



Address by the Minister of Basic Education, Mrs Angie Motshekga, MP, during the National Seminar on Reading Literacy held at the DBE Conference Centre.

16 May 2023

Programme Director,
Esteemed Dignitaries,
Members of the Media,
Ladies and Gentlemen

Ladies and gentlemen, esteemed guests gathered here in Pretoria and joining us online, I warmly welcome this critical seminar focused on understanding reading literacy trends.

It is truly an honour and privilege to address you all today.

Today, we are privileged to acquire vital information on how learners comprehend texts and apply essential comprehension skills across various reading materials.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) will present key findings highlighting achievement data and Grades 4 and 6 trends.

These findings will be complemented by initial insights on reading literacy from the Early Learning National Assessment (ELNA) in Grade 1 and our national Systemic Evaluation study in Grade 3.

These distinct yet complementary assessment programmes provide us with a comprehensive overview and purposeful measure of reading literacy outcomes.

Enhancing learners' ability to read for meaning is a top priority for this administration, aligned with the presidential mandate and the 2030 sustainable development goals, as it forms a crucial cornerstone of the government's educational mandate.

We carry the mandate of providing quality education to all learners in the country, starting from early childhood development up to secondary education.

Our primary objective is to ensure that every learner has access to high-standard education that caters to their needs, regardless of their socio-economic background.

We remain steadfast in fulfilling this critical mandate, ensuring that all learners in South Africa have access to quality education that equips them for success in their personal and professional lives.

In light of this context, we have received the PIRLS 2021 results, and our initial observations indicate a significant disappointment within the sector.

The results indicate a disappointingly low performance, contrasting with our previous participation in other international assessments like TIMSS and SEACMEQ, which showed that we were "system on the rise" before the impact of COVID-19.

We must acknowledge that things were not always better in the past.

Over the decades, we have made considerable strides in expanding access to schooling, including early childhood development (ECD) and Grade R.

Additionally, primary and secondary school completion rates have steadily increased, allowing us to address the educational injustices stemming from our apartheid history.

However, as we entered the early 2000s and nearly all 7- to 15-year-old children were enrolled, we became acutely aware that the quality of learning and teaching remained alarmingly low and unequal.

Our participation in the first PIRLS assessment in 2006 revealed a particular challenge: a significant number of children were reaching Grade 5 without acquiring adequate reading comprehension skills.

This issue was further confirmed by other international studies on learner achievement, such as TIMSS and SACMEQ, which shed light on the disconcertingly low and unequal learning outcomes within our education system.

Between 2009 and 2012, various reforms were implemented to address the challenges in South Africa's education system, and these efforts have yielded positive results.

The DBE Workbook Programme has revolutionised the availability of educational materials in South African classrooms.

At the same time, introducing the Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statements (CAPS) has brought much-needed clarity and received widespread acceptance across the sector.

Additionally, the implementation of Annual National Assessments from 2011 to 2014 has emphasised the importance of learning outcomes in primary schools and strengthened accountability.

The ongoing expansion of the Grade R programme has significantly increased educational participation among 5- and 6-year-olds over the past two decades.

Experts recognise that these reforms have contributed to South Africa's improved performance in international assessments such as PIRLS, TIMSS, and SACMEQ.

It should be noted that South Africa is only one of three African countries participating in PIRLS, alongside Morocco and Egypt.

PIRLS represents the first international large-scale assessment to report results after successfully collecting data during the COVID-19 pandemic, assessing 400,000 students across 57 countries.

As a developing country, South Africa participates in PIRLS and TIMSS with an understanding that these tests establish a global standard for reading comprehension.

We must not be discouraged but rather have confidence in our efforts to surpass current limitations and raise the skills of African children, despite the challenges posed by limited resources.