

SHINE'S SUNSET

A LETTER FROM OUR BOARD

THE COVID-19 PANDEMIC HAS IRREVERSIBLY ALTERED THE EDUCATION LANDSCAPE

in South Africa and created a greater need than ever for reading catch-up programmes. As we transitioned into the COVID recovery period in 2022, we also embarked on a recruitment process to appoint a new Director as our founding Director, Maurita, prepared to retire. We reviewed our strategies to respond to the COVID-era needs in our programmes and found them to be incomplete in a COVID recovery context.

Following this realisation and two director recruitment drives, we found ourselves at a turning point, which catalysed some deep reflection. We began to imagine Shine into the future, and asked ourselves: "What is the essence of Shine? What do we have to offer that we believe remains absolutely critical for the children of South Africa?"

The answer is easy: Shine can turn a struggling reader into a confident reader in as little as six months. We can train anyone to do it. We package our models in a simple, 'paint-by-numbers' way that is easy to replicate.



Over the years, Shine has experimented with different ways to help children learn to read for meaning. This has included Shine Centres, which harnessed the time, skills and love of committed volunteers; a social franchise model with Shine Chapters; training youth to work in classrooms; pairing older children and young children as 'book buddies'; take home packs and digital resources; and training parents to embed a culture of reading at home. Through each of these models, we have remained focused on our North Star: helping children read with meaning and confidence. We have done this with a focus on the 'magic' that makes Shine effective: the quality of relationships, a safe learning space, solid partnerships, high-quality learning resources, and practical training.

Since we launched our first Shine Centre at Observatory Primary in 2000, a lot has changed. At the time, we were one of only a few non-profit organisations (NPOs) focused on reading. Since then, many more organisations have been established to improve reading, and some provincial governments are investing heavily in foundation phase literacy. There are more models available, and more research about what works in what context. Government is scaling up youth employment programmes. This creates challenges and opportunities.

In this context, we believe that the 'magic' of Shine is needed more than ever.





But is sustaining Shine in its current form – as an NPO – the only way to achieve this? And is it the best way? After deep reflection, forecasting and planning, we have come to realise that the answer is: ‘No’.

And so Shine is taking a bold step: we are launching a ‘sunsetting’ strategy. This entails the managed transition of our activities from our hands to our chapter partners’ hands, whilst at the same time open-licensing and sharing our curricula so it is available to partners, literacy programmes, funders and government into the future.

This is an unconventional path. While many nonprofits have shut down due to insufficient funds, it often happens ‘on the back foot’ – an unwanted response to difficult circumstances.

We are not making this decision under financial pressure. Shine has loyal funders, a strong individual donation base, and healthy reserves. Nor is this decision our only option: we explored a merger with a like-minded literacy organisation, and we could continue to seek a new Director. Choosing proactively to sunset is a response to a changing environment, and a clear-eyed assessment of how our experience and resources can best serve the children of South Africa into the future.

We see this as not as a defensive move, but as the opposite: a joyful celebration of what Shine has contributed over the years, and a thoughtful, considered approach to ensuring its intellectual property, experience, and learning becomes a public good, in service of all who are committed to improving literacy.

And we see it as a courageous, innovative path – one we hope may inspire others. Nonprofits are facing rising operational costs, scarce funding and a context of volatility. Under these conditions, organisations may find themselves pushed to prioritise survival over delivering on their purpose. When we let go of the imperative to sustain Shine as an organisation indefinitely into the future, we were amazed at the innovative thinking it catalysed and the opportunities that appeared – and we are excited and energised to explore them over the months ahead.

At the end of the sunsetting process, in March 2024, we plan to have achieved the following:

1. Strengthened our Chapters to continue, deepen, and grow their work in the schools and communities they support.
2. Open-sourced our materials for wider use so that they can continue impacting readers indefinitely.
3. Built awareness, skills, and knowledge about key reading support skills in volunteers, paraprofessionals, and the people who support them.
4. Fulfilled all of our existing programme, funder, and partner commitments alongside the sunset process.
5. Sunset with integrity to our values and ethos with accountability to our team, partners, and funders and to all financial and government requirements.
6. Shared our learnings from this process with the sector, with honesty, integrity and courage, to share best practice and inspire others.

As embodied in our Trust Deed, at the end of the Sunset we will be donating our remaining funds to our Shine Chapters and to other like-minded literacy NPOs, as approved by our Board, so that our influence and legacy will live on through others. And even after Shine has formally closed its doors, our learnings, training and resources will continue to support struggling readers through these partners.

Along this journey, we plan to document and share what we learn – including where we misstep and change course. We hope to offer a good-practice blueprint to organisations who, like Shine, come to realise that sustaining an organisation may not be the only way, or the best way, to achieve their ultimate goal.

Our vision, as Shine, is ‘a nation of readers’ – because we know that ‘words can change worlds’. We hope to leave a legacy that feeds into that goal for many years to come. And we invite you to join us on that journey.

Sincerely,

Kehiloe Ntsekhe

BOARD CHAIR ON BEHALF OF THE BOARD OF TRUSTEES OF SHINE LITERACY

