

DIGITAL

2023
READING PANEL

BACKGROUND REPORT

24 February 2026



Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, the former deputy president of South Africa, convened the 2030 Reading Panel to bring together respected South African leaders to answer the question: “What needs to change for us to ensure that all children learn to read by 2030?” The panel meets annually and will continue to do so until 2030.

The panel comprises the following members (in alphabetical order by surname): Colin Coleman, André Gaum, Prof Sizwe Mabizela, Noncedo Madubedube, Archbishop Thabo Makgoba, Prof Veronica McKay, Prof Mary Metcalfe, Dr Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka, Prof Njabulo Ndebele, Prof Vuyokazi Nomlomo, Kentse Radebe, Hulisani Ravele, Prof Michael Sachs, Elinor Sisulu and Dr Faranaaz Veriava. More information is available at readingpanel.co.za

This Background Report was prepared by Sipumelele Lucwaba at the request of the chairperson 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 panel sponsors.

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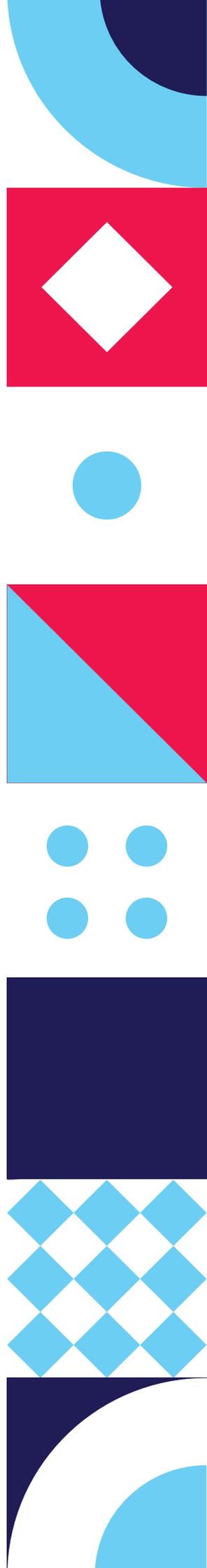


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Abbreviations and acronyms

APP	Annual Performance Plan
ATP	Annual Teaching Plan
BEd	Bachelor of Education
BEEI	Basic Education Employment Initiative
BELA	Basic Education Laws Amendment
CEM	Council of Education Ministers
CHE	Council on Higher Education
CSI	corporate social investment
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DHET	Department of Higher Education and Training
EFAL	English first additional language
EGRA	Early Grade Reading Assessment
EGRS	Early Grade Reading Study
ELOM	Early Learning Outcomes Measure
FAL	first additional language
FUNS	Funda Uphumelele National Survey
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
HL	home language
HEQC	Higher Education Quality Committee
ITE	initial teacher education
LoLTA	language of learning, teaching and assessment
LTSM	learning and teaching support material
MTbBE	mother tongue-based bilingual education
MTbRL	mother tongue-based reading literacy
MTDP	Medium-Term Development Plan
MTSF	Medium-Term Strategic Framework
NECT	National Education Collaboration Trust
NETC	National Education and Training Council
NEEDU	National Education Evaluation and Development Unit
NGO	non-governmental organisation
NHLRP	National Home Language Reading Programme
ORF	oral reading fluency
PGCE	Postgraduate Certificate in Education
PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
PLCs	professional learning communities
SA-SAMS	South African School and Administration Management System
SASE	South African Systemic Evaluation
SEACMEQ	Southern and Eastern Africa Consortium for Monitoring Educational Quality

Executive summary

1. How many learners can read?

A new national survey has revealed that only 30% of Grade 1–3 learners are reading at grade level, with up to 25% of Grade 3 learners in certain language groups unable to read a single word.

In 2025, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) released the Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS). The survey is the first nationally and provincially representative dataset of reading outcomes in Grades 1–4 in all languages reported against DBE benchmarks. FUNS revealed that only about 30% of learners in Grades 1–3 are performing at grade level in their home language (HL). English first additional language (EFAL) outcomes are also weak, with only 35% and 38% of Grade 3 and Grade 4 learners respectively reaching the grade benchmarks. As has been the case with the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) and the South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE), the outcomes from FUNS were largely determined by socio-economic status and language. Learners tested in English generally performed the best, and Grade 3 learners in Quintile 5 schools were almost three times more likely to reach the HL benchmark than learners in Quintile 1 schools. Concerningly, 15% of Grade 3 learners are not yet able to read a single word correctly, with this figure as high as 25% in Sepedi and Xitsonga. Finally, there is a strong relationship between oral reading fluency (ORF) and comprehension. Among learners classified as non-readers (the second-lowest category), 86% scored below 25%, while only 2% scored above 50% for written comprehension. In contrast, among learners who met the HL benchmark, just 7% scored below 25% and 66% scored above 50% for written comprehension.

2. New findings on reading outcomes

There is growing evidence that access to Grade R and early grade repetition can improve learning outcomes; however, socio-economic disparities persist.

New research on Grade R learning outcomes shows there are clear benefits to attending Grade R; however, there are disparities between socio-economic classes. After a year of Grade R, the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) scores of learners in no-fee schools improved by up to 8.6 points. The scores of learners in mid-fee schools increased by more than double (18.7 points). With Grade R now compulsory under the Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act 32 of 2024, these persistent inequalities – which closely mirror those in the rest of the schooling system – must be confronted if Grade R attendance is to have the intended impact.

Another new study using South African School and Administration Management System (SA-SAMS) data across six provinces found that learners who fall just below the promotion threshold and repeat Grade 1 achieve estimated gains of 18.1 percentage points in Grade 2, 9.5 percentage points in Grade 3, and 5.2 points in Grade 4. These results contribute to the growing body of evidence on the benefits of grade repetition in the foundation phase. While these gains are larger than any existing home-grown reading intervention, they need to be viewed cautiously given the high costs of repetition. Nonetheless, given the ongoing media debate about the National Executive's apparent decision in 2019 to eliminate foundation phase repetition and its explicit mention in the DBE's Action Plan to 2029, the release of these findings is well-timed.

3. Proactive provinces

Four provinces are moving to large-scale, evidence-based reading interventions, funded and delivered through consortia.

In 2025/26, four provinces – the Eastern Cape, the Free State, Gauteng and Mpumalanga – have started to implement large-scale early grade reading interventions, with some also including numeracy. In Mpumalanga, the intervention is funded by a donor collaborative and focuses on Grade R HL, maths and school readiness. Teachers are trained by specialist trainers who work alongside subject advisors for one day per month. The other three provinces have partnered with a donor consortium known as Float – a collaborative initiative aimed at enhancing literacy and numeracy outcomes for learners in Grades R-3 with the help of philanthropic funders. In both the Free State and the Eastern Cape, the interventions target Grades R-3 and include the provision of lesson plans and classroom materials as well as quarterly teacher training over a two-year period. In addition to HL, the Free State intervention will also focus on maths. The Gauteng intervention focuses on HL, EFAL and maths in Grade 3 and includes providing structured materials and quarterly teacher training, with the addition of in-class coaching at selected schools. All of these interventions are evidence-based, drawing on lessons from the DBE's Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), and are being implemented through consortium delivery models.

4. The role of philanthropy

Philanthropic funding can provide leverage to accelerate government-led reform.

Although philanthropic funding of educational initiatives is small relative to public spending on education, it can play an important catalytic role when it is aligned with government priorities and with evidence on what works. In 2025, corporate social investment (CSI) in education amounted to R5.8 billion, of which only R2.2 billion went to basic education, compared with public spending of R347 billion. Philanthropy therefore cannot drive system change on its own. Its value lies in providing leverage rather than scale, by supporting government to move further and faster than it otherwise could. The Float funder collaborative provides a good example. Over the next three years, Float is expected to reach approximately 390 000 learners across three provinces, representing about 40% of target Grade R-3 learners in those provinces. This will be achieved through interventions embedded within provincial plans and implemented at meaningful scale. Experience from the EGRS and FUNS reinforces the lesson to be learnt from these initiatives: When government sets the agenda and retains ownership, philanthropic and technical partnerships can strengthen implementation, generate usable evidence and accelerate system-level reform.

5. Systemic opportunities

The current review of teacher education programmes offers a system-wide opportunity to improve reading outcomes.

The Council on Higher Education (CHE), through the Higher Education Quality Committee (HEQC), is currently undertaking a compulsory national review of all initial teacher education (ITE) qualifications (Bachelor of Education [BEd] and Postgraduate Certificate in Education [PGCE]) across all phases, running from 2024 to 2027. This is the first such review since 2005 and is a response to strong evidence of persistent weaknesses in teacher content knowledge and pedagogy. To address these weaknesses, the review focuses explicitly on whether educational programmes adequately prepare graduates to teach reading and writing, the extent to which reading pedagogy and language

development strategies are integrated into the course material (including phonics, comprehension and multilingual approaches), and whether institutional improvement plans prioritise literacy teaching competencies. The review requires all institutions to assess and align their programmes with the new national standards. Possible outcomes include confirmation of alignment, implementation of monitored improvement plans or, where justified, withdrawal of accreditation.

At the same time, improved teacher preparation will only translate into better reading outcomes if teachers are deployed in response to system needs. In this regard, recent analysis of 2023 teacher deployments is encouraging from an equity perspective. The analysis reveals that in many cases, provinces placed newly deployed teachers in Quintile 1-3 schools and aligned deployments with provincial language profiles. In three provinces (the Eastern Cape, Limpopo and North West), roughly 80-90% of newly deployed primary school teachers were placed in Quintile 1-3 schools. Gauteng is an exception, with a large share (47%) of new primary school teacher deployments going to Quintile 5 schools. The majority of new teacher deployments also aligned with provincial language profiles. For example, 79% of new primary school teachers in KwaZulu-Natal were isiZulu HL speakers. What remains unclear is whether the scale of new deployments offsets retirement pressures and whether placements match school-level needs by phase, specialisation and language.

6. National promises

Although public announcements prioritise reading, planning documents obscure it with other priorities.

Public speeches and statements continue to frame foundation phase reading as a national priority; yet the current administration's plans suggest a shift away from an explicit focus on reading. Although Goal 1 of the DBE's Action Plan to 2029 is still to increase the number of Grade 3, 6 and 9 learners who have mastered grade-level competencies by the end of the grade, the Medium-Term Development Plan (MTDP) – previously the Medium-Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) – no longer specifically references reading. The issue of reading competencies is now included under the broader objective of “improved educational skills”. In addition, the plan no longer appears to include detailed specifics of the interventions set out in the document. A review of documents from the seventh administration suggests that the boundaries between mother tongue-based bilingual education (MTbBE) and early grade reading are becoming increasingly blurred. Although they are complementary and both are important, each requires distinct objectives, sequencing and implementation strategies. Without this clarity, there is a risk that neither are pursued with sufficient depth or intensity.

7. 2022–2026: How far have we come?

Six provinces are implementing reading interventions despite limited national coordination.

Irrespective of whether we look at the results from PIRLS or SASE, it is clear that we are far from meeting the presidential injunction that all Grade 4 learners should be able to read for meaning by 2030. Currently, only about 20% of Grade 4 learners are reading with comprehension. There are, however, early signs of momentum at a national level. The DBE has initiated an update of the national catalogue to define a minimum package of foundation phase resources, which is expected to be ready for provincial procurement in 2026/27. The DBE has also developed a structured phonics programme for African languages in collaboration with the National Education Evaluation and Development Unit (NEEDU); this programme is now embedded in the revised Annual Teaching

Plans (ATPs). Thirdly, the department, in partnership with the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT), is piloting the National Home Language Reading Programme (NHLRP), reaching 5 000 teachers across eight provinces through a structured literacy programme. The most recent phase of the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) has also allocated 57 000 Reading Champions to the foundation phase to support reading.

There is also evidence of notable progress led by the provinces since we began reporting on reading in 2022. In 2022, no provinces were implementing large-scale responses to reading or maths in the foundation phase; in 2026, six of the nine provinces are implementing evidence-based reading interventions. Although there are disparities between the provinces, this shift is encouraging and signals a growing focus on reading. Many of these interventions are funded through a combination of provincial and donor resources. This is positive, as it reflects stronger collaboration; however, it also raises questions about long-term sustainability. The bulk of the education budget sits with the provinces. Yet the national department still has a critical role to play, in line with the responsibilities identified by the DBE: developing clear pedagogical guidance for teachers; working with the Department of Higher Education and Training (DHET) to ensure the appropriate quality, language specialisations and supply of teachers; and engaging National Treasury on effective approaches to resource allocation. While we applaud the efforts already made by the DBE, these functions must be pursued as part of a single, coherent national strategy. Without national drive, gains made through provincial initiatives and national projects risk remaining fragmented and insufficient to shift early grade reading outcomes at scale.

8. Recommendations

Growing provincial momentum requires clearer national coherence and direction.

Since 2022, political commitment to early grade reading has strengthened, with provinces increasingly rolling out evidence-based interventions at meaningful scale. Six provinces now provide defined minimum packages of learning materials. Important system advances have also emerged. These include the introduction of the FUNS assessments, which has expanded insight into foundational skills and strengthened provincial assessment systems. In addition, the CHE's national review of ITE programmes has the potential to better prepare teachers for foundation phase literacy.

Despite this progress, the 2030 Reading Panel's main recommendations remain unchanged. **Reading must be restored as a standalone national priority. Since many of the documents reviewed here will only be updated by the eighth administration, there is an opportunity to re-establish reading as a priority and to clarify what interventions are required to bring about reform through a comprehensive national reading plan.** From 2027, the recommendation to "move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful funding to reading resources and interventions" will be refined to call for a national plan that is either allocated a meaningful budget or wherein existing funding mechanisms are clearly specified. While implementation rightly sits with the provinces, the DBE has a central responsibility to provide policy direction, define minimum standards and align key system levers.

Advisory Notes

In addition to this Background Report, there are several short advisory notes included in the references. We are indebted to the authors for their contribution to this work. The authors of these notes are listed alphabetically by surname or institution below:

1. Bengtson, A., Mirazi, S., Nicolaai, A., Tshabalala, F., Vywers, Z., (2026). Gauteng province – Grade 3 intervention.
2. Clayton, R. 2026. The impact of early grade repetition on learner marks in South Africa.
3. Float. 2026. Partnering to advance foundational literacy.
4. Hofmeyer, H. (2026). What can and can't we expect from Grade R? Evidence from the Roots & Shoots study.
5. Mathey, M., Jannecke, C. and Green, W. (2026). Background note on the national review of initial teacher education (ITE) qualifications.
6. Mkhwanazi, S.J. Ledwaba, M., Behrendt, S., Kuhne, C., Makhanya, M., Luke Crowley, L., and Molefe, H. (2026). Mpumalanga province Grade R Capacity Building Programme (MP-R).
7. Mohohlwane, N. (2026). A reflection on reading initiatives and efforts.
8. Montso, ET. (2026). Transforming foundation phase learning outcomes: The Free State Literacy and Numeracy Strategy.
9. Western Cape Education Department. (2026). A systemic approach to early grade reading: Institutionalising foundation phase reform in the Western Cape.
10. Xundu-Bula, C.N. and Gwele, B.L. (2026). Mabafunde Bonke: Improving reading outcomes in the Eastern Cape.

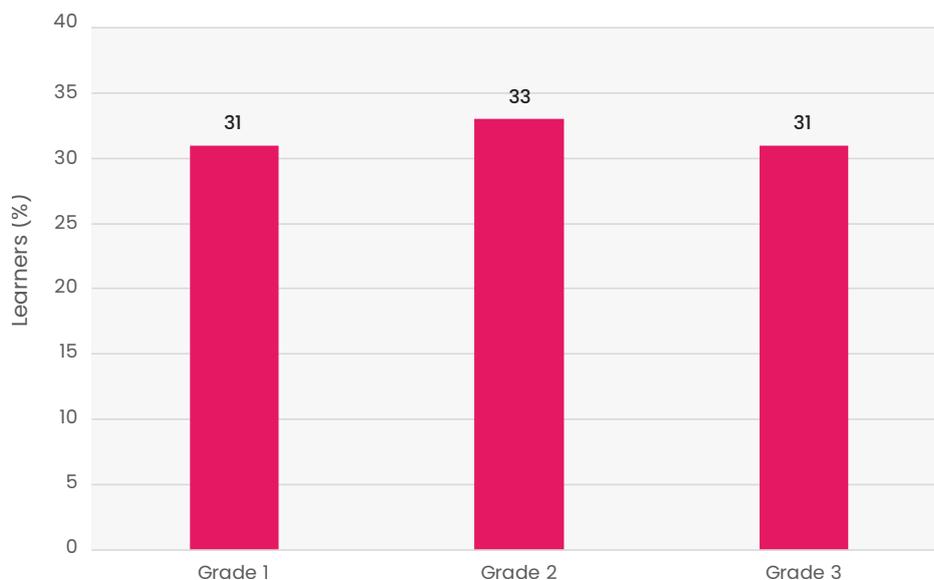
1. How many learners can read?

In November 2025, the DBE released the results from FUNS (DBE, 2025b). FUNS is representative at the national, provincial and language levels and provides the first representative data of early reading outcomes in Grades 1-4 in all languages. The survey measures oral and written literacy skills, with oral skills reported against the DBE's ORF benchmarks that were developed between 2017 and 2023¹. The benchmarks were developed in all languages, including EFAL. They measure grade-level proficiency and can be used to monitor whether learners are on track to read with comprehension by the time they reach Grade 4. In Grade 1, FUNS tests letter sound knowledge, in Grades 2 and 3 it tests ORF, and in Grades 3 and 4, comprehension (both written and oral) is added.²

In Grades 1-3, only 30% of learners are meeting grade-level reading benchmarks in their home language.

In Grades 1-3, only 30% of learners are meeting grade-level benchmarks in their HL (see Figure 1). EFAL outcomes are also weak, with only 35% of Grade 3 learners and 38% of Grade 4 learners reaching the respective benchmarks. These results are deeply concerning, regardless of the lens through which they are viewed. Firstly, poor EFAL skills mean that most learners are unable to access core content subjects such as maths and science when they reach Grade 4. Secondly, and critically, learners are entering Grade 4 before they have mastered their HL. A strong body of evidence³, some of which is based on the DBE's own studies, shows the importance of learners mastering their HL before moving on to an additional language, with clear positive transfer effects.

Figure 1: Percentage of learners reaching grade-level HL benchmarks per grade



Source: DBE (2025b)

¹ For example, see Ardington et al. (2020) and DBE (2022).

² Letter sound knowledge is measured by the number of correct letter sounds per minute and ORF by measuring the correct words per minute.

³ See Kim and Piper (2018), Mohohlwane et al. (2023) and Kim et al. (2024).

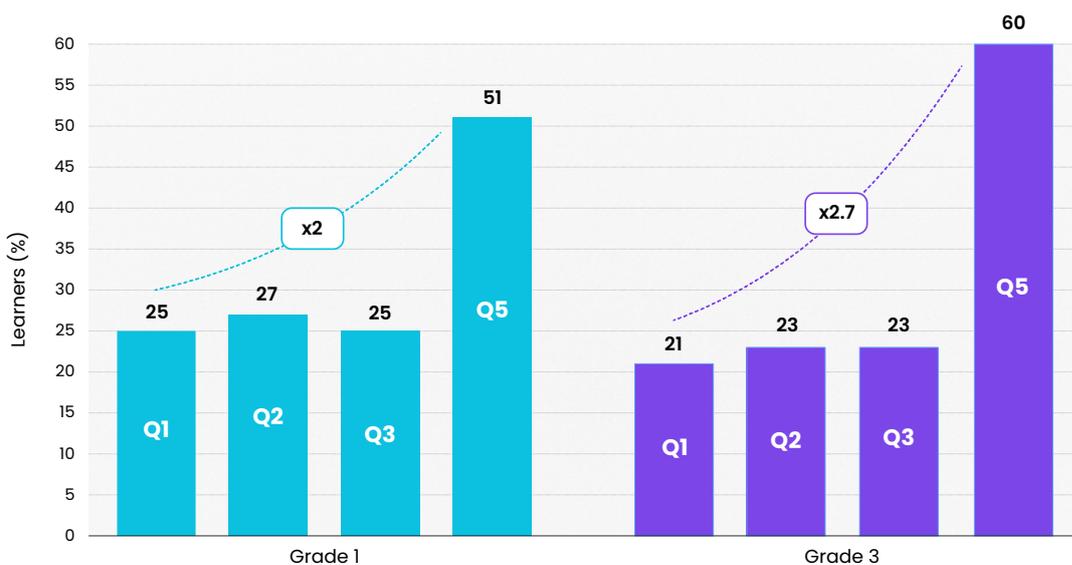
How do learning outcomes differ based on socio-economic status?

As with all assessments in the early grades, the results are determined by language and socio-economic status. Grade 1 learners in Quintile 5 schools are two times more likely to reach HL benchmarks than learners in Quintile 1 schools. Grade 3 learners in Quintile 5 schools are almost three times more likely to reach the benchmark than learners in Quintile 1 schools – as shown in Figure 2.

Grade 3 learners in Quintile 5 schools are almost three times more likely to reach the grade-level benchmark than learners in Quintile 1 schools.

In terms of the provinces, Grade 3 outcomes indicate that the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal are the top performing provinces (see Table 1). Learners in both provinces are around two times more likely to reach the grade-level benchmark than learners in the bottom four provinces – the Free State, Mpumalanga, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.

Figure 2: Percentage of Grade 1 and 3 learners reaching grade-level HL benchmarks by school quintile



Source: DBE (2025b)

Table 1: Percentage of learners reaching grade-level HL benchmarks by province and grade

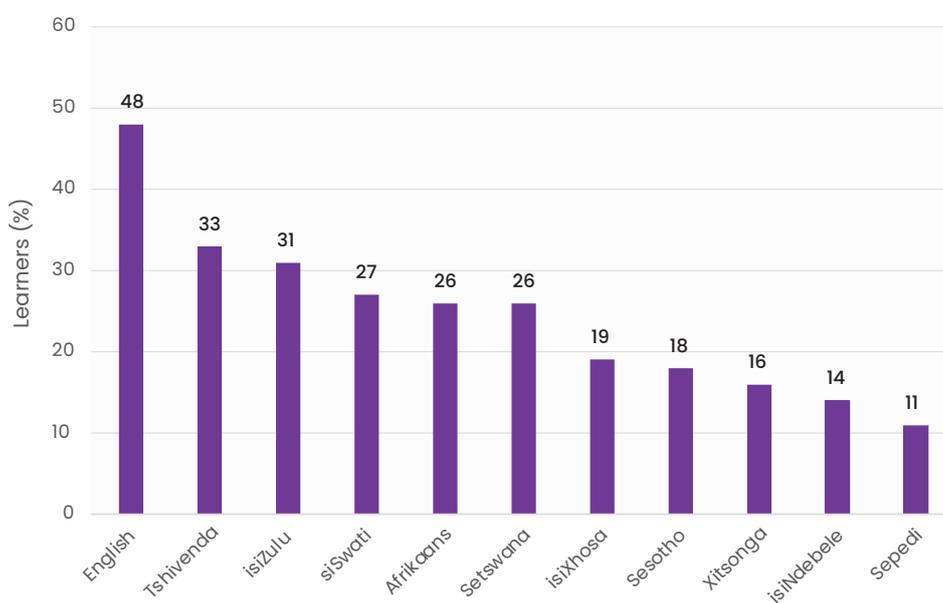
	Grade 1	Grade 2	Grade 3
Western Cape	54	49	43
KwaZulu-Natal	18	30	40
Gauteng	34	37	37
Northern Cape	37	23	27
North West	30	29	25
Free State	33	22	23
Mpumalanga	21	30	23
Eastern Cape	37	30	22
Limpopo	31	30	19

Source: DBE (2025b)

What are the differences in outcomes by language?

Figure 3 shows the percentage of Grade 3 learners who are meeting the benchmark by language. In Grade 3, the largest proportion of English HL learners (48%) meet the benchmark. Positively, the next best-performing languages are Tshivenda (33%) and isiZulu (31%). Learners writing in English are more than four times more likely to reach the benchmark than the lowest-performing African language, Sepedi (11%).

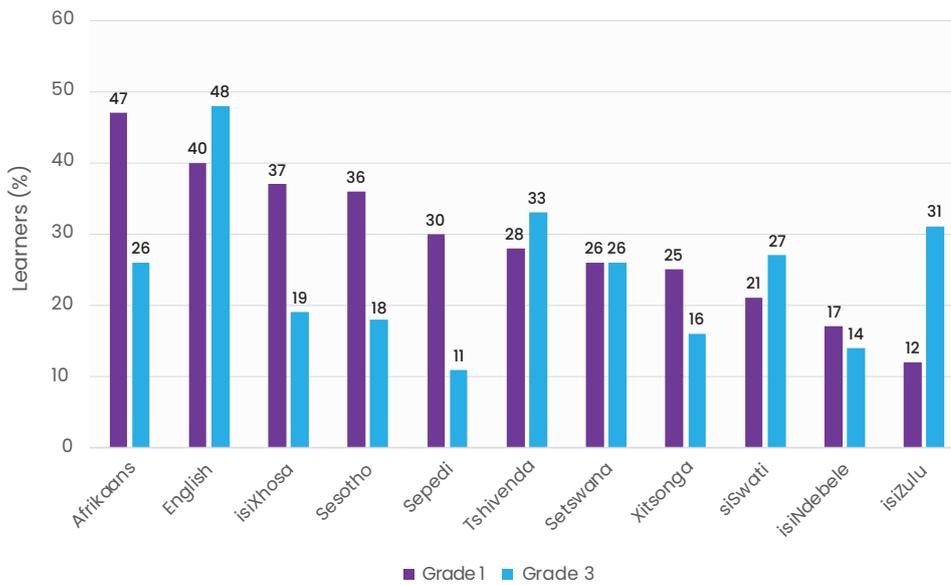
Figure 3: Percentage of Grade 3 learners reaching the HL benchmark by language



Source: DBE (2025b)

Interestingly, there are inconsistent patterns in reaching the benchmark based on letter-sound knowledge in Grade 1 and reaching ORF benchmarks in later grades. Figure 4 shows the percentage of learners in Grade 1 and Grade 3 reaching the HL benchmarks by language. For example, 37% of isiXhosa learners reach the Grade 1 benchmark, whereas only 19% reach the Grade 3 benchmark. On the other hand, isiZulu sees very poor results in Grade 1, with only 12% of learners reaching the benchmark; however, more than double the number of learners (31%) reach the benchmark in Grade 3. The DBE suggests that a possible reason for the discrepancy in isiXhosa performance is that letter-sound knowledge is a constrained skill and can be taught through rote learning, whereas reading words, sentences and paragraphs requires more complex skills (DBE, 2025b).

Figure 4: Percentage of Grade 1 and 3 learners meeting HL benchmarks by language



Source: DBE (2025b)

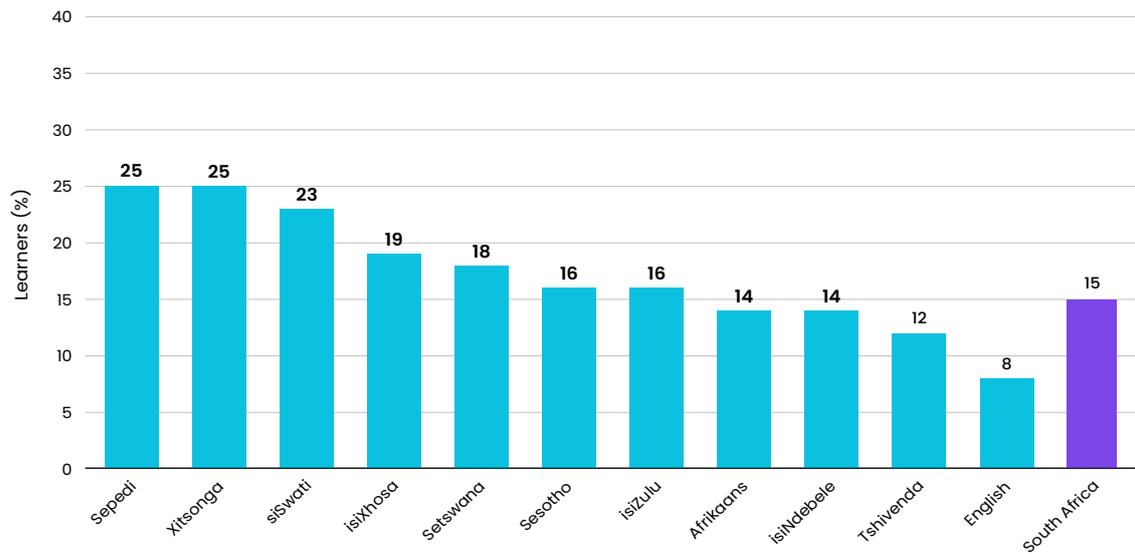
How many learners cannot read a single word by the end of Grade 3?

Overall, 15% of Grade 3 learners cannot read a single word by the end of the school year (see Figure 5). Sepedi (25%), Xitsonga (25%) and siSwati (23%) have the highest proportion of learners in Grade 3 who scored zero. While the proportion of siSwati learners reaching benchmarks in Grade 3 is close to the national average of 31%, as little as 14% of isiNdebele learners and 11% of Sepedi learners reach the benchmark. The provinces where these languages are most prevalent also have some of the highest proportion of Grade 3 learners with zero scores⁴. Finally, across languages, learners in Quintile 1 schools are four times more likely to be unable to read a single word than learners in Quintile 5 schools.

Learners in Quintile 1 schools are four times more likely to be unable to read a single word than learners in Quintile 5 schools.

⁴ Eastern Cape, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, the North West, and the Northern Cape all have more than 20% of grade 3 learners with zero scores.

Figure 5: Percentage of Grade 3 learners who are unable to read a single word by the end of Grade 3 by language



Source: DBE (2025b)

How critical is oral reading fluency to comprehension?

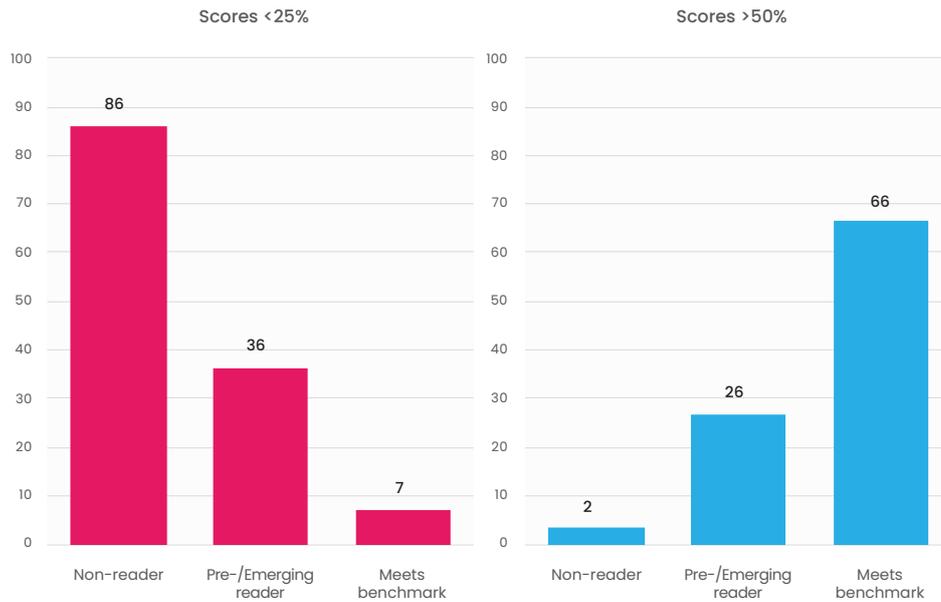
FUNS further disaggregates learner performance into six categories. The first four – zero scores, non-readers, pre-readers and emerging readers – are all classified as below the benchmark. Zero scores refer to learners who cannot provide a single correct answer; in other words, they are unable to identify a single letter or read a single word correctly. Learners who reach the benchmark are then grouped into two additional categories: those who meet the benchmark and those who exceed the benchmark. The latter refers to learners who not only achieve the expected grade-level standard but also meet the benchmark for the subsequent grade. There is no ‘exceeds benchmark’ category for Grade 1⁵.

As expected, there is a strong relationship between ORF and reading comprehension. Figure 6 shows the performance of Grade 3 and 4 learners on written comprehension by each benchmark category. The chart on the left shows the performance of learners at the lower end of the distribution who scored below 25%, i.e. with poor comprehension. Among Grade 3 and 4 learners classified as non-readers, 86% scored below 25%, compared with just 7% of those who met the benchmark.

On the right-hand side of Figure 6, the proportion of learners who scored above 50% for written comprehension is shown for each benchmark category. Only 2% of non-readers scored above 50%, compared with 66% of learners who met the benchmark.

⁵ The reason for this is that once a learner reaches the Grade 1 letter-sound benchmark, the DBE finds no additional benefit in becoming faster. Learners are expected to move on to acquiring more complex skills in Grade 2, which is why the Grade 2 benchmarks focus on word reading. See DBE (2025b).

Figure 6: Written comprehension scores for Grade 3 and 4 learners by reading benchmark category



Source: DBE (2025b)

The results from FUNS are in no way surprising. If approximately 80% of South African Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning, it follows that most learners would not have developed foundational reading skills. Earlier research has already pointed to that gap. For example, a longitudinal study of 230 schools in the North West found that only 40% of Grade 1 learners knew the letters of the alphabet by the fourth term, with learners falling two to four years behind by the time they reach Grade 7 (Wills, Ardington and Sebaeng, 2022). However, a nationally representative dataset at this scale never existed. Even with the introduction of SASE, measurement remained focused on comprehension, with limited insight into the development of foundational reading skills early enough to enable timely intervention, before learners exit the foundation phase. **The value of the FUNS data therefore cannot be overstated; its collection represents a significant achievement by the DBE.**

SECTION 2

2. New findings on reading outcomes

Does access to Grade R and early grade repetition improve learning outcomes?

In advisory note 4, Heleen Hofmeyer uses data collected between 2022 and 2023 from a cohort of 440 learners. The learners were drawn from 75 no-fee, low-fee and mid-fee schools in the Western Cape and were assessed twice: at the beginning of Grade R and again one year later at the start of Grade 1⁶, using ELOM⁷. Hofmeyer found differences in developmental outcomes between schools at the start of grade R, with learners in mid-fee schools attaining higher average ELOM scores⁸. In addition, as shown in Figure 7, for learners starting at the same developmental level,

6 This note is based on a longitudinal study called Roots & Shoots. See Roots & Shoots (n.d.).

7 ELOM tests school readiness across five domains: gross motor development (GMD), fine motor coordination and visual motor integration (FMC-VMI), emergent numeracy and mathematics (ENM), cognition and executive function (CEF), and emergent literacy and language (ELL). Hofmeyer uses ELOM 4&5 for assessment at the beginning of Grade R and ELOM-R when learners are in Grade 1.

8 This is not surprising: The Thrive by Five Index – a nationally and provincially representative survey of preschool outcomes (four-year-olds) – finds that learners in better resourced early learning programmes are more likely to start school developmentally on track. See Giese et al. (2025).

the study found that the learning gains from attending Grade R differ by school type: 8.6 points for learners in no-fee schools (who make up the majority of South African learners), compared with 18.7 points for learners in mid-fee schools – more than double the gains. This suggests that the extent to which learners benefit from Grade R depends largely on their socio-economic circumstances. In other words, participation in Grade R does not guarantee similar learning progress across socio-economic settings.

In 2026, with Grade R made compulsory under the BELA Act, the system must confront these persistent early grade inequalities – which closely mirror those in the rest of the schooling system – if making Grade R compulsory is to have the intended impact. Hofmeyer concludes that while Grade R is an important component, it cannot address the inherent inequalities in developmental outcomes that are present from the onset or existing weaknesses in school quality. If Grade R is to make a meaningful contribution to better learning outcomes, it needs to be embedded in a system of earlier intervention and improved school quality.

For learners starting at the same developmental level, learning gains from attending Grade R differ by school type: 8.6 ELOM points for learners in no-fee schools compared with 18.7 ELOM points for learners in mid-fee schools – more than double the gains.

There are clear benefits to putting the right foundations in place as early as possible, given that early learning gains compound over time. However, this must be balanced against the risks of expanding the education system in ways that prioritise access over quality, particularly in the context of severe resource constraints. While recent public commitments⁹ to upskill Grade R practitioners are welcome, these efforts must contend with the realities of an already constrained schooling system. Despite the introduction of Grade R as compulsory schooling, projected spending on Grade R is expected to decline by 1% between 2025 and 2027 (Gustafsson, 2026). Unlike Grade R, the foundation phase¹⁰ has historically been relatively well funded. Introducing additional, underfunded or unfunded mandates risks adding further dysfunction, leading to minimal or unequal gains in learning outcomes. Moreover, this approach regards expanding the system as the solution, rather than addressing the long-standing underperformance in Grades 1-3. In this context, we strongly agree with the following statement by Hofmeyer in her background note:

“These patterns suggest that Grade R is shaped by the same institutional and resource constraints that characterise the rest of the schooling system. Where school quality is weak, an additional year of schooling is unlikely to produce substantially different results. This aligns with the argument advanced by Akkari (2022), who cautions against extending the existing system downward without first addressing its underlying capacity and quality constraints. In such contexts, expansion risks reproducing inequalities earlier rather than eliminating them.”

⁹ See DBE (2026).

¹⁰ Following the implementation of the BELA Act, Grade R is now part of the foundation phase; however, in this context, we are referring to the definition prior to Grade R being made compulsory, i.e. Grades 1-3.

Figure 7: Predicted learning gains during Grade R by school fee group



Source: Hofmeyer (2026)

The impact of early grade repetition: We covered the matter of grade repetition in the 2025 Background Report, but given its recent prominence in the media¹¹, it is worth revisiting. The current focus on grade repetition has its roots in an apparent¹² decision made by the Council of Education Ministers (CEM) in 2019 – but not yet implemented – to discontinue repetition in the foundation phase. In the Action Plan to 2029, the DBE adopts a more balanced position and indicates that a final decision has not been made. The DBE notes that any decision on early grade repetition would need to be carefully considered, taking into account the potential benefits of reduced class sizes and evidence of the learning gains associated with repetition (DBE, 2025a). Importantly, the DBE further notes that some of the challenges associated with repetition stem from broader systemic weaknesses, such as ineffective assessment practices, rather than repetition itself.

The Action Plan to 2029 draws on emerging evidence from Wills (2023). In analysing Grade 1-4 Setswana reading scores, Wills found some benefits to repeating Grade 1 and diminishing returns to repeating Grades 2 and 3. More recent analysis by Clayton using SA-SAMS data across six provinces provides further insight (Clayton, 2025)¹³. Clayton found that for learners in Grades 1 and 4 who are just below the promotion threshold, repetition has high effect sizes. Her findings reveal that Grade 1 learners whose marks were just below the threshold for repetition, performed better after repeating the grade than similar learners who just passed the grade. As shown in Figure 8, for repeating Grade 1, Clayton estimates gains in HL of 18.1 percentage points in Grade 2, 9.5 points in Grade 3, and 5.2 points in Grade 4. To put this into perspective, although not directly comparable, these gains are larger than some of our most effective reading interventions.

Grade 4 repetition increases Grade 5 HL performance by an estimated 11.1 percentage points, Grade 6 HL by 7.5 percentage points and Grade 7 HL by 6.3 percentage points. Clayton suggests that the substantial impact of Grade 1 repetition is likely due to the maturation of learners, which has a larger effect on Grade 1 learners than older learners. She also found that 95% of Grade 1 repeaters had failed their HL, with foundational literacy as the primary barrier to promotion.¹⁴ Test scores between repeaters and non-repeaters also narrowed as learners moved up in grades, indicating that repetition can improve learner results.

11 For example, see Pongweni (2025) and Govender (2026).

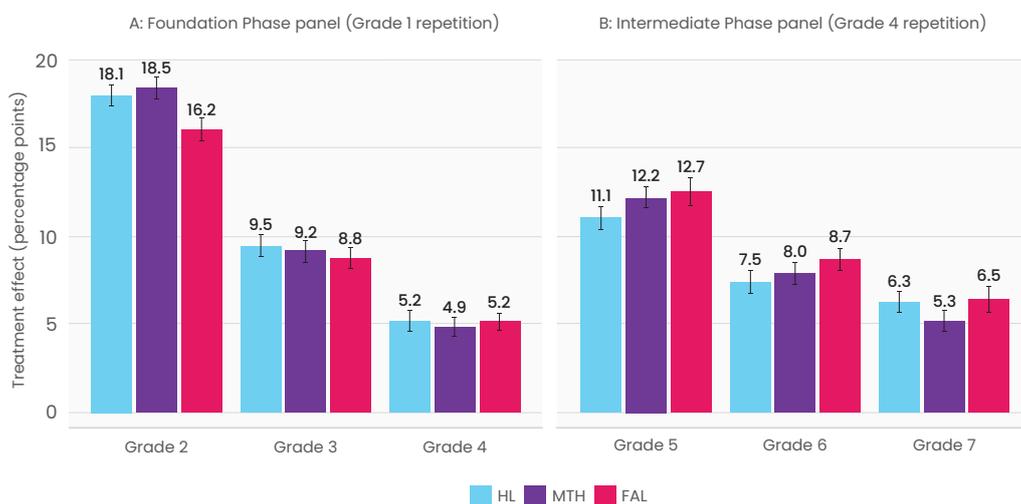
12 We could not find valid documents confirming this decision, but it is widely reported.

13 A summary is provided in advisory note 2.

14 In order to be promoted between grades 1-3, learners need to achieve at least 50% in HL, and at least 40% in FAL and Maths.

For learners who repeat Grade 1, Clayton (2025) estimates gains of up to 18.1 percentage points in HL. These are higher than some of our most effective reading interventions

Figure 8: Estimated effect of repetition on learner marks, by subject



Source: Clayton (2026)

Repetition, like many policies in South Africa, is undermined by weak implementation. This includes the assessments used to determine the need for repetition and the limited remediation measures once a learner has repeated a grade. As many as 8% of learners in the foundation phase repeat a grade more than once (Clayton, 2025), despite policy prohibiting repetition twice within the same phase (DBE, 2021). In addition, policy contemplates that progressed learners (learners who are moved to the next grade despite not meeting all the requirements for promotion) or learners who are likely to spend more than four years in a phase need support in order to progress (DBE, 2021).

There is currently no systemic remediation programme to address learner gaps. This is particularly concerning for HLs given the widespread weaknesses in foundational skills (as reflected in the FUNS results) and the central role of HL failure in early-grade repetition.

To echo the DBE, while these gains are large and encouraging, any potential benefits of repetition must be weighed against its high cost. In 2018, repetition was estimated to account for 8% (R20 billion)¹⁵ of the national budget allocated to basic education (van der Berg, 2019). Even with this high cost, what further complicates matters is that repetition is often used as the main form of remediation, in the absence of a systemic remediation programme or focused literacy intervention. However, to echo Clayton's conclusion, these large gains should not be interpreted as an endorsement of increased repetition, particularly given the costs and social impacts on learners. Wills (2023) makes four recommendations regarding repetition: 1) redirecting any savings from reduced repetition towards early-grade remediation programmes, 2) strengthening the quality of Grade R and early learning programmes to ensure learners enter Grade 1 with stronger language skills, 3) improving assessment practices to reduce misplaced repetition, and 4) developing longitudinal reading data to better understand the longer-term effects of repetition.

¹⁵ These costs are largely driven by secondary schools, with repetition rates historically significantly higher than primary schools. For example, in 2023, repetition rates were around 5% in primary schools, peaking at almost 15% in high schools. See DBE (2025h).

3. Proactive provinces

Four provinces are implementing large-scale, evidence-based reading interventions through consortium delivery models.

In 2026, four provinces will be implementing new, large-scale, multi-year interventions focused on the foundation phase. Together, these programmes mark a significant shift in the system, moving beyond small-scale pilots towards interventions designed for system-level impact. While the programmes differ in scope, sequencing and grade coverage, they share a common emphasis on evidence-based design, structured pedagogy, high-dosage teacher training aligned with materials, and defined minimum classroom inputs.

Eastern Cape: As part of its existing reading strategy, the Eastern Cape will implement Mabafunde Bonke, a Grade R-3 literacy programme, in 1 652 Quintile 1-3 schools, focused on isiXhosa and Sesotho (advisory note 10). Based on both historical neglect and current need, the province has prioritised four predominantly rural districts for initial implementation: Alfred Nzo East, Alfred Nzo West, OR Tambo Inland and OR Tambo Coastal. While the Eastern Cape has 12 districts in total, these four districts account for approximately 40% of all schools offering foundation phase education in the province. As in the other provinces, the programme centres on structured teacher training, supported by aligned lesson plans and a minimum package of classroom materials. Each teacher will receive two days of training per term over a two-year period. The rollout will take place in phases, with the programme introduced in two grades at a time. Implementation is starting in Grades 1 and 3 this year, followed by the addition of Grades R and 2 in 2027. Given the prevalence of multigrade schools in the province (estimated at 20%), the programme will include targeted support for multigrade classrooms. The total programme cost is R89 million, which translates to R465 per learner.

Free State: Between 2025 and 2030, the Free State is rolling out Operation Tharollo, a large-scale literacy and numeracy programme implemented across 433 Quintile 1-3 schools (advisory note 8). Operation Tharollo forms part of the province's existing reading and maths strategy. The two target languages (Sesotho and Afrikaans) are the two most widely used HLs in the province.

The intervention will reach approximately 89% of Grade R-3 learners who do not have English as a HL. The programme is officially starting this year with literacy in Grades R and 1 and will expand incrementally each year to include additional grades and subjects. For example, in 2027 the province will complete the second year of literacy training for Grades R and 1, introduce maths in Grades R and 1, and begin first-year literacy training for Grade 2 teachers. Operation Tharollo includes a structured package of teacher training, lesson plans and a minimum set of classroom materials. Each teacher will receive a total of 32 days of training – two days per term for each subject over a two-year period. As reported in 2025, the Free State currently collects Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) data from all Grade 3 learners and will continue to use these assessments to track improvements in learner performance over time. The total programme cost is R82.3 million, which translates to R724 per learner.

Gauteng: In 2026, Gauteng is introducing a Grade 3 programme aimed at strengthening foundational skills (advisory note 1). The intervention will be implemented in 588 schools and builds on the existing Language and Reading Improvement Programme and Mathematics Improvement Programme of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The first cohort of schools, totalling 394, will receive structured lesson plans, classroom materials and teacher training. The second cohort of

schools, which includes schools with more than one language of learning, teaching and assessment (LoLTA), will also receive these inputs as well as additional coaching support for departmental heads. Implementation will take place over three years. In the first year, the programme will focus on HLs, with teachers receiving three years of training. Maths will follow, with two years of training provided to teachers. EFAL will be introduced in the final year, with teachers receiving one year of training. Given that the GDE already runs programmes that provide an additional 30 minutes of instructional time for struggling learners, the province will leverage and strengthen these existing initiatives. Where programmes such as the Basic Education Employment Initiative and the Gauteng Youth Brigade are already in place, the province will prioritise their deployment in target schools and provide additional training for teaching assistants. While the funding initiative supporting the programme includes an external evaluation component, the GDE will continue to collect Grade 3 ORF data to monitor learner performance over time.¹⁶ The total programme cost for this intervention was unavailable at the time of writing this report.

Mpumalanga: In 2025, Mpumalanga launched a four-year Grade R intervention, the Mpumalanga Province Grade R Capacity Building Programme (MP-R), reaching all 965 Quintile 1-3 primary schools in the province (advisory note 6). The programme focuses on strengthening literacy, numeracy and school readiness, with the primary objective being to improve the quality of Grade R teaching at scale and to strengthen data-driven Grade R management across the system.¹⁷ Teachers receive one day of training each month jointly facilitated by change agents¹⁸ and provincial subject advisors.

Further support is provided through termly professional learning communities (PLCs) led by the change agents. If the change agents identify additional needs at these PLCs, they will also provide classroom-level coaching and implementation support. The total programme cost is R100 million, which equates to R500 per learner.

Notably, all these programmes are evidence-based and draw, to varying degrees, on the EGRS model. This includes the use of structured lesson plans, sustained teacher training, the implementation of a defined minimum package of classroom materials, and, in the case of Gauteng, coaching. The inclusion of a minimum package is particularly significant, as it addresses one of the most persistent constraints in the sector: uneven access to high-quality materials. All interventions are also embedded in existing reading or foundational learning plans and strategies, rather than being treated as standalone components.

Importantly, three of the programmes explicitly include Grade R¹⁹. This inclusion reflects both the growing evidence of the importance of early foundations and the recent legislative shift that makes Grade R part of compulsory schooling.

Finally, the programme draw on the long-standing expertise in early literacy from South African non-governmental organisations (NGOs).²⁰ This body of work demonstrates how deep content and pedagogical expertise developed outside the state can be used to support government to strengthen implementation, improve classroom practice and extend impact at scale. Increasingly, this expertise is being integrated into government-led programmes – not as parallel delivery, but as technical support to provinces in designing, adapting and executing their own foundational learning strategies at scale more effectively.

¹⁶ See Gauteng Department of Education (2025).

¹⁷ Implementing partners include Penreach, Wordworks, RED INK, and Trackosaurus. Funding partners include the Roger Federer Foundation, Get it Done Foundation and Thungela Resources.

¹⁸ Change agents are supplied by the implementing partners and trained in HL and maths content. In addition to training teachers alongside subject advisors, these agents provide ongoing support and coaching and monitor programme activities.

¹⁹ Gauteng already has a Grade R intervention that began in 2022 – see Spaul (2023).

²⁰ Implementing partners in the Eastern Cape, Free State and Gauteng include: Axiom education, Catholic Institute of Education, Funda Wande, Nelson Mandela Institute for Education and Rural Development, Olico Maths Education, RED INK, Room to Read, UCT Schools Development Unit, and Wordworks.

Table 2: Summary of the foundation phase interventions in the Eastern Cape and the Free State

	Eastern Cape (2025–2030)	Free State (2025–2030)
Focus	Home Language (isiXhosa and Sesotho)	Home Language and Maths (Sesotho and Afrikaans)
Grade	R-3	R-3
# learners	191 526	113 651
# teachers	5 473	3 557
# schools	1 652	433
Budget	R89 million (84% Float, 16% ECDoE)	R82.3 million (91% Float, 9% FSDoE)
Resources	Lesson plans and classroom materials (e.g. anthologies, posters, flashcards)	<p>Home Language</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Anthologies, big books and graded readers Teacher guides with structured lesson plans Concept guides as well as a teacher guides for parent meetings (Grade R) <p>Maths</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher guides with structured lesson plans and manipulatives
Teacher training	Two days of training per term for two years	Two days of training per subject per term for two years

Source: Xundu-Bula and Gwele (2026); Montso (2026)

Table 3: Summary of the foundation phase interventions in Gauteng and Mpumalanga

	Gauteng (2026–2028)	Mpumalanga (2025–2028)
Focus	Languages and Maths (isiZulu, Sepedi, Sesotho, Setswana and EFAL)	Home Language, Maths, and school readiness (physical, cognitive, social-emotional)
Grades	3	R
# learners	88 239	53 000
# teachers	2 153	1 957
#schools	588	965
Budget	Unavailable	R100 million ²¹

21 The Mpumalanga Department of Education and funding partners have secured R45 million in funding, which will cover the costs for 2025 and 2026.

	Gauteng (2026–2028)	Mpumalanga (2025–2028)
Resources	<p>Languages Teacher guides, Learner activity books and learner worksheets, NEEDU phonics programme lesson plans.²²</p> <p>Maths Teacher guides which include lesson plans</p>	<p>Digital</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Tablets for teachers • The school readiness component uses digital apps to support teacher development, track attendance and learner assessments.. • Maths and Language resources for teachers are being digitalised <p>Physical</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Play-based activity guides • Teacher manuals • Concept guides • Practical classroom resource kits for HL (e.g. gameboards, story packs incl. big books) and maths (e.g. posters and manipulatives) for all teachers
Teacher training	Two days of training per term for the first two years and then one day per term in the third year	One day of training once a month
Additional support	In 194 schools where there is more than one LoLTA, departmental heads receive coaching.	Two circuit-based Communities of Practice (CoPs) take place every quarter. In addition, classroom support visits are conducted by change agents on a needs basis.

Source: Bengtson et al. (2026); Mkhwanazi et al. (2026)

Lessons from the Western Cape: The Western Cape is currently the most advanced province in terms of large-scale implementation of foundation phase interventions, having begun this work in 2021. As outlined in advisory note 9, the province has introduced additional instructional time for literacy and maths in the foundation phase. Specifically, two additional hours per week in the foundation phase timetable have been allocated to HL and one additional hour to maths. Furthermore, Grade 3 learners in schools with isiXhosa as the LoLTA will receive an extra 30 minutes per week for a first additional language (FAL), reallocated from life skills. Life skills remains an important subject and is being taught in an integrated manner.

To strengthen foundational skills, the Western Cape has added two additional hours per week to HL instruction and one hour to maths, with the teaching of life skills integrated into foundation phase learning.

The key lesson from the Western Cape is that it is not simply about adding time, but also about embedding that time within the existing system in a strategic way. It is one thing to roll out a programme at scale and declare it part of the core curriculum; it is another to use system-level levers to genuinely institutionalise it and maximise its chances of success. The Western Cape provides an example of how integration can be operationalised, rather than treated as an add-on.

²² This includes the review and reformatting of existing LRIP/MIP materials.

The integration of life skills into HL instruction has its origins in COVID-19-era national directives.

In 2020, the DBE issued a circular on the implementation of annual teaching plans and minimum core content and skills, requiring life skills to be integrated into HL and allocating additional time to EFAL in Grade 3 (DBE, 2020b). In 2023, the DBE issued another circular that adjusted foundation phase time allocations to support curriculum recovery for 2023–2024 (DBE, 2023a). This allowed life skills to be reduced by up to three and a half hours per week, with the time reallocated to HL (two hours), maths (one hour) and FAL (30 minutes), on the assumption that life skills would be integrated into HL and maths.

In reviewing policy responses to learning losses, Hoadley (2020) supports extending the integration of life skills into HL past the COVID-19 learning recovery period. However, she cautions that this must be accompanied by clear guidance on how the additional time should be used. This concern is less pronounced in the Western Cape, where a structured learning programme that explicitly integrates life skills into HL instruction is already in place.

Finally, while the Western Cape is well known for its systemic assessments²³, these assessments only measure written comprehension. To ensure the system monitors progress much earlier on, the Western Cape will be introducing standardised baseline assessments to be conducted within the first 10 days of the school year as well as aspirational targets per grade. While the Western Cape already has an existing EGRA dashboard (see the example in advisory note 9), the province is also developing an app-based dashboard, which will consolidate the new baseline data and be used to monitor progress.

SECTION 4

4. The role of philanthropy

Philanthropic funding invested in evidence-based interventions can catalyse government impact.

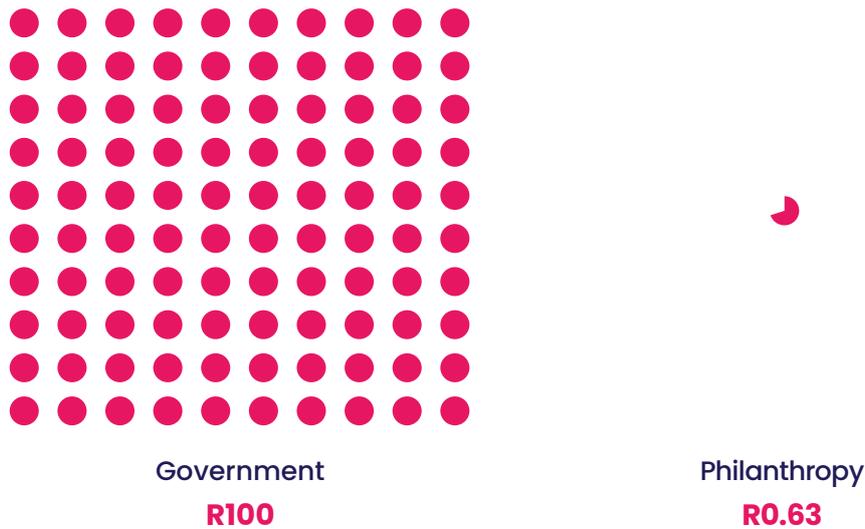
There is no single actor that can, or should, make a decision on behalf of funders about where they should invest to improve learning outcomes. However, because philanthropic investment in education initiatives is proportionately much smaller than government education spend, and because substantial, targeted investment is required to shift a system, any funder serious about impact must work with the state and align its investments with both evidence-based and government programmes.

In 2025, corporate responsibility consultancy Trialogue reported that CSI spending on education amounted to R5.8 billion. Of this, only R2.2 billion (around 38%) was directed towards basic education (Triologue, 2025). Compared with public spending on education in 2025 (R347 billion)²⁴, this is marginal: For every R100 the government spent on basic education, philanthropy contributed approximately R0.63.

²³ See Western Cape Education Department (2025).

²⁴ See National Treasury (2025).

Figure 8: Spending on basic education in 2025 – government expenditure versus philanthropic contributions



Source: own calculations using *Triologue (2025)*, *National Treasury (2025)*

Yet philanthropic funding is not insignificant. Over the next three years, a new funding collaborative called Float is expected to reach approximately 390 000 learners²⁵ across three provinces, representing 40% of grade R-3 learners²⁶ in those provinces²⁷. Float (advisory note 3) is a collaborative funding mechanism that was established to support provincial and national efforts to improve foundational literacy and numeracy in the foundation phase. The partnership brings together multiple philanthropic funders²⁸ to combine resources in support of evidence-based interventions that are embedded within provincial education plans, rather than operating as standalone projects. Float works in close collaboration with provincial education departments to co-design and co-fund interventions implemented at a province-wide or multi-district scale, reaching large numbers of schools, teachers and learners, instead of implementing limited or short-term pilots. As of 2025/26, Float is supporting large-scale foundation phase interventions across three provinces (the Eastern Cape, the Free State and Gauteng), collectively reaching 2 673 schools and 11 137 foundation phase teachers. In addition, Float is supporting national government in strengthening the Grade R curriculum and developing a national cohort of Grade R master trainers to support rollout. By pooling funding and technical support, Float seeks to reduce fragmentation in the early grade literacy and numeracy landscape and to enable provinces to implement interventions at scale, while generating lessons to inform longer-term system integration and sustainability.

Collectively, Float-supported interventions will reach approximately 40% of Grade R-3 learners across three provinces, with coverage in Gauteng limited to Grade 3.

²⁵ Float (2026).

²⁶ Gauteng, we only include Grade 3 learners as part of the calculation as the intervention only targets them.

²⁷ The percentage is based on our own calculations using DBE (2025c) as source.

²⁸ The Float funders include the Cyril Ramaphosa Foundation, FEM Education Foundation, Gates Foundation, Kagiso Trust, Optima, Prevail Fund, Standard Bank Tutuwa Community Foundation and Zenex Foundation. See Float (n.d.).

While Float’s footprint is limited in absolute terms, its value lies in leverage rather than scale. The 2030 Reading Panel previously described the use of philanthropic funding as “using private funds to influence government spending”. **In the context of Float, a more precise framing is that philanthropic capital can be used to catalyse government impact, which can, in turn, enable reforms to advance further, faster and with greater coherence than public systems can manage alone.**

Outside of Float, there are other concrete examples of the effectiveness of this approach in South Africa. In fact, some of the most significant advances in foundational learning over the past decade have come from government-led initiatives supported by external technical and philanthropic partners, most notably the EGRS and FUNS. In both cases, the DBE set the agenda and retained ownership while partnerships enabled implementation and support.

A recent report on government-led education research from What Works Hub for Global Education reinforces this lesson (Alsofrom, Mnqayi and Vorster, 2025). It shows that when government leads, evidence is more likely to shape policy, inform implementation and influence practice at system level. Importantly, these initiatives have not only strengthened the national and international evidence base – they have also shifted attention decisively towards the foundation phase, highlighting both the constraints that limit reform and the practical solutions that make progress possible within these constraints.

SECTION 5

5. Systemic opportunities

The current review of teacher education programmes has the potential to improve reading outcomes on a system-wide scale.

The CHE is conducting a national review of ITE qualifications (BEd and PGCE) across all phases. All higher education institutions (both public and private) that offer ITE qualifications are required to participate in this national review. The review, which is detailed in advisory note 5, commenced in 2024 and will be completed in 2027.

The review responds to a growing body of evidence²⁹ pointing to persistent weaknesses in teacher content knowledge and pedagogy as well as limited emphasis on literacy development and effective teaching practice within university programmes.

In advisory note 5, the authors state the following:

“Together, these findings highlight systemic risks in mathematics, literacy, and early grade pedagogy. While not all institutions are implicated, the persistence of these weaknesses suggests insufficient alignment with the constitutional imperative to secure literacy and numeracy outcomes for all learners. Other concerns include uneven content depth across specialisations, credit allocations, responsiveness to priorities such as climate change and inclusive education, digitalisation, and unequal implementation of teaching practice.”

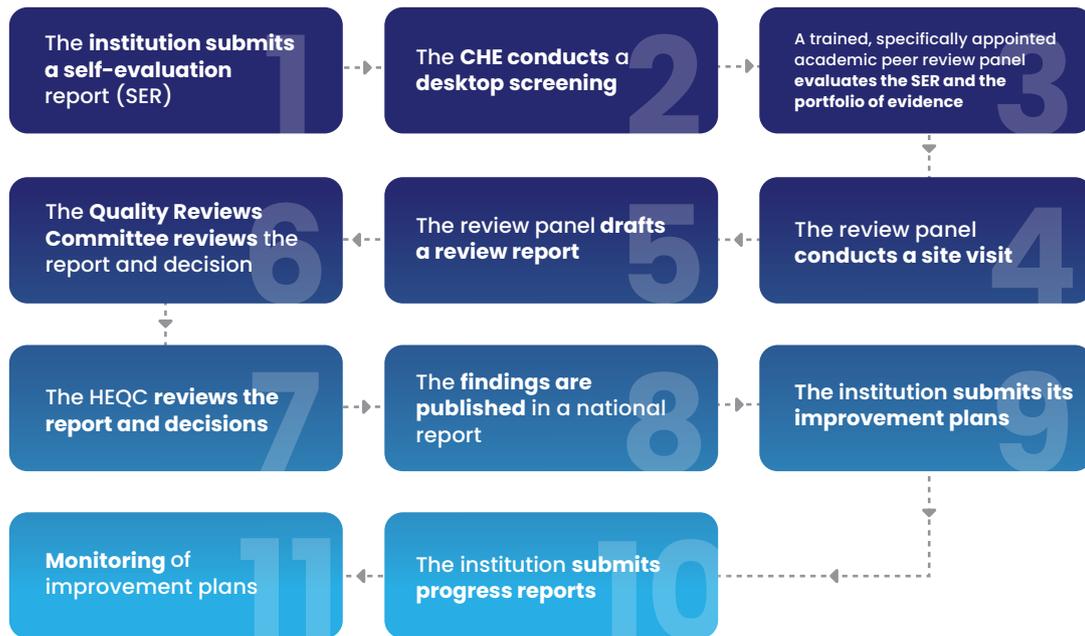
The last time the CHE reviewed teacher education qualifications was in 2005. Of the 81 programmes reviewed, about a quarter received conditional accreditation following the review; just under a quarter of the total were placed in danger of losing their accreditation (Council on Higher Education, 2010).

²⁹ See Reed (2020), Bowie, Venkat and Askew (2019) and DBE (2024).

The review requires institutions to submit self-evaluation reports, a process that is already underway, followed by peer reviews and verification through site visits. Review outcomes fall into three broad categories: 1) confirmation of alignment with qualification standards, 2) identification of areas of strength, and 3) identification of areas requiring improvement, accompanied by a monitored improvement plan. While the objective of the review is to support programme development, the CHE has indicated that persistent misalignment or failure to address identified weaknesses could result in the withdrawal of programme accreditation.

The diagram in Figure 9 illustrates the review process.

Figure 9: Overview of the CHE national review process



Source: Mathey (2026)

In terms of supporting improved programmes that address the quality of teachers produced by universities, the review has three foci: 1) evaluating whether the programmes adequately prepare graduates to teach reading and writing effectively, 2) assessing the integration of reading pedagogy and language development strategies (phonics, comprehension strategies and multilingual approaches) into curricula, and 3) prioritising improvement plans that include literacy teaching competencies.

In addition, the review will focus on the quality of teacher practice placements, which must be “formally arranged, structured, supervised, and credit-bearing, with explicit alignment to graduate attributes – including literacy pedagogy in authentic, diverse classroom contexts”.

This is a significant development in the sector that addresses one of the most important levers for change – placing quality, well-prepared teachers in the system.

Although teacher deployments broadly follow equity and language needs, they may still fall short of offsetting looming retirement pressures.

In our recent reporting, we tracked three related teacher provisioning problems in the system: 1) the scale of looming teacher retirements³⁰, 2) the fact that the provinces facing the most significant

³⁰ See Teacher Demographic Dividend Project (n.d.).

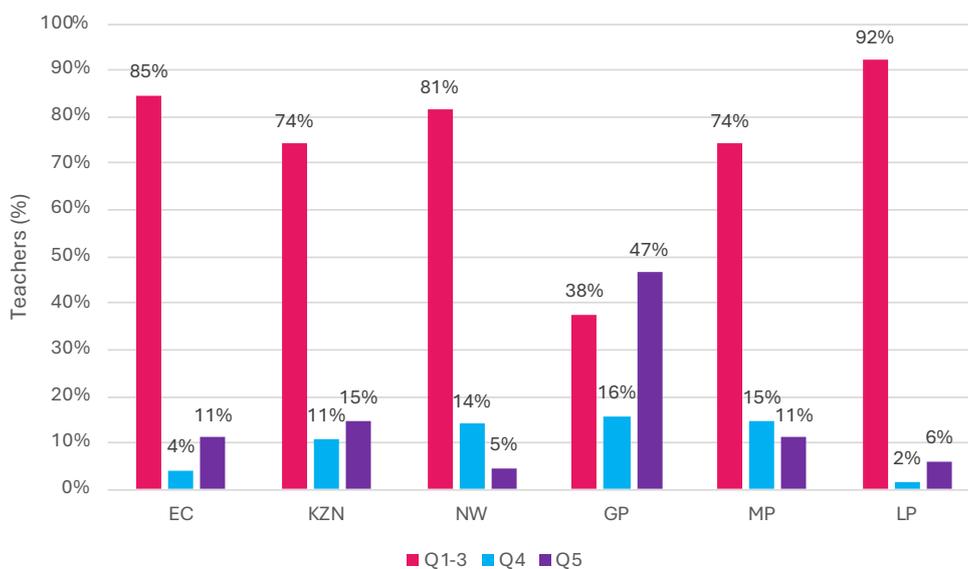
retirement pressures also tend to have some of the largest class sizes³¹, and 3) the challenge of assigning the appropriate teachers to the appropriate classrooms by specialisation and by language when new posts are added (Gustafsson, 2025). New analysis by Moses (2025) draws on the Master List of Schools for 2022 (quarter 3) and the 2023 Data Driven Districts dataset across six provinces: the Eastern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Gauteng, Mpumalanga and Limpopo. The analysis confirms the scale of the retirement risk: Across these six provinces, 54% of primary school teachers and 37% of secondary school teachers were 50 or older in 2022, meaning they will become eligible for retirement in 2027.

Against this backdrop, the 2023 deployment patterns are mostly encouraging from an equity perspective. Quintile 1-3 schools have the biggest need for new teachers, as these schools face the highest proportion of teacher retirements. Quintile 1-3 primary schools in the Eastern Cape, North West and Limpopo received roughly 80-90% of new provincial deployments. Gauteng is a clear exception, with only 38% of newly deployed primary teachers going to Quintile 1-3 schools, while 47% went to Quintile 5 schools (see Figure 10).

The deployment patterns also align with language needs at a provincial level. For example, 69% of newly deployed primary school teachers in the Eastern Cape report isiXhosa as their HL and 79% in KwaZulu-Natal report isiZulu. In all six provinces, teachers who speak African languages as their HL were predominantly deployed to Quintile 1-3 schools, while Quintile 5 schools were more likely to receive newly deployed teachers with English or Afrikaans as their HL.

Overall, Moses concludes that the 2023 deployments broadly reflected equity considerations, with most new teachers placed in poorer schools and in provinces facing larger staffing pressures. Yet he points out one unresolved question: whether the scale of deployment is sufficient to offset retirements and learner growth. In addition, it is unclear whether deployments match the numbers required by specialisation and by language at the school-level.

Figure 10: Newly deployed primary school teachers in 2023, by province and quintile (percent of provincial totals)



Source: Moses (2025)

31 See Böhmer and Gustafsson (2023); Wills (2023).

6. National promises

Even though public announcements continue to emphasise foundational literacy, concrete plans are lacking.

“Our message is simple: Reading is non-negotiable, and the foundation phase is where the battle for equity and excellence must be won.”³²

Table 4 provides an overview of the status of reading based on documents from the sixth (2019-2024) and seventh (2024-2029) administrations. In the sixth administration’s plans, reading was a clearly articulated national priority. All major strategy documents – including the MTSF, the DBE Strategic Plan and the Action Plan to 2024 – were aligned around improving early grade reading³³. The MTSF defined the targeted outcome as “10-year-old learners enrolled in publicly funded schools read for meaning” (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020). The MTSF went further by identifying specific interventions that support this outcome, including the rollout of structured lesson plans, graded readers, teacher coaching and professional development for teaching reading and numeracy (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2020). Similarly, the DBE’s Action Plan to 2024 placed reading at the centre of the system, with the first goal defined as increasing the number of Grade 3, 6 and 9 learners who master minimum language and numeracy competencies by the end of the school year (DBE, 2020a).

These commitments did not, however, translate into the rollout of a DBE-led national reading intervention. In fact, this period was marked by the absence of a publicly available national reading plan. Nevertheless, the coherence across policy documents helped shift reading from a rhetorical priority to a documented one, shaping the broader direction of the sector. By the end of 2024, all provinces had developed provincial reading plans and many Annual Performance Plans (APPs) included targets relating to training teachers in reading methodologies.

In the current administration period, there is cause for concern. While foundational literacy still features in policy language, it has been subsumed under broader initiatives. In the MTDP³⁴ 2024-2029, reading is no longer framed as a standalone priority; instead, it falls under the broader outcome of “improved education outcomes and skills” (Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation, 2025). While the main text continues to reference the prioritisation of lesson plans, graded readers and coaching, the only target outcomes and indicators that are explicitly specified is an increase in the proportion of learners performing above the evolving level, as measured through SASE. In terms of intervention, the document focuses on the continued provision of mother-tongue HL workbooks in the foundation phase, with the baseline, midline, and targets for the period all set at 100%. There is no reference to the introduction of new workbooks. At best, this could be interpreted as an intention to update or improve existing workbooks. Even under this generous reading it is a push to interpret this as a new intervention. Rather, it appears to signal the continuation of an existing input that, while necessary, is insufficient to drive the scale of reform required.

The Action Plan to 2029 further states, under a section on system weaknesses, that the DBE will progressively implement MTbBE to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, alongside the “rollout

³² See DBE (2025e).

³³ See Department of Planning, Monitoring and Evaluation (2020), DBE (2020c) and DBE (2020a).

³⁴ The MTDP has replaced the MTSF.

of lesson plans, reading books, and other interventions that have been proven to work” (DBE, 2025a). The plan also introduces performance targets linked to improvements in SASE and PIRLS as measures of progress in reading outcomes. Furthermore, the plan repeats the same Grade 3 literacy goal as the previous plan, in alignment with the minister’s priority areas.

The boundaries between foundational reading in Grades R-3 and MTbBE have become blurred, despite each requiring distinct planning, sequencing and implementation. This distortion is most evident in the DBE’s 2025/26 APP “problem and solution analysis”, shown in Table 5. While the identification of poor literacy and numeracy outcomes among African language learners is accurate, the framing of the root cause as primarily being the language transition in Grade 4 is incomplete. As acknowledged elsewhere in DBE documentation, the deeper issue is that many learners do not acquire strong reading foundations in their HL in Grades R-3, despite being taught in that language. This does not render the proposed MTbBE interventions incorrect, but it does make them insufficient on their own. While a component of MTbBE is mother tongue-based reading literacy (MTbRL) which is focused on reading in the early grades, the Action Plan itself clarifies that MTbBE is, at least initially, focused on extending the use of African languages as LoLTAs in Grades 4-7 through a bilingual approach. Overall, improving reading outcomes in the foundation phase does not emerge as a clear priority within this framework. In addition, the perception of the “root cause” being present in Grade 4 only suggests that getting the foundations right earlier is not yet the central organising concern.

Table 4: Excerpt from the DBE APP 2025/26 problem and solution analysis

Problem	Root cause	Solution	Intervention	Outcome
Poor learning outcomes of African learners in literacy and numeracy	Learners being taught and assessed in a language that is not their mother tongue/ familiar language beyond Grade 3	MTbBE strategy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Relevant resources (LTSM) • Teacher Development • Amend and implement MTbBE policy • Strengthen the NIMP and MST Strategy to be aligned with MTbBE Strategy 	Improved learning outcomes

Source: DBE (2025f)

Taken together, this raises a broader caution. While foundation phase reading, and MTbBE are complementary, each requires its own detailed plan for meaningful integration to occur. Without detailed plans, interventions will be expected to solve problems they were never designed to address. Although this report should not be read as a literal account of everything the DBE is doing to improve or believes will improve literacy outcomes, it does point to a mismatch between stated priorities and the design and implementation of plans. Without sharper diagnosis and clearer planning, the system risks expending effort without achieving the intended gains in reading outcomes.

It is reasonable to expect the recently released South African National Literacy Strategy and Plan to address some of these challenges. While the strategy rightly affirms the goal that “all children should read for meaning in any language by Grade 4”, details regarding the implementation of the plan remain vague (DBE, 2023b). Its first stated target is the development of “an unambiguous policy statement setting out a national literacy strategy and mechanisms for strategy implementation”, which suggests that the document itself is a precursor to a more substantive plan

that is still to come. Although it references important elements such as improved teacher training and the provision of age-appropriate materials, it stops short of setting out the concrete actions, sequencing, accountability mechanisms and budget alignment required to support provinces at scale.

As reflected in the quote from the minister at the beginning of this section, public statements and speeches continue to emphasise foundational literacy as a priority – and this is echoed in the headline goals of the Action Plan to 2029. However, if these commitments are not backed by concrete plans, the disconnect between public announcements and future implementation will persist.

Table 5: Status of reading as captured in policy documents from the sixth and seventh administrations

Policy document	Sixth administration (2019–2024)	Seventh administration (2024–2029)
MTSF/MTDP	<p>Reading is a core outcome Reading for meaning by age 10 is an explicit outcome: “10-year-old learners enrolled in publicly funded schools read for meaning”.</p> <p>Interventions and targets</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Roll-out of best practices such as lesson plans, graded reading books and individualised coaching of teachers • All Grade 1-3 HL teachers to have lesson plans • All foundation phase teachers to be trained in teaching reading and numeracy • All schools to receive EGRA toolkits • All provinces to implement the national reading plan 	<p>Reading is downgraded in the framing Reading is incorporated into a broader outcome (“Improved education outcomes and skills”), rather than being a stand-alone priority.</p> <p>The MTDP 2024-2029 does mention continuing earlier interventions (lesson plans, graded readers and teacher coaching) to ensure all learners read for meaning by Grade 4. However, the only measured intervention in the plan is the provision of foundation phase HL workbooks, with both the baseline and midline targets at 100%. This implies maintaining the existing workbook distribution, i.e. no new reading programmes or expanded targets.</p>
DBE Strategic Plan	<p>The plan does not have a strong focus on reading. However, it does align with the MTSF’s outcome on reading and the president’s call for all 10-year-olds to read for meaning.</p> <p>In addition, it sets a target for the distribution of graded readers to all Grade 3 learners and a specific proportion of Grade 3 learners reaching the required competency levels in reading and numeracy.</p> <p>Reading is also listed as a CEM priority.</p>	<p>The DBE Strategic Plan 2025-2030 reiterates the importance of foundational literacy but couches it within a new approach. It words its commitment as follows: “The Department will be progressively implementing mother tongue-based bilingual education to improve literacy and numeracy outcomes, and rolling out lesson plans, reading books and other interventions that have been proven to work”.</p> <p>The plan further states that the DBE’s implementation of MTbBE includes the mother tongue-based reading literacy programme for early childhood development to Grade 3.</p> <p>The plan sets outcome targets tied to improved reading scores – for example, a 20-point improvement in reading results from SASE and a 20-point improvement in Grade 4 PIRLS results by the next cycle.</p>
DBE Action Plan	<p>Contains a specific goal on Grade 3 reading The Action Plan to 2024 (released in 2020) made early literacy its first goal: “Goal 1: Increase the number of learners in Grade 3 who, by the end of the year, have mastered the minimum language and numeracy competencies for Grade 3”.</p>	<p>Continued emphasis on goals The new Action Plan to 2029 retains Goal 1 on Grade 3 literacy and numeracy as a priority, emphasising its alignment with priorities announced by the minister.</p>

Source: DPME (2024), (2025); DBE (2020a), (2020c), (2025a) (2025g)

7. 2022–2026: How far have we come?

When the 2030 Reading Panel was established, it was in response to the presidential injunction that, within the next decade, all Grade 4 learners should be able to read for meaning (SONA, 2019). This ambition aligned with the National Development Plan goal of 90% of learners mastering grade-level competencies by 2030. Irrespective of whether we look at the results from PIRLS or SASE, it is clear that we are far from these targets.

Truth be told, these goals were overly optimistic from the outset. Education systems do not shift that quickly. But they shift even more slowly in the absence of deliberate interventions that accelerate learning gains. The experience of Sobral, a small municipality in Brazil that has exhibited some of the largest learning gains, shows that even in a relatively small system, achieving universal reading comprehension can take more than 20 years (Cruz and Loureiro, 2020)³⁵. The lesson, however, is not only one of caution or about how slowly systems improve – it also illustrates what is possible with targeted intervention.

When we began reporting on reading in 2022, there was very little in place by way of interventions that could credibly improve learning outcomes at scale. Although South Africa already had a strong body of local evidence on what works to improve reading, the national reading plan at the time was unpublished and fragmented, and it only became public following a media request³⁶. Notably, it failed to incorporate many of the interventions supported by the evidence. Provinces were implementing various initiatives to support teachers and provide classroom resources; however, none matched the scale and rigour of the Gauteng Primary Literacy and Mathematics Strategy – a large-scale teacher coaching intervention that reached nearly 1 000 schools before ending in 2014.

In the years that followed, this began to change. Through the updated national foundation phase catalogue, the DBE is now developing a minimum, standardised resource package for the foundation phase (advisory note 7). As reported in 2025, the DBE issued a call in June 2024 for proposals to update the catalogue, setting out a minimum package of resources: teacher guides, graded readers, big books and classroom materials (friezes, flashcards, posters and handwriting charts). The updated catalogue is expected to be ready for provincial procurement from the 2026/27 financial year. Provinces will have the option of centralised procurement to leverage economies of scale. Based on past experience, the DBE suggests that centralised procurement could reduce costs by up to 50%, making it a potentially cost-effective approach. If clear guidance and accountability measures ensure that provinces and schools procure the full package, rather than cherry-picking items, this could be a significant step towards sustainably resourcing all foundation phase classrooms through the existing National Norms and Standards for School Funding.

To strengthen reading in African languages, the DBE, together with NEEDU, has developed a structured phonics programme (letter-sound relationships, blending and word-building), which has been incorporated into the revised ATPs. In partnership with the NECT, the DBE is also implementing the NHLRP – a structured pedagogy initiative that provides lesson plans, teacher guides and learning and teaching support material (LTSM). The programme integrates the phonics

³⁵ Sobral is a municipality in the state of Ceará in Brazil. In 2001, 40% of Grade 3 learners in the area were unable to read a single word. Less than 20 years later, over 80% of Grade 3s could read for meaning, and the municipality continues to maintain almost universal literacy rates. Although Sobral is a small municipality comprising only 34 primary schools, the interventions were scaled to the state of Ceará, where there are 3 558 primary schools. As a result, Ceará has registered some of the largest increases in education quality nationally: 10 of its municipalities rank in the top 20 in Brazil and some outperform the average private school in São Paulo.

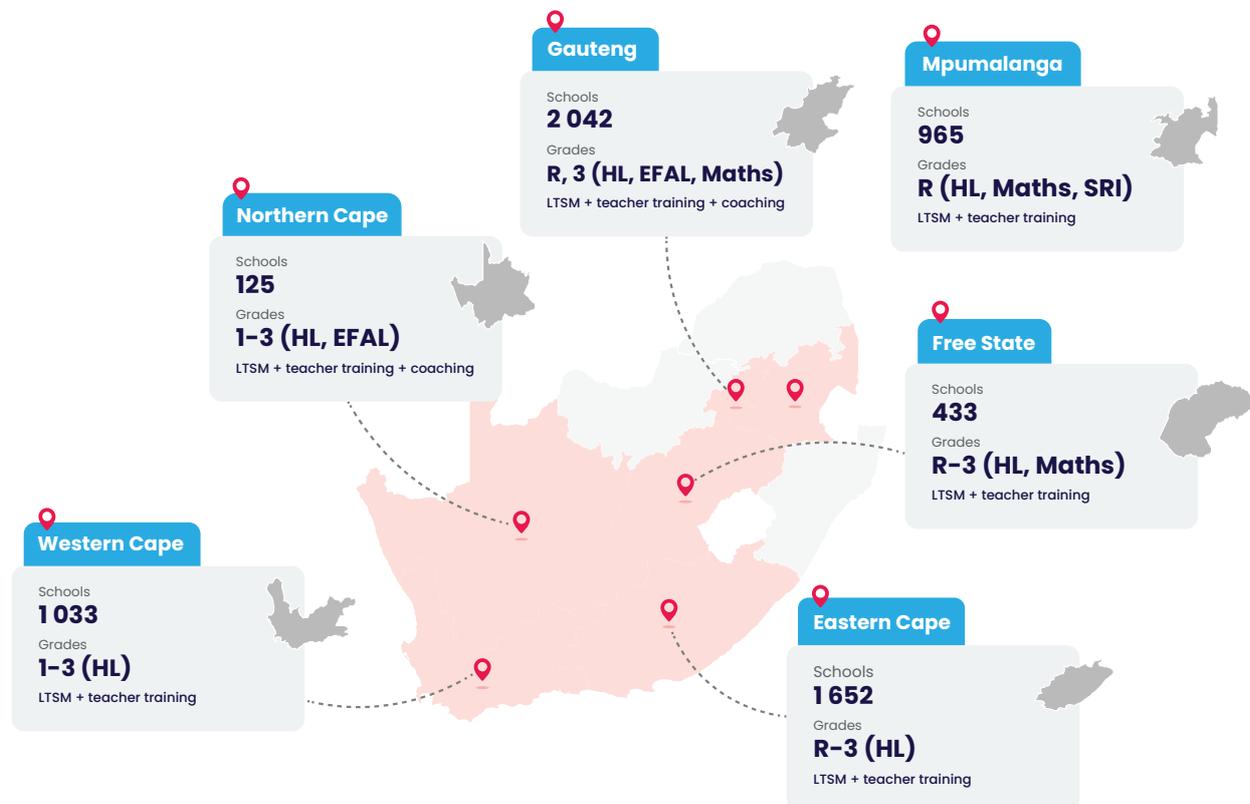
³⁶ See Knoetze and Human (2023).

approach to ensure coherence and is currently being piloted with 5 000 teachers across eight provinces, with training and support provided through subject advisors and district coordinators.

In Phase 5 of the BEEI, the DBE made a strategic decision to prioritise the foundation phase, appointing more than 57 000 Reading Champions – double the number of the previous cohort – across all 75 districts. Training was coordinated nationally to provide all assistants with baseline orientation and role-appropriate training; however, delivery varied across provinces and districts. Training was delivered in person and/or virtually, with support from NGO partners. It focused on reading activities, reading manuals, reading pedagogy and reading promotion. Language and literacy training was strengthened by including HL in addition to EFAL. We do not have full sight of the training that the Reading Champions received or the support they provided to learners in classrooms. However, the initiative is encouraging, as evidence³⁷ suggests that placing well-trained youth in classrooms, supported by a structured programme, can drive substantial gains in learning outcomes. In addition, the scale of the BEEI creates an opportunity for a truly large-scale intervention, with the potential to reach every school offering foundation phase education.

In terms of provincial initiatives, six provinces are now implementing some combination of early grade reading interventions (see Figure 11). This is not to suggest that these developments are attributable to the 2030 Reading Panel but rather that they reflect a broader shift across the sector. It also does not imply that the remaining three provinces are inactive. Instead, the distinction is that these six provinces are rolling out a coherent basket of evidence-based interventions at scale. Table 6 provides a summary of additional interventions that have been implemented since 2022. These are being implemented in partnership with specialist NGOs and are funded through a combination of government and philanthropic resources.

Figure 11: Provinces currently implementing at-scale foundation phase reading interventions



37 See Ardington, (2024)

We also know more about what works to improve reading outcomes. South African interventions with the most significant impact on reading outcomes generally fall into one of three categories: (1) LTSM, including workbooks and graded readers combined with aligned teacher guides and training on how to use these resources, (2) using unemployed youth as teaching assistants, and (3) teacher coaching³⁸. While the EGRS has been running since 2015 and is widely understood to have had a positive impact on the treatment group, new iterations and further data analysis continue to provide rich evidence for the sector. Using EGRS data, Mohohlwane et al. (2023) demonstrate that interventions in learners' HL also have a positive impact on their second-language proficiency, indicating that decoding and other foundational skills are best taught in HLs. Furthermore, by tracking learner data from Grades 1 to 7, Stern et al. (2024) found long-term impacts in areas targeted by the EGRS, namely Setswana ORF and Setswana written comprehension, as well as in English written comprehension. Additionally, learners from the treatment group were nine percentage points less likely to repeat a grade as they progress to Grade 7.

Given existing provincial and national commitments, what else should we expect from national government? Over 90% of education budgets sit with provincial governments. Since the DBE controls only about 10% of total education expenditure³⁹, it often raises the question of what role the department can realistically play. The answer is not a matter of opinion; in fact, it is set out clearly in the DBE's own action plan. Firstly, the DBE has a central responsibility to provide sound pedagogical guidance to educators, particularly in the foundation phase. This includes using mechanisms such as "CAPS [Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements], guidelines and circulars, strategic documents, learning materials, research outputs, and advocacy campaigns that clearly signal what works best". Secondly, the DBE must strengthen its partnership with the DHET on ITE to ensure an appropriate mix of language competencies and specialisations. This is especially important in light of the current review being conducted by the CHE. The production of higher quality teachers must also translate into teachers with the correct specialisation in the correct language being placed at schools. Finally, the DBE, working alongside National Treasury, has a critical role to play in reviewing funding policies that shape how resources are distributed across the system, including achieving the right balance between primary and secondary schooling and across school quintiles. In terms of the foundation phase, as the DBE itself notes, "it is arguably in the earliest grades that the educational cost of excessive class sizes is highest".

We know that some of these areas are being investigated by the minister's newly formed National Education and Training Council (NETC)⁴⁰. One of the priorities of the NETC is to advise on the expansion of access to quality foundational learning through a support package for every foundation phase classroom, which could be translated into national policy. This package includes core LTSM, sufficient time for learning in classrooms, appropriate and effective assessment and intervention, and stronger integration and coherence across the sector.

38 See Ardington (2024), Ardington & Spaul (2022), Taylor et al. (2025)

39 Based on the 2025/2026 Budget

40 The NETC was established by the minister as an advisory body and will review four areas: 1) the school resourcing model, 2) assessment, promotion and progression requirements, 3) reducing the administrative burden on teachers, and 4) expanding access to quality foundational learning. See DBE (2025d).

Through the NETC, the minister is exploring a minimum support package for all foundation phase classrooms, covering core learning materials, teacher training, instructional time for reading and maths, and appropriate assessment, with a view to formalising this in national policy.

It is encouraging to hear the minister speak of these elements as a package that will be translated into policy, as these areas cannot be pursued as separate or parallel workstreams, despite the recent, encouraging developments from the DBE. Without a coherent national plan or policy that explicitly links pedagogy, teacher preparation and resource allocation to a shared diagnosis of the constraints in early grade reading, these efforts risk remaining fragmented, shallow or internally contradictory. In this context, a national plan is therefore not an added layer of bureaucracy; rather, it is a mechanism through which existing mandates, budgets and reforms can be aligned, prioritised and driven towards sustained improvement in early grade reading outcomes.

Table 6: Overview of the scope of existing provincial interventions since 2022 not covered in this report

	Gauteng	Northern Cape	Western Cape
# schools	2 042	125	1033
# teachers	4 500	894	9521
# learners	130 000	32 317	298 983
Grades	R	1-3	1-3
Languages	All HLs	Setswana, EFAL ⁴¹	Afrikaans, isiXhosa, English
Materials	<p>Teachers: Training materials (workbooks for teachers) and classroom resources (concept guides, activity guides, facilitators' guides, slide presentation packs with videos, puppets, sequence cards, big books, game cards, maths kits)</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers: Termly scripted lesson plans, termly teacher guides graded for Setswana HL and EFAL Learners/classrooms: Alphabet friezes, phonic and conversation posters, flashcards (phonics, sight words and theme vocabulary words), big books, anthologies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teachers: Quarterly teacher guides; Grade 1 Big Books; eClassrooms via an interactive poster with additional resources for Afrikaans HL. Learners: quarterly learner activity books; anthologies for isiXhosa and Afrikaans learners; decodable graded readers for all Afrikaans, English and IsiXhosa HL classes (Grade 1 - 3) and Jolly Phonics workbooks for all Grades 1 & 2 English LoLT classes.

41 In phase 2, additional schools and languages will be added to the intervention.

	Gauteng	Northern Cape	Western Cape
Training	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers: 11 monthly face-to-face training sessions on Saturdays (eight hours) and one day during holidays, additional training for departmental heads once per term in the form of a two-hour online information session in the afternoon • Subject advisors: Five days of face-to-face block training, termly face-to-face training session on Saturdays (eight hours) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers: Quarterly training and individual, onsite coaching support from external coaches on a weekly or biweekly basis • Subject advisors: Subject advisors will form part of the support structure that enables strengthening of teacher and coach training 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teachers: 4-day in-person training in October; Termly online training; 10-day deep training at CTLI for selected teachers. • Subject Advisors: Four days face-to-face dry run for block training; Ongoing training through SA development sessions, Curriculum Strengthening Forums, Ongoing online training sessions.
Will it be evaluated?	Yes	Yes	WC systemics and the new standardised oral reading fluency benchmarks will be used to track progress.
Funding	80% donor, 20% provincial department	100% donor	100% WC

SECTION 8

8. Recommendations

A coherent national plan is more critical than ever to sustain the progress being made on a provincial level.

Since 2022, political commitments to early grade reading have strengthened and provinces have begun rolling out tangible, evidence-based interventions at meaningful scale. This momentum marks a clear turning point. Six provinces are now implementing evidence-based interventions that include a defined minimum package of learning materials for learners.

The release of the FUNS data also represents an important advance as it introduces new national assessments at the primary school level, albeit not yet universal. Beyond the data itself, the FUNS tools have also strengthened existing provincial assessment systems⁴². One of the most significant recent developments, however, is the CHE's review of ITE programmes. Given its scope and focus, this review has the potential to meaningfully improve the preparation of new teachers, particularly for foundation phase literacy.

The 2030 Reading Panel's main recommendations remain largely unchanged. That said, the need for a coherent national plan to improve foundational learning outcomes has become more urgent than ever. The panel has called for such a plan in successive reports. In light of the recent, encouraging developments in the sector, the absence of a national framework is no longer a background concern – it is a binding constraint on coherent progress. Without a national plan that links diagnosis, priorities and system levers, national and provincial efforts risk remaining fragmented and uneven.

⁴² In the 2024 Background Report, we covered primary school assessments that are being implemented in four provinces – the Western Cape, Gauteng, the Free State and the Eastern Cape.

Reading needs to be restored as a standalone national priority. Since many of the documents reviewed here will only be updated by the eighth administration, there is an opportunity to re-establish reading as a priority and to clarify what interventions are required to bring about reform through a comprehensive national reading plan. From 2027, the recommendation to “move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful funding to reading resources and interventions” should be refined to call for a national plan that is either allocated a meaningful budget or wherein implementation mechanisms and funding are clearly specified.

We have adjusted our status rating for clarity and measure progress using the following four categories:

- **No progress:** No material progress has been made toward the recommendation.
- **Notable progress:** There have been noteworthy developments, but these are still limited relative to what the recommendation requires.
- **Significant Progress:** Significant progress has been made toward meeting the recommendation, though it is not yet fully achieved.
- **Complete:** The recommendation has been fully implemented (completed as intended)

Table 7: Overview of the 2030 Reading Panel's recommendations

Recommendations (2022-date)	Status	Comment
National: Measure what matters by implementing a universal, standardised assessment of reading proficiency at a primary school level	Notable progress	Currently, the only national assessment is SASE, which replaced the Annual National Assessments (discontinued in 2014). SASE, however, has several limitations. The results of the first assessment (conducted in 2021) were presented two years after initial data collection – a significant delay that rendered any system-level response impossible. Furthermore, only a sample of schools participated and the assessment is planned for every 3-4 years only. Lastly, the next iteration of SASE should have been implemented in 2025, but it was not. We do, however, recognise the collection of FUNS data and the use of DBE benchmarks for reporting are both unprecedented and important advances in our understanding of reading outcomes. The development of these tools also represents meaningful progress towards supporting more consistent data collection at a provincial level. Nevertheless, as FUNS is sample-based, it does not meet the criteria of a universal assessment.
Provincial: Measure what matters by implementing a universal, standardised assessment of reading proficiency at a primary school level	Notable progress	Three provinces – the Western Cape, the Free State and Gauteng – have allocated significant resources to learner assessments in primary schools. In addition, the Eastern Cape is piloting a set of assessments that would be representative at a school level.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Recommendations (2022-date)	Status	Comment
National: Move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful budgets to reading resources and interventions, instead of simply discussing these	No progress	Although the 2025 State of the Nation Address included renewed promises to roll out lesson plans and provide reading materials, the 2025/26 Budget did not include any new significant national budgets for reading programmes or reading resources. The upcoming 2026/7 Budget will be very telling in this regard.
Provincial: Move on from slogans to budgets by allocating meaningful budgets to reading resources and interventions, instead of simply discussing these	Notable progress	Six provinces are now implementing some form of reading intervention at scale. The Western Cape Department of Education intervention is 100% funded by the province. Gauteng, Eastern Cape and Free State are co-funding interventions alongside donor groups.
National: Provide a standard, minimum set of reading resources to all foundation phase classrooms (Grades R-3) as a matter of urgency	No progress	We note that the DBE has included a minimum set of LTSM in the Foundation Phase catalogue. However, finalisation of the catalogue has already been delayed, and it remains unclear what mechanisms will be used to ensure provinces procure the full package, rather than only selected elements. This target will be updated to “notable progress” once the catalogue is published
Provincial: Provide a standard, minimum set of reading resources to all foundation phase classrooms (Grades R-3) as a matter of urgency	Notable Progress	From 2026, six provinces will be providing a minimum pack of materials to learners in the foundation phase. A large part of this, however, relies on donor funding, which means sustainability plans will be key to ensuring the packs stay in the system and continue to be funded.
National: Conduct an audit of pre-service teacher education programmes at universities	Significant Progress	The audit, conducted by the CHE, is underway and should be completed in 2027.

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