

# Promoting literacy with a National Reading Sector Strategy

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The Department of Basic Education (DBE) developed a National Reading Sector Strategy in 2015 to provide a framework for promoting reading and improving literacy levels in South Africa.



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However, subsequent events like the impact of the Covid pandemic on teaching and learning, and the 2021 PIRLS results that demonstrated a 3% drop in reading for meaning scores in Grade 4 learners since 2016, have necessitated the sector to reconsider its original strategy.

Since February 2023, the DBE has embarked on a consultative process to critically review the National Reading Sector Strategy with a specific focus on African home languages. The National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT) has supported the DBE in this initiative as it remains convinced that the country's best chance at improving reading for meaning scores in primary schools, is to develop long-term solutions and actions based on continuous support and engagements with all role-payers and stakeholders.

To date, the NECT has supported the DBE with several important collaborations to review the National Reading Sector Strategy.

## Reading Retreat

Representatives from government, labour, civil society, and academia convened in April 2023 for a two-day facilitated reading retreat. The aim of this retreat was to critically reflect on the original strategy, on its implementation successes and challenges, and on ways to bolster the strategy based on emerging reading literacy trends and realities.

The NECT recognises the many important reading initiatives the DBE has championed since 2015, for example the Primary School Reading Improvement Programme (PSRIP), the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS), the National Framework for African languages, and the development of reading benchmarks for African languages, to name but a few.

The NECT also acknowledges the DBE's openness to reflect on gaps in the original strategy and in its implementation. For example, the 10 strands included in the original strategy proved cumbersome; implementation was fragmented and lacking in coherence as well as coordination across provinces; issues related to teacher education were muted in the strategy; and non-negotiables concerning how reading should be taught and resourced were not made explicit.

Agreement was reached that priority needed to be given to improving the teaching of African languages on a large scale in the early and emerging phases (ECD and Foundation Phase). It was also agreed that issues relating to reading policy, teacher professional development, reading resources and community engagement should be foregrounded in a revised strategy as the central strands.

## Reading Literacy Dialogues

After the reading retreat and the launch of the 2021 PIRLS results in May 2023, the NECT initiated a multi-layered Reading Literacy Dialogue series that included some 10 dialogues held at provincial and national levels. The NECT created opportunities for deliberations around the PIRLS findings and the implications for reading improvement in South Africa.



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The dialogues provided stakeholders at all levels with a platform to navigate challenges and solutions to improve reading. They fostered a deeper understanding of the complex factors that contribute to reading success, and how these factors vary across different contexts. The identification of promising practices and innovative approaches for improving reading instruction and promoting literacy were also foregrounded in the dialogues. The voices of teachers were strongly represented throughout the dialogues where over 400 teachers shared valuable insights and raised important issues concerning reading and literacy instruction from a practical perspective.

The series culminated in June 2023 with a national Reading and Literacy Dialogue convened in Pretoria in the presence of the Minister of Basic Education. Over 150 participants representing government, teachers, social partners, civil society, and academia debated issues relating to improving reading literacy in South African schools and communities.

Commissions were convened for in-depth discussion on the following: reading literacy policy and programming; assessment, monitoring and evaluation; LTSM provision; parent and community engagement; and teacher preparation, training, and development. Agreement was reached on how commission discussions would filter through to the National Reading Sector Strategy review process.



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The national dialogue ended with a Declaration that recognised the role that international and local assessments play in highlighting gaps in reading literacy, especially in African home languages. It also acknowledged the centrality of reading literacy in knowledge acquisition and the importance of reading for meaning. The need for a dedicated commitment towards adopting innovative methods to enhance reading proficiency was also recognised. Concrete action steps were identified to be taken forward as the review process continues.

Dialogue participants welcomed the engagement opportunities created by the NECT and committed themselves to further participation and input in the review and finalisation of a strengthened strategy to improve reading and literacy outcomes.

### Development of Reading Plans

A three-day facilitated process was convened mid-June 2023 to unpack the vision of the reading strategy and to develop concrete reading plans. Agreement was reached on the vision for a Revised National Reading Sector Strategy (2024-2030) namely that, South African children can read for meaning at age 10. This vision is supported by the statement 'South African children accessing quality, culturally relevant and age-appropriate materials in classrooms, libraries and community through exposure to pedagogically sound reading practices, in all South African languages, that inculcate reading for pleasure, meaning and lifelong learning'.

Outcomes, actions, risks, and mitigations were developed for the following strategic intents: South Africa has a national reading policy; teachers are highly skilled and equipped to teach reading; children read culturally relevant and age-appropriate materials; and parents and communities are fully engaging in supporting children's reading development.



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It was also agreed that for the Revised National Reading Sector Strategy to be fully comprehensive, the following cross-cutting enablers needed to be included: research, monitoring and evaluation to be conducted across all strands; partnerships to be expanded and encouraged on teacher training, materials development, and community engagement; and ongoing communication and advocacy to take place in relation to reading for meaning both inside and outside of classrooms.

It must be acknowledged that discussions that led to the development of the plans were not without contested areas. The NECT recommends that more debate takes place around how phonic awareness and phonics instruction embedded in the science of reading is relevant in relation to reading instruction in African home languages.

### Way Forward

The collaborative process plays a crucial role in strategy development, in that it brings together diverse perspectives, knowledge, and expertise to create a more effective and robust reading strategy fit for the South African context. Whilst the strategy revision is still unfolding; it is important for the DBE to acknowledge the ongoing nature of the process and communicate transparently about it to role-players and stakeholders.

By openly acknowledging the strategy revision process, seeking stakeholder input, and by maintaining transparent communication, trust will be fostered. This will ensure that the final strategy reflects a comprehensive and well-informed

approach that meets the needs of all parties involved. The NECT undertakes to support the DBE in this important endeavour.

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Godwin Khosa is the Chief Executive Officer of the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT). The NECT was formed in July 2013 as a response to the call by the National Development Plan (NDP) for increased collaboration among stakeholders to improve educational outcomes.

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