

Press release

International Literacy Day: A chance to give children a better future

The EU, with UNICEF, the DBE and NECT launches an innovative programme to strengthen reading and leadership in South African schools

8 September, Pretoria: As the world commemorates International Literacy Day today, we are reminded of the critical importance of being able to read as a matter of dignity, sustainability and human rights. Literacy is an integral part of education and lifelong learning premised on humanism as defined by Sustainable Development Goal 4.

The statistics around literacy and children are a clear call to action. Despite global progress over the past three decades, 617 million children and adolescents are not achieving minimum proficiency levels in reading and mathematics. Furthermore, during the initial phase of the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were closed thereby disrupting the education of 62.3 per cent of the world's student population of 1.09 billion.

In response to this challenging situation, a joint two-year programme has been launched that is focusing on enhancing literacy initiatives at schools in KwaZulu-Natal, the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. *Reading and Leadership Strengthening in South African Schools (REALS-SA) for Learning During Covid-19 and Beyond*, is a European Union-funded (EU) initiative that is implemented by the United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF) in partnership with the Department of Basic Education (DBE) and the National Education Collaboration Trust (NECT).

"For decades, most education authorities made steady progress towards eradicating illiteracy. However, Covid-19 has had a profound effect and years of having successfully narrowed the literacy gap between pupils from lower and higher income backgrounds could be reversed if we do not act," explained EU Ambassador to South Africa, Dr Riina Kionka. "This is why I am delighted that the EU Delegation to South Africa is a participant in this important initiative", added Dr Kionka.

The programme will be implemented in 650 schools in the three aforementioned provinces and is expected to reach 292 000 learners, 65 000 parents, 4 600 teachers, 975 School Management Team members as well as 104 circuit managers and subject advisors.

The DBE is encouraged that the programme will support curriculum recovery by addressing the learning losses in reading and literacy caused by the pandemic. "As a collaborative exercise, the REALS SA programme has provided us with an ideal opportunity to consolidate available resources in the country and put

systems and processes in place to make these accessible to school managers, teachers and parents,” notes Kulula Manona, Chief Director of Foundations for Learning at the DBE.

These interventions will include input from tertiary institutions and NGOs to support the DBE’s education continuity plans while improving learning and teaching outcomes. There is also a focus on enhancing parental engagement, accountability and leadership for sustainability through capacity-building for district officials and School Management Teams.

Underlying all this is the reality that COVID-19 has affected the reading gains made in the pre-pandemic period. “The loss in learning time has resulted in learning losses,” explained UNICEF South Africa Representative, Christine Muhigana. “Hence the need for interventions such as this one, that addresses reading, continues to be critical,” she added.

The Reading Recovery component of the programme includes the provision of 650 primary schools with 50 new reading books for each grade. These books are a mix of storybooks for reading for pleasure and graded readers for learning to read. “I am delighted that these books will be accompanied by guidelines for teachers and managers on their use so that they will have maximum positive impact and I look forward to seeing these books in action in schools and in homes,” said Dr Lorraine Marneweck, Technical Advisor at the NECT.

In light of the focus of this critical educational initiative, it is fitting that International Literacy Day 2021 will explore how literacy can contribute to building a solid foundation for a human-centred recovery. In doing so, we have the opportunity to reimagine future literacy teaching and learning, within and beyond the context of the pandemic.

Note to editors:

The 8th of September was proclaimed International Literacy Day by UNESCO in 1966 to remind the international community of the importance of literacy for individuals, communities and societies, and the need for intensified efforts towards more literate societies. The UN's Sustainable Development Agenda, adopted by world leaders in September 2015, promotes universal access to quality education and learning opportunities throughout people’s lives. Sustainable Development Goal 4 has as one of its targets ensuring all young people achieve literacy and numeracy and that adults, who lack these skills are given the opportunity to acquire them.

For further information please contact:

Sudeshan Reddy, Communication Specialist, UNICEF South Africa,
+27 82 561 3970 / sureddy@unicef.org, or
Toby Fricker, Chief of Communications and Partnerships, UNICEF South Africa,
+27 61418 7486 / trficker@unicef.org