



POLICY BRIEF

Closing the early learning gap for 3-5-year-olds



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Summary • ● ●

Children born in South Africa 30 years after democracy still face vast inequalities in their circumstances, opportunities, and life trajectories. Achieving universal access to quality early childhood development (ECD) services is one of the most powerful and cost-effective equalisers to break intergenerational cycles of poverty and help vulnerable children reach their full potential.¹ To change the status quo and improve life trajectories, we urgently need to provide quality early learning at scale.

● Introduction

An uneven ECD landscape means poor children are missing out

In South Africa, the early learning landscape is fragmented and uneven. The provision of early learning (before Grade R) is market-led and dominated by private suppliers, primarily black women operating in the informal space who run non-profit organisations (NPOs) and micro-social enterprises serving poor communities with limited cash flows.² The government’s ECD subsidy (a provision of a R17 per child per day subsidy to registered early learning programmes) has not ensured fair access for all children, while non-governmental organisations’ (NGOs’) interventions are often uncoordinated. Where early learning programmes (ELPs) do exist, quality is inconsistent. This is important because research suggests children generally benefit from attendance at ELPs only once a critical threshold of quality is achieved.³

Early childhood offers a crucial window of opportunity to shape a child’s holistic development trajectory and build a solid foundation for their future.⁴ Development of early numeracy and literacy skills is significantly associated with achievement in school mathematics and science.⁵

The ECD landscape was further disrupted by COVID-19, which seriously affected ECD attendance and, thus, literacy and numeracy development for young children. International and local evaluations confirm that our children are lagging according to the following indicators:

- The Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) 2019 found that a quarter of learners were numerically ready and half literacy-ready when they entered school.⁶
- 78% of South African Grade 4 learners could not reach the PIRLS Low International Benchmark, a widely used threshold that is the lowest of four levels of reading recorded by PIRLS.⁷
- In 2021, Thrive by Five, South Africa’s first nationally representative survey of preschool children, found that an alarming 57% of children attending an ELP were not on track for cognitive and/or physical development.⁸
- The 2022 Reading Panel Background Report states, “On our current trajectory of improvement, we will only reach 95% of Grade 4s reading for meaning in 80 years (the year 2108).⁹

A shift in focus

The function shift of ECD services from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE) in April 2022 can be seen as an opportunity to change this landscape. The DBE ensures children have access to quality early learning opportunities before Grade R, the first year of primary school education. This is particularly important for children from poorer households as global research shows that socio-economic status strongly predicts school readiness and later performance.¹⁰

There are roughly three million children aged three to five years old in South Africa. A progress report in June 2023 from the DBE to a parliamentary committee revealed that:

- 1.3 million children aged between three and five were not yet attending any form of early learning; and
- A total of 66% of our country's poorest children were not in ELPs compared to 36% of the wealthiest.¹¹

South Africa's National Integrated ECD Policy (NIECDP) commits to providing comprehensive quality age- and developmental stage-appropriate opportunities for learning for all children from birth until they enter formal school by 2030.¹² However, many factors have combined to create barriers to equitable access to early learning in South Africa.

This policy brief outlines some of the main barriers to equitable access on the next page. While this is not an exhaustive list, it highlights the main problem areas that require policy solutions.



●●● Reasons behind the early learning gap

- **THERE ARE NO MECHANISMS FOR DELIVERY AT SCALE** (in particular, systems for large-scale recruitment and operationalising new sites) and no population-level planning.
- **THE REGISTRATION PROCESS FOR EARLY CHILDHOOD DEVELOPMENT CENTRES IS COMPLEX AND COSTLY, PARTICULARLY WHEN ACHIEVING COMPLIANCE WITH MUNICIPAL BY-LAWS.** For many centres, it is a barrier to accessing the state subsidy for early learning programmes.¹³ Access to these funds could help them improve the quality of their programmes and contribute to better child outcomes.
- **VARIED QUALITY AND TRAINING:** Levels of training and experience amongst ECD practitioners vary dramatically, as does the quality of the services provided to children. ECD practitioners are typically not adequately remunerated and often work long hours in challenging circumstances.¹⁴
- **INADEQUATE NUTRITION:** Inflation and ever-increasing food prices make it difficult for parents and caregivers to buy nutritious food for children, resulting in a quarter of children under five being stunted.¹⁵ Significantly, while many children might catch up physically by age 4 to 5 years, they may still suffer the neurological effects of having been stunted at an earlier age.¹⁶
- **SOCIO-ECONOMIC INEQUALITY:** Children from disadvantaged backgrounds are less likely than their better-off peers to have the right learning foundations when they start school. A study found that while 8 out of 10 children in 'high fee' ELPs (charging more than R1 750 per month) were found to be developmentally on track when it comes to early learning, only 3 out of 10 children from 'low fee' ELPs achieved the expected learning standards for their age.¹⁷ In addition, many parents/caregivers in low-income brackets do not receive good-quality information on the importance of early learning.¹⁸
- **A SUBSTANTIAL INCREASE IN GOVERNMENT FUNDING – BEYOND THE CURRENT BUDGET FOR THE ECD GRANT – IS NEEDED TO EXPAND ECD SERVICES SIGNIFICANTLY.** The ECD subsidy, at R17 per child per day and accessible to registered ECD centres, is simply not enough for quality programmes. According to the World Bank's South Africa Public Expenditure and Institutional Review for Early Childhood Development, the actual cost is R31 per child per day.¹⁹
- **THE LACK OF ACCURATE DATA AND LACK OF COHESION IN THE ECD SECTOR** continues to hamper government and civil society's efforts to harness its full potential.²⁰

If we are to disrupt this pattern, which has high costs for children, society and the economy, we must prioritise interventions most likely to increase the proportion of children that are developmentally on track when they reach Grade R.²¹

Lessons from other countries

Some countries have opted for integrated ECD service delivery. For example, in Cuba, ECD services are provided through the national health and education systems. One of the strengths of the Cuban model is that ECD services are provided in an inter-sectoral manner. Instead of requiring separate interventions, the work of all institutions is coordinated and linked at all levels of the country's political-administrative organisation (national, provincial, municipal, and local).²²

Cuba's integrated system has had significant results for children. It has achieved universal access to quality early childhood education, whether institutional or community-based, significant child development outcomes, universal maternal and child healthcare, and protective environments at the family and community levels.²³

There are exciting examples of relatively low-cost, high-reach practitioner training and support interventions in low- and middle-income countries. For instance, in Ghana, the National Nursery Teacher Training Center conducted a five-day in-service pre-primary training followed by refresher courses at regular intervals.²⁴ The method emphasises hands-on learning to aid educators in understanding and applying age-appropriate, play-based approaches in the classroom. Early results from an evaluation suggest that regular in-service training and ongoing professional development could boost teaching quality, classroom atmosphere, and teacher motivation.²⁵

● How do we begin to change the trajectory?

Shift the focus from the building to the child

The current system is geared to financing relatively better-off registered facilities through a per capita subsidy. It is not structured to reach children in out-of-home settings (childminder groups and pop-up sites) that could be supported to provide a quality package of early learning services in venues that meet basic health and safety standards, but do not meet the infrastructural standards for registration.

The system needs to shift from a primary focus on the building to a focus on the child, supporting and accrediting quality services that reach children wherever they are.

National delivery platform

A national delivery platform, such as SmartStart²⁶, can close the provisioning gap in two ways: First, by integrating every stage on the service delivery continuum, and second, by providing the architecture and systems for establishing and managing programmes at scale. SmartStart reaches over 75 000 children a year, and its reach continues to expand.²⁷ Crucially, in areas where ECD NGOs are already active, a national delivery platform acts as an equal partner, harnessing their experience and assets, linking their contributions and providing the systems for growth. The platform can seed new NGOs or directly provide the full-service spectrum in areas where NGOs currently lack coverage.²⁸

The development of a national delivery platform will take time and planning.

Key policy actions for quality early learning

- **ENSURE PRACTITIONERS ARE WELL-TRAINED AND HIGHLY MOTIVATED** – research has shown that the most critical factor for improved learning outcomes is the quality of engagement between practitioner and child.²⁹ This will require greater emphasis on training and resources.
- **INVEST IN THE ECD SECTOR** to meet the National Development Plan’s goal of universal access by 2030. In its analysis of the sector, the World Bank suggests a cost of an additional R6.8 billion per year that would provide provinces with sufficient funds to provide subsidies for all children attending ELPs who meet the eligibility criteria while returning the subsidy amount to its 2015 purchasing parity.³⁰

- **IMPLEMENT SYSTEMS FOR AN ECD INDEX** to track children’s progress, milestones and outcomes at municipal, provincial and national levels. Monitoring and quality assurance efforts can help countries learn what works in the local context, identify implementation bottlenecks to improving child learning (which can be helpful to fine-tune interventions and policy), and define which investments to prioritise and which to deploy over time.³¹

There are already several initiatives underway to bridge the data gap:

- The DBE launched the **ECD Census** in preparation for its takeover and sought to identify ELPs –registered and unregistered across South Africa.³²
- The **Thrive by Five Index** tracks whether preschool children are on track for their age in three key areas of development: early learning, physical growth and socio-emotional functioning.³³
- The **ELP Baseline Assessment** focused on ELP principal and practitioner interviews and assessments of the learning environment and practitioner-child interactions, providing insights into the quality of services across different resource areas.³⁴
- **HARNESS PARTNERSHIPS:** The government cannot be expected to do this alone; partnerships are essential. In South Africa, these would include the non-profit and private sectors, primarily responsible for delivering early learning programmes, and the provincial and district education departments responsible for ensuring adherence to quality standards.³⁵
- **SUPPORT SOCIAL-FRANCHISE MODELS AND OTHER INNOVATIONS WITHIN INFORMAL SOCIO-ECONOMIC NETWORKS,** which seek to scale up and increase access to subsidised, quality ELPs. A less onerous registration process would allow more programmes to register, allowing them to access funding and more children to access early learning.
- **REEVALUATE THE CHILD SUPPORT GRANT (CSG):** The value of the CSG must be critically assessed to ensure that it adequately supports the nutritional needs of our nation’s children and is not below the Food Poverty Line.



●●● Conclusion

Ensuring access to early learning presents a real opportunity to improve our children's outcomes and change their life trajectories. We need to urgently close the early learning gap by implementing large-scale programmes and management systems for ECD supported by an integrated, data-driven approach where civil society and the private and public sectors work together for change.



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What is Change Ideas?

DGMT's Change Ideas is a new initiative that makes cost-effective and scalable policies accessible to the public and politicians. These policies, drawn from years of implementation experience, research, and embeddedness in South African civil society, offer opportunities to get South Africa out of the inequality trap. Change Ideas aims to empower you with comprehensive policy briefs, research findings, and expert perspectives on 10 key opportunities identified as pivotal for fostering sustainable change.



Making change possible

This policy brief was written by Daniella Horwitz with contributions from pivotal projects within DGMT. We want to thank SmartStart, Ilifa Labantwana and other civil society organisations whose implementation experience contributed to the policy proposals contained in this brief.



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