

We must do more to close the inequality gap in education

By [Stacey Brewer](#)

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Education was a priority for President Cyril Ramaphosa during his fourth State of the Nation Address (Sona) last week, with some major announcements around government's plans to develop the skills our youth need to forge a meaningful future.



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The timing of Sona was always going to be interesting, coming just a month after the release of the inaugural World Economic Forum (WEF) report on social mobility, which put South Africa at 77th out of 82 countries. In a nutshell, what the report said was that the current levels of education in South Africa are hindering the ability of our children to have better lives than their parents.

It's been shown time and again that education is a ticket out of poverty, but right now, low-income families have limited opportunities to improve their circumstances. In short, the current inequality of opportunity that many South Africans endure is only being compounded by a lack of access to quality education – something government is all too aware of and working hard to try and remedy.

What about the building blocks?

So, did Sona do enough to show government's commitment to improving our beleaguered education system? Yes and no. There were some big-ticket announcements made, but most of the initiatives were focused at tertiary education level: a new university for Ekurhuleni, and nine new TVET colleges across the country.



Sona 2020's impact on the learning year ahead

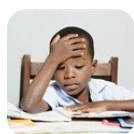
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Those hoping for more concrete action to boost our pre-primary and primary schools, where the critical building blocks of lifelong skills like literacy and numeracy are laid, may have come away less encouraged.

The highlight of Sona for primary school learners was the announcement that government will this year introduce Coding and Robotics in Grades R to 3 in 200 schools, with the aim of implementing it fully by 2022. President Ramaphosa said government would be piloting the Coding and Robotics Curriculum in selected schools 'to equip learners with the required skills for the 4th industrial revolution'.

Staying with technology, the process of distributing tablet devices to every learner in the country, which was announced last year, is also 'well under way'. The government sees this as an important step in driving the country's early reading programmes, with the stated goal of getting every 10-year-old to be able to read for meaning. The importance of this cannot be understated: the 2016 Progress in International Reading Literacy (PIRLS) study found that 8 out of every 10 Grade 4 learners in South Africa cannot read for meaning.



PIRLS report shows 80% of SA children struggle to read at appropriate level

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Focus on the basics

Is it enough, though? There's no doubt that coding and robotics are critical skills for the future, and that the use of technology like tablets in the classroom can play an important role in improving educational outcomes. But global best practices suggest more of a focus on the basics: reading and writing have to make up a large proportion of a student's daily timetable, especially in the foundation phase. Instruction in reading comprehension cannot begin only after a child reaches phonetic competency and fluency; it must be integrated from the outset.

We also need to see more progress in numeracy. Right now, South African Grade R learners are only expected to be able to count to 10. At Spark Schools and internationally, Grade R learners are able to count to 100.

Access and quality

Access to education is a bugbear that just won't go away. The WEF report said more than 8% of South African learners can't access any form of primary education, and high student-to-teacher ratios make it difficult to deliver quality teaching and learning. The PIRLS study suggested that the average class size in South African primary schools had risen from 40 to 45 – and in no-fee primary schools, that number had grown from 41 to 48. What does this mean? Our issues begin with access, and then go to the quality of learning that happens in the classroom.

Providing jobs for our youth is a critical step in addressing the socio-economic ills that plague our country. We need to go further, though, and start earlier. We, as an education community, have an obligation to work towards a South Africa where all children can access a quality education. We need to work together better to build an education system where the injustices of the past no longer determine a child's future. Without an effective education system, we won't just fall behind economically and technologically. We will be failing the next generation. And that's just not good enough.

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