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POLICY BRIEF · SOUTH AFRICA

Keeping Learners on Track: The Long-Term Benefits of Early Literacy Interventions in South Africa

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Key messages

- Scale coaching-based literacy interventions across South Africa to reduce dropout rates and improve progression in Grade 9.
- Invest early in foundational literacy to deliver long-term returns in learning outcomes.
- Complete provincial-level analysis before expanding the programme nationally.
- Structured pedagogy interventions combining lesson plans, quality materials, and embedded coaching have shown sustained improvements in grade progression and high school outcomes.
- The Department of Basic Education (DBE) should consider institutionalising provincial-based coaching systems for Foundation Phase teachers.

Background and policy context

South Africa's education system continues to face a severe literacy crisis. National and international assessments show that most learners perform two to three grades below their required grade level, with only 19% of Grade 4 learners able to read for meaning and reach the lowest Progress in International Reading Literacy Study 2021 (PIRLS) benchmark (Department of Basic Education, 2022; Mullis et al., 2023). This learning deficit grows over time, contributing to high dropout rates, particularly in Grade 9, when compulsory schooling ends, with dropout rates continuing to grow in later years of secondary school.

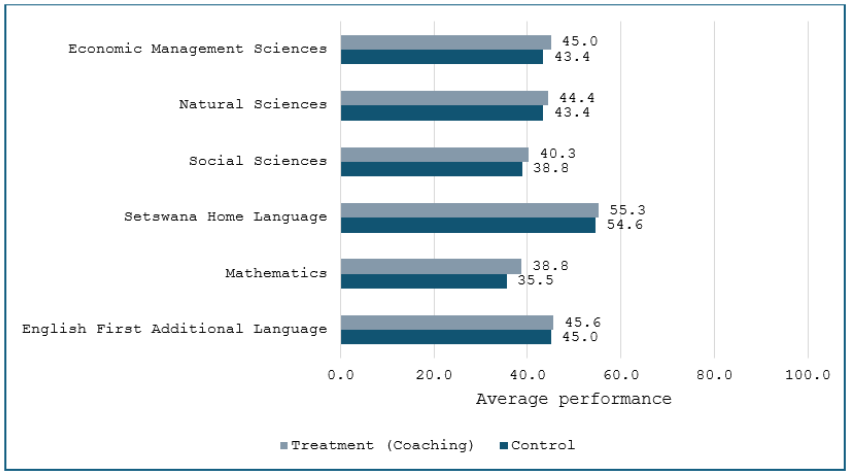
The risks of inaction are noteworthy: persistent literacy gaps undermine learners' ability to access the curriculum, widen inequalities across quintile schools, and contribute to poor progression and high-grade repetition rates. Without effective interventions, South Africa risks failing to meet its national development goals on education quality.

Current Department of Basic Education (DBE) priorities emphasise learning recovery post-pandemic, improving reading outcomes, and reducing dropout. While initiatives such as the National Reading Strategy and Gauteng Primary Language and Mathematics Strategy have demonstrated short-term gains, they have struggled to report on sustained improvements. The Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) provides new evidence that coaching-based interventions can deliver lasting impacts, directly informing ongoing policy debates on literacy, equity, and resource allocation.

Research project overview

- **Objective:** Assess whether early literacy interventions produce lasting impacts on learner outcomes in later years of schooling.
- **Approach:** Randomised controlled trial (2015–2017) with three treatment arms: Teacher Training; On-site Teacher Training and Coaching; Parental Involvement.
- **Data:** school-based assessment (SBA) administrative records linked to learners in Grades 8–9 (2023) from the Data Driven Districts system.
- **Methodology:** Longitudinal tracking of intervention cohorts using school-based assessment data.
- **Evidence generated:** Learners who received the coaching intervention were significantly more likely to progress through school on time. Six years after the intervention, they were 7.2 percentage points more likely than their peers in the control group to have reached Grade 9 without delay. In addition to improving grade

Figure 1: Average high school performance by subject and treatment group



progression, the intervention also produced gains in high school learning outcomes.

Figure 1 above illustrates differences in high school subject performance between learners in the coaching treatment group and those in the control group. Average scores were generally higher among treatment learners across all subjects. However, the OLS estimates indicate that these differences were statistically significant only for Economic Management Sciences and Mathematics. Overall high school performance, as measured by a composite score, was 0.12 standard deviations higher for treatment learners than for control learners.

Key findings and policy-relevant insights

Learners exposed to coaching were found to be more likely to remain "on track" in their schooling, progressing to Grade 9 without delay. When full controls are applied, the likelihood of being on track increases by 7.2 percentage points compared to peers in the control group. The coaching intervention produced positive effects on learning outcomes in high school, with particularly strong gains in Mathematics and Economic Management Sciences.

These results essentially show that coaching interventions help more learners reach key transition grades on time, reduce grade repetition, and improve subject performance in areas that are critical for later schooling and employability. For the education system, this translates into higher efficiency, lower dropout, and stronger preparation for the senior phase, making coaching a scalable intervention in strengthening long-term system performance.

- **Sustained gains:** Coaching interventions produced lasting improvements in learner outcomes, persisting through Grade 9.
- **Reduced dropout:** Dropout rates in early high school were lower among intervention learners.
- **Comparative effectiveness:** Coaching outperformed lesson plans or materials alone, highlighting the importance of ongoing teacher support.
- **Policy implications:** Structured pedagogy that integrates coaching has demonstrated strong and lasting impacts on learner outcomes. This approach directly supports the Department of Basic Education's priorities on learning recovery, offering a scalable pathway to strengthen foundational literacy and improve progression through the school system.

The results also showed that the effect of the coaching intervention was significantly lower for learners who moved to Gauteng than for those in North West. The intervention was more effective for learners who moved to and attended high school in the Northern Cape.

These differences in the impact of the coaching treatment across provinces may be a result of the differences in school quality or instructional alignment in these provinces. Further analysis is still being conducted to get to the root cause of these provincial differences. The policy implication for these differences is that coaching interventions may need differentiated implementation strategies across provinces. This will ensure that scale-up contributes to reducing educational inequalities instead of reinforcing them.

Existing and new evidence from the Early Grade Reading Study shows that structured pedagogy together with coaching delivers the strongest and most sustained impacts. While targeted rollouts can be a starting point, national implementation is needed to achieve equity and systemic improvement.

Table 1: Policy choices: structured pedagogy and coaching models

Policy option	Expected impact	Feasibility	Risks
Maintain current programmes	Low	High	Limited gains, persistent dropout
Structured pedagogy only (lesson plans + materials)	Moderate	High	Reduced sustainability without ongoing teacher support
Structured pedagogy + coaching	High	Moderate	Requires dedicated resources, budget, and systemic support
Targeted rollout in priority schools	Moderate–High	High	Uneven coverage – risk of widening disparities if not scaled nationally

Conclusions and policy messages

The evidence from this research shows that coaching-based literacy interventions deliver sustained improvements in learner outcomes, reduce dropout, and support progression in high school.

Policy recommendations

- Coaching-based interventions should be prioritised in poorer-performing schools and can be implemented on a temporary basis through independent contracting and oversight structures coordinated by the DBE.
- The Department of Basic Education should progressively institutionalise literacy coaching within the education system. As provincial capacity develops, integrate literacy coaching into provincial education departments and embed it within the National Reading Strategy.
- Partnerships with NGOs, universities, and donors should be utilised by the DBE to support scale-up, training, and monitoring.
- The Department of Basic Education should provide sustainable funding for literacy coaching by allocating dedicated budget lines within provincial education budgets to support the gradual transition from externally contracted support to a permanent, government-led coaching model.
- The Department of Basic Education should continue administering subsequent data collections on the same sample of learners to measure the long-term impacts of these reading interventions.

By prioritising coaching-based interventions, the department can ensure that early investments in literacy yield long-term improvements in learning outcomes and reductions in educational inequalities.

Roadmap for implementation and upcoming research

Short-term (1–2 years)

- Complete provincial-level analysis to identify the factors driving differences in effectiveness before national scale-up.
- Pilot provincial coaching units in priority (poor-performing) schools.
- Recruit and train literacy coaches and integrate them into DBE's learning recovery agenda.
- Develop monitoring systems using administrative data.

Medium-term (3–5 years)

- Expand structured pedagogy nationally, embedding coaching into teacher professional development.
- Secure dedicated budget lines for literacy coaching.
- Strengthen partnerships with NGOs, universities, and donors to support scale-up.

Long-term (5+ years)

- Institutionalise coaching as a permanent feature of teacher development.
- Use longitudinal evidence to guide sustainable funding and partnerships.

Resources and enabling conditions

- Dedicated funding streams within DBE and provincial budgets.
- Training programmes for literacy coaches.
- Monitoring and evaluation systems to track learner outcomes.

Key partners

- National Department of Basic Education
- Provincial education departments
- NGOs and donor organisations
- Universities and research institutes

While the evidence from the Early Grade Reading Study (EGRS) shows sustained benefits of coaching-based interventions in the early years of high school, more information

is still required to fully understand their long-term effectiveness through to the end of secondary schooling.

This critical evidence gap is being addressed through the EGRS Longitudinal Study, which has recently completed data collection and is currently undergoing analysis. Unlike earlier analyses that relied on administrative data, this new study collected direct assessment data from the original cohort of learners in Grade 11, providing a more reliable measure of long-term impacts.

The results of the EGRS Longitudinal Study will be formally launched in October 2026, and these findings will provide policymakers with clearer guidance on the most effective implementation steps for scaling literacy interventions. The implementation steps above will be refined once the October 2026 results are available, ensuring that scale-up decisions are firmly evidence-based.

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About this brief

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