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Thrive by Five Index 2024:

North West

PROVINCIAL REPORT

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About the Thrive by Five Index

The *Thrive by Five Index*, first launched in 2021, is the largest survey of preschool child outcomes in South Africa. It was established as a collaborative effort to track progress and promote positive change in Early Childhood Development.

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* is the second in a planned series of cross-sectional, nationally and provincially representative studies conducted every three years. The 2024 survey was led by the Department of Basic Education and coordinated by DataDrive2030, with support from the FirstRand Foundation, the LEGO Foundation, This Day Foundation, and Yellowwoods.

www.thrivebyfive.co.za
Published: September 2026

basic education
Department:
Basic Education
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North West Provincial Report

SEPTEMBER 2026

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Executive Summary

The ***Thrive by Five Index 2024*** is South Africa's second nationally and provincially representative assessment of the developmental status of four-year-old children. Building on the inaugural 2021 Index, it provides evidence on children's early learning, social-emotional functioning and physical growth, while also examining the quality of Early Learning Programmes (ELPs), household environments and other factors associated with children's development. The Index is intended to support evidence-based planning and action to improve children's readiness for school and long-term developmental outcomes.

This report presents the findings for **North West Province.** It focuses on children aged 50–59 months who were enrolled in ELPs during the 2024 Index. In North West, 432 children enrolled in 112 ELPs were assessed. The findings therefore provide a cross-sectional picture of the developmental status of children attending ELPs in the province.

Overall, **43% of four-year-old children attending ELPs in North West are On Track for overall early learning,** while 32% are Falling Behind and 25% are Falling Far Behind. Children perform best in Emergent Literacy and Language, where 52% are On Track. Outcomes are weaker in Cognition and Executive Functioning (39% On Track), Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (34% On Track), Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (29% On Track), and Gross Motor Development (27% On Track). Gross Motor Development is the weakest-performing domain and is significantly below the national average.

Unlike the national pattern, there is little difference in overall early learning outcomes between girls and boys in North West. Overall, 43% of girls are On Track compared with 42% of boys, and there are no statistically significant gender differences across the developmental domains. Socio-economic differences are, however, pronounced. Among children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs, **79% are On Track,** compared with 39% of children attending the remaining 80%. Children attending higher-fee ELPs perform better across all developmental domains, with particularly large differences in Cognition and Executive Functioning, Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, and Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration.

Development extends beyond early learning. In the North West, **55% of children meet the expected standard for emotional readiness for school and 50% meet the standard for social relations.** Gender differences in social-emotional functioning are relatively small.

Physical growth remains an important developmental concern. **9% of children are moderately or severely stunted,** while a further 19% are mildly stunted. These levels are broadly comparable with the national findings but remain important given the relationship between growth faltering and poorer early learning outcomes.

The findings also highlight a marked difference between caregiver perceptions and measured developmental outcomes. Although 43% of children are On Track for overall early learning, **92% of caregivers believe that their child is developing at the same rate as, or faster than, other children of the same age**. This suggests there may be gaps in caregivers' awareness of developmental expectations and milestones for four-year-old children.

Access to early learning is another important part of the provincial picture. The report estimates that approximately **26% of four-year-olds in North West, or around 20,000 children, are not enrolled in an ELP.** The developmental findings presented in this report therefore represent children who already have access to ELPs and should not be interpreted as representative of all four-year-olds in the province.

Overall, the North West findings present a mixed picture. Early learning outcomes are generally similar to the national pattern, but Gross Motor Development is a particular area of concern. Gender differences are minimal, while substantial inequalities are evident between children attending lower- and higher-fee ELPs. Social-emotional outcomes and physical growth also indicate that a considerable proportion of children are not meeting expected developmental standards. The large gap between caregiver perceptions and measured early learning outcomes further highlights an important dimension of children's developmental environment.

Introduction

Why the Thrive by Five Index matters

The first five years of life are a critical period for children's development. During these early years, rapid brain development lays the foundation for later learning, health and wellbeing. Children's development during this period is influenced by the quality of the care, nutrition, stimulation and learning opportunities they experience at home and in early learning settings.

The *Thrive by Five Index* was established to provide reliable national and provincial evidence on how young children in South Africa are developing before they enter formal schooling. First conducted in 2021, the Index is designed to monitor children's developmental outcomes, identify areas requiring attention, and support evidence-based planning across the early childhood development sector. The 2024 Index is the second in a planned series of nationally and provincially representative cross-sectional studies conducted every three years.

This report presents the findings for the North West Province. It focuses on four-year-old children (50–59 months) attending ELPs and examines three key developmental outcomes:

- Early learning;
- Social-emotional functioning; and
- Physical growth.

The report also examines characteristics of ELPs, household circumstances and home learning environments to provide a broader understanding of the contexts in which children are developing.

Purpose of the Index

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* was designed to:

- **Determine** the proportion of young children in SA who attend ELPs who are On Track for their age in three key areas of development: early learning, social-emotional functioning, and physical growth.
- **Monitor** trends in performance gaps and gains over time and across socio-economic groups.
- **Explore** a range of potential predictors of key child outcomes.
- **Track** progress towards local and global development goals.
- **Inform** decision-making and actions to improve developmental outcomes for young children.

Access to organised early learning in the Province

This report presents findings on the developmental outcomes of four-year-old children enrolled in ELPs across the North West. By focusing on children already participating in organised early learning, it provides insight into how these children are developing and into the environments in which they learn. The findings do not, however, represent children who are not enrolled in an ELP.

According to the *2024 General Household Survey*[1], 64% of four-year-old children in the North West attend an ELP, a further 10% attend Grade R or school, while 26% are not enrolled in any form of organised early learning.

[1] GHS 2024 analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute UCT. July 2025

North West Sample

The *Thrive by Five Index 2024* is the largest survey of preschool child outcomes conducted in South Africa to date. The study used a stratified, multistage sampling design to obtain nationally and provincially representative samples of children attending ELPs.

Across South Africa, the final sample included 5,001 children attending 1,388 ELPs in 414 wards. Within each participating ELP, children aged 50–59 months were randomly selected to participate in the study.

In the North West, the planned sample comprised 35 wards, 105 ELPs and 420 children. The realised sample included all 32 selected wards, 112 ELPs and 432 children, achieving 105% of the planned child sample. The final provincial sample included 211 boys and 221 girls, with a mean age of approximately 55 months.

Table 1: *Planned and realised samples for the 2024 Thrive by Five Index in the North West*

Stages	Planned sample size	Realised sample size	Realised / planned
Wards	**35**	**32**	**91%**
ELPs	**105**	**112**	**107%**
Children	**420**	**432**	**105%**

Table 2: *Gender distribution and mean age of children in the North West sample*

Gender	% of sample	Mean age (months)	N
Boys	**49%**	**54.6**	**211**
Girls	**51%**	**54.6**	**221**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data

The North West sample reflects the linguistic profile of the province. Setswana was the most commonly reported home language (53%), followed by English (30%) and Sesotho (7%). Other home languages accounted for 9% of children in the sample. In the North West, 59% of children spoke more than one language at home.

Children's socio-economic circumstances are a key lens for understanding disparities in developmental outcomes and access to opportunities. Economic circumstances are deeply connected to the resources and support systems available to young children. These circumstances significantly affect caregiver wellbeing, child health and nutrition, the home learning environment, and access to quality ELPs, all of which are major influences on developmental outcomes.

A core objective of the Index is to report on and monitor the performance gap between children from higher and lower socio-economic groups. Monthly ELP fees, reported by principals and validated through cross-checks with parent-reported data, are used as the most appropriate available proxy for children's socio-economic circumstances. Fees offer a practical reflection of what households are likely able to afford within their local context, providing a useful, if imperfect, indicator of relative economic means.

Almost all ELPs in the North West charge fees (99%) which is consistent with the national figure of 97%. Among participating ELPs in the province, monthly fees range from R0 to R3,680. Fee quintiles were constructed using provincial fee thresholds to help account for notable differences in the cost of living between provinces. These quintiles were created at the ELP level by ordering ELPs according to the fees they charge and grouping them into five equal-sized categories based on the unweighted distribution of fees. Table 3 shows a comparison of the fee distribution and levels between the provincial and national samples.

Table 3: *Minimum and Maximum fees by quintile in the North West and nationally*

Fee bands	North West sample			National sample		
	Minimum fees	Maximum fees	Number children	Minimum fees	Maximum fees	Number children
Fee Quintile 1	**R0**	**R200**	**107**	**R0**	**R120**	**1,043**
Fee Quintile 2	**R201**	**R300**	**75**	**R121**	**R240**	**1,039**
Fee Quintile 3	**R301**	**R450**	**79**	**R241**	**R350**	**998**
Fee Quintile 4	**R451**	**R1,100**	**82**	**R351**	**R800**	**948**
Fee Quintile 5	**R1,101**	**R3,680**	**89**	**R801**	**R6,400**	**973**

Source: Unweighted data from Thrive by Five Index 2024

To enable meaningful comparisons by socio-economic context, ELPs were grouped into fee-based categories using provincial fee thresholds. The four lower fee quintiles constituted the lower-fee 80% of ELPs, while the highest fee quintile represented the top 20%.

Table 4 presents the minimum and maximum monthly fee ranges for these two categories, along with the number of ELPs and children included in each group. Throughout this report, child-level findings are presented for the full sample, as well as disaggregated by these ELP fee categories.

Table 4: *Proportion of ELPs and children in the Bottom 80% and Top 20% fee groups in the North West and nationally*

80/20 Split	North West sample			National sample		
	Fee range	Number of ELPs	Number of children	Fee range	Number of ELPs	Number of children
Bottom 80%	**R0-R1,100**	**90**	**343**	**R0-R800**	**1,113**	**4,028**
Top 20%	**R1,101-R3,680**	**22**	**89**	**R801-R6,400**	**275**	**973**

Source: Thrive by Five Index 2024

More detailed technical information is available in the ***Thrive by Five Index 2024 Technical Report***

Measures

The study assessed children's development using standardised tools that have been developed or validated for use in the South African context. Early learning was assessed using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM 4&5), which evaluates children's development across five domains:

- Gross Motor Development;
- Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration;
- Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics;
- Cognition and Executive Function; and
- Emergent Literacy and Language.

Based on their performance, children were classified as:

- **On Track –** demonstrating developmental competencies expected for their age;
- **Falling Behind –** showing developmental delays that warrant attention; or
- **Falling Far Behind –** showing substantial developmental delays relative to age expectations.

The Social-Emotional Functioning (SEF) Rating Scale was used to measure children's social relations with peers and adults and their emotional readiness for school. It is administered as an interview questionnaire with the child's practitioner. Children's scores are categorised as either Meet the Standard (indicating the child performs at the expected level for their age) or Don't Meet the Standard.

Physical growth was assessed by measuring children's height and classifying height-for-age according to World Health Organization standards to identify stunting.

The Learning Programme Quality Assessment Tool (LPQA v2) was used to measure the quality of ELPs. It involves a two-hour observation of a class and has 22 items spread across five domains: Materials & Equipment, Planning & Assessment, Learning Programme, Teaching Strategies and Relationships & Interactions. The domain and total scores are categorised into three rating levels: Inadequate, Basic and Good.

Interviews with principals and practitioners and facility observations provided rich contextual data on early learning environments.

Interviews were also completed with primary caregivers (PCGs) of the assessed enrolled children. The vast majority of PCGs were biological mothers.

Limitations

The findings presented in this report describe four-year-old children attending ELPs in the North West during 2024. They do not represent children who were not enrolled in an ELP at the time of the survey.

Provincial findings should be interpreted as a cross-sectional snapshot. The current provincial sample was not large enough to support reliable comparisons over time, although strengthening provincial trend analysis is planned for future rounds.

The provincial sample size also means that estimates are less precise than the corresponding national estimates. Comparisons between provincial and national findings should therefore be interpreted with appropriate caution, particularly where differences are small.

Despite these limitations, the Thrive by Five Index provides the strongest available evidence on the developmental status of young children attending ELPs in the North West. The findings offer an important evidence base to inform provincial planning, strengthen early childhood development services and improve children's readiness for school.

Child outcomes

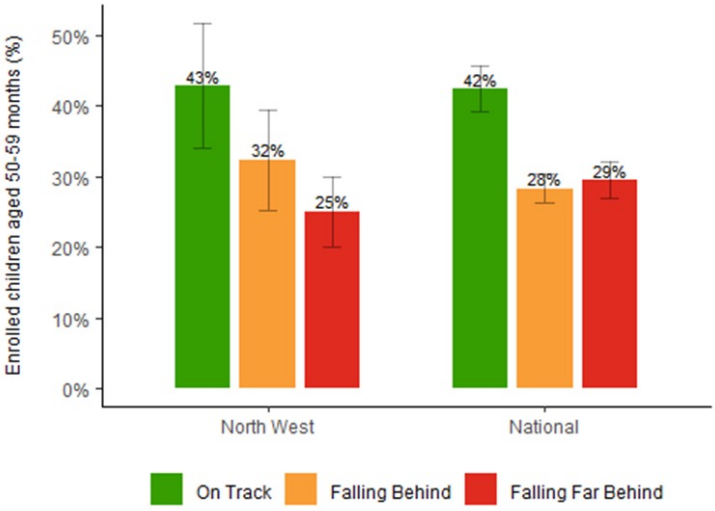
Early learning

Percentage children On Track

The *Thrive by Five Index* assesses children's early learning using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM 4&5), which measures children's development across five domains that are important for school readiness.

Overall, 43% of four-year-old children attending ELPs in the North West are developmentally **On Track** for their age, while 32% are **Falling Behind** and 25% are **Falling Far Behind.** These findings indicate that most children attending ELPs in the province have not yet developed the knowledge and skills expected for their age before entering formal schooling. The North West's overall early learning outcomes are similar to the national pattern.

Figure 1: *ELOM Total – Percentage of children On Track, Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind in the North West compared with the national average.*



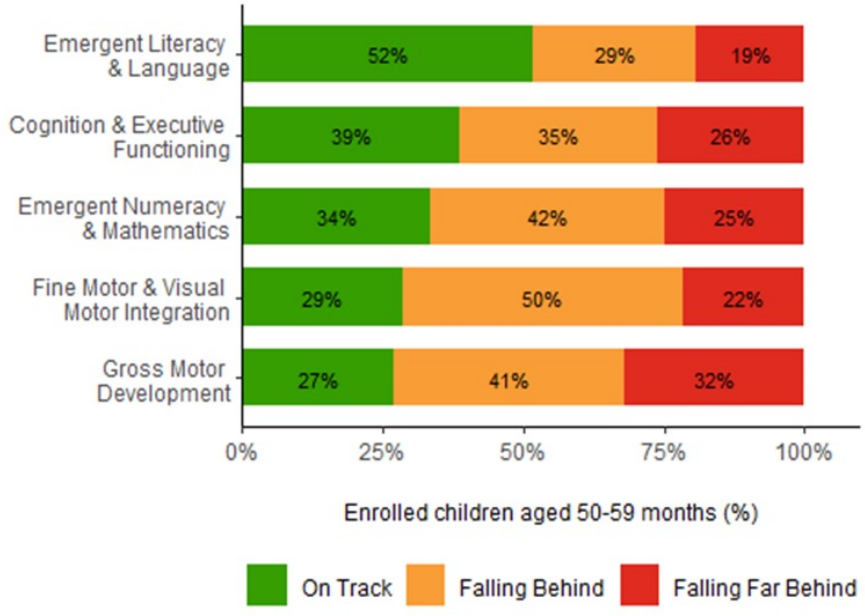
Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

Performance across developmental domains

Children's performance varies across the five developmental domains assessed by the ELOM. The strongest performance in North West is in Emergent Literacy and Language, where 52% of children are On Track. Performance is weaker across the remaining domains: 39% of children are On Track in Cognition and Executive Functioning, 34% in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, 29% in Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, and 27% in Gross Motor Development.

Gross Motor Development is the weakest-performing domain, with 32% of children classified as Falling Far Behind.

Figure 2: *Percentage of children On Track, Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind in each developmental domain.*



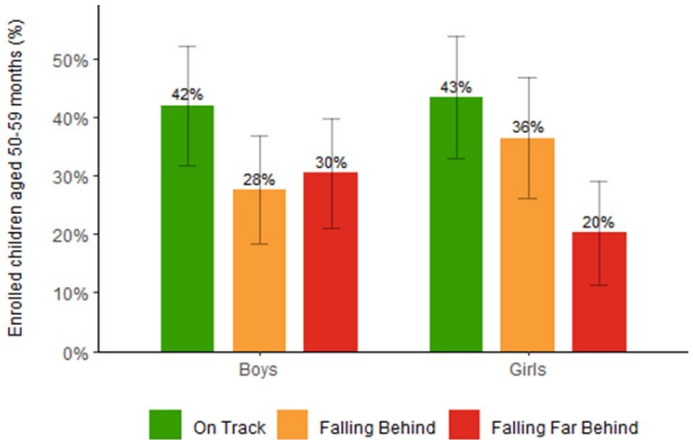
Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.

Gender differences in learning outcomes

There are minimal gender differences in overall early learning outcomes in North West. Overall, 43% of girls are On Track for early learning compared with 42% of boys. Boys are more likely to be Falling Far Behind (30%) than girls (20%), while girls are more likely to be Falling Behind (36%) than boys (28%).

Overall, the findings indicate broadly similar levels of early learning achievement among girls and boys in the province, with no statistically significant gender difference in overall On Track performance.

Figure 3: *Percentage of children On Track, Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind by gender.*



Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

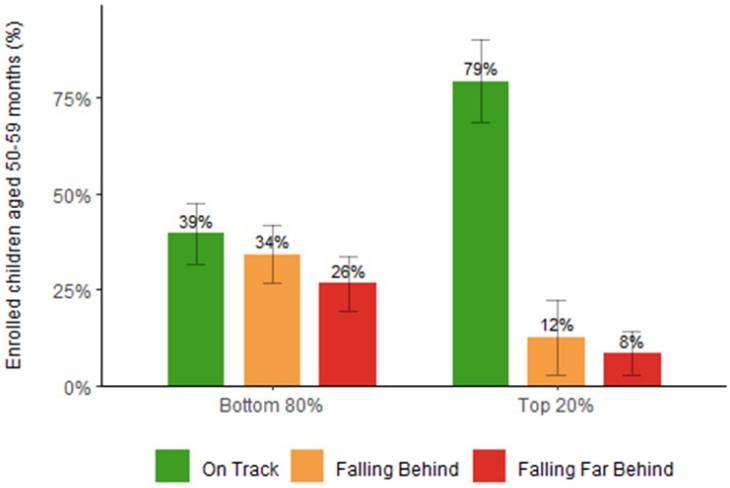
Differences by ELP fee group

Large differences in children's developmental outcomes are evident across ELP fee groups in North West. Among children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs, 79% are On Track for overall early learning, compared with 39% of children attending the remaining 80%. Children attending lower-fee ELPs are also more likely to be Falling Far Behind (26%) than those attending the highest-fee ELPs (8%).

Children attending higher-fee ELPs perform better across all developmental domains, with particularly large differences in Cognition and Executive Functioning, Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics, and Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration.

These findings highlight substantial socio-economic inequalities in children's early learning outcomes within the province, mirroring the national picture and reinforcing the importance of ensuring that all children have access to high-quality early learning opportunities, regardless of the resources available to the ELPs they attend.

Figure 4: *Percentage of children On Track, Falling Behind and Falling Far Behind by Bottom 80% and Top 20% fee groups.*



Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

Caregiver perceptions of children's development

Understanding how caregivers engage with their child's ELP and how they perceive their child's development is meaningful, as responsive caregiving depends on knowing and recognising a child's individual needs and strengths. Primary Caregivers (PCGs) were asked how they viewed their child's development compared to other children of the same age. Almost all caregivers (92% of those who were interviewed) believed their child was developing as quickly as or faster than other children their age. These perceptions were consistent across both higher and lower fee groups. This is in stark contrast to the ELOM 4&5 findings, which show that only 43% of enrolled children in the North West are developmentally On Track for early learning.

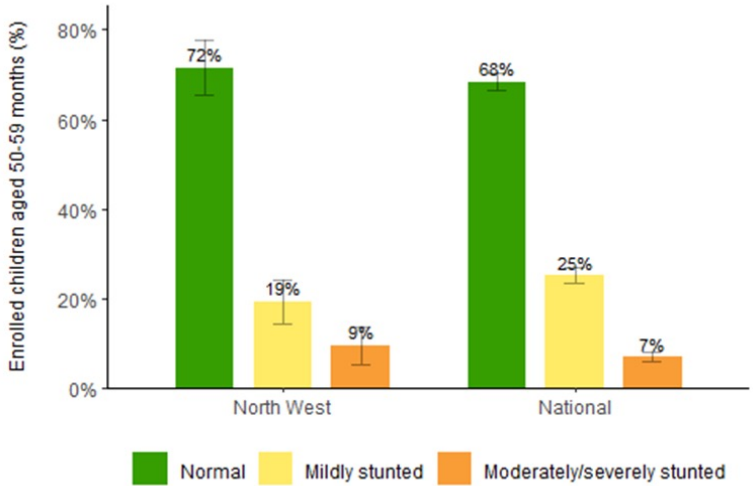
There are several likely reasons for this difference between perceived and actual performance. Firstly, PCGs were asked how their child was developing relative to other children of the same age, rather than whether they believed their child was meeting age-expected developmental milestones. This means that reference group effects may have influenced responses, as caregivers are likely to compare their child with other children in their immediate social context, whose developmental experiences may be similar. Secondly, caregivers may not always have clear information about what development typically looks like at this age, and some may also be hesitant to identify or report concerns about their child's development. This highlights the importance of raising public awareness around early development and increasing access to tools that help caregivers accurately understand and support their children's growth.

Physical growth

Children's physical growth was assessed by measuring height and classifying growth according to World Health Organization standards.

In the North West, 9% of children aged 50-59 months enrolled in ELPs are moderately or severely stunted. A further 19% show signs of mild stunting. These figures closely mirror those at national level. Children with growth faltering are less likely to meet the early learning standard. National findings show that by the age of four years, moderately or severely stunted children are on average five months behind their non-stunted peers when it comes to early learning. Mildly stunted children are approximately two months behind.

Figure 5: *Stunting rates in the North West compared with the national average.*



Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

Social-emotional functioning

Children's readiness for school depends not only on cognitive development but also on their ability to regulate emotions and build positive relationships. The survey measured children's:

- Social Relations with Peers and Adults: This includes abilities such as cooperating independently, participating effectively in group activities, resolving conflicts without aggression, and comfortably seeking support, assistance, or information from familiar adults.
- Emotional Readiness for School: This encompasses skills such as effectively communicating with adults, appropriately expressing needs and emotions, demonstrating independence, adapting to changes in routine at home or school, showing confidence in new situations, and initiating activities.

In the North West, 55% of children meet the expected standard for emotional readiness for school, while 50% meet the standard for social relations with peers and adults. Girls are more likely than boys to meet the expected standard in both areas.

Although half of children meet the expected standard, a substantial proportion enter school without the social-emotional skills expected for their age. National analysis found that stronger social-emotional functioning is associated with better early learning outcomes, reinforcing the importance of supporting children's emotional wellbeing and relationships alongside cognitive development.

Early Learning Programmes

Access to an Early Learning Programme (ELP) is important, but the extent to which children benefit will depend on the quality of the programme. The Thrive by Five Index assessed programme quality using the Learning Programme Quality Assessment Version 2 (LPQA v2) Interviews were conducted with the Principal and practitioner who provided information on the characteristics of the ELP.

This section presents findings on programme quality and the characteristics of ELPs in the North West.

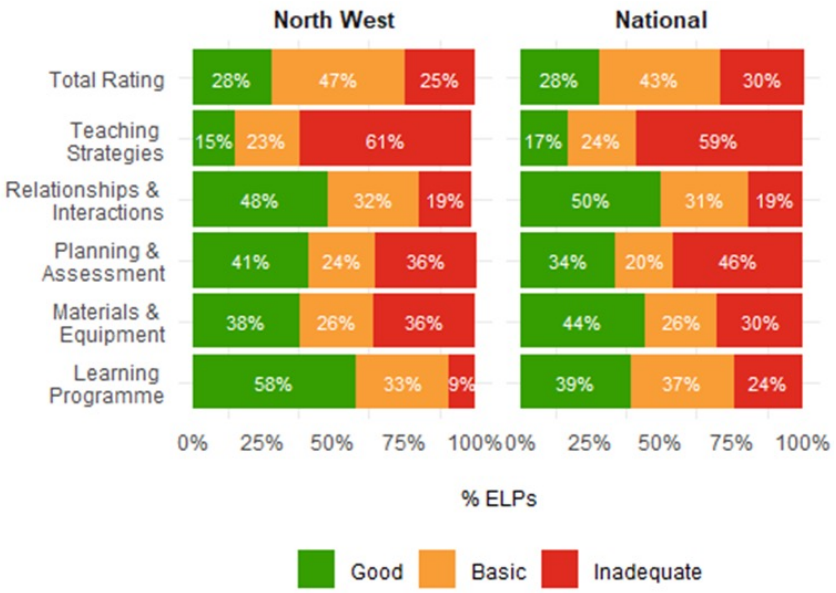
Programme quality

Learning programme quality matters. The Learning Programme Quality Assessment Tool (LPQA v2) measures the quality of a group learning programme for children aged 3–5 years in five domains aligned with the South African National Curriculum Framework (NCF):

- **Materials & Equipment:** Evaluates the learning materials and how they are organised in the classroom.
- **Planning & Assessment**: Examines curriculum use, programme planning, and child monitoring.
- **The Learning Programme:** Examines the daily schedule and the quality of numeracy, literacy, group times, and free-play sessions.
- **Teaching Strategies:** Evaluates the strategies used by ELP staff to support and extend children's learning and encourage independence.
- **Relationships & Interactions:** Examines interactions between children and staff and how staff encourage positive peer interactions.

The North West performs relatively well in Learning Programme, with 58% of ELPs achieving a Good rating, compared with 39% nationally. Almost half (48%) achieve a Good rating for Relationships and Interactions, while 41% are rated Good for Planning and Assessment and 38% for Materials and Equipment. Overall, 28% of ELPs receive a Good total LPQA rating, the same as nationally.

Figure 6: *LPQA ratings, North West compared with the national average.*



Source: Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.

Teaching Strategies represent the province's weakest LPQA domain: only 15% of ELPs received a Good rating, while 61% were rated Inadequate. This is particularly important because Teaching Strategies was the only LPQA domain significantly associated with children's ELOM 4&5 outcomes in the national analysis.

ELP characteristics

Table 5 summarises key characteristics of the 112 ELPs sampled in the North West, with national figures provided for context. On average, ELPs in North West had been operating for 16 years, with 78% having been open for more than six years. Most ELPs (83%) were founded by either the current principal or a previous principal, reflecting the micro-enterprise nature of the province's early learning sector.

The average enrolment per ELP was 52 children, while attendance on the day of the survey averaged 49 children. The average observed class size was 22 children, slightly higher than the national average of 19, and ELPs were open for an average of 49 hours per week, compared with 46 hours nationally.

Most ELPs (62%) operated from purpose-built ECD centres, compared with 57% nationally, while 25% operated from someone's home and 8% were based on school premises. Access to amenities was mixed. While 86% of ELPs had an outdoor play area and 67% had a flush toilet on site, only 40% had tap water inside the building, compared with 52% nationally.

Table 5: *ELP origin, size and infrastructure, North West compared to national*

Indicator	North West	National
General		
Average years in operation	16	17
% More than 6 years in operation	78%	84%
Founded by current / past principal	83%	85%
Average number of enrolled children	52	45
Average attendance on day of survey	49	36
Average class size (observed)	22	19
Average hours open per week	49	46
Infrastructure		
Purpose built ECD centre	62%	57%
In someone's house	25%	22%
On school premises	8%	8%
In the garage of someone's house	2%	5%
At a place of worship	3%	3%
Community hall / centre	0%	2%
Municipal building	0%	1%
Other	**0%**	1%
Amenities		
Tap water in building	40%	52%
Flush toilet on site	67%	59%
Outdoor play area	86%	87%
N range	**112**	**1358-1388**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions.

ELP registration and income

In the North West, 35% of ELPs were fully registered, compared with 55% nationally. A further 11% were conditionally registered and 24% were in the process of registration, while 25% were not registered. Among ELPs reporting full or conditional registration, 97% were able to provide evidence of registration.

Parent fees were the primary source of income for 99% of ELPs in North West. At the time of the study, 24% of all ELPs received the government ECD subsidy, substantially lower than the national figure of 44%. Among ELPs with full or conditional registration, 50% received the subsidy, compared with 67% nationally.

Subsidy reliability was also lower than nationally. Among subsidised ELPs, 33% reported receiving the subsidy on time, compared to 53% nationally and 47% reported receiving the expected amount compared to 60% nationally. Overall, 30% reported receiving the expected amount on time, compared with 38% nationally.

In addition, 25% of ELPs offered Grade R, similar to 26% nationally. Among these ELPs, 68% reported that Grade R was registered with the Department of Basic Education, compared with 48% nationally.

Table 6: *Registration and income, North West compared to National*

Indicator	North West	National
Partial Care Facility Registration		
Fully Registered	35%	55%
Conditionally Registered	11%	8%
In Process	24%	18%
Not Registered	25%	15%
Lapsed Registration	1%	3%
Don't know	3%	1%
Of those who reported full / conditional registration - Able to provide evidence of registration (certificate)	97%	91%

Income		
Receives the ECD subsidy (% of ELPs with full or conditional PCF registration)	50%	67%
Receives ECD subsidy (% of ELPs)	24%	44%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving subsidy on time	33%	53%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving expected subsidy amount	47%	60%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving expected subsidy amount, and on time	30%	38%
Parent fees cited as the primary source of income	99%	96%
Grade R		
Offers Grade R	25%	26%
Grade R registered with DBE	68%	48%
N range	**112**	**1,370-1,388**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions.

Employment conditions and staff retention

ELPs in the North West employed an average of seven paid staff, including five paid teaching staff. ELPs in North West employed an average of seven paid staff, including five paid teaching staff. Practitioners worked an average of 43 hours per week. All ELP practitioners are women however 3% of principals are men. Employment conditions were somewhat stronger than the national figures on several measures. In the North West, 65% of practitioners had an employment contract, 62% received paid sick leave and 58% received paid holiday leave, compared with 57%, 52% and 48% nationally. However, only 13% of practitioners earned more than R5,000 per month.

Principals had worked at their current ELP for an average of 10 years. Among practitioners, 23% had worked at their ELP for less than one year, 32% for one to four years, 26% for five to 10 years and 19% for more than 10 years. Practitioner retention is a notable concern: 42% reported that they were considering leaving the ECD profession, compared with 26% nationally.

Almost two-thirds of ELPs in North West (63%) belonged to an ECD Forum, lower than the national figure of 75%.

Table 7: *Employment conditions and staff retention, North West compared to national*

Indicator	North West	National
Conditions of employment		
Number of paid staff (average of all paid staff)	7	6
Number of paid teaching staff (average)	5	4
Average hours worked per week	43	40
Practitioners earn above minimum wage	13%	9%
Practitioner has employment contract	65%	57%
Practitioner gets paid sick leave	62%	52%
Practitioner gets paid holiday leave	58%	48%
ELP is member of ECD Forum	63%	75%
% of principals who are female	97%	95%
% of practitioners who are female	100%	96%
Retention and stability		
Principals - average years at current ELP	10	12
Practitioner years at ELP: <1 year	23%	20%
Practitioner years at ELP: 1-4 years	32%	36%
Practitioner years at ELP: 5-10 years	26%	27%
Practitioner years at ELP: >10 years	19%	15%
Practitioner thinking of leaving the ECD profession	42%	26%
N range	**89-112**	**1.107-1,388**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions.

Principal and practitioner qualifications

In North West, 43% of principals had an NQF Level 5 or higher ECD qualification, compared with 14% of practitioners. A further 26% of principals and 34% of practitioners had an NQF Level 4 qualification.

However, 19% of principals and 39% of practitioners reported having no formal ECD qualification. The proportion of practitioners with no formal ECD qualification was higher than the national figure of 34%, while the proportion with an NQF Level 5 or higher qualification was lower than the national figure of 18%.

Table 8: *Principal and practitioner qualifications, North West compared to national*

Indicator	North West	National
Highest ECD qualification of principal		
None	19%	15%
NQF 1 / Accredited skills programme	11%	9%
NQF 4	26%	38%
NQF 5	30%	25%
Above NQF 5	13%	12%
N	**112**	**1388**
Highest ECD qualification of practitioner		
None	39%	34%
NQF 1 / Accredited skills programme	13%	14%
NQF 4	34%	33%
NQF 5	12%	14%
Above NQF 5	2%	4%
N	**99**	**1223**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions.

Curricula and in-service training

In North West, curriculum use was high, with 95% of practitioners reporting that they used a curriculum, compared with 77% nationally. However, only 23% reported that the curriculum had supporting learning resources, substantially lower than the national figure of 56%. Among the curricula used, 64% were based on national curricula or standards, including the NCF, CAPS, ELDA or NELDS.

During the previous two years, 43% of principals received in-service training, compared with 47% nationally, while 39% of practitioners received in-service training, compared with 50% nationally. Among practitioners who received training, 35% were trained by NGOs and 33% by the national or provincial Department of Basic Education, broadly similar to the national figures of 36% and 35%, respectively.

Table 9: *Curricula and training reported in use, North West compared to national*

Indicator	North West	National
Training		
Principal received in-service training in past 2 years	43%	47%
Practitioner received in-service training in the past 2 years (2023-2024)	39%	50%
Training provided to practitioners by NGOs	35%	36%
Training provided to practitioners by DBE (national / provincial)	33%	35%
Training provided to practitioners - all other training providers	23%	39%
Curriculum use		
Practitioners use curriculum	95%	77%
Of those with a curriculum, what % have accompanying learning resources	23%	56%
Type of curriculum used		
National curriculum / standards (NCF/CAPS/ELDA/NELDS)	64%	58%
Other	18%	39%
Own curriculum	18%	3%
N range	**99-112**	**1,223-1,388**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data .
Note: "Other" category contains curriculum names with less than 2% uptake in the province. Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions

Inclusion of children with disabilities and additional support needs

The survey examined the extent to which ELPs accommodate children with disabilities and additional support needs. Children with disabilities were not directly assessed as part of the Thrive by Five child assessments. However, principals were asked whether their ELP enrolled children aged four years and older with significant functional difficulties related to seeing, hearing, walking or moving, communicating or learning.

One-third (29%) of ELPs in the North West reported accommodating at least one child with a disability, indicating that many ELPs are already providing opportunities for inclusive early learning.

Strengthening inclusive early learning remains an important priority for improving equitable access to quality education for all children. Continued investment in practitioner support, specialised services and accessible learning environments is also needed to enable ELPs to better meet the needs of children with disabilities.

Health and nutrition services

ELPs play an important role in supporting children's health and nutrition alongside learning. The survey indicates that several health services are reaching a high proportion of ELPs in North West. During the survey period, 88% of ELPs received deworming services, 87% received Vitamin A supplementation and 82% received immunisation services. These levels were substantially higher than the national figures of 61%, 60% and 65%, respectively. Growth monitoring reached 25% of ELPs, the same as nationally.

However, screening services were considerably less common. Only 6% of ELPs received vision screening, 6% received hearing screening and 8% received developmental screening, compared with 17%, 16% and 21% nationally. This suggests an important gap in preventative and developmental screening despite the relatively strong reach of other health services.

These findings are particularly relevant given that 9% of children attending ELPs in North West are moderately or severely stunted, with a further 19% showing signs of mild stunting. The combination of strong reach for immunisation, deworming and Vitamin A supplementation, but limited access to screening, highlights an opportunity to strengthen the range of health and developmental services delivered through ELPs.

Table 10: *DoH official visited ELP in 2023 or 2024, North West compared to national*

Indicator	North West	National
Vision screening	6%	17%
Hearing screening	6%	16%
Developmental screening	8%	21%
Growth monitoring	25%	25%
Immunisations	82%	65%
Deworming	88%	61%
Vitamin A	87%	60%
Provide nutrition training / support	14%	15%
Other	0%	2%
None	6%	19%
N	**112**	**1,388**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data

Home language and Language of Learning and Teaching

Children learn most effectively when opportunities for learning are available in languages they understand, particularly during the early years.

North West is characterised by considerable linguistic diversity, with Setswana, English and Sesotho among the most commonly reported home languages. The survey therefore examined the alignment between children's home language and the Language of Learning and Teaching (LoLT) used within ELPs.

For 69% of children, the language used by the practitioner matched the child's main home language, similar to the national figure of 71%. This was 70% among children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs and 59% among those attending the highest-fee 20%.

When children's full multilingual language profiles were considered, 93% of children had at least one home language that matched the language used in the classroom, compared with 90% nationally. This was 93% among children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs and 100% among those attending the highest-fee 20%.

These findings suggest that most children in the North West experience learning in at least one familiar language. While alignment with children's main home language is somewhat lower among children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs, all children in this group had at least one home language that matched the language used in the classroom.

Table 11: *Alignment between home language and language of learning and teaching (LoLT), North West compared to national*

Language combinations	North West			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
The child's main home language (as reported by PCG) matches the language that the practitioner uses in the classroom (as observed by the assessor)	70%	59%	69%	71%
Any of the child's home languages match the language that the practitioner uses in the classroom (as observed by the assessor)	93%	100%	93%	90%
N	**254**	**66**	**320**	**3,841**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.

Household profile and nurturing care

Children's development is shaped not only by their experiences in ELPs, but also by the care, resources and relationships available within their homes and communities.

Primary Caregiver (PCG) interviews were completed for 320 of the 432 assessed children in the North West, representing 74% of the provincial child sample. Most PCGs were the child's biological mother (75%); 8% were the biological father, 9% a grandmother and 8% another caregiver.

Employment, education, assets, and basic services

Household circumstances differed substantially between children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs and those attending the highest-fee 20% in North West. Overall, 64% of PCGs in North West had completed Grade 12, compared with 56% nationally. This ranged from 61% among PCGs of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs to 98% among those attending the highest-fee 20%. PCG unemployment was 37% overall, compared with 45% nationally, and differed markedly by fee group: 40% in the lower-fee group compared with 6% in the highest-fee group.

Access to a working cellphone was universal at 100%. However, access to other household assets differed substantially by fee group. A functional laptop or computer was available in 30% of households in the lower-fee group and 89% in the highest-fee group. Internet access through a connection in the dwelling was reported by 20% and 88%, respectively, while ownership of a working motor vehicle was reported by 35% and 91%.

29% of households had a tap inside the dwelling, similar to the national figure of 27%. However, access differed considerably by fee group, from 24% of households in the lower-fee group to 86% in the highest-fee group. These findings indicate substantial socio-economic differences between the two ELP fee groups, particularly in caregiver education and employment, access to digital resources, transport and household water infrastructure.

Table 12: *Employment, assets and basic services, North West and national*

Indicator	North West			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
PCG completed grade 12	61%	98%	64%	56%
PCG is unemployed	40%	6%	37%	45%
Household has access to a working cellphone	100%	100%	100%	100%
Functional laptop/computer in the home	30%	89%	35%	29%
Internet is mainly accessed by connection in the dwelling	20%	88%	26%	23%
HH has a motor-car in working order	35%	91%	39%	36%
Main water source: tap inside dwelling	24%	86%	29%	27%
N	**254**	**66**	**320**	**3,841**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions

Home Learning Environment

Access to children's books differed substantially across households in North West. Overall, 16% of sampled households had no children's books, 28% had one, 48% had two to five, and 8% had more than five.

Differences were particularly pronounced by the ELP fee group. Among households whose children attended the lower-fee 80% of ELPs, 18% had no children's books and only 4% had more than five. Among those attending the highest-fee 20%, 1% had no children's books and 57% had more than five.

Overall, 47% of PCGs in North West reported reading to their child at least three times a week, compared with 36% nationally. This differed considerably by fee group, from 44% of PCGs in the lower-fee group to 81% in the highest-fee group.

Fathers had lived in 36% of sampled households at some point during the previous six months, compared with 45% nationally. Overall, 54% of fathers had not participated in any of the measured home learning activities during the previous week, while 24% had participated at least three times. Father involvement differed substantially by fee group: 57% of fathers in the lower-fee group had not participated in any home learning activities, compared with 18% in the highest-fee group. Similarly, 20% of fathers in the lower-fee group participated at least three times during the previous week, compared with 70% in the highest-fee group. The national Thrive by Five findings show a positive association between high levels of father involvement and children's learning outcomes. More specifically, the association was only statistically significant when comparing children with no reported father involvement to those whose fathers had engaged in play-based activities with them three or more times in the past week. These findings reinforce the importance of encouraging fathers and father figures to participate in activities such as reading, storytelling, singing, playing, counting and drawing with children.

National analysis also found positive associations between children's early learning outcomes and access to books t. Children living in households with 10 or more books scored an average of 6.6 points higher on the ELOM4&5 than children living in households with no books, after accounting for age, gender and ELP fee level. These findings reinforce the importance of home learning opportunities, including reading, storytelling, singing, playing, counting and drawing with children.

Table 13: *Home learning environment (HLE), North West and national*

Indicator	North West			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
Books and reading				
No children's books in the home	18%	1%	16%	26%
1 children's book in the home	29%	7%	28%	19%
2-5 children's books in the home	49%	35%	48%	45%
More than 5 children's books in the home	4%	57%	8%	10%
PCG reads books to child ≥3x/week	44%	81%	47%	36%

Father involvement				
Father lives in the household	32%	81%	36%	45%
Father not involved in HLE activities	57%	18%	54%	60%
Father did HLE activities 3+times in the past week	20%	70%	24%	18%
N	**254**	**66**	**320**	**3,841**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions

Health, hunger and social protection

Access to social protection was high in the North West. Similar to the national estimate, 98% of children in the North West had a birth certificate. The Child Support Grant reached 71% of children, compared with 78% nationally. Uptake differed substantially by ELP fee group, with 77% of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs receiving the grant compared with 8% of those attending the highest-fee 20%.

Food insecurity was more commonly reported in the North West than nationally. Overall, 9% of PCGs reported that a household member had skipped meals because of food shortages during the previous three months, compared with 6% nationally. In addition, 4% reported that a child had skipped meals over the same period, compared with 2% nationally. Both measures of food insecurity were concentrated among households whose children attended the lower-fee 80% of ELPs.

Pregnancy and birth-related risks were also reported. Overall, 27% of children were exposed to at least one of the measured pregnancy or birth-related risk factors, compared with 18% nationally. Premature birth was reported for 13% of children, the same as nationally, while 8% were born with a low birth weight, compared with 11% nationally. Reported alcohol consumption during pregnancy was notably higher in the North West at 13%, compared with 4% nationally, while 7% of mothers reported smoking during pregnancy, compared with 3% nationally. These self-reported behaviours should be interpreted with caution, as behaviours that carry social stigma may be subject to underreporting.

National analysis found that low birth weight was significantly associated with lower early learning scores, with children born with a low birth weight scoring an average of 2.9 points lower on the ELOM4&5 than their peers.

Table 14: *Health, hunger and social protection, North West and national*

Indicator	North West Sample			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
Social protection				
Child has birth certificate	97%	100%	98%	98%
Child receives Child Support Grant	77%	8%	71%	78%
Hunger				
Household member skipped meals due to food shortage (past 3 months)	10%	0%	9%	6%
Child skipped meals (past 3 months)	4%	0%	4%	2%
Pregnancy related risks				
Mother smoked during pregnancy	7%	7%	7%	3%
Mother consumed alcohol during pregnancy	15%	0%	13%	4%
Premature birth (<37 weeks)	14%	6%	13%	13%
Low birth weight (<2.5 kg)	8%	10%	8%	11%
Overweight (>4kg)	9%	6%	8%	6%
Exposure to at least one pregnancy / birth risk factor	29%	16%	27%	18%
N	**254**	**66**	**320**	**3,841**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions

Caregiver social connectedness and daily functioning

Responsive caregiving during the preschool years plays a critical role in child development, particularly for children exposed to early adversity. Responsive caregiving refers to a caregiver's timely and developmentally appropriate responses to a child's cues, as well as ongoing emotional support and engagement in activities that promote learning. The capacity of PCGs to provide responsive care may be constrained by structural stressors such as poverty, gender inequality and unsafe communities.

Two aspects of PCG wellbeing were included in the PCG interview: social connectedness and daily functioning. PCGs were asked to select the most appropriate response from a short list of options for each of four statements shown in Table 15.

Overall, indicators of PCG wellbeing in the North West were broadly similar to the national pattern. Social support from family was reported more frequently than support from friends. Overall, 84% of PCGs agreed or strongly agreed that their family tries to help them, compared with 85% nationally, while 50% reported that they could count on their friends when things go wrong, compared with 51% nationally.

Most PCGs reported relatively low levels of difficulty with daily functioning. Only 34% found taking care of things at home somewhat, very or extremely difficult, compared with 39% nationally. A smaller proportion, 13%, reported some level of difficulty getting along with other people, compared with 18% nationally.

These findings should be interpreted with caution. The indicators presented capture only a limited dimension of caregiver wellbeing and do not provide a comprehensive measure of stress or mental health.

As such, they may underestimate the broader challenges faced by caregivers. Nonetheless, the findings suggest that some caregivers experience constraints in their social support and daily functioning that may affect their capacity to support children's early learning and development.

Table 15: *Primary caregiver social connectedness and daily functioning, North West and national*

Social functioning indicator		North West Responses	National Responses
Social connectedness	**"My family tries to help me"**		
	Agree/strongly agree	84%	85%
	Disagree/strongly disagree	16%	15%
	"I can count on my friends when things go wrong"		
	Agree/strongly agree	50%	51%
	Disagree/strongly disagree	50%	49%
Daily functioning	**"In the last 4 weeks, I found taking care of things at home"**		
	Not difficult	66%	61%
	Somewhat difficult	17%	26%
	Very/extremely difficult	17%	13%
	"In the last 4 weeks, I found getting along with other people"		
	Not difficult	87%	82%
	Somewhat difficult	9%	13%
	Very/extremely difficult	4%	5%
N Range		**320**	**3,753-3,841**

Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data
Note: Due to Don't know responses and Refusals, sample sizes (N) differed for questions

Conclusion and key recommendations

The North West findings present a mixed provincial picture. Overall early learning outcomes show that a substantial proportion of four-year-old children attending ELPs are not yet developmentally On Track. Outcomes vary across developmental domains, with girls generally performing better than boys. Substantial differences are also evident by ELP fee group, with children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs achieving stronger outcomes than those attending the remaining 80%.

These differences are reflected in the environments surrounding children. Household circumstances vary markedly by ELP fee group, particularly in caregiver education and employment, access to children's books and digital resources, transport and household water infrastructure. ELP conditions also present challenges. Parent fees are the primary source of income for 99% of ELPs, only 24% receive the ECD subsidy, and subsidy reliability is lower than nationally. Practitioner retention is a particular concern, with 42% considering leaving the ECD profession. At the same time, North West records strengths in curriculum use, employment conditions and the alignment between children's home languages and the language used in the classroom.

The evidence therefore points to inequalities that extend across children's learning outcomes, ELP resources and household learning opportunities. Health service delivery through ELPs shows important strengths, with high coverage of immunisation, deworming and Vitamin A supplementation, although vision, hearing and developmental screening remain limited. Household food insecurity and pregnancy-related risk factors also warrant attention.

The findings highlight the interconnected influences of ELP quality, household circumstances, health and home learning opportunities on children's development. Strengthening these areas will be important to support more children in the North West to enter formal schooling with the foundations needed for continued learning and development.

The marked difference between caregiver perceptions of child development and measured developmental outcomes highlights the importance of supporting caregivers to recognise children's developmental progress before they enter formal schooling.

Key recommendations

1. **Make teaching quality the province's top quality-improvement priority.**
   Focus practitioner training, coaching and support on practical teaching strategies that extend children's thinking, participation and independence. Only 15% of North West ELPs achieved a Good rating for Teaching Strategies, making this the weakest programme-quality domain in the province. This is particularly important because national analysis identified Teaching Strategies as the only observed programme-quality domain significantly associated with ELOM 4&5 outcomes. Practitioner development should therefore prioritise practical, responsive and play-based teaching approaches, supported by mentoring and opportunities for practitioners to apply these approaches in the classroom.

2. **Target support for developmental domains where North West children struggle most.**
Strengthen play-based learning activities, practitioner support and learning materials in the developmental domains where children are least likely to be On Track, with particular attention to gross and fine motor development, emergent numeracy, and cognition and executive functioning. Support should also respond to the gender differences evident in the provincial findings, with girls generally achieving stronger developmental outcomes than boys. Practitioner support should therefore ensure that learning activities provide varied and engaging opportunities for all children to strengthen these foundational skills.

3. **Prioritise quality improvement in lower-fee ELPs.**
Direct additional resources and quality support towards ELPs serving poorer communities, where developmental disadvantage is greatest. Only 39% of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs are On Track for early learning, compared with 79% in the highest-fee 20%. These inequalities extend beyond developmental outcomes: household circumstances differ markedly by fee group, including caregiver education and employment and access to books, digital resources, transport and basic services. Quality-improvement initiatives should therefore prioritise lower-fee ELPs through practitioner coaching and access to appropriate learning and play materials, helping to ensure that children's opportunities to learn are not determined by household or programme resources.

4. **Use the province's registration and subsidy platform to drive quality.**
Strengthen registration pathways and access to reliable public funding as a foundation for ELP quality and sustainability. Only 35% of North West ELPs are fully registered and 24% receive the ECD subsidy, while parent fees remain the primary source of income for 99% of ELPs. Among subsidised ELPs, only 30% report receiving the expected subsidy amount on time. Strengthening support for ELP registration, expanding access to available subsidies and improving the reliability of subsidy payments would provide a more stable platform for investment in programme quality and the ECD workforce. Practitioner retention also requires attention, with 42% of practitioners considering leaving the ECD profession.

5. **Close critical infrastructure, health and nutrition gaps around ELPs.**
Build on the comparatively strong reach of immunisation, deworming and Vitamin A supplementation through North West ELPs while strengthening preventive screening and support. Vision, hearing and developmental screening remain comparatively limited, reducing opportunities to identify developmental or health concerns early. Greater coordination between Education, Health, Social Development, local government and ECD partners should strengthen screening, nutrition and referral services through ELPs. Attention should also extend beyond ELPs to the household conditions affecting children, particularly food insecurity and pregnancy-related risk factors identified in the provincial findings.

6. **Mobilise families around simple home learning and developmental milestones.**
Expand access to children's books and encourage caregivers, fathers and father figures to participate regularly in reading, storytelling, singing, counting, drawing and play. Overall, 16% of households have no children's books, while 47% of PCGs read to their child at least three times a week. Father involvement remains limited: 54% of fathers did not participate in any of the measured home learning

activities during the previous week, while only 24% participated three or more times. These patterns are particularly unequal by fee group. Supporting families with practical, low-cost home learning activities and accessible information about age-appropriate developmental milestones can strengthen learning opportunities beyond the ELP.

7. **Reach children who remain outside organised early learning.**
   According to the 2024 General Household Survey, 26% of four-year-old children in North West are not enrolled in any form of organised early learning. Expanding access must continue alongside efforts to improve quality for children already enrolled.

The recommendations presented above reflect the key priorities emerging from the North West findings and stakeholder engagement. They should be read alongside the national Thrive by Five Index 2024 recommendations, which provide a broader framework for strengthening early learning across South Africa. The full national recommendations are available in the ***Thrive by Five Index 2024 Recommendations Brief***

Addendum: Sampled wards and number of ELPs and children assessed in the North West

District	Municipality	Ward ID	# sampled ELPs	# sampled children
Bojanala	Local Municipality of Madibeng	63702004	3	12
		63702008	3	12
		63702031	3	12
	Moretele Local Municipality	63701016	5	17
	Moses Kotane Local Municipality	63705022	1	4
	Rustenburg Local Municipality	63703009	4	13
		63703013	7	29
		63703014	7	30
		63703018	5	17
		63703019	2	6
		63703029	5	19
		63703030	5	19
		63703040	3	12
Dr Kenneth Kaunda	City of Matlosana Local Municipality	64003008	3	11
		64003019	5	16
	JB Marks Local Municipality	64005003	2	11
		64005023	2	7
		64005024	1	3
		64005025	2	7
	Maquassi Hills Local Municipality	64004009	1	4
Dr Ruth Segomotsi Mompati	Greater Taung Local Municipality	63904013	3	12
	Kagisano/Molopo Local Municipality	63907006	3	12
		63907007	3	12
	Lekwa-Teemane Local Municipality	63906005	2	8
	Naledi Local Municipality	63902001	2	8

District	Municipality	Ward ID	# sampled ELPs	# sampled children
Ngaka Modiri Molema	Ditsobotla Local Municipality	63804003	4	13
		63804008	3	12
	Mafikeng Local Municipality	63803002	2	8
		63803004	3	12
		63803013	3	14
		63803016	2	8
	Ramotshere Moiloa Local Municipality	63805015	4	16
	Tswaing Local Municipality	63802009	3	12
		63802011	3	12
		63802012	3	12



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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.

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