

PIRLS 2021 Overview of Key Findings

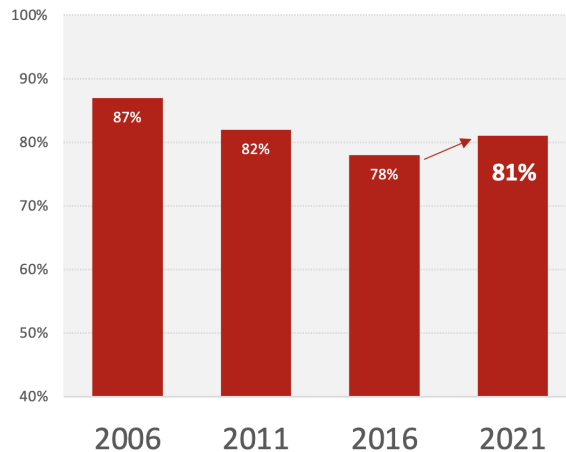
All figures in this document are referenced, or come directly from, the PIRLS 2021 SA Report or [PIRLS 2021 International Report](#)

- Nic Spaull (Secretariat of the [2030 Reading Panel](#))

What are the main findings?

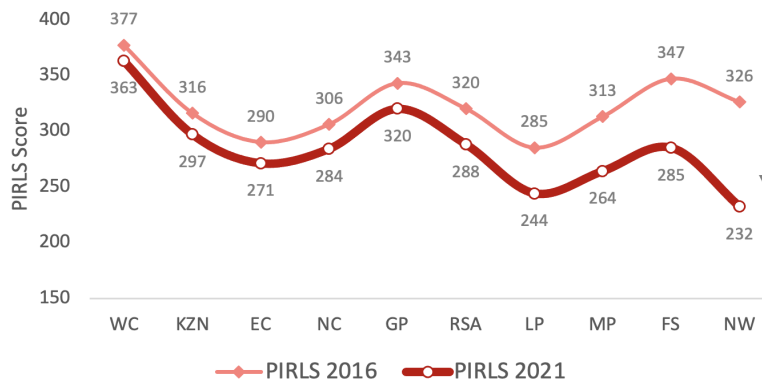
- In 2021 81% of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning in any language, up from 78% in 2016.** This means that only 19% of South African Grade 4 children could read for meaning in any language in 2021 (all 11 languages were assessed). Because PIRLS is a nationally-representative sample, of the [1,127,877](#) Grade 4 students in 2021, 914,000 could not read for meaning in any language. SA's PIRLS score dropped from 320 (2016) to 288 (2021), approximately 0,8 years of learning.
- We have lost a decade of progress.** Between 2006 and 2016 the percentage of children that could not read declined from 87% (2006) to 82% (2011) to 78% (2016), but has now increased back to 81% (2021), wiping out a decade of slow progress and taking us back to 2011 levels of achievement.
- Northern rural provinces experienced the largest declines in reading with coastal provinces experiencing the smallest declines.** Four provinces experienced declines of more than a full year of learning between 2016 and 2021. Given that 40 points amounts to one year of learning, this was as follows: North West (-2,4yrs), Free State (-1,6yrs), Mpumalanga (-1,2yrs) and Limpopo (-1yr). The three coastal provinces (WC, KZN and EC) experienced the smallest declines with WC showing the smallest decline (-0,4yrs).
- English and Afrikaans schools did not experience a decline between 2016 and 2021.** In comparison, most African language schools did decline, highlighting that the pandemic increased inequality between no-fee and fee-charging schools.

% of SA Gr4's who cannot read in any language
 (i.e. could not answer straightforward comprehension questions (PIRLS 2006 - 2021) Note all 11 languages were assessed. This is the percentage of Grade 4's that could not reach the PIRLS Low International Benchmark (400 points)



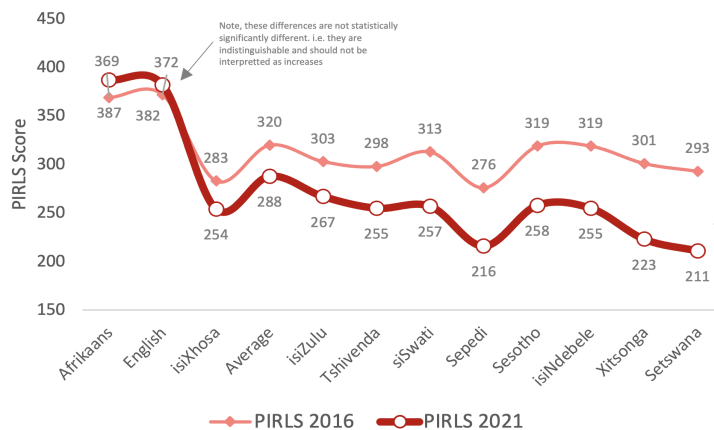
Provincial changes from PIRLS 2016 to PIRLS 2021

Source: Howie et al (2016: p.50); Van Staden (2023: p.5)



Average PIRLS scores by language (2016 to 2021)

Source: Howie et al (2016: p.55); Van Staden (2023: p.4)



5. **The average Brazilian Grade 4 child is three years ahead of the average South African Grade 4 child.** The average score in Brazil was 419 points in 2021 compared to South Africa's 288 points. The average Grade 4 child in South Africa is 3,3 years behind the average Brazilian Grade 4 child. In Brazil 61% of Grade 4's could read at a basic level in 2021 compared to 19% in South Africa. Note that Brazil and South Africa have roughly the same GDP/capita (\$7000/capita).
6. **South Africa had the largest gender gap (pro-girl) of all 57 participating countries/regions.** The average Grade 4 girl in South Africa scored 57 points higher than the average Grade 4 boy, placing them about 1,5 years of learning ahead of their male counterparts. While girls outperform boys in all countries, the South African gap is more than twice the international average gap between boys and girls.
7. **South Africa experienced the largest decline in reading outcomes (-31 points) of all 33 countries/regions with data in 2016 and 2021. Despite this South Africa has no real plan or budget to catch up lost learning.** It should be noted that PIRLS 2021 is the first nationally representative indication of learning losses to date. To quote a recent research report reviewing DBE's interventions relating to COVID-19 "There has been no attempt to recoup time in order to remediate learning losses, apart from very recent attempts in one province. The insistence on a largely business-as-usual approach to curriculum implementation fails to recognise and address the severe educational impact of the pandemic, especially on learners in the poorest communities ([Hoadley, 2023: p.1](#)). By contrast, many countries have multi-billion rand catch-up programs, for example Colombia's [PROMISE](#) program (R3,5-billion), the Indian state of Gujarat's [GOAL](#) initiative (R9,5-billion), the [Recovering Learning Losses](#) program in northern Brazil (R4,8-billion), or the R7,3-billion '[2023 Plan de Ractivación Educativa](#)' in Chile announced last month, acknowledging it will take at least four years to catch up the learning losses from COVID-19. Only one province (WC) has so far announced a budgeted plan for catching up learning losses (WCED's R1,2bn '[Back on Track](#)' program)
8. **A 'generational catastrophe':** The new PIRLS 2021 reveal what can arguably be referred to as a 'generational catastrophe.' More than 4-million children in primary school have experienced more than half their schooling career in a disrupted state (either school closures or rotational timetables). Research on school closures from natural disasters like [earthquakes in Pakistan](#) and the [Ebola crisis in West Africa](#) all show that there are long term consequences to short term crises. These include lower educational attainment, lower earnings, higher unemployment and being more likely to be in lower skilled occupations in adulthood. This effect might even carry over to the children of the children affected by school closures, as happened with [school closures in Argentina](#).

What can be done?

Evidence-based interventions to catch up learning losses. South Africa has the benefit of numerous interventions that have been proven to raise learning outcomes, even in no fee schools and in poorer provinces. These have been summarized in a recent book published by Oxford University Press (Spaull & Taylor, 2022)

(1) **Recruiting, training and equipping youth to be Teacher Assistants.** Teaching assistants help teachers deal with large classes and different learning levels of children. A successful program in Limpopo selected youth using numeracy and literacy tests, trained them for four days face-to-face per term, equipped them with

workbooks to use and monitored and supported them with TA-mentors (see [Makaluza & Mpeta, 2022](#)). This resulted in substantial improvements to literacy and numeracy equivalent to more than [1 additional year](#) of learning. The government's Presidential Youth Employment Initiative (PYEI) Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) has established the organizational, political and financial feasibility of operating a teacher assistant programme at scale. The Limpopo programme demonstrates that it is also feasible to meaningfully impact learning outcomes and provides a model for recruitment, training and mentoring to achieve that. Subsequent iterations of the PYEI / Jobs Fund program could incorporate these learnings to catch up learning losses.

(2) **Rolling out anthologies of graded readers to all grade 1-3 children.** Most children do not have basic texts needed to learn how to read in their home language at school or at home. This can be remedied using low cost anthologies of graded readers that cost R15/book/child. For a brief period of 2 years (2019 and 2020) the Eastern Cape Department of Basic Education rolled out anthologies of graded readers – essentially a set of about 20 sequenced stories aimed at teaching children to read in their home language. The program was evaluated and shown to improve reading outcomes in isiXhosa for the children who received them compared to previous cohorts in the same schools who did not (see [Ardington & Spaul, 2022](#)).

(3) **Training teachers face-to-face and equipping them with comprehensive workbooks and teacher guides:** ([Ardington, 2023](#)). Research in Limpopo shows that equipping learners with workbooks and teachers with teacher guides, in addition to four days of face-to-face training per term led to a 60% of a year of learning increase compared to business-as-usual schools.

(4) **Using teacher-coaches to support teachers on how to teach reading.** The [DBE's Early Grade Reading Study \(EGRS\)](#) shows that reading outcomes of Grade 1-3 learners improve after at least 2 years of an expert reading coach supporting and visiting teachers in the schools.

PIRLS Facts

[PIRLS](#) (Progress in International Reading Literacy Study) is an independently administered, nationally representative assessment of reading comprehension among a sample of Grade 4 learners in South Africa. South Africa has participated in PIRLS four times (2006, 2011, 2016 and 2021). The tests are set by the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) and implemented in South Africa by the Center for Evaluation and Assessment ([CEA](#)) at the University of Pretoria. The tests are comparable over time and across countries, with all tests translated into the official languages of each country. In South Africa all 11 languages are tested. Children are tested in Grade 4 in whatever the language of instruction is from Grades 1-3 in the school (i.e. an isiZulu learner in an isiZulu school in KZN would write the test in isiZulu).

- Total # of Grade 4 children tested	12 426
- Total # of primary schools in the sample:	321
- Dates of testing:	Aug-Nov 2021

Useful links:

1. [SA PIRLS 2021 report](#)
2. [International PIRLS 2021 report](#)
3. [Other PIRLS reports](#)
4. [“COVID-19 and the South African curriculum policy response”](#) (Hoadley, 2023)