

Funda Uphumelele **POLICY SUMMARY**



basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA



Read to Lead

A Reading Nation is a Leading Nation



Background

Over the past seven years, the DBE has led the development of reading benchmarks in all 11 official spoken languages. These benchmarks specify the foundational reading skills that children need to acquire by the ends of grades 1, 2 and 3 in order to be on track to read with comprehension by grade 4. Teams of linguists and data analysts worked together to develop benchmarks specific to each language, taking into account the different language features.

The DBE plans to use these benchmarks to mobilise change at three levels of the system:

National and Provincial Administration	Mid-tier support (Districts and School Management)	Classrooms
Defines reading proficiency (benchmarks)	Use standardised tools to assess reading across schools	Standard against which to measure reading skills
Communicates benchmarks and targets	Identify schools and classrooms needing support	Identify early on learners at risk of not learning to read
Monitor progress	Provide targeted support to schools and teachers	Adapt instruction to learner needs

Now, for the first time, the Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) measures the percentages of children reaching these critical reading benchmarks by the end of grade 1, 2 and 3. FUNS assessed 27 838 learners across 710 schools and is representative nationally, provincially and of every language.

This is the primary aspect of this work however there are three aspects in total, namely:

- A national survey to measure reading against Foundation Phase national benchmarks in Grade 1-4 in all 11 official spoken languages (FUNS)
- The development of a new battery of benchmark-aligned assessments (FURS)
- Research on the Teaching of Reading in African Languages (TRIAL)

Results

In Grade 1, only 31% of learners achieved the Home Language Reading Benchmark, defined as 40 correct letter sounds per minute across all languages. In Grades 2 and 3, just over 30% of learners met their respective Home Language Reading Benchmarks, which vary by language group and are based on oral reading fluency measured in words correct per minute.

By the end of grade 3, there are still 15% of learners who cannot read a single word.

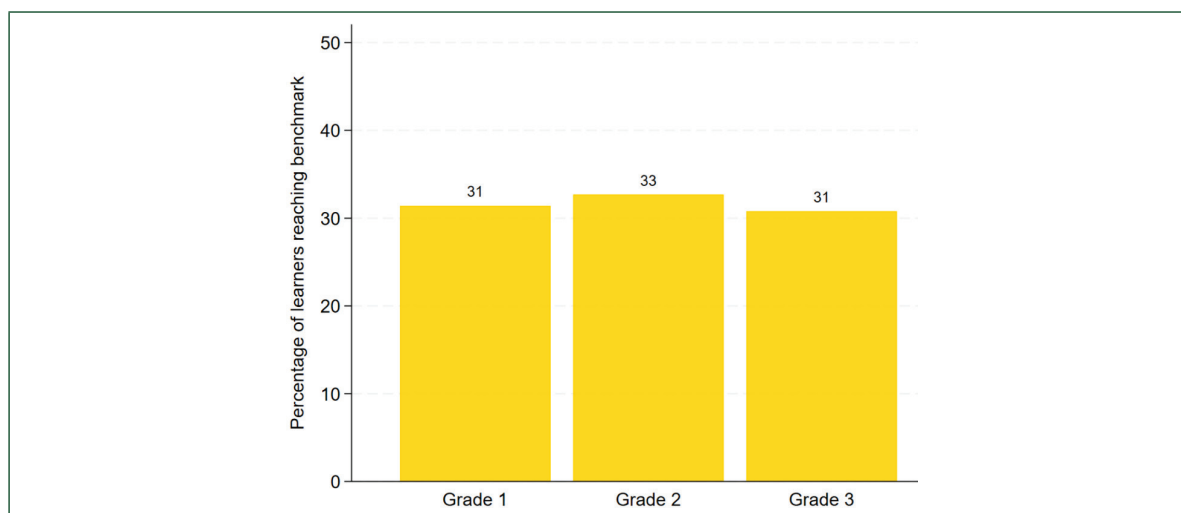
There are significant inequalities in the likelihood of reaching benchmarks by language, province, gender and socio-economic status.

Learners assessed in English were most likely to reach benchmarks, as were learners in the Western Cape and Gauteng compared to other provinces. However, these advantages are largely attributable to the higher average socio-economic status of these groups.

Children in quintile 5 schools are roughly twice as likely to reach reading benchmarks than children in no-fee schools (quintile 1-3).

Gender gaps are also exceptionally large in favour of girls – in some languages girls are twice as likely to reach the benchmarks than boys. These inequalities in early learning are certainly contributing to the disparities we see later on in the system, where boys are more likely to drop out of school without completing secondary education.

Figure 1: Percentage of learners reaching Home Language Benchmarks

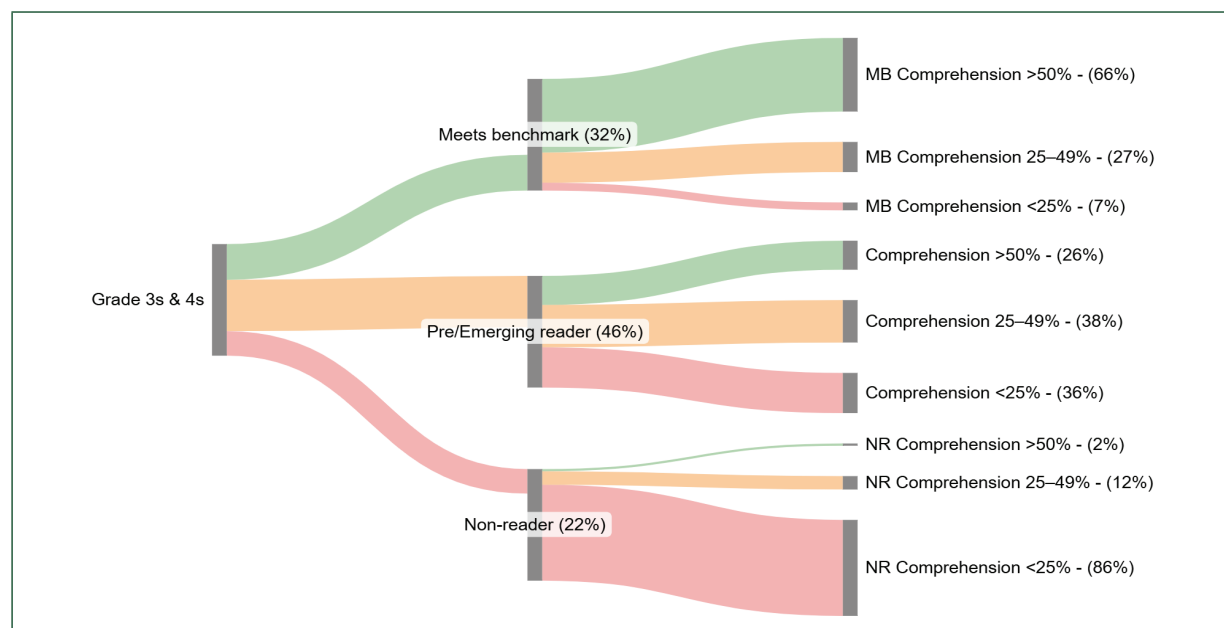


The FUNS data reveals a strong relationship between mastering foundational reading skills and the all-important outcome of reading comprehension. The Sankey diagram below shows the percentages of all Grade 3 and 4 learners who meet the fluency benchmark, who are in a pre- or emerging reader phase, or who are non-readers. Each of these three categories is then split into another three categories based on their performance in written comprehension. For learners who met the benchmark in oral reading fluency, 66% also scored above 50% in written comprehension, while only 7% scored below 25%. The opposite pattern is evident for non-readers at the bottom of the diagram: 86% of non-readers scored below 25% in comprehension, and only 2% managed to achieve more than 50%. This diagram visually confirms the importance of meeting oral reading fluency benchmarks in order to go on to read with comprehension.

Oral language skills, such as vocabulary and morphological awareness, also matter for reading comprehension. Most learners bring relatively strong vocabulary and morphological awareness in their home language. This is why the child's home language is an important resource when learning the foundational skills of reading and writing.

The Funda Uphumelele project is an example of collaboration and investment in our indigenous African languages, which have historically been neglected. The assessment instruments were developed by 25 linguists from 11 universities working across all 11 languages. The Zenex Foundation, FEM Foundation, UNICEF, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, Old Mutual Foundation, Optima Foundation, the World Bank, and the Michael & Susan Dell Foundation all invested significantly in our local languages and in foundational learning.

Figure 2: Relationship between ORF category and written comprehension



Implications for the sector

These results collectively suggest that the learning challenges typically identified in the intermediate phase (e.g. PIRLS and the South African Systemic Evaluation) emerge earlier. This highlights the need to scale up evidence-based interventions to support learners in acquiring home language reading skills in Grades 1 to 3.

The first round of FUNS is a baseline, with the intention to administer subsequent rounds in 2029 and beyond. This will allow us to track progress in the foundational skills that will lead to improvements in assessments of comprehension later on.