

SA's children have lost a decade of reading progress, study shows

International study confirms that eight out of 10 Grade 4 learners still can't read for meaning...

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An international literacy study has confirmed that 81% of South Africa's Grade 4 children could not read for meaning in any language in 2021, almost exactly the same proportion as in 2011. This means that a decade of slow progress in reading has been wiped out.

The child literacy rate observed by the Progress on International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) in 2011 was 82%. In 2016, the figure was 78%.

Learning losses associated with the Covid-19 pandemic are the main reason for the slide backwards since 2011. But a research paper published to coincide with the PIRLS results has shown that the Department of Basic Education has done almost nothing to help children catch up on lost time. Viewfinder and GroundUp also [revealed](#) last week that the Department's National Reading Plan, which it has touted in Parliament as a success, is actually a serious failure from a planning, implementation and monitoring perspective.

More than 12,000 South African learners from 321 schools participated in the 2021 round of PIRLS. The study is conducted every five years. Of the 57 countries and regions that participated, South Africa performed the worst.

Professor Nic Spaull, an education economist from Stellenbosch University and a member of the Reading Panel 2030 set up to monitor reading interventions, hosted a briefing on the results a few hours after they were published on Tuesday. He pointed out that South Africa was two to five years behind other middle-income countries, such as Jordan, Egypt, Iran and Brazil.

The results, Spauld said, were indicative of a wider “generational catastrophe” for more than four million primary school children whose schooling had been disrupted by the pandemic.

“Research on school closures from natural disasters like earthquakes in Pakistan and the Ebola crisis in West Africa all show that there are long term consequences to short term crises. These include lower educational attainment, lower earnings, higher unemployment, and being more likely to be in lower skilled occupations in adulthood,” he said.

Also at the briefing was Professor Ursula Hoadley from the University of Cape Town’s Education Department. Hoadley’s most recent paper, published on Tuesday, mapped out learning losses in public schools. She criticised the DBE for a “business as usual” approach, noting that there are no nationally coordinated programmes or attempts to recoup class time and learning losses. One notable exception is in the Western Cape where the provincial Department of Education recently launched its R1.2-billion #BackOnTrack campaign.

Hoadley’s paper showed that learning losses associated with the pandemic were worst for learners in South Africa’s poorest provinces and communities, deepening education inequality in the country. These findings were mirrored in the PIRLS results, which showed that learners in Afrikaans language and English language schools experienced no decline in reading outcomes when compared to the previous five-year cycle of the study which ended in 2016. In comparison, African language schools showed significant declines.

Universal literacy for ten-year-olds is one of the top five goals in President Cyril Ramaphosa’s Medium Term Strategic Framework for addressing poverty, inequality and unemployment.

The DBE is the department tasked by the President to put policy interventions in place and with guiding the provinces in a nationally coordinated program. Viewfinder and GroundUp last week published findings based on exclusive access to the Department’s National Reading Plan and progress reports. These documents showed there is no “massive reading campaign” underway in South Africa, as promised by the President during his State of the Nation Address in 2019.

The department has blamed the Covid-19 pandemic for its failure to properly implement the plan.

Ahead of the PIRLS results launch, we requested comment from the Department’s spokesman Elijah Mhlanga. He responded saying that our reporting was “faulty” and directed us to attend the Department’s seminar on reading literacy, which was scheduled to coincide with the PIRLS launch. He did not respond to our follow-up query about which aspects of Viewfinder and GroundUp’s reporting he found to be faulty.

At the seminar, Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga gave the opening address.

“We are finalising our revised National Reading Plan to address the gaps in our approach,” she said.

“Our plan will ensure further provision of minimum learning and teaching support material especially designed to support reading ... The plan will expand the implementation of more direct and targeted training and support. The primary focus will be on home language literacy as children need to learn to read in a language that they understand,” said Motshekga.

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