



MEDIA RELEASE

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Thungela, Federer Foundation and Mpumalanga Department of Education lead foundation phase collaboration

Thungela, in collaboration with the Federer Foundation and the Mpumalanga Department of Education, convened the Mpumalanga Foundation Phase Collaboration Symposium in Mbombela on 10 September 2026. The gathering brought together businesses, current and prospective funders, and implementation partners supporting Foundation Phase education across the province. Building on its experience from the implementation of the Thungela Education Initiative, the company sought to explore meaningful ways to collaborate with the Federer Foundation and other partners to address persistent challenges in Mpumalanga's foundation phase.

Recognising the wealth of impactful work already underway, the partners engaged the Mpumalanga Department of Education to align efforts and maximise systemic impact. By establishing a joint effort, the parties have convened a provincial education symposium designed to unite key stakeholders, foster collective action, and strengthen coordinated support for early learning.

Designed as a working alignment session, the symposium provided a dedicated platform to unpack the Department's strategic priorities. By doing so, enabling stakeholders to identify synergies, eliminate duplicate interventions, and address critical delivery gaps in early education delivery.

Mpumi Sithole, executive head of corporate affairs at Thungela, said: "Our work across the 45 schools supported through the Thungela Education Initiative, launched with the Mpumalanga Department of Education in 2024, has provided valuable insights into the systematic factors shaping early learning. The Symposium aimed to mobilise diverse support around shared provincial priorities while raising the visibility of high impact interventions already underway. Better coordination of investment, technical expertise and partnerships is essential to meeting the urgent needs of teachers and learners."

"Our baseline Early Grade Reading Assessment (EGRA) and Early Grade Mathematics Assessment (EGMA), conducted across 45 schools and involving 1,350 learners, highlighted foundational literacy and reading comprehension as key areas requiring targeted support. These insights have helped shape the Thungela Education Initiative's focus on school readiness, literacy and numeracy, ensuring that interventions address the needs of learners at the earliest stages of their educational journey, said Mpumi Sithole."

Strengthening early literacy and numeracy also remains an urgent priority for the province. Mpumalanga scored 264 in the 2021 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), below the benchmark, highlighting learning challenges before learners transition to intermediate grades.

In response, the Department of Basic Education introduced the Hluma Systemic Improvement of Languages and Numeracy (SILN) intervention in Mpumalanga, implemented in 555 schools across the Ehlanzeni and Nkangala districts, targeting languages and mathematics. The project is equipping Grades 1 to 3 classrooms with graded readers, classroom library boxes and mathematics toolkits.

Lucy Moyane, Head of Department in the Mpumalanga Department of Education, said: "We are delighted to partner with Thungela and the Federer Foundation on this important initiative. We recognise the scale of the challenges facing Foundation Phase education and value the contribution of partners collaborating with us to improve learning outcomes. This Symposium provided a valuable platform to strengthen alignment between the Department's Foundation Phase priorities and the efforts of private sector and civil society organisations, enabling greater collaboration and impact for learners across Mpumalanga."

The Federer Foundation has been active in South Africa since 2003 and brings experience in early and foundational learning through its work with governments, communities and local partners on school readiness. In Mpumalanga, the Federer Foundation has implemented the School Readiness Initiative in Ehlanzeni and Bohlabela districts through Penreach since 2019. Since 2025 the Foundation has built a coalition with Thungela and other funders and NGOs to implement a comprehensive Grade R maths, language and assessment programme across all public primary schools in Mpumalanga.

Carien Vorster, Director Global Partnerships and Advocacy at the Federer Foundation, said: “The urgency to improve foundational learning outcomes in the province, combined with the shrinking of development budgets, makes it imperative that we work together. By combining our resources and expertise and coordinating our support across districts and circuits, we can ensure that all schools get the support they need. Coalitions between funders and implementers can reduce fragmentation and improve integration in the sector, making scale and sustainable improvements possible.

Over 60 stakeholders attended the symposium and together explored practical ways in which they can work together. There was consensus among the group that collaboration is essential for greater effectiveness and resource efficiency. The symposium provided a solid foundation for building a coalition of partners focused on advancing Foundational Learning in Mpumalanga.

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