

Low literacy levels pose a threat on SA's economic growth prospects

The shockingly low rate of literacy in South Africa and its detrimental effects on the country's prospects for economic progress are of great concern to the Cape Chamber of Commerce and Industry.



Photo by Katerina Holmes via www.pexels.com

Findings of an international literacy study made public this week reveal eight out of 10 Grade 4 South Africans struggle to comprehend what they are reading, in any language. South Africa's score was the lowest of all participating nations, according to the 2021 study which incorporated reading comprehension assessments of around 400,000 pupils.

Of particular concern is South Africa's declining score relative to our score in the previous study in 2016. The percentage of South African Grade 4 pupils who now cannot read properly has increased from 78% to 81%. It is the first time South Africa has suffered a literacy reverse since 2006 when it first formed part of the study.



SA's children have lost a decade of reading progress, study shows

Liezl Human and Daneel Knoetze 19 May 2023



In announcing the study findings recently, government highlighted the negative impact of Covid-19 on pupils' performance.

The Chamber acknowledges the hugely negative impacts of Covid-19 on school education, notably the disruption of critical face-to-face schoolwork. However the literacy crisis highlighted in this latest study predates Covid-19 and is unfortunately reflective of a systemic problem within national education. The findings are all the more concerning given the huge proportion of the national budget spent on basic education.

In the Western Cape alone the education budget has nearly doubled in less than a decade, from R16bn in 2014 to R29,5bn in 2023. The Western Cape has at least acknowledged the problem in the form of a budget plan for a 'Back on Track' programme aimed at reversing learning losses brought about by Covid-19.

However it is clear that an enormous amount of work remains to be done if we want to attain the kind of literacy levels seen in other developing countries such as Brazil which has a similar GDP per capita. Brazil Grade 4 pupils scored on average 419 in the latest study, compared with South Africa's average of 288.

This literacy gap is indicative of the fact that as a nation we are falling behind in the crucial task of educating our children.



ALPs needed to cure Covid-19 learning losses

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There is a direct correlation between quality of education and economic performance. There is a similar correlation between basic education and a country's overall skills base. To a large extent our economic potential is determined by our ability to provide a solid educational foundation – something we are failing to do.

"What these latest results show is that we are failing our children and thereby sabotaging our ability to grow our economy," says Cape Chamber President Jacques Moolman.

"We urge government to respond to these findings with the necessary urgency. As a country we are at a severe disadvantage if our children are not afforded a decent education. The sooner pupils master basic reading and comprehension, the sooner they can absorb the knowledge and skills required to become economically active."

"A growing economy will also lead to greater revenue that can be used to help develop our people and our country."

"Conversely, the longer we wait to address this education crisis the less our economy is able to deliver the kind of growth we need to advance," Moolman said.

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