (Grade R-3) it would be R1,7-billion per year.
- 3. Providing a standard minimum set of reading resources to all Foundation Phase classrooms (Grade R-3) as a matter of urgency.** Arguably the most successful education intervention in the last 10 years has been the DBE Workbooks. These full-color Language, Mathematics and Life Skills workbooks are provided to every single Grade R-9 classroom in the country and are the only resource that is universally available in all schools. The 2021 Basic Education Budget Vote (Vote 16) reports that the cost of printing the 58-million workbooks for Grades R-9 (Languages, Mathematics and Life Skills) is R1,2-billion per year (p.253). Under Naledi Pandor, the Department of Basic Education determined what a minimum set of resources was needed to teach literacy. This was gazetted in March 2008³² under the Foundations For Learning Campaign. Of approximately 10 “Recommended resources for literacy in Grades 1-3”, which include learner’s workbooks, alphabet friezes, wall charts, graded readers, big books, story books, a systematic phonics program, stationery etc., only one of these (Learner’s Workbooks) has

³¹ According to the 2019 School Realities there were 879,898 learners in public schools in Gauteng in Grades R-7 leading to an annual 2022 per-learner cost of R677. There are 7,086,128 learners in public schools across the country and approximately 70% are in no-fee schools (i.e. 4,960,289) thus 4,960,289*R677 = R3,36-billion per annum.

³² <https://www.ecurriculum.co.za/FoundationPhase/FFL-Gazette30880-2008.pdf>

actually been provided to all schools. Perhaps the easiest, most cost-effective and evidence-based approach to begin this equipping is to start with Anthologies of Graded Readers for all Grade 1–3 learners. These Vula Bula anthologies are Open Access and thus the only costs to providing them are the print costs (there are no licensing or royalty fees), and therefore typically cost between R10–R15 per anthology. New research evaluating the Eastern Cape Department of Education’s roll-out of the anthologies to all primary schools in 2019 and 2020 has found statistically significant positive results relative to cohorts who did not receive the anthologies. These Vula Bula anthologies already exist in all 11 of South Africa’s official languages³³. This would cost approximately R32-million³⁴ per year to print an anthology of graded reader for every child for every grade every year.

4. **University audit of pre-service teacher education programs.** It is now clear that, on the whole, faculties of education are not preparing incoming teachers to reach reading in the home language. After reviewing teacher training curricula the ITREP study has shown quite clearly that many B.Ed programs lack coherence around the fundamentals of teaching reading and mathematics at the primary school level. They do not currently allocate sufficient time to the practical elements of teaching reading (decoding, blending and segmenting, phonemic awareness, classroom management, assessment etc.). There is still a heavy focus on research and the philosophy of education to the detriment of time for the fundamentals of how to teach reading and mathematics. For example, the number of credits that are allocated to the teaching of literacy was as low as 6% of the total number of credits for a primary school B.Ed program at three well-known universities³⁵. The Centre for Higher Education (CHE) and/or the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) should implement a sector-wide audit of Foundation Phase programs with ongoing certification contingent on meeting reasonable requirements regarding time allocated to the teaching of reading and mathematics.

Background Advisory Notes

In order to gain further input from a number of people working on key initiatives within the sector, we have requested short Advisory Notes. Authors were asked to reflect on the state of reading in South Africa and include sections on (1) What are we doing right as a country? (2) What are we doing wrong as a country? (3) What needs to change (and how might that happen) if we are to reach the goal of all children reading for meaning by age 10 by 2030?

³³ The Molteno Institute (with Zenex funding) developed Open Access graded readers for Grades 1–3 in all African languages (except Afrikaans) for the GPLMS intervention. In order to save on printing costs when printing ‘skinny books’ Funda Wandé has subsequently converted these into anthologies of graded readers (one per grade) and also developed an Afrikaans anthology. These are freely available on their website <https://fundawande.org/learning-resources>.

³⁴ There are 3,182,989 Grade 1–3 learners in South Africa and at a printing cost of R10 per anthology this would amount to R31,829,890 per year. If these books are distributed together with the DBE Workbooks (as the ECDOE did in 2019 and 2020) there are no additional delivery costs.

³⁵ See Table 1 in Bowie, L., & Reed, Y. (2016). How much of what? An analysis of the espoused and enacted mathematics and English curricula for intermediate phase student teachers at five South African universities. *Perspectives in Education*, 34(1), 102–119. <https://doi.org/10.18820/2519593X/pie.v34i1.8>

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