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PIRLS 2011: MEDIA RELEASE

11 December 2012

43% OF SOUTH AFRICAN GRADE 5 LEARNERS TESTED IN AFRIKAANS OR ENGLISH CANNOT READ AT APPROPRIATE LEVEL

South Africa participated in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2011) alongside 48 other countries and 9 benchmarking participants. PIRLS is one of the largest international reading literacy assessments of its kind.

In PIRLS 2011, 325 000 Grade 4 students were tested internationally across 49 countries, with four countries testing Grade 6 learners and nine countries participating in benchmarking. Three countries took part in prePIRLS, a new study initiative.

The following findings were revealed by the PIRLS 2011 survey of reading literacy of South African Grade 4 and 5 learners:

- **43% of South African Grade 5 learners have not developed the basic reading skills required for reading at an equivalent international Grade 4 level. Fewer children attained the highest international benchmarks than in 2006.**
- **29% of Grade 4 learners do not have the rudimentary reading skills required for reading at an equivalent international Grade 2 level.**
- **Girls outperform boys in Grade 4 and Grade 5 in South Africa and in Grade 4 internationally**
- **More South African Grade 5 children tested in Afrikaans or English reached the highest international benchmark in contrast to Grade 4 children in 13 other countries (including Morocco, Indonesia, Oman, Norway, Belgium and Colombia, amongst others).**

- **More than half of learners tested in Sepedi and Tshivenda are at risk, with 57% of Sepedi children not reaching the lowest international benchmarks.**
- **Rural and township children are, on average, 2-2.5 years behind urban children in reading.**
- **More than half of South African schools (59%) have no libraries, which is the second highest percentage internationally after Morocco.**
- **More than half of Grade 4 children (55%) report frequent bullying at primary school, the highest internationally.**

This study (PIRLS 2011), together with the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS 2011), are both directed by the TIMSS and PIRLS International Study Centre at Boston College in the USA and are conducted under the auspices of the International Association for the Evaluation of Educational Achievement (IEA) from its headquarters in Amsterdam, The Netherlands.

PIRLS 2011 follows the 2006 South African study, which was the largest, most ambitious and complex national study ever undertaken within an international comparative study, with South Africa having the largest number of learners. In 2011, approximately 19 000 Grades 4 and 5 learners in more than 430 schools across the country participated in PIRLS, and were tested in all 11 and 2 official languages respectively.

PIRLS 2011 is just one of a number of research projects undertaken at the University of Pretoria's Centre for Evaluation and Assessment (CEA). The research is designed to provide a comprehensive investigation into the reading literacy of South African children, their levels of reading literacy and how these can be explained in order to understand what is needed to improve the reading literacy of young children.

"We hope that this empirical study, as with PIRLS 2006, with its extensive information, will serve as a vehicle for policymakers, curriculum planners, educators and educational researchers to improve reading literacy and answer crucial questions related to learners' reading performance," said Prof Sarah Howie, Director of the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment and National Research Coordinator for PIRLS South Africa, and Dr Surette van Staden, Co-National Research Coordinator.

Internationally, Grade 4 learners from Hong Kong SAR, Russian Federation, Finland and Singapore, achieved the highest scores, thereby making them the top four achieving countries. Learners at Grade 5 tested in Afrikaans or English in South Africa, achieved similar results to Grade 4 learners in Indonesia and Qatar, and Grade 6 learners in Botswana, Kuwait and Morocco, and achieved substantially higher scores than Grade 4 learners in Oman and Morocco, who obtained the lowest scores in the study.

In South Africa, only 4% of Grade 5 learners reached the highest international benchmark compared to 8% of Grade 4 children internationally. A major concern is that there are fewer children at the top end attaining the highest benchmarks, than compared to 2006. The good news is that more children at the bottom end are achieving the international benchmarks than previously. The national results for the two studies, namely prePIRLS (tested at Grade 4 in three countries) and PIRLS (tested at Grade 5 in 45 countries), were released today by the PIRLS National Research Centre, the Centre for Evaluation and Assessment at the University of Pretoria.

prePIRLS represents a very significant new baseline study of reading literacy for Grade 4 learners in South African primary schools, across all 11 languages that also includes international comparative data and international benchmarks. The new baseline study, called prePIRLS, an easier, less demanding and shorter test than the “gold standard” set by PIRLS, was conducted in South Africa, Botswana and Colombia.

PIRLS is designed to measure trends in achievement and to indicate growth or decline within a global context. The PIRLS study of Grade 5 learners in South Africa (which only included children tested in Afrikaans or English), is important for monitoring how children’s learning has progressed between 2006 and 2011.

Forty-three percent of South African Grade 5 learners failed to reach the lowest international benchmark, in contrast to 5% of Grade 4 learners internationally, meaning that they have not yet mastered basic reading skills requiring access and retrieval of information for reading comprehension purposes.

Twenty-nine percent of the Grade 4 learners, who wrote prePIRLS, did not reach the lowest prePIRLS benchmark. Approximately 90% of Grade 4 learners, tested in English or Afrikaans, attained the lowest international benchmark, while between 24% and 57% of children writing in the nine official African languages did not do so. In particular, learners tested in Sepedi and Tshivenda achieved the lowest results, had the lowest percentage of learners reaching this international benchmark, and are considered to be at risk educationally.

In addition to the assessment of reading literacy, PIRLS also collects a considerable amount of information from parents/guardians and learners about the home environment and the child’s literacy development. Furthermore, information is gathered from teachers about practices and learners in the classroom, their personal information, attitudes and beliefs. Information is also collected from school principals about the school environment and its surrounding community.

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