



**Funda Wande**  
Reading for Meaning

## EVIDENCE BRIEF:

Closing the foundational  
learning gap in Limpopo:  
Evidence-based policy  
imperatives

*Authored by the Funda Wande Research Team - November 2025*



The long-term economic productivity and social equity of Limpopo province depend directly on the foundational literacy and numeracy skills established in the first decade of a child's life. Without this solid foundation, the entire education system becomes unsustainable, producing learners unprepared for higher education or the demands of a modern workforce. The longitudinal study initiated in 2024 by Funda Wandé across 30 Limpopo schools serves as a vital diagnostic tool, providing clear, localized evidence of the specific challenges hindering learner progress. The initial baseline findings paint a stark but unambiguous picture of systemic deficiencies that demand immediate and decisive policy action.

The key challenges identified at the outset of the study include:

- **Near-absent foundational literacy:**

Most Grade R learners could not identify any letter sounds, and an alarming 86% were unable to read a single word. This fundamental decoding skill deficit means that reading comprehension is practically non-existent at this stage.

- **Undeveloped conceptual mathematics:**

Learners demonstrated weak number recognition and an inability to perform basic operations, with over 90% struggling with simple subtraction. More critically, the core concepts of part-whole reasoning and ordinality, which are prerequisites for problem-solving, were severely underdeveloped.

- **Significant presence of over-aged learners:**

A high proportion of learners are older than their grade-level peers, indicating broader systemic issues related to school readiness, poverty, and progression bottlenecks.

These baseline results established a critical benchmark of underperformance. The subsequent midline findings offer a crucial measure of progress or the lack thereof against this severe starting point.



# A TALE OF TWO TRAJECTORIES:

## Progress and persistent gaps

While targeted support can yield encouraging progress in foundational skills, the most stubborn and consequential learning gaps often persist without systemic policy intervention. The data from the 2025 midline reveals a dual reality: learners are acquiring some basic skills at a faster rate, but a dangerous divide is opening between mechanical ability and genuine understanding, creating divergent educational outcomes.

The evolution of learner performance from the 2024 baseline to the 2025 midline highlights this trend:

Area of Assessment	Key Findings: Baseline (2024) vs. Midline (2025)
Basic Literacy (Decoding)	<b>Baseline:</b> Most Grade R learners could not identify letter sounds; 86% could not read a single word. <b>Midline:</b> Significant improvement in Grade 1 letter-sound knowledge; more learners can now read 10-20 familiar words per minute.
Reading Comprehension (Meaning-Making)	<b>Baseline:</b> Comprehension was nearly absent; decoding did not translate into meaning. <b>Midline:</b> Gains remain limited. While decoding has improved, most learners still cannot demonstrate an understanding of what they read.
Basic Numeracy (Operations)	<b>Baseline:</b> Weak number recognition; over 90% struggled with Level 2 subtraction. <b>Midline:</b> Stronger performance in Grade 1, with over half of learners reliably identifying numbers up to 20. Simple addition has improved, but subtraction and conceptual mathematics (part-whole, ordinality) remain stumbling blocks.
Conceptual Mathematics	<b>Baseline:</b> Part-whole reasoning and ordinality were underdeveloped. <b>Midline:</b> Conceptual mathematics remains a major weakness. Too few learners are reaching age-appropriate conceptual levels required for problem-solving.
Equity Dimensions	<b>Baseline:</b> A significant share of over-aged learners was identified. <b>Midline:</b> The gap is widening, as over-aged learners continue to underperform. Socio-economic and school readiness disparities are becoming more visible as learners progress.

The trend is clear, learners are improving on routine, foundational skills like letter recognition and simple counting. The critical transition to higher-order skills reading for meaning and using numbers to solve problems is not happening at the required pace. This evidence of persistent, deepening gaps signals an urgent need for targeted policy interventions that go beyond the basics.





## THE CORE DEFICITS:

### Interpreting the Evidence for Policy Action

To be effective, policy must move beyond observing raw data to diagnosing the root causes of underperformance. The midline findings reveal four core deficits in the early grade education system in Limpopo that, if left unaddressed, will solidify into long-term learning failures and entrench inequality.

#### 1. The comprehension deficit:

The data shows learners are mastering the processes of decoding without grasping the meaning of the text, which makes this a critical failure. Reading without comprehension is not reading; it is a pointless exercise that creates a cohort of functionally illiterate learners unable to engage with STEM, history, or any text-based field, crippling the province's future workforce.

#### 2. The conceptual math bottleneck:

Progress in routine counting has not translated into deeper number sense. Learners' inability to grasp fundamental concepts like part-whole reasoning and ordinality prevents them from moving beyond memorization to genuine mathematical thinking and problem-solving. This bottleneck ensures they will struggle with any mathematical task that requires reasoning rather than simple recall.

#### 3. The widening equity gap:

The system is actively failing its most vulnerable learners. The continued underperformance of over-aged learners and the increasing visibility of socio-economic disparities show that existing support structures are inadequate. Without targeted intervention, the school system will continue to amplify initial disadvantages, making social mobility impossible for those who need it most.

#### 4. Systemic fragility:

The uneven improvements observed across schools indicate that progress is isolated and not systemic. Pockets of success are likely due to exceptional local efforts rather than a resilient, high-functioning system. This fragility means that under-resourced and rural contexts will continue to lag, perpetuating a cycle of educational inequality across the province.

These deficits represent fundamental structural failures that demand a proportionate and systemic policy response, not incremental adjustments.



# ACTIONABLE POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SYSTEMIC CHANGE

This brief's central purpose is to translate evidence into action. The following recommendations are not a menu of optional interventions but a set of interconnected, non-negotiable priorities for transforming early grade education in Limpopo. They are designed to directly address the core deficits identified in the longitudinal study and build a system where all learners can succeed.

- 1. Mandate School Readiness as a Grade R priority Policy must mandate a rigorous focus on oral language, phonological awareness, and number sense in Grade R.** The baseline data provides incontrovertible evidence that learners are entering Grade 1 unprepared for the formal curriculum, making this upstream intervention a non-negotiable prerequisite for reducing costly, and often ineffective, downstream remediation.
- 2. Reorient Grade 1 instruction around comprehension and conceptual fluency Instructional policy must be reformed to make meaning-making in literacy and problem-solving in numeracy central components of Grade 1 teaching from day one.** The evidence proves that a narrow focus on decoding and rote counting creates a critical bottleneck. This policy shift is essential to ensure that foundational skills translate into genuine understanding.
- 3. Fund equity-responsive interventions for at-risk learners' Provincial policy must direct dedicated funding toward equity-responsive strategies, including differentiated classroom support and readiness interventions for over-aged learners and those in disadvantaged schools.** The data confirms that a one-size-fits-all approach is widening equity gaps. A targeted strategy is essential to break the cycle of disadvantage and ensure that a child's background does not determine their educational destiny.
- 4. Establish systemic, ongoing teacher professional development to ensure that policy changes translate into classroom practice, the province must invest in sustained, practical professional development and collaborative platforms for teachers.** This training must focus explicitly on effective instructional techniques for teaching reading comprehension and conceptual mathematics, equipping educators with the tools to address the core learning deficits identified in this study.





The findings from the Funda Wande longitudinal study present a mixed but urgent picture. While progress is possible, persistent and deepening gaps in comprehension and conceptual mathematics threaten to leave an entire generation of learners in Limpopo “irreversibly behind.” This is not merely a pedagogical issue; it is a systemic failure that will manifest as higher dropout rates, increased youth unemployment, and a permanent drag on provincial economic growth within a decade.

However, the evidence does not just diagnose the problem; it provides a clear roadmap for intervention. The core deficits are understood, and the policy levers for addressing them are identifiable. The challenge now is to move from evidence to implementation. This brief calls on Limpopo’s educational policymakers to seize this opportunity and use this robust evidence to drive systemic, lasting change. The goal must be clear and unwavering: to build an education system that ensures every child in the province can read with meaning and compute with confidence by age 10.

