**MEDIA STATEMENT**  
   
**BASIC EDUCATION PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE BRIEFED ON READING AND LITERACY STUDY**  
   
**Parliament, Tuesday, 23 May 2023 –** The Portfolio Committee on Basic Education today received a comprehensive briefing from the Department of Basic Education (DBE) on the recently released Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) for 2021.  
   
Committee Chairperson Ms Bongiwe Mbinqo-Gigaba indicated that the committee noted media reports on the outcome of the study and requested a detailed, official briefing from the DBE on its implications.  
   
The PIRLS 2021 study reveals very low performance levels for learners' ability to read for meaning as they turn 10 years old. Reading comprehension is the ability to read text, process it and understand its meaning. It relies on two interconnected abilities: word reading (being able to decode the symbols on the page) and language comprehension (being able to understand the meaning of the words and sentences). Readers who have a strong understanding can draw conclusions after reading a text.  
   
The committee heard that the DBE uses three different national assessments to generate data: Early and emergent literacy skills (ELNA); Foundational reading comprehension (Systemic evaluation) and International reading comprehension benchmarks. The results of the ELNA and the Systematic evaluation assessments are better than the International reading comprehension assessment results, the DBE said.  
   
The committee heard that South Africa has participated in PIRLS since 2006, with subsequent cycles in 2011, 2016, and most recently in 2021. 12 426 Grade 4 learners in 321 schools and 9 317 Grade 6 learners in 253 schools were assessed. Grade 4 learners were representative of the 11 official languages and nine provinces, while the Grade 6 learners only represented Afrikaans and English. South Africa's Grade 4 and 6 participation rate was 97% and 98% respectively (after replacements).  
   
South Africa's trend score from 2016 dropped significantly from 320 to 288 (difference of 32 points). 81% of Grade 4s and 56% of Grade 6 learners did not reach the low benchmark of 400 points. Grade 6 learners scored 384 points, with Afrikaans learners scoring an average of 456. The best performing language was Afrikaans (387) and lowest Setswana (211). The Western Cape had the highest scores: Grade 4 at 363 and Grade 6 at 460, almost 131 points above North West in Grade 4, which achieved 232. At 317 score points nationally, Grade 4 girls achieved 57 score points higher than Grade 4 boys (260).              
   
Some of the challenges with reading for comprehension highlighted by the DBE are the lack of a culture of reading in many households in South Africa, along with poorly resourced schools and a lack of emphasis on reading during the early childhood development phase.  The DBE indicated that it will now study and analyse the results in order to improve in these areas.  
   
Ms Mbinqo-Gigaba said the committee is concerned about the results, but noted the societal issues that impact on South Africa's results, including the days of learning lost during Covid-19. Furthermore, the committee noted that the PIRLS assessments are done in English and some learners do not have English as a language of learning in the developmental phase. "We took to heart some of the suggestions and strategies mentioned, like placing more emphasis on access to books and reading corners in classrooms, thereby inculcating a love for reading and being able to read with meaning and understanding."  
   
**ISSUED BY THE PARLIAMENTARY COMMUNICATION SERVICES ON BEHALF OF THE CHAIRPERSON OF THE PORTFOLIO COMMITTEE ON BASIC EDUCATION, MS BONGIWE MBINQO-GIGABA.**  
   
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