

POLICY

BRIEF

FINANCIAL AND FISCAL COMMISSION (2023)

Learner Teacher Support Materials

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learner teacher support materials (LTSMs) have been recognised as an essential element in relation to the constitutionally enshrined right to a basic education. Based on the apparent crowding out of non-personnel spending in the basic education sector, important educational inputs such as LTSM are threatened.

The FFC thus undertook an analysis to understand the policy context underpinning the provision of LTSM in South Africa, as well as the funding thereof. Generally the analysis shows that there is no approved national LTSM policy in the basic education sector and that prioritisation from a funding perspective, can be improved upon. The FFC has thus advised government to finalise its LTSM policy and has made suggestions as to how funding of LTSM can be strengthened. In addition, as a means of improving early grade reading and reading for meaning, the Commission has called on government to fund and implement a national reading programme that draws on the approaches taken by successful local interventions.



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BACKGROUND

LTSM is an essential tool to convey knowledge to learners in a way that transforms complicated concepts into understandable content. Therefore, LTSM is a crucial component of curriculum creation and a tool for fostering an efficient teaching and learning process in schools. Examples of LTSMs include textbooks, workbooks, worksheets and supplementary resource materials used in classroom settings. LTSMs can also include electronic materials, such as e-textbooks, tablets, computers, and supplementary electronic materials – also known as eLTSMs.

Provision and appropriate use of LTSMs provides an essential element for strengthening educational outcomes and is key to addressing the existing challenge that South Africa is experiencing with respect to poor early grade reading levels. In 2022/23, of the R298 billion allocated to basic education, 75 per cent was allocated to compensation of employees. The ever-expanding compensation costs threaten spending on non-personnel educational inputs such as LTSM. Given the rigidity of provincial revenue bases, provinces are left with the task of having to reorient spending towards the most pressing needs and for schools that are unable to supplement government funding with revenue from school fees, this means less funding for essential educational inputs such as LTSM. The analysis undertaken by the FFC seeks to determine what funding is allocated to LTSM, as well as some of the challenges confronting the provision and priority attached to this essential educational input.

Research Findings

There were four key findings that emerged from the FFC's analysis. They are outlined below:

1. LTSM policy in draft form since 2014: The LTSM policy has stalled, having been in draft form for the past nine years. To convey the importance of LTSMs, as well as government's aspirations around this important educational input, the policy must be finalised. In addition, as the policy moves towards finalisation the lack of emphasis on eLTSMs must be corrected. This aspect is important as progression towards e-education and the use of eLTSMs are contained as goals in the National Development Plan (NPD) as measures to embrace the use of technology in education and improve ways of learning.
2. Need for greater priority and a differentiated funding approach: Funding for LTSM at the school level is via the annually gazetted 'per learner' amounts (governed by the National Norms and Standards for School Funding policy), which is applicable to all public ordinary schools. Learners in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 represent the neediest learners and are allocated higher per learner amounts relative to learners in quintiles 4 and 5 who are considered more affluent.

The amounts are the same per learner in the same quintile, irrespective of whether a learner is in primary or high school. The concern is that as learners progress to higher grades, the number of textbooks and the length of textbooks increase, which implies higher costs. The funding currently does not consider this differentiated need of learners as they progress to higher grades. This non-differentiated approach is not aligned with best practice as recommended by the World Bank whereby governments ought to spend a minimum of 3-5 per cent of the primary education budget and a slightly higher, 4-6 per cent of the secondary education budget, on textbooks.

Some provinces noted that this increase in costs associated with LTSMs in higher grades can at times result in inability to ensure that all learners have textbooks and other LTSMs. Provinces further noted that in early grades, as learners receive textbooks each year, they come to rely on them for structure. This is then reversed and learners are left floundering when they enter secondary school and no longer receive their own textbooks.

In particular, the analysis of provincial spending trends highlighted a relatively low priority attached to LTSM spending in public special schools when compared to such spending in public ordinary schools and to a lesser extent, early childhood development (ECD). Over the period 2010/11 to 2020/21, the nine provincial education departments (PEDs) allocated an average of 0.6 per cent to LTSM in public special schools. Given the cost associated with specialised LTSM requirements (such as converting text to braille) and assistive technology (such as audiobooks and electronic worksheets) that can be used by learners with special educational needs, the level of LTSM funding allocated to this category of schools, is disproportionately small. It must be noted, however, that the low level of priority attached to LTSM in special schools is indicative of a broader challenge around the lack of

a comprehensive funding framework for special schools that has been raised by the FFC in previous annual submissions – see for example chapter 5 of the Annual Submission for the 2021/22 Division of Revenue.

3. LTSM and links to improving early grade reading and reading for meaning: While the national DBE (and various PEDs) have spearheaded various interventions (including the 2008 National Reading Strategy) to improve reading for meaning, impact has been limited with these aspects remaining challenges that require significant and urgent turnaround. Recent, 2023 statistics, indicating that 82 per cent of Grade 4 learners cannot read for meaning, attest to this. From an infrastructure point of view, data from the National Education Infrastructure Management System indicates that as at 2021, 30.41 per cent of schools had a library. Of that 30.41 per cent, only 17.39 per cent had a stocked library that contained books. This means that 69.59 per cent or over 17 000 schools have no library facilities. While this represents an improvement relative to 2020 where 74.16 per cent of schools did not have library facilities, the amount of schools without these facilities is high and this aspect should be urgently addressed, not only because it is part of the minimum norms and standards for school infrastructure, but because these facilities can play an important role in promoting a culture of reading and access to reading materials at school. While international and regional best practice case studies provide guidance on how to improve educational performance, successful local initiatives also exist.

The Vula Bula Anthologies and Funda Wande interventions are cases in point. In 2018, the Eastern Cape PED developed a reading strategy for 2019-2023. This was in response to the expanding amount of domestic and global research that affirms the idea that children should go to school and learn how to read, and write for meaning. Included in this strategy was the distribution of graded readers and other LTSMs. Due to the expensive cost of supplying an acceptable quantity of graded readers in skinny-book format, the Department explored open-access readers.

The Department collaborated with non-government organisations such as Funda Wande, who, along with Molteno, was transforming Vula Bula's open-access graded readers into an anthology format. Since the readers were open education resources, printing the anthologies was significantly less expensive. As a result, in 2019 and 2020, the anthologies were provided to all Grade 1-3 learners at roughly R15 for each reader. A total of 825 000 readers were distributed to 463 276 children across 4 298 schools.

A key requirement that accompanied the provision of these readers to schools was the requirement that learners had to take the readers home. The readers also contained a note to parents and caregivers requesting them to encourage learners to read the stories aloud at home. According to an interaction with one of the key implementers of this initiative, the emphasis on allowing learners to take readers home departs from the norm of schools wanting to protect and hold on to textbooks and readers and thus very rarely, or ever, allowing these forms of LTSM to leave the school.

The extensive usage of these readers improved the learner's word-reading fluency in their native tongue. As a result, learners who had full access to these readers in the Eastern Cape could read three more isiXhosa words fluently per minute in Grade 3 compared to those without access.

Unfortunately, despite the programme's efficacy and impact on learners' reading performance in 2019 and 2020, the books were not printed or delivered in the subsequent years due to budgetary constraints. Similarly, the 2023 Reading Panel Background Report provides key insights into local initiatives that have proven to positively influence reading for meaning (Spaull, 2023)¹. One such example is the Funda Wande Limpopo Teacher Assistant intervention that coupled the provision of additional materials with the placement of a trained teaching assistant per teacher. With this approach reading outcomes improved dramatically (by 129 per cent).

4. Systems to improve monitoring of LTSM: Where functions are shared amongst national and provincial spheres of government, the national sphere is generally more focussed on monitoring and overseeing service delivery as implemented by provinces. This is the case when it comes to LTSM as well. At present, the national DBE does not have an electronic monitoring system so as to track performance of PEDs when it comes to LTSMs.

Likewise, at a provincial level, it is important for PEDs to be aware of how schools within their jurisdiction are performing in relation to the delivery of basic education. At present, a few provinces, notably the Free State, North West and Northern Cape

¹ Spaull, N. (2023). 2023 Background Report for the 2030 Reading Panel. Cape Town.

provinces have their own internal electronic systems. The Free State has noted various advantages as a result of being able to effectively monitor and track requisitioning, receipt and retrieval of LTSMs by schools – even in some instances being able to avoid unnecessary spending on top-ups of textbooks.

Given the high costs associated with procuring information technology (IT) systems, the basic education sector needs to consider how to leverage existing systems and processes to assist with monitoring and oversight nationally and provincially. In this regard, the South African School Administration and Management System (SA-SAMS) provides an opportunity. The SA-SAMS has been developed and implemented by the national DBE, the State Information Technology Agency (SITA) and PEDs. This system can be used to ensure that all provinces are capturing data related to LTSM such as coverage rates, retention, top ups.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The Commission makes the following recommendations:

1. *The Minister must ensure that the draft LTSM policy, which has been stalled since 2014, is finalised and approved.*
2. *Funding for LTSMs should be prioritised, especially for learners in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 schools. National funding norms need to be developed to guide spending on LTSM per child, per phase i.e. foundation, intermediate and senior and FET. Moreover, specific priority should be given to the provision of LTSMs for learners with special educational needs.*
3. *LTSMs are critical in improving reading for meaning. The Minister of Basic Education must fund a national programme that is aimed at improving reading for meaning and which is uniformly implemented across the nine provinces. Lessons from successful local initiatives must be drawn on to determine which approaches are likely to succeed.*
4. *To aid improved monitoring and oversight of LTSMs (particularly textbooks) and achieve the goal of universal coverage, the Minister of Basic Education must expand the modules contained in the South African School Administration and Management System (SASAM) to include LTSM.*

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