

Foundation phase crucial for improved literacy levels

Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga says the solution to improved literacy levels in South Africa lies in improving work in the foundation phase.



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The follows the release of the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) Results on Tuesday.

“The 2016 PIRLS results, are lower than what we had expected. The score of the Grade 4 learners is significantly below the PIRLS centre point of 500; while 78% of the Grade 4 learners, were unable to reach the lowest benchmark,” said Minister Motshekga.

The study measured literacy rates between 2011 and 2016 and saw South African learners come last in the study.

Results show dismal performance and efficiency in reading by Grade 4 learners, the grade considered the most crucial for learners. It is from this grade when learners begin to use reading to learn in other subjects.

The Minister said the results are of particular concern because the attainment of an improved and quality education system rests on the shoulders of the early grades that set the foundation for higher grades.

Illiteracy at this point, is compounded by the transition of some learners who use home languages and have to transition to using English in Grade 4.

Reflections of the 2016 PIRLS Report include:

- More than 60% of the learners who participated in the 2016 PIRLS, came from rural schools. This is poignant when considering the dearth of literature in the Home Languages dominant in such areas;
- The highest performing test languages for Grade 4 learners were English (with 372 points) and Afrikaans (with 369 points); and the lowest were isiXhosa (with 283 points) and Sepedi (with 276 points);
- The Grade 4 learners in 2016, achieved a similar score to what the Grade 5 learners achieved in 2006;
- There has been a statistically significant improvement among Grade 4 learners in five African languages, namely, IsiNdebele, Sepedi, Sesotho, Tshivenda, and Xitsonga; in 2016, a significantly larger number of Grade 4 learners, who wrote the test in Sesotho, scored above the minimum benchmark than observed in 2011;
- Grade 4 and 5 learners in schools with libraries, obtained higher mean scores, than those in schools without libraries;
- 49% of the Grade 5 learners were unable to reach the lowest benchmark, compared to 4% internationally;
- There was a significant improvement in Grade 5 scores for English and Afrikaans, but a much significant improvement for isiZulu between 2006 and 2016;
- In both Grades 4 and 5, the scores of girl-learners, were better than boys with each test cycle; and the gap is widening; and
- The performance of second language learners at schools where English is the language of instruction, is improving significantly.

Initiatives to improve learning

The Department of Basic Education (DBE) said it has several initiatives to improve the situation, these include:

- The incremental introduction of African Languages in early Grades;
- Introduce English First Additional Language in the Foundation Phase,
- Promote initiatives on English across the curriculum; and
- Increase access and quality for the girl child

Annually, as part of the “Read to Lead Campaign”, the department hosts the National Spelling Bee South Africa, which targets Grade 4 to 6 learners. It is aimed at improving learners' performance in languages, especially in English.

The department also plans to focus on learners who have the potential to improve their scores to above 400 points.

This will positively influence the results even further in the next PIRLS cycle.

The department said the profile of reading comprehension at this level, will assist the sector to identify areas where basic reading skills can be improved.

If the areas are identified, there is potential to improve the country's results in the next PIRLS cycle.