

Reading Indaba

Keynote Address – MEC Zolile Monakali

Sol Plaatje University, Kimberley

Monday, 4 September 2023

Former Deputy President of the Republic, Dr. Phumzile Mlambo-Ngcuka

Representatives from our Teacher Unions;

Our valued Stakeholders and Partners in Education;

Senior Officials in Government;

Principals and Educators;

Learners;

Members of the media;

Ladies and Gentleman

Programme Director, literacy is a key component of the UN's Sustainable Development Agenda leading up to the year 2030, understanding that for countries to be developed in a sustainable manner, they must assure that their citizens are able to function on a literate level, for their own benefit as well as for the world around them.

As more children gain access to school, findings from myriad learning assessments have highlighted the failure to support children's acquisition of literacy, numeracy and other critical skills.

While many factors contribute to this learning crisis, language is increasingly, and rightly, recognized as a key reason that millions of learners globally do not acquire the skills they need to succeed in school and in life.

Statistics indicate, that before the COVID-19 pandemic, 53% of children in low and middle-income countries could not read. At its peak during the COVID-19 Pandemic, 1.6 billion children were out of school – approximately 90% of the entire student population. Today, Up to 9.7 million children are at risk of dropping out of school due to rising levels of child poverty exacerbated by COVID-19. All of this amounts to a global education crisis we cannot ignore.

Further to this, I must tell you that South Africa does not have a reading culture. Reading statistics indicate that only 14% of South Africans are readers of books and only 5% of parents read to their children.

The Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) 2021 results were released on the 16th May 2023 and confirmed that learning losses caused by the Covid-19 pandemic are severe in South Africa.

The study shows that in South Africa, **81%** of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning. There was a 32-point drop in South Africa's average PIRLS score in 2021(288), down from 320 in 2016. The Northern Cape Province dropped by 22 points, from 306 in 2016 to 284 in 2021.

At the core of our efforts is our deliberate determination that in-order to improve literacy and reading with comprehension, we must make reading fashionable. However, we cannot do this without providing fully functioning libraries in our schools. We view libraries as a key player because they have a role in almost

all of these literacy factors - from access to materials and training to promotion and cooperation. The role of libraries in our view is to offer our learners more than just prescribed books, but reading material that will expand their horizon beyond the confines of their schools and communities.

To immediately address the reading challenge, the Northern Cape Department of Education has identified a number of interventions that we will embark on.

This is what brought all of us here today, the Reading Indaba, under the theme ***“TEACHING AND PROMOTING READING IN THE COVID-19 CRISIS AND BEYOND”***.

The Indaba coincides with the International Literacy Day that is celebrated annually on the 8th September as well as National Book Week from 5-11 September, to raise awareness of the importance of literacy for individuals as well as for communities as a whole. These initiatives is important in encouraging the value of reading as a fun and pleasurable activity and to showcase how reading can easily be incorporated into one’s daily lifestyle.

The Indaba is aimed at tackling the challenges schools face, that hinders the reading skills of South African learners, particularly in the Northern Cape. The Indaba will on the main focus to:

- Help teachers improve their instructional strategies for teaching reading, including phonics, comprehension, fluency, and vocabulary development.
- Equip teachers with tools and knowledge to assess learners; reading abilities and diagnose reading difficulties.
- Encourage critical thinking and reflection among teachers.
- Explore how technology can be integrated into reading instruction to enhance engagement and learning outcomes.

- Encourage learners to develop a love for reading, which in turn will benefit their personal and cognitive development.

Another initiative that we are currently embarking on is the Reading Retreat. This intervention is aimed at developing young writers. At the retreat, learners receive intensive reading and writing instructions from a qualified teacher as tutor, geared to his/her individual interests and participates in fun-filled group activities with other learners. Whilst teaching learners how to write, the retreat will also find ways to encourage them to write.

A booklet capturing what learners have written will be developed and shared with other learners in the province. This programme will be sustained through establishment of reading clubs where learners will be assisted in their reading clubs not only to read but to put their thoughts, feelings and ideas in writing.

In addition to this, we will be establishing 4 (four) Reading Laboratories in the Province. The Reading Lab is a skills class designed to assist students in improving their reading comprehension and vocabulary through a diagnostic test, plan intervention, check to see if intervention is working, or monitor the progress over time.

Reading Laboratory lets you develop confident readers through supplemental and personalised Grade R-12 reading content that ensures each learner is working at the appropriate level and moving ahead at his or her own pace. Four reading laboratories (2 per district) will be established in the Frances Baard and John Taolo Gaetsewe Districts.

We have recently successfully launched the MEC Book Club in the Province, together with the National Education Collaboration Trust and the Nation

Reading Coalition. This Book Club will aim to contribute towards inculcating a culture of reading for pleasure within the Province and also create a platform to discuss important issues and topics affecting society.

Ladies and Gentleman, we have an array of Reading programmes currently being implemented in our schools which includes: Read to Lead Campaign, Reading Champion programme, Drop All and Read Campaign, and many more.

Government and the Department of Basic Education can launch and initiate all these wonderful programmes, but it will mean nothing if we don't have the support from all our stakeholders and the communities. Our homes are the first institutions of learning where good values and norms must be inculcated to our children.

As communities, must work harder to help our children and adults to rediscover the joys of reading and life-long learning. In the event where parents cannot read, they should tell their children stories and let the children look at picture books and make up their own stories. Listening to stories, whether they are read or told, is enjoyable and creates an appetite for more stories, which encourages children to learn to read. Encouraging your child to read is probably the most valuable thing a parent can do to help a child with school and in life.

Members of religious and community organisations can play a very useful role in promoting reading by setting up and running reading clubs for children and adults. It is more effective if reading clubs are not seen as part of the school programme, but as something that is done for fun.

Religious and community based organisations play a leading role in our communities, and are also in a position to lead in the promotion of reading in

the community. We are looking forward to working together towards building a prosperous nation.

In conclusion, many approaches and solutions exist. Until all children are reading with comprehension and attaining meaningful literacy and learning outcomes, we all have work to do.

Let us take hands to address literacy and make reading fashionable in our homes, schools and communities. A modern, growing and successful Province, requires a citizenry with high levels of education, requisite skills and knowledge, who actively participates in the economy of our Province. This can only be achieved through Education. Let us make Education our business and become actively involved.

I encourage you participate and deliberate robustly in the Reading Indaba to emerge from here with clear strategies and plans to address reading with comprehension in our schools.

A reading nation is a winning nation.

I thank you!