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Joint statement: The 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results confirm a schooling system in crisis and the extent of learning losses created by COVID-19

On Tuesday 16 May 2023, the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study ([2021 PIRLS](#)) results were released. The results revealed that the majority (81%) of Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning in any language, including their home languages. This is yet another grim sign that our education system is in crisis and has been for a long time.

Equal Education (EE) and the Equal Education Law Centre (EELC) are disappointed that government, particularly the national and provincial education departments, have failed to adequately address the deep cracks in the system that continue to let learners down. This lack of political will has undoubtedly contributed to South Africa consistently being the worst performing of the participating countries. Shockingly, but perhaps unsurprisingly, South Africa performed significantly worse than it did in the 2016 assessments.

While the PIRLS assessment report is a consolidation of individual learner performances, the social and educational contexts of participating learners are important in understanding these results. The reality is that many of these learners attend schools in unfavourable circumstances, mostly in rural and township communities, with overcrowding, poor infrastructure, unqualified teachers, and a lack of adequate teaching and learning resources like libraries, having a negative impact on their performance.

Undoubtedly, the COVID-19 pandemic has played a part in undoing the slow progress made since 2006 in reading outcomes and taking the sector back to 2011 levels of achievement. The pandemic worsened the situation when school closures and the prolonged use of rotational timetables robbed learners of important classroom time, leading to [severe learning losses](#). However, the pandemic alone cannot explain the decline in reading outcomes in the country. The ongoing reading crisis—many South African learners' inability to read for meaning—shows how poorly the government and education departments have recognised the multiple challenges in the sector and have failed to muster the necessary political will to address them.

The pandemic only worsened existing cracks and historic challenges in the sector. This is clear from the class divide in the 2021 PIRLS results, where English and Afrikaans schools (mostly quintiles 4 and 5) did not experience a decline in reading outcomes, but most African language schools (predominantly quintiles 1-3) did. Although South Africa has a [legal framework](#) for the identification, management, and support of so-called 'underperforming schools', [EELC's research](#) shows that it does not focus on ensuring that

disadvantaged schools receive the holistic support they need to address deeply entrenched and multi-pronged challenges.

It is unfair to expect learners from these schools to master a foundational skill like reading when most of them lack important infrastructure relevant to reading, such as libraries. DBE [statistics](#) show that over 17 000 (70%) of our public schools do not even have libraries, and of those that do, over a third (2 133) are not stocked. It is clear that education departments are poised to miss the 2023 Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure deadline, requiring that all schools be provided with libraries. Moreover, the national department's lack of an effective, legally binding national regulatory framework on this issue truly reveals its priorities.

Reading for meaning is important to unlock further learning. Early learning is key to developing this foundational skill. Interventions must, therefore, begin much earlier at the Early Childhood Development (ECD) level. Yet, [only about a quarter \(28.5%\)](#) of children aged 0-4 years attended an ECD programme in 2021. Moreover, the ECD system is not properly funded, with many needy centres unable to access state support. So, targeted efforts to improve outcomes must be initiated early and throughout learners' schooling journeys and not be limited to matric cohorts.

Improving learning outcomes in the country, including reading, will require a lot more concerted efforts and political will from national and provincial education departments. EE and the EELC continue to call for education departments to:

- develop legally binding regulations and accountability mechanisms for holistic support for all public schools, particularly historically disadvantaged schools, to improve learning outcomes, including reading for meaning;
- fulfill their legal obligations in terms of the Norms and Standards for Public School Infrastructure and urgently #FixOurSchools;
- provide increased, pro-poor and inclusive funding and support for early childhood development programmes.

[END]

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