

# South Africa

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## Introduction

South Africa is a multilingual, multiracial country with 11 officially recognized languages spoken across nine provinces. In 2019, Statistics South Africa estimated the midyear population of South Africa at 58.78 million.<sup>1</sup> Approximately 51.2 percent (or 30 million people) of the population is female. The black African population is in the majority (47.4 million) and constitutes approximately 81 percent of the total South African population.

The language profile of the country is made up of Afrikaans (61.2 percent) and English (36.3 percent), the two official languages prior to 1994. African languages, as spoken in a variety of combinations by black people, include the Nguni family of languages, consisting of isiNdebele (1.6 percent), isiZulu (31.1 percent), SiSwati (2.8 percent), isiXhosa (18.2 percent), and Xitsonga (3.6 percent). The Sotho languages are made up of Sepedi (12.4 percent), Sesotho (9.7 percent), and Setswana (11.1 percent). Tshivenda completes the language offerings and is spoken by 2.5 percent of the population. According to Statistics South Africa's Community Survey of 2018, nationally, just over one in four (25.3 percent) individuals spoke isiZulu at home, while 14.8 percent of individuals spoke isiXhosa, and 12.2 percent spoke Afrikaans.<sup>2,a</sup>

While English is spoken by 8.1 percent of individuals at home, it is the second most commonly spoken language outside the household (16.6 percent) after isiZulu (25.1 percent) and before isiXhosa (12.8 percent).

## Overview of Education System

Despite the presence of a large independent and private school sector in South Africa, the National Department of Basic Education oversees the South African schooling system. The Minister of Basic Education and her Deputy Minister head the department and are supported by the Director General, who oversees departmental management. In addition, each of South Africa's nine provinces has a provincial head of education. Each province, in turn, is divided into districts, and district managers report to these provincial heads, while school principals report to the district managers. Education provision and delivery is largely a provincial responsibility, and district offices provide support and advice directly to schools, particularly regarding curriculum. Following the official adoption of the Interim Constitution in 1994, attempts were made to

<sup>a</sup> Percentages in this paragraph do not total 100 percent because respondents may have indicated they speak more than one language.

decentralize education decision making. However, problems were encountered with education standards and examination quality when managed provincially; consequently, the government decided to centralize the examination system, including all school exit examinations.

Under the South African Schools Act of 1996, schooling is compulsory from ages 7 to 15. In 2014, the Department of Basic Education started introducing a “reception year” (Grade R) in government primary schools to reduce the disadvantages of students coming from different backgrounds when they start first grade. The department intended for Grade R to become a compulsory year of schooling in 2022.<sup>3</sup> Primary schools in South Africa include Grades 1 to 7 (ages 6 to 13), and secondary schools include Grades 8 to 12 (ages 14 to 18). There are, however, middle schools in some provinces. The structure of compulsory schooling provision in South Africa is presented in Exhibit 1.

**Exhibit 1: Structure of Compulsory Education in South Africa**

Phase	Grades	Ages	Status of Education	School Level
Preprimary	—	4–5	Not compulsory	Preprimary
Foundation	R	5–6	To be compulsory by 2022	Primary
	1–3	7–9	Compulsory	Primary
Intermediate	4–6	10–12	Compulsory	Primary
Senior	7–9	13–15	Compulsory	Primary (to Grade 7) Secondary (Grades 8–9)

The Constitution of 1996 specifies that all children in South Africa have the right to be educated in their own language. The Department of Education’s Language-in-Education Policy, guided by the Constitution and the South African Schools Act, recommends that wherever possible, the student’s first language be used for teaching and learning, especially in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3).<sup>4</sup> A policy of multilingual education underpins the country’s education philosophy and, from third grade onward, all students are expected to have one additional approved language as a subject. An additive bilingual model has been adopted with the underlying principle of maintaining home language(s) while providing access to and the effective acquisition of additional language(s). However, particularly in schools where the dominant first language is an African language, it is not standard practice that every student is educated in his or her first language.

### Use and Impact of PIRLS

South Africa’s first participation in PIRLS was in the 2006 cycle. Subsequent cycles followed, with participation in PIRLS and prePIRLS 2011, and PIRLS/PIRLS Literacy 2016.

Naledi Pandor, former Minister of Education, publicly recognized the value of South Africa's participation in large-scale assessments and PIRLS 2006 in particular. Angie Motshekga, current Minister of Education, stated in a speech that the department aims to improve students' reading levels to be age appropriate, and that this call was in response to national and international assessments.<sup>5</sup> The Department of Basic Education supported the administration of PIRLS 2006 and PIRLS 2011 in schools. For PIRLS 2021, the Department of Basic Education provided significant funding for the project for the first time in partnership with the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment, University of Pretoria, the implementation partner.

South Africa's results from PIRLS 2016 prompted action from the government with a particular focus on reading for meaning. As mentioned in President Ramaphosa's State of the Nation address, the concerning fact was that 78 percent of children could not read for meaning, as evidenced from low international benchmark results. On September 8, 2021, the Human Rights Commission brought an application to the Constitutional Court for basic reading and writing skills to be recognized as a human right, using the PIRLS low international benchmark descriptors as evidence that basic skills have been obtained.

## The Language/Reading Curriculum in Primary Grades

As a consequence of implementing a new constitution, South Africa's education system faced several reforms to address the inequalities of the past. The first curriculum after the 1994 elections was the *Curriculum 2005*.<sup>6</sup> In September 1997, an initial form of this curriculum was approved by the Department of Basic Education as three separate policy documents for the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3), the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), and the Senior Phase (Grades 7 to 9). The curriculum was revised in 2001 and released as the *Revised National Curriculum Statement* in 2002.<sup>7</sup> Thereafter, another reform took place, which resulted in the *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* (CAPS).<sup>8</sup> CAPS was devised not as a new curriculum but as an amendment to the *Revised National Curriculum Statement*. It was implemented in January 2012 with the first cohort being students in the Foundation Phase (Grades R to 3) and tenth grade.

The Intermediate Phase (which includes Grades 4 and 5) has six subjects: home language, first additional language, mathematics, natural science and technology, social sciences, and life skills. The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* specifies instruction time for each of these subjects that schools should adhere to. Furthermore, the curriculum policy also provides a clear breakdown of the time spent per language skill, that is, listening and speaking, reading and viewing, writing and presenting, and language structures and conventions. Underlying these skills are thinking and reasoning, and language structure and use.

## Language and Reading Curriculum

In a multilingual country like South Africa, the curriculum emphasizes the importance of students reaching high levels of proficiency in at least two of the 11 official languages. The language-specific curriculum (subject statement) follows an additive bilingual approach to multilingualism; namely, all students learn a language on a “home language” level and at least one additional official language—usually English—and become competent in their additional language on a second language level, while the home language is maintained and developed. Thus, learning to read in the home language helps build on students’ literacy skills.

The language subject area includes all 11 official languages as home languages, first additional languages (e.g., English), and second additional languages (e.g., French, Arabic, or Greek, among others, used primarily for interpersonal and societal purposes). The Language in Education Policy states that the students’ home languages should be used for teaching and learning whenever possible, particularly in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1 to 3) when children learn to read and write.<sup>9</sup> This policy was devised to support the language of learning and teaching in education. The reality, however, is that the majority of students officially change to a language, usually English, that is not their home language in fourth grade. Although the curriculum expects careful planning when students are required to make the transition from their home language to an additional language for learning and teaching, this may not be experienced as such by the student.

In the Foundation Phase, the curriculum reflects the guiding principle that language development involves a gradual process of improving literacy teaching and learning. For example, the reading and phonics skills aim for students to be able to read and view for information and enjoyment and to recognize the purpose of each type of text. These skills also aim to produce students who are creative and critical thinkers. The curriculum advocates an integrated approach to language and literacy development as it is used across the curriculum, though in fourth grade onward the language teaching approach is text-based, communicative, and process oriented.

The *Curriculum and Assessment Policy Statement* for Grades R to 3 also emphasizes that all students learn to read. The curriculum policy gives schools the autonomy to decide whether they would like to have more or less teaching time for home and first additional languages based on the students’ needs. Of the seven hours per week allocated to language instruction, 4½ hours are dedicated to phonics, shared reading, and group reading. In this regard, the curriculum recognizes that all students must be taught strategies that help them to decode written text and to read with understanding. Students also should learn to interpret pictures and other graphics that will help them make sense of visual and multimedia texts. Furthermore, they should know how to locate and use information, follow a process or argument, summarize, develop their own understanding, and adapt and demonstrate what they learn from their reading. As part of this process, learners are encouraged to try to answer higher-order questions based on what they have read. Exhibit 2 presents the reading and viewing skills in the Foundation Phase.

## Exhibit 2: Reading and Viewing Skills, Grades R to 3

Skills		Grades
Emergent Reading Skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Recognizes common objects in pictures</li> <li>Interprets pictures and arranges pictures to form a story</li> <li>Book handling skills</li> <li>Reads own name and names of peers</li> <li>Begins to “read” high frequency words (e.g., door, cupboard)</li> </ul>	R–1
Shared Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reads enlarged texts</li> <li>Links stories with own experiences</li> <li>Sequences the events of the story</li> <li>Uses visual cues to predict what the story is about</li> <li>Discusses main idea</li> <li>Identifies the characters, the “problem” in the story, and the plot</li> </ul>	R–3
Group Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reads aloud from own book</li> <li>Uses phonics and contextual and structural analysis to make meaning</li> <li>Monitors self when reading</li> <li>Uses self-correcting strategies when reading</li> <li>Uses diagrams and illustrations in text to increase understanding</li> </ul>	1–3
Independent Reading	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reads picture books</li> <li>Reads own writing</li> <li>Starts to correct errors</li> </ul>	R–1
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reads own and others’ writing</li> <li>Reads aloud to a partner</li> <li>Reads independently simple fiction/nonfiction books including magazines, poetry, and comic books</li> </ul>	2–3

During the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6), students are expected to further develop their proficiency in reading and viewing a wide range of literary and nonliterary texts, including visual texts. The reading curriculum envisages students who are able to recognize genre and reflect on the purpose, audience, and context of texts. Through classroom and independent reading, students in this phase learn to become critical and creative thinkers. Students in the Intermediate Phase are assessed in four language areas: Oral Literacy Skills, Reading Comprehension, Language in Context, and Writing. Students need at least an overall score (mark level) of 4 (50 percent to 59 percent) for home language and an overall score of 3 (40 percent to 49 percent) for first additional language to pass the language subject.

### Summary of National Curriculum

In January 2012, the *National Curriculum Statement for Grades R to 12* was put in place nationally. A single comprehensive curriculum and assessment policy document was developed for each subject, replacing the subject statements, learning program guidelines, and subject assessment

guidelines in Grades R to 12 that had been part of the former outcomes-based curricula. The *National Curriculum Statement for Grades R to 12* emphasizes the importance of knowledge, skills, and values worth learning in South Africa. Moreover, it aims to produce students who are able to do the following: collect, analyze, organize, and critically evaluate information, and communicate effectively using visual, symbolic, and language skills in various modes. The national curriculum also stresses the importance of working effectively individually and with others. Language learning in the Intermediate Phase (Grades 4 to 6) encompasses all 11 official languages in South Africa as well as nonofficial languages, which can be offered at different language levels.

In the current curriculum, the first language acquired by students is called the home language. The home language level of proficiency ideally reflects the basic interpersonal communication skills required in social situations, as well as the cognitive skills essential for learning across the curriculum. However, many South African schools do not offer the home languages of some or all of the enrolled students and can offer only one or two languages representative of the community and/or selected by the parent body. Some students may not speak those one or two languages used for teaching and learning at school. As a result, the curricula for home language and first additional language refer to the proficiency level at which the language is offered—native (home) or acquired (additional) language.

In South Africa, many African children start using their first additional language, English, as the language of learning in fourth grade. This means that they must reach a high level of competency in reading and writing in English by the end of third grade. Taking this into consideration, the additional language policy implemented effectively means that all children must be taught an additional language from first grade onward in addition to their home language. For most schools offering instruction in Grades 1 to 3 in an African language, this effectively means that English is implemented in first grade as the additional language. For schools where Afrikaans is offered as a home language, in most cases English is included as the first additional language. In schools where English is offered as a home language in Grades 1 to 3, the additional language will be Afrikaans or an African language, depending on the demographics of the school and parental choice. At the additional language level, emphasis is placed on teaching of listening, speaking, reading, and writing skills. This level is intended to provide students with literary, aesthetic, and imaginative competencies that will enable them to recreate, imagine, and empower their understanding of the world in which they live. Listening and speaking receive less emphasis than reading and writing skills from seventh grade onward.

The current curriculum places the responsibility on teachers to differentiate reading levels and to select reading materials that will support students effectively. Course readers are considered important for reading instruction, while authentic reading material (library books and other real-life texts) are thought to develop higher levels of reading (e.g., independent reading). The current curriculum is much more specific in providing teachers with instruction plans that contain the minimum content that should be covered over two-week blocks.



Lastly, the *National Curriculum Statement for Grades R to 12* provides teacher guidelines on the development of a language lesson. It suggests that prereading activities should be used to prepare students for reading. Typical prereading activities include discussions of the text title, predictions about story content, and the use of key words from the text to engage students before starting to read. The curriculum encourages teachers to interrupt reading sessions by “looking back” at the text to verify whether predictions were accurate or to discuss why things did not develop the way in which students predicted. At the same time, further predictions could be made about the story. Teachers are advised to engage students in reflection following reading. Literal questions could be asked, leading to more complex and abstract answers based on inferences made from the text. Students could be asked to retell, dramatize, or critically discuss the text by focusing on values, messages, or cultural or moral issues conveyed in the text. Other activities include comparing the text to other texts they read independently or identifying differences and similarities between texts.

## Professional Development Requirements and Programs

To address the issue of poor teacher professional development and the lack of participation in professional development activities, the Department of Basic Education developed and implemented the Integrated Quality Management System as well as collaborated with the South African Council for Educators by using the Continuing Professional Teacher Development (CPTD) system.<sup>10</sup> By doing so, the Department of Basic Education encourages teachers to participate in formal and informal professional development activities to enhance their teaching (i.e., strategies and methods) and to improve their content knowledge.

The Integrated Quality Management System assists in addressing challenges teachers might face when dealing with a multilingual and multicultural classroom. This system also provides teachers with additional education related to teaching and learning. The South African Council for Educators suggests several forms and methods of professional development activities where teachers can improve their teaching practices. South African teachers are required to earn at least 150 CPTD points in a three-year cycle.<sup>11</sup> The points system suggests that attending various professional development activities should in essence lead to higher levels of student attainment. There are various types of formal and informal professional development activities, yet teachers are reluctant to participate in them.

Professional development activities are divided into three categories, namely teacher-initiated activities, school-initiated activities, and externally initiated activities.<sup>12</sup> Teachers are required to participate in each of these. Teacher-initiated activities occur when the teacher identifies a need and tries to address it with appropriate professional development activities, such as completing short courses or presenting a paper at a conference. School-initiated activities happen when the school as a collective identifies a concern and addresses it by hosting subject cluster meetings or

initiating school projects. The externally initiated activities are those initiated by provincial education departments, school governing bodies, and independent or private groups; examples include leadership and management courses, on-site support, curriculum training, and activities responding to national, provincial, or district priorities.

## Monitoring Student Progress in Reading

The right to basic education is enshrined in the South African Constitution and should be available, accessible, acceptable, and adaptable.<sup>13</sup> To ensure that basic education upholds the four A's, the Department of Basic Education commissioned a national survey in 2017 to monitor public schools' progress to reach national goals and indicators. These goals and indicators are highlighted in the *Action Plan to 2019* report,<sup>14</sup> which supports the statement "improved education . . . will lead to higher employment and earnings, while more rapid economic growth will broaden opportunities for all and generate the resources required to improve education."<sup>15</sup> As such, the School Monitoring Survey was conducted to monitor progress made across 1,000 schools offering sixth grade and 1,000 schools offering twelfth grade from each province. The School Monitoring Survey focused on service delivery, as well as the areas that require additional support and funding. This survey provided valuable insights into school management practices, facilities, resources, and quality.

In terms of monitoring reading in South Africa, the Department of Basic Education launched the Early Grade Reading Assessment, which is an oral diagnostic reading test that is administered across all 11 official languages. The test assesses recognition of initial sounds; word recognition; and passage and reading. As such, the Early Grade Reading Assessment assists in unpacking students' prereading and reading skills. This test looks at the complexity of language and how it may affect the length of time for a student to acquire and master these skills. By doing so, the test assists in identifying areas of need that should be supported.

Apart from the above examples of macro and meso levels of monitoring, efforts to monitor student progress across the curriculum require teachers to capture and report learning progress regularly to students, parents, and heads of departments, as well as to the Department of Basic Education. Each teacher is required to complete record sheets that include the topic area assessed, the knowledge and skills tested, and the breakdown of lower-order and higher-order questions. To complete these records, teachers use the seven-point scale as stipulated by the Department of Basic Education. This scale ranges from "code 1: not achieved (0 percent to 29 percent) to code 7: outstanding achievement (80 percent to 100 percent)." Each student receives his or her overall performance for each subject or learning area in report cards, which are the main form of communication between the school and parents. The parents of students who require additional assistance and support are contacted by the school and are invited to attend parent meetings, parent-teacher conferences, or phone calls.



## Special Reading Initiatives

Based on the previous cycle of PIRLS results, President Ramaphosa announced that reading literacy is a national prerogative—every child should be able to read for meaning by the age of 10. Prior to this announcement, several initiatives for teaching reading and improving reading skills were organized. These include Read to Lead and Drop All and Read, where schools were encouraged to set aside a specific time to engage in a reading activity at least once a week. However, many scholars have questioned these projects as they appear to be slogans rather than effective initiatives.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, a report has indicated that South Africa is not on the correct trajectory to meet the goals set for 2030 as envisioned by *Action Plan to 2019*.<sup>17</sup>

The 2030 Reading Panel, which consists of various individuals and organizations, deliberated on the current need for reading initiatives in the country. The current initiative of train-the-trainer is commendable, yet evidence suggests that this method is ineffective. Other programs and initiatives where in-classroom coaching occurs or where a teacher assistant is assigned to first grade teachers have shown improvements. Examples include the Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy, Early Grade Reading Study, Funda Wandé Coaching Intervention, and the Funda Wandé Teacher Assistant & Learner Workbook intervention. These initiatives each showed growth in students' reading literacy skills. One of the recommendations made by the 2030 Reading Panel is to implement a universal standardized reading assessment, that is, across all 11 official languages.

## Response to COVID-19 Pandemic

### Teaching and Learning During the COVID-19 Pandemic

When it became clear that South Africa, like many other countries globally, was in the grip of a pandemic, all schools were closed on March 18, 2020. The Department of Basic Education advised districts and schools to ensure student participation in educational activities from home.<sup>18</sup> By June 2020, the Department of Education (DBE 2020b) published its second medium-term plan titled *School Recovery Plan in Response to Covid-19* (SRPRC) and schools ultimately reopened in August 2020. The plan was based on a phasing-in of grades through a rotational approach, beginning with students in seventh grade and twelfth grade.<sup>19</sup> The rotational arrangement meant that only particular grades were in attendance on particular days of the week to minimize overcrowding.

A multimedia learner support program in conjunction with the South African radio and television broadcaster was launched across three public television and 12 national and eight regional radio stations.<sup>20</sup> Curriculum support lessons were placed online for Early Childhood Education (ECD) and students in Grades 10 to 12, with an emphasis on mathematics, physical sciences, English first additional language, life sciences, and accounting. In addition, multimedia materials that were supported by mobile apps were made available on the DBE website and email, and WhatsApp feeds were sent to teachers responsible for teaching reading.

A series of consultations were held to assess system readiness for the provision of personal protective equipment, the availability of water at every school, and the capacity of every school to ensure student safety to prevent the further spread of the virus.

### Impact of the Pandemic on Student Learning

Projections currently state that the greatest learning losses are for those students from disadvantaged socioeconomic backgrounds. Estimations state that most students could have lost 60 percent of the originally anticipated 198 contact school days.<sup>21</sup> For low socioeconomic status (SES) students, the percentage rises to 65 percent. By January 2021, a survey conducted by the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) found that 51 percent of school principals reported that most of the trimmed curriculum for most subjects was taught, thereby covering essential content.<sup>22</sup>

### Policy and Practice Changes

The COVID-19 pandemic did not prompt implementation or consideration of any enduring changes in education policy or practice. Instead, all actions were geared toward developing a robust curriculum recovery plan, managing examinations (especially for twelfth grade students, who needed to exit the schooling system), and developing standard operating procedures to guide the basic education sector to manage and contain the spread of the virus.

### Impact of the Pandemic on PIRLS 2021

Problems arose where schools chose to limit the physical presence of students at the school due to COVID-19. Return visits were needed in many instances to test the remaining sampled classrooms. In some instances, students were divided into multiple groups to accommodate social distancing where schools had the requisite infrastructure to do so. This arrangement resulted in the need for additional fieldworkers so test administration could be conducted according to International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) protocol.

### Suggested Readings

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