Speech by the Minister of Basic Education, Hon Siviwe Gwarube

Launch of the Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS)

10 November 2025

Good morning, everyone!

What a privilege it is to be with all of you today — colleagues from the Department, our partners in universities and foundations, linguists, teachers, and researchers who have walked this journey with us. Today feels like a milestone for South African education and foundational learning in particular.

When we speak about schooling outcomes, we often focus on the end point: on matric results, university access, or employment statistics. But what happens much earlier in that journey is what determines how far a child will go. And a critical phase in that journey is learning to read.

Learning to read is part of a broader process of literacy development, but it is a gateway skill that unlocks so many other opportunities to access knowledge and learning.

The goal of reading is to engage meaningfully with all sorts of texts, whether academic or for pleasure or for everyday living. The goal is to read with comprehension.

But reading with comprehension is like the tip of an iceberg. Only the tip of an iceberg is visible, but the largest part of the iceberg in under the surface. What we see in assessments that measure reading comprehension, such as PIRLS or the South African Systemic Evaluation, is just the visible part. Beneath the outcome of reading with comprehension lies a whole range of foundational skills, such as phonemic awareness, vocabulary knowledge, associating letters with sounds, and building words. As these skills become fluent, they work together to make comprehension possible.

To better understand how these foundational skills develop, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has led a process to develop reading benchmarks in all 11 official spoken languages. These benchmarks indicate the level of fluency in letter sound recognition that should be achieved by the end of Grade 1, and the level of oral reading fluency that should be achieved by the ends of Grades 2 and 3 in each home language, for children to be on track to read with comprehension by Grade 4.

Given the distinct linguistic features of South Africa's language families, these benchmarks were developed separately for each group of languages. The department spent about 6 years developing these benchmarks, language by language.

Now, for the first time, the Funda Uphumelele National Survey (FUNS) provides a baseline measure of the percentages of children, in all languages, who are reaching these critical benchmarks at the end of Grades 1, 2, and 3.

For many years, we knew that too many South African children were not learning to read with meaning by the end of Grade 3. But we didn't have a full picture of *why*. We could see the symptom, but not the underlying causes.

That is what makes the Funda Uphumelele National Survey so important. For the first time, we have a national picture, across all 11 languages, of how children develop the specific reading skills that lead to comprehension.

The work behind this survey is both remarkable and rigorous. It was led by teams of linguists and researchers from universities across the country, working hand in hand with officials from the Department of Basic Education. Together they have produced a technically sound and linguistically sensitive assessment in every one of our official spoken languages.

This is no small achievement. It required years of testing, refining, and validating the tools. It required listening to teachers and language experts. And it required a deep respect for the unique character of each of our languages.

Funda Uphumelele has deliberately placed great emphasis on Home Language because children learn to read most effectively in the language they understand best, which is their **home language**. When you learn to join the letters, i n d l u together to form a word – indlu – the lights will come on if you know what that word means (a house).

This is why home language is a valuable resource for learning, not an inconvenient barrier for us to overcome.

Lapho izingane zifunda ngolimi lwazo, zingakwazi ukuxhumana, zicabange, zizizwele, futhi zifumane intsingiselo yoko bakufundayo.

(When children read in their own language, they can make connections, they can think, they can feel, and they can make meaning of what they read)

That is why this project matters so much, because it affirms that our languages matter. By showing that we care if children learn specific reading skills in their home languages, we raise the status of all our languages.

When children have a solid foundation in their home language, it also becomes easier to build bilingual proficiency, which for most children in South Africa means learning English as a First Additional Language.

Furthermore, we are rolling out **Mother Tongue-based Bilingual Education** in Grades 4 and beyond. The idea is that a learner's mother tongue is a critical resource for learning even beyond the foundation phase. Therefore, the stronger their home language reading, the more powerful the use of mother tongue as a pedagogical instrument for later on.

The results of Funda Uphumelele confirm that we still face serious challenges in the early grades. Too many children are not yet reaching the reading fluency benchmarks needed to be on track to read with comprehension by Grade 4.

But the good news is that we now understand much more precisely *where the problem lies*, and therefore what to do about it.
And this is the value of good data: it gives us the power to act intelligently, not blindly.

Let me say this clearly: we are not measuring for the sake of measuring. The reading benchmarks, and the Funda Uphumelele work, are designed to inform real change at three levels:

1. **At the system level:** We will use these results to monitor progress nationally, provincially, and in each language.
2. **At the district and school support level**: By distributing newly developed, language-appropriate reading assessments to subject advisers and schools, this work will strengthen accountability and improve support from district offices and school management teams.
3. **At the classroom level:** Teachers will use the benchmarks and accompanying tools to conduct diagnostic assessments with their learners and to inform targeted remediation.

I want to take a moment to express my heartfelt appreciation to all those who made this work possible.

To the **25 linguists** who represented all 11 South African languages and who brought their expertise and care to developing, translating, and refining the assessments — *thank you*.
To the teams from the **University of Pretoria, Tshwane University of Technology, University of Venda, Rhodes University, Nelson Mandela Institute, University of the Free State, University of Mpumalanga, University of South Africa, Stellenbosch University, University of the Western Cape, Varsity College,* and the *University of KwaZulu-Natal* — your collaboration has been extraordinary.

To our **funding partners** — 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** — thank you for believing in this work and for investing in the foundational skills that will transform lives.

And to the **officials of the Department of Basic Education** who led and coordinated this complex process: you have demonstrated what is possible when technical excellence and public service commitment come together. I appreciate the support from the branch heads involved in this project and the leadership from the DG to go ahead with this work even though the findings could be revealing of significant challenges.

Colleagues, today's launch is not just the release of a report. It is a call to refocus our attention and to do what is needed to make sure that our children learn to read with meaning by the end of Grade 3.

Re batla hore bana bohle ba bale ka kutlwisiso qetellong ya Kereiti 3. (We want all children to read with understanding by the end of Grade 3)

If we can achieve that, so much else in our education system becomes possible: better learning in the higher grades, greater success in matric, and more opportunities in life.

So let us commit ourselves, as educators, parents, researchers, and citizens, to making reading a national priority.
Let us use the evidence from FUNS not just to talk about the problem, but to act on it.

In a few years' time, when we conduct the next round of Funda Uphumelele, I am confident that we will see progress, not only in the numbers, but in the daily experience of children who can now open a book and make sense of the world around them.

As the human rights activist and French author, Victor Hugo, once said, "To learn to read is to light a fire; every syllable that is spelled out is a spark."

Ngiyabonga kakhulu. Ke a leboha. Thank you.