

Literacy crisis deepening in South Africa, says new report

By [James Stent](#)

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Children are far behind in learning to read and it is getting worse.



Image by Lisa Nelson

Fewer primary school children can read for meaning now than before the Covid pandemic, and most children entering Grade 2 do not know the alphabet. But despite a literacy crisis, there is no national reading plan, no proper budget, no accurate reporting, and no progress on implementing vital interventions.

The results of the [2023 Background Report for the 2030 Reading Panel](#), written by leading education economist Nic Spaull, released Tuesday, show a country going backwards in the fundamental unit of education: literacy.

The [2030 Reading Panel](#) is a group of leaders and researchers convened by former Deputy President Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka to ensure that all children in South Africa aged ten or older can read for meaning by 2030. The report finds that “nothing short of a sustained countrywide overhaul of the education system would be likely to yield this result”.

Extrapolating from Western Cape data, the report estimates that the share of Grade 4 children that cannot read for meaning has increased to at least 82%, from 78% recorded in 2016.

The report finds that about 60% of children have not learned most of the letters of the alphabet by the end of Grade 1, citing data from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), which has followed children from over 200 schools for more than seven years in the North West province.

By the end of Grade 2, over 30% still don't know all the letters of the alphabet. The report finds that these children are "perpetually behind and in 'catch-up' mode, although they never actually catch up".

What is being done to ensure that literacy is put first? Frighteningly little, says the report.

The most visible national reading programme is the Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) Educator Assistant Program. In 2023, nearly 30,000 Educator Assistants (EAs) are to be "Reading Champions" focused on improving reading for foundation phase learners. The report notes this with some scepticism, since the only requirements to enter are very low - 30% in matric and fluency in the home language of the school - and the Reading Champions will have no face-to-face training or be submitted to a selection process.

Nationally, the DBE is not giving the reading for meaning crisis-specific attention. Despite claims to the contrary from the DBE, the report finds that there is no National Reading Plan, and that the most recent "National Reading Strategy" was published in 2008.

In the 2022 Education Budget Vote, the budget specifically allocated for reading is R11-million to the Early Grade Reading Assessment. This targets 18 schools. The DBE only managed to reach nine schools.

Some hopeful signs

There are some sparks of hope in two provinces, the Western Cape and Gauteng.

In the Western Cape, the provincial government has chosen Funda Wandé, an education NGO, as a partner to roll out a province-wide Reading for Meaning program in all Afrikaans and isiXhosa schools in the province. Over the next three years, the Western Cape Education Department will fully fund the R111-million program.

In Gauteng, the provincial Department of Education is working with WordWorks, also an education NGO, to implement a Grade R program in all schools. The three-year R107-million budget is 80% funded by a consortium of donors, with the remaining 20% coming from the provincial budget.

While the Eastern Cape Department of Education recently launched its Reading Strategy & Campaign 2022 – 2030, it has not provided any budget for these programs.

The report estimates that South Africa will take until 2026 to return to 2016 levels of improvement, without immediate intervention.

The report identifies two types of interventions which have shown excellent results in smaller trials. One is the use of a teacher coach who visits teachers in their classroom. The other is employing Educator Assistants who are trained and given enough resources to teach reading. The Educator Assistants in the PYEI program are not trained or specially resourced.

But interventions are scarce. Almost no progress has been made to bring effect to the Panel's four recommendations from last year: to assess reading at every school in the country annually; to allocate new national budgets for reading programs or reading resources (only the Western Cape has done so); to give all Foundation Phase classrooms a standard minimum set of reading resources (only done in the Western Cape and Gauteng); and to audit teacher education programs before

graduates enter the workplace.

“The problem is not about lacking an evidence base on how to improve reading outcomes, but rather the political economy issues of why adequate funding for reading interventions has not been forthcoming,” says the report.

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