

Minister Angie Motshekga
Department of Basic Education
Private Bag X603,
Pretoria, 0001

6th June 2013

Dear Minister Motshekga

NEEDU Report - The State of Literacy Teaching and Learning in the Foundation Phase

We would like to contribute to the dialogue around how NEEDU's report feeds into a broader understanding of the many factors that are shaping literacy underachievement. Our particular interest and expertise relates to what the evidence says about how children learn language and literacy successfully. In relation to this, we would like to register our concerns about the report's focus and recommendations and explain the reasons for these concerns.

We welcome the fact that NEEDU chose to focus on the Foundation Phase for their first report. This reflects the growing understanding in South Africa of how important the early years are in shaping later academic attainment. We support the central recommendation of the report that the DBE must take urgent steps to build teachers' subject knowledge and pedagogic understanding. We are also pleased that the need for books in classrooms is given priority in the recommendations.

The report implies that if we can improve the instructional knowledge and skills of Foundation Phase teachers, literacy results will improve. However, while improved training and support for teachers is vital, the evidence shows that it is only part of the answer. By only asking questions of the formal schooling system, the recommendations are necessarily limited in scope. To gain a complete picture, it is essential to consider other important factors that impact on literacy learning. The report does not do this and not only does this undermine its findings, it also means that inadequate attention is given to two key components of successful language and literacy learning – firstly, high quality language and literacy experiences in the preschool years, and secondly a supportive home learning environment.

Research has shown that children's progress in literacy is not only determined by how well they are taught at school, but on their levels of language and literacy at school entry. The NEEDU investigation did not include any assessments of children's language and literacy skills at the beginning of Grade One and was therefore unable to address the degree to which this might be a significant factor in the subsequent development of their reading and writing skills. This is particularly important, because there is a risk we might yet again ignore the wealth of international research showing that if children begin school with poor language and early

literacy skills, it is difficult for them to catch up even with skilled teaching (more information on these studies can be found in Wordworks' report '*Narrowing the Literacy Gap: Strengthening language and literacy development between birth and six years for children in South Africa*'). Economists have also shown how remedial interventions at school age (closing gaps) are much more costly than investment in high quality early years education (preventing gaps), and this is now influencing the approach being taken to raising literacy levels by governments around the world.

Universal attendance of high quality Grade R classes could play a significant part in strengthening children's literacy foundations. Tackling the huge variations in the quality of Grade R teaching and learning should therefore be an urgent priority for DBE. The years between birth and five are also crucial. This is the optimal period for language development and so it is essential that children of all backgrounds are exposed to the learning opportunities (in home, community and preschool settings) that support and enable such development.

In addition, at the heart of any successful strategy to tackle South Africa's low literacy rates must be recognition and support for the vital role of families and communities as co-producers of education. Studies have demonstrated not only a strong link between a child's home learning environment and their later attainment in reading and mathematics, but also that the ability to deliver an effective home learning environment does not have to depend on parents' education levels. This gives much cause for optimism in terms of understanding the potential to empower all parents and carers to play a central role in breaking intergenerational cycles of educational underachievement.

If we are to improve the chances of young children in South Africa, we cannot keep making the same mistakes. We need a radical shift in thinking and approach. It is unrealistic to expect schools and teachers alone to redress the deep inequalities that already exist when children start school – with many learners already two to three years behind – and to remedy a system that is not providing adequate learning opportunities for children before they begin school. In other words, we need to ensure that all children at the outset have equal opportunity to benefit from improved teaching in school.

We hope these comments are helpful. We would welcome your views on the points above, and would also welcome the opportunity to meet with you to discuss these issues in more detail.

Dr Shelley O'Carroll
Director, Wordworks

Cc: Dr Nick Taylor, CEO, NEEDU