2024 thrive5
thrive by five | INDEX

Thrive by Five Index 2024:
Recommendations Brief: Evidence to Action

September 2025

2024 thrive5
thrive by five INDEX
BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFELONG SUCCESS

Introduction

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* is South Africa's largest survey of preschool child outcomes. Conducted every three years, it tracks national progress and highlights areas where urgent change is needed to ensure all children can reach their full potential.

In 2024, 5,000 four-year-old children enrolled in 1,388 Early Learning Programmes (ELPs) across nine provinces were assessed. A smaller, sub-study looked at children *from low-income areas in three provinces* who were not enrolled in ELPs. While this sub-study was not nationally representative, it offers important insights into some of the country's most vulnerable young children.

The findings confirm that too many young children in South Africa start school without the skills needed to succeed in the foundation phase and beyond.

www.thrivebyfive.co.za

Published: September 2025

basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

BANA PELE

DATA DRIVE

FirstRand FOUNDATION

The LEGO Foundation

THIS DAY

Where do children stand?

The *2024 Index* offers a clear overview of how young children in South Africa are developing in three key areas: early learning, social-emotional functioning and physical growth (stunting). It highlights the most significant gaps, with notable differences based on gender and socio-economic circumstances (using ELP fees as a proxy). It also shows that some children achieve strong results despite facing disadvantages.

Overall findings for 4-year old children

- **Less than half are On Track for early learning:** Only 42% of children enrolled in ELPs are On Track; 28% are Falling Behind, and 30% are Falling Far Behind.
- **Girls do better than boys:** 48% of enrolled girls are On Track compared to 37% of boys.
- **The poorest children are struggling most:** Children in ELPs charging less than R50 per month are half as likely to be developmentally On Track as their peers in High Fee ELPs (charging more than R1690 per month).
- **What children bring to learning matters:** Children's personal capacities, such as task orientation (ability to focus) and emotional functioning, can help buffer the effects of poverty and enable stronger outcomes despite limited resources.
- **Non-enrolment compounds risk for poor children:** Outcomes were even more concerning for those not attending ELPs. Only 18% of the 272 non-enrolled children in the sub-study were developmentally On Track, and 55% were Falling Far Behind.

These findings underscore the urgency of improving access to early learning programmes, and enhancing the quality of these programmes.

Priority Actions

Here are **five priority actions** that can change the story and build a more equitable early learning system in South Africa.

1. Finance the sector appropriately

1.1 Improve the flow of public funds to ELPs

Why? Without predictable, timely funding, ELPs are financially unstable - less able to retain staff and maintain quality.

- Only 44% of ELPs reported receiving the government subsidy (R18 per day per qualifying child).
- Among ELPs that received the government subsidy, only 39% always received it on time and in the expected amount.
- Over 90% of ELPs rely on parent fees as their main source of income.
- Only 20% had full fee recovery in the prior month.

Proposed action: Strengthen subsidy disbursement systems so funding flows to ELPs on time and in full.

1.2 Remove financial barriers to enrolment for the most vulnerable children

Why? Non-enrolled children are the most vulnerable group, facing the steepest developmental delays. Nearly one-third (29%) of 4-year-olds in South Africa are not attending an ELP; these children generally live in markedly poorer households than their enrolled peers[1].

- In the Index non-enrolled sub-study *(a non-representative sample):*
  - For 77% of primary caregivers, not being able to afford fees was the main reason for their child not attending an ELP.
  - Only 18% of children were On Track in early learning, and 55% were Falling Far Behind.
  - Non-enrolled boys in this sample were especially vulnerable: only 14% were On Track compared to 22% of girls.
  - 18% of the non-enrolled children were moderately or severely stunted.

Proposed action: Urgently address financial barriers to enrolment with targeted strategies tackling both supply- and demand-side barriers. If we are committed to leaving no child behind, this group must become a central focus of our coordinated efforts.

[1] Hall, K. (2025) General Household Survey 2024 data as analysed by Katharine Hall. University of Cape Town Children's Institute.

1.3 Ensure decent working conditions for early learning practitioners

Why? Poor pay, limited protections, and high turnover undermine workforce stability in the early learning sector and threaten programme quality.

- Over 90% of early learning practitioners and principals earn below the minimum wage; in Lower Fee ELPs (the 80% of ELPs that charge less than R800 per month), 98% of practitioners fall below the threshold.
- Only 57% of practitioners have a formal employment contract, and fewer than half receive paid holiday leave, despite working full-time (average 40 hours per week).
- 50% of practitioners cite low salaries as the main barrier to doing their jobs effectively.
- 27% of practitioners report that they are planning to leave the ECD profession.

Proposed action: Subsidy values must progressively reflect the true cost of delivering quality early learning, including fair pay, decent working conditions, and continuous professional development for practitioners.

1.4 Resource the non-profit support tier

Why? Non-governmental organisations (NGOs) play a vital role in strengthening practitioner skills, building leadership capacity, and improving access to resources associated with programme quality.

- NGOs are the main providers of in-service training to principals and practitioners.
- They often operate in the poorest communities, providing curricula, learning materials, and professional development in the most difficult conditions.

Proposed action: Provide sustained and predictable funding to this critical tier of support so NGOs can scale training, mentoring, and resources to ELPs nationwide, helping to ensure investments in access are matched by improvements in quality.

2. Strengthen the early learning workforce and practices

2.1 Review training to strengthen responsive teaching

Why? High-quality, responsive teaching is critical for child outcomes, yet current training and qualification pathways are not equipping practitioners with the evidence-based, practical skills required.

- Only 17% of ELPs received a "Good" rating for Teaching Strategies — the only quality domain observed that significantly predicted child outcomes. These are strategies that support and extend children's learning and encourage appropriate levels of independence.
- Qualifications showed no significant link to Teaching Strategies, suggesting they do not adequately prepare practitioners with the skills that matter most.

Proposed action: Review and reform practitioner training and qualification frameworks so that they emphasise practical, evidence-based skills for responsive teaching.

2.2 Build practitioner capacity to support children's social and emotional development

Why? Strong social-emotional skills help young children adapt to new environments, manage emotions constructively, foster resilience, build positive relationships and ask for assistance.

- Children's emotional functioning is a powerful predictor of early learning outcomes, with an effect size nearly as large as socio-economic status.
- Only 56% of enrolled children met the standard for Emotional Readiness, and 63% for Social Relations.

Proposed action: Provide principals and practitioners with guidance on how to integrate simple, everyday practices into ELP routines that recognise and support children's emotional development, for example: daily check-ins, activities to name feelings, warm responses to emotions, and positive reinforcement.

2.3 Equip under-resourced ELPs for focused, engaged learning

Why? Children's ability to focus is central to learning, and access to quality materials plays an important role in building this skill.

- Task orientation - children's ability to concentrate, persist, and show interest - was the strongest predictor of good early learning outcomes.
- Unlike age, gender, or household socio-economic status, attentional skills are modifiable and can be improved.

- The quality and variety of learning materials help foster children's attention and focus, yet access to these materials is uneven:
  - Only 40% of Lower Fee ELPs had adequate teaching materials, compared to 74% of Higher Fee ELPs.
  - And while most principals (83%) and practitioners (81%) reported using a learning curriculum, only half had the supporting materials needed to implement it effectively.

Proposed action: Provide every ELP with a minimum package of high-quality learning and play materials, paired with practitioner training to use them effectively. Prioritise domains where children struggle most: Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, Cognition and Executive Functioning.

2.4 Back principals as leaders

Why? Women principals form the backbone of South Africa's early learning sector. Investing in their leadership skills and capacity will strengthen programme quality and stability.

- Over half (58%) of ELPs were founded by the current principal, and an additional 27% by a previous principal, underscoring the privatised, micro-enterprise character of the early learning sector.
- Fewer than half of principals (47%) received any in-service training in 2023–24, despite their pivotal role in programme quality.
- 75% of principals belong to local ECD forums, with over 80% of these forums meeting at least three times a year, a promising but underutilised channel for peer-to-peer learning and problem-solving.

Proposed action:
Invest in principals as pedagogical leaders and managers by:
- Strengthening their skills in staff recruitment, mentoring, and retention.
- Building their capacity to drive programme quality and champion play-based learning.
- Leveraging existing forums to expand peer-to-peer learning and support.

3. Integrate early learning and child health

3.1 Address the root causes of stunting

Why? Stunting is more than a matter of height - it signals poor body and brain development, undermines learning, and carries lifelong consequences.

- 7% of enrolled children were moderately or severely stunted (nationally representative of enrolled 4-year-olds).
- 18% of the non-enrolled children in the sub-study were moderately or severely stunted (not nationally representative).
- By age four, stunted children are on average five months behind their non-stunted peers in early learning.

Proposed action: Implement a comprehensive, cross-sectoral approach to address food insecurity, promote maternal wellbeing, and increase access to healthcare, clean water, and sanitation. Reducing stunting must be a shared national priority.

3.2 Expand health and nutrition services through ELPs

Why? Many ELPs already act as access points for children's nutrition and health services. Using the existing infrastructure can provide vital support during children's most crucial years of growth and development.

- 90% of ELPs provide at least one daily meal.
- Lower Fee ELPs are more likely to provide both breakfast and lunch, crucial for children most at risk of nutritional deprivation.
- Over 60% of principals reported that the Department of Health had visited their ELP at least once during 2023-2024 to deliver immunisations (65%), deworming (61%), or Vitamin A supplementation (60%).

Proposed action: Strengthen collaboration between the Departments of Basic Education and Health to use ELPs as platforms for delivering nutrition and health services.

4. Support positive parenting

4.1 Enhance caregiver involvement in early learning

Why? Learning starts at home. Limited access to books and low awareness of developmental milestones diminish opportunities for home learning, deepening disadvantage.

- Among children enrolled in ELPs, 64% of caregivers believed their child was ahead of peers in development. In contrast, only 42% of children were found to be On Track.
- Many caregivers reported that adults in the home rarely or never read to the child, told stories, or drew pictures together.
- Access to books in the home was linked to better learning outcomes, after accounting for other factors. Yet access remains limited:
    - Only 11% of households with enrolled children had more than five children's books, while 26% had none.
    - For non-enrolled children, 77% of caregivers reported having no children's books at all.

Proposed action: Implement awareness campaigns and community outreach to help families recognise and understand the importance of developmental milestones, expand access to books and support learning at home through simple, low-cost activities.

4.2 Recognise the role of fathers

Why? Fathers' involvement is increasingly recognised as a vital factor in children's development. However, in South Africa, it remains poorly understood and often overlooked, especially in low-income households.

- Over 60% of fathers had no involvement in learning activities with their child in the prior week.
- Where fathers engaged in home learning three or more times a week, children scored significantly higher on learning outcomes.

Proposed action: Include fathers and other male caregivers in communication campaigns, acknowledging the importance of their role, and encouraging their consistent participation in children's early learning and care.

5. Strengthen foundation phase teaching and learning

Why? Too many children enter Grade R already behind, with boys and those from poorer households facing the greatest disadvantage. Without targeted assistance, early gaps are likely to widen during the foundation phase, creating unequal learning paths that persist.

- Fewer than half of children from ELPs arrive in Grade R with the right foundational skills in place; nearly one-third have little or no preschool experience.
- Gender gaps are evident from the start. Boys are less likely than girls to be On Track across all domains except Gross Motor Development.
- Children in Lower Fee ELPs are only half as likely to be On Track as those in Higher Fee ELPs.
- Children from poorer communities are more likely to attend no-fee schools, which often lack the resources for effective catch-up support.

Proposed action: Strengthen Grade R as a bridging year, especially in no-fee schools – helping children who start behind to catch up, while sustaining and extending gains for those who are On Track.

Conclusion

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* is both a warning and a guide. It shows that too many young children start school already behind, held back by poverty, inequality, and inconsistent programme quality.

But it also shows what can change. Urgent action is essential if South Africa is to meet its 2030 goals and give every child a strong start.

The evidence, investment, and partnerships are in place. What is needed now is decisive, collective action - by government, civil society, academia, business, and communities - to ensure every child has the opportunity to thrive by five.

We must rewrite the story of early childhood in South Africa.

For the full *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National Findings* and additional insights,
visit www.thrivebyfive.co.za.

2024 thrive5
thrive by five INDEX
BUILDING FOUNDATIONS FOR LIFELONG SUCCESS

The Thrive by Five Index 2024 is led by the Department of Basic Education and coordinated by DataDrive2030, with the support of the FirstRand Foundation, the LEGO Foundation, This Day, and Yellowwoods.

basic education
Department:
Basic Education
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

BANA PELE

DATADRIVE

FirstRand FOUNDATION

The LEGO Foundation

THIS DAY