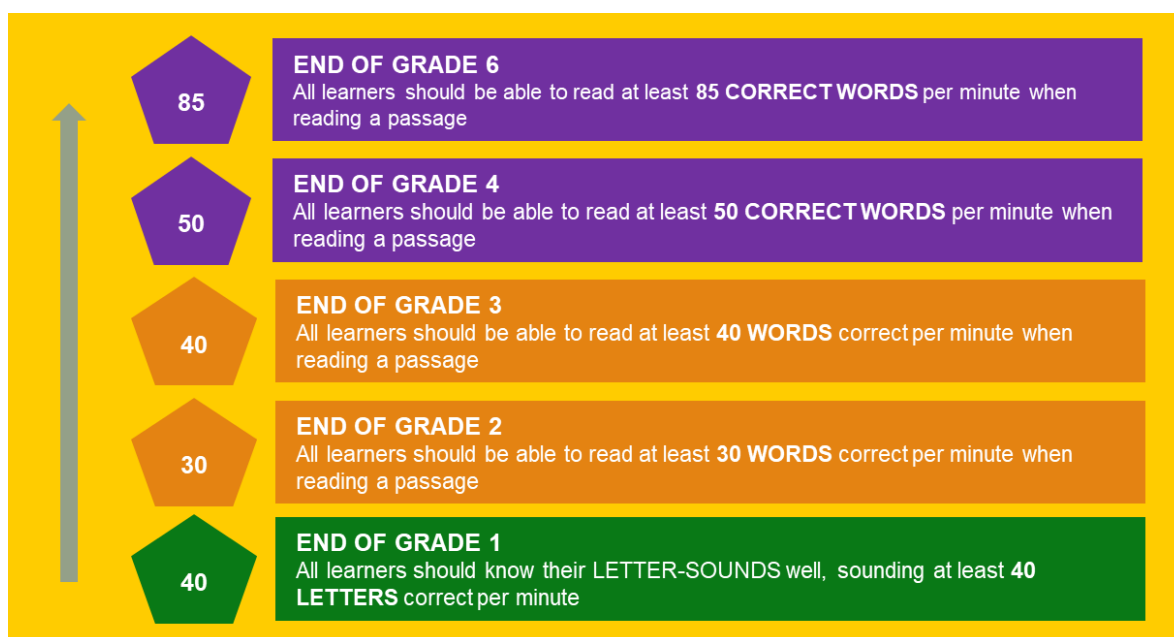# XITSONGA READING BENCHMARK

LEARNING BRIEF
2023

By the end of the Foundation Phase learners are expected to 'read fluently and with understanding.' To monitor if children are on track to meet that goal in the Foundation Phase, specific numerical measures of proficiency in specific reading skills are needed. These measures of proficiency are referred to as reading benchmarks.

Until recently reading benchmarks did not exist for South African languages including the Xitsonga language. While the African Home language Curriculum Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) curriculum for the Foundation Phase specifies levels of accuracy and fluency for reading and comprehension, they did not provide the metrics for measuring this according to specific skills. Recent work led by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in collaboration with African language specialists, quantitative analysis, academics and reading practitioners, funders and international benchmarking specialists has bridged this gap, producing reading benchmarks for the Foundation Phase.

How fluently must Xitsonga Home Language learners in the Foundation Phase read to be able to "comprehend"?

85 — **END OF GRADE 6**
All learners should be able to read at least **85 CORRECT WORDS** per minute when reading a passage

50 — **END OF GRADE 4**
All learners should be able to read at least **50 CORRECT WORDS** per minute when reading a passage

40 — **END OF GRADE 3**
All learners should be able to read at least **40 WORDS** correct per minute when reading a passage

30 — **END OF GRADE 2**
All learners should be able to read at least **30 WORDS** correct per minute when reading a passage

40 — **END OF GRADE 1**
All learners should know their LETTER-SOUNDS well, sounding at least **40 LETTERS** correct per minute

- By the end of Grade 1, all learners should be able to correctly sound 40 letters per minute.

  - This is the same benchmark as for the Nguni and Sesotho-Setswana languages. While pronunciation may be different, the letters across languages are the same supporting the use of one benchmark.

  - Letters are a good early predictor of oral reading fluency (ORF) levels acquired by the end of the Foundation Phase. Improvements in letter-sound speed stagnate at 40 letters.

  - Once learners have achieved this level of letter-sound knowledge, phonics instruction should focus on blending of sounds and complex consonants while decoding instruction should focus on helping learners apply word attack strategies.

- By the end of Grade 2, all learners should be meeting the fluency threshold, correctly reading from a passage at least 30 words per minute.

  - Below this threshold, accuracy is poor, and we find little evidence that learners can understand what they have read. For learners not meeting the Grade 2 benchmark, instruction should focus on improving decoding skills.

  - Once learners have reached this level, they would benefit from instruction that focuses on developing fluency and exposes them to a wider range of texts.

- By the end of Grade 3, all learners should be meeting the fluency benchmark, correctly reading from a passage at least 40 words per minute.

  - At this level of fluency, reading comprehension becomes increasingly possible when learners read on their own. Once learners reach this level of fluency, it appears that poor comprehension skills become the limiting factor to further literacy development.

  - Once learners have reached this fluency level, instruction should shift to strengthening comprehension skills through continued development of vocabulary, language skills and encouraging learners to engage critically with text.

- By the end of Grade 4, all learners should be meeting the fluency benchmark, correctly reading from a passage at least 50 words per minute.

  - This level of fluency allows learners to read independently and to use their reading skills in order to learn.

  - Instruction should focus on broadening learners vocabulary while developing mastery of reading various texts, such as literal, narrative and inferential text.

- By the end of Grade 6, all learners should be meeting the fluency benchmark, correctly reading from a passage at least 85 words per minute.

  - Additional support for learners is required to master this fluency benchmark and to improve their reading comprehension skills.

  - Strengthening comprehension skills requires instruction that guides and assists learners in understanding comprehension strategies for different texts, when and how to apply such strategies.

Reaching these benchmarks is within reach of learners, including those attending less resourced schools. Examples from this study confirm that the benchmarks are attainable, yet learners are acquiring decoding skills (such as letter-sound knowledge) and fluency far too slowly. Considerable progress will need to be made for all learners to reach these benchmarks in the Foundation Phase.

As benchmarks are increasingly used to assess and track reading through systematic measurement in early grades, we will gain more understanding of how well children are able to keep pace with these African language benchmarks to support improvements in reading for meaning.

How can we use the reading benchmarks?

National and provincial administration	School	Classroom
Establishes definition of reading proficiency Clearly communicates standards and targets Monitor progress	Standards and targets that school leaders can aim towards Standardises assessment practices across and within schools Identify the extent of remedial support required	Standard against which to measure learner skills Identify early on learners at risk of not being able to read Adapt instructional focus to meet learners' needs

How did we create these benchmarks?

The Xitsonga early grade reading benchmarks are based on reading assessments of more than 7 000 unique learners and 700 no-fee schools in the Limpopo province.