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Thrive by Five Index 2024:

Gauteng

PROVINCIAL REPORT

2024 thrive5
thrive by five | INDEX

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.

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Gauteng Provincial Report

SEPTEMBER 2026

Executive Summary 04

Introduction 06
- Why the Thrive by Five Index matters 06
- Purpose of the Index 06
- Access to organised early learning in the Province 06
- Gauteng Sample 07
- Measures 09
- Limitations 10

Child outcomes 10
- Early learning 10
- Percentage children On Track 10
- Performance across developmental domains 11
- Gender differences in learning outcomes 12
- Differences by ELP fee group 12
- Caregiver perceptions of children's development 13
- Physical growth 14
- Social-emotional functioning 14

Early Learning Programmes 15
- Programme quality 15
- ELP registration and income 18
- Employment conditions and staff retention 19
- Principal and practitioner qualifications 21
- Curricula and in-service training 21
- Inclusion of children with disabilities and additional support needs 22
- Health and nutrition services 23
- Home language and Language of Learning and Teaching 24

Household profile and nurturing care 25
- Employment, education, assets, and basic services 25
- Home Learning Environment 26
- Health, hunger and social protection 27
- Caregiver social connectedness and daily functioning 28

Conclusion and key recommendations 30

Addendum: Sampled wards and number of ELPs and children assessed in Gauteng 33

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 Gauteng Province. It focuses on children aged 50–59 months who were enrolled in ELPs during the 2024 Index. The findings provide a cross-sectional picture of children's developmental status in the province.

Overall, 40% of four-year-old children attending an ELP in Gauteng are On Track for overall early learning, while 25% are Falling Behind and 35% are Falling Far Behind. Children perform best in Emergent Literacy and Language, where 47% are On Track, followed by Cognition and Executive Functioning (44% On Track). Outcomes are weaker in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (33% On Track), Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (32% On Track), and Gross Motor Development (29% On Track), making Gross Motor Development the weakest-performing domain in the province. Overall early learning outcomes are broadly similar to the national pattern, although performance in Gross Motor Development falls significantly below the national average.

Substantial disparities are evident within the province. Girls outperform boys across most developmental measures. Overall, 46% of girls are On Track for overall early learning compared with 33% of boys. There are substantially more boys likely to be Falling Far Behind, reflecting a gender pattern that is also evident nationally. Socio-economic differences are also pronounced. Children attending the top 20% of fee-charging ELPs are considerably more likely to be developmentally On Track than children attending the bottom 80% of ELPs (57% compared with 36%). Differences between fee groups are evident across almost every developmental domain, highlighting persistent inequalities in children's early learning opportunities and outcomes.

Development extends beyond early learning. Just over half of four-year-old children attending ELPs in Gauteng meet the expected standards for social-emotional functioning. 54% meet the standard for emotional readiness for school, while 57% meet the standard for social relations with peers and adults. Girls perform marginally better than boys in emotional readiness, while social relations outcomes are similar across genders.

The province records a moderate or severe stunting rate of 6%, with a further 27% of children classified as mildly stunted. Although the rate of moderate and severe stunting is similar to the national estimate, stunting remains an important developmental concern because national findings show that children experiencing growth faltering are substantially more likely to experience poorer early learning outcomes.

The findings also highlight a marked difference between caregiver perceptions and measured developmental outcomes. Although only 40% of children are developmentally On Track for overall early learning, approximately 96%of primary 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.

The Thrive by Five Index highlights the importance of integrated action across Gauteng's early childhood development system. Improving children's outcomes will require continued investment in the quality of teaching and learning within ELPs, strengthened support for boys and children attending lower-fee ELPs, greater emphasis on gross motor development, sustained efforts to improve children's nutrition and healthy growth, and increased support for caregivers to recognise and promote children's development during the early years.

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 Gauteng 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 Gauteng. 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] 68% of four-year-old children in Gauteng attend an ELP, a further 7% attend Grade R or school, while 25% are not enrolled in any form of organised early learning.

Gauteng 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 Gauteng, the planned sample comprised of 76 wards, 228 ELPs and 912 children. The realised sample included all 76 selected wards, 275 ELPs and 923 children, achieving 101% of the planned child sample. The final provincial sample included 458 boys and 465 girls, with a mean age of approximately 55 months.

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

Stages	Planned sample size	Realised sample size	Realised / planned
Wards	**76**	**76**	**100%**
ELPs	**228**	**275**	**121%**
Children	**912**	**923**	**101%**

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

Gender	% of sample	Mean age (months)	N
Boys	**50%**	**54.7**	**458**
Girls	**50%**	**54.8**	**465**

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

The Gauteng sample reflects the province's linguistic diversity. More than two-thirds (73%) of children were reported to speak more than one language at home, substantially higher than the national average of 56%. English was the most commonly reported home language (34%), followed by isiZulu (20%), Other languages (13%), Setswana (12%), Sepedi (11%) and Sesotho (10%).

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

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.

All ELPs in Gauteng charge fees (100%) which is consistent with the national figure of 97%. Among participating ELPs in the province, monthly fees range from R150 to R6,400. 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 Gauteng and Nationally*

Fee bands	Gauteng sample			National sample		
	Minimum fees	Maximum fees	Number children	Minimum fees	Maximum fees	Number children
Fee Quintile 1	**R150**	**R300**	**218**	**R0**	**R120**	**1,043**
Fee Quintile 2	**R301**	**R380**	**153**	**R121**	**R240**	**1,039**
Fee Quintile 3	**R381**	**R480**	**158**	**R241**	**R350**	**998**
Fee Quintile 4	**R481**	**R700**	**214**	**R351**	**R800**	**948**
Fee Quintile 5	**R701**	**R6,400**	**180**	**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 two 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 Gauteng and Nationally*

80/20 Split	Gauteng sample			National sample		
	Fee range	Number of ELPs	Number of children	Fee range	Number of ELPs	Number of children
Bottom 80%	**R150-R700**	**220**	**743**	**R0-R800**	**1,113**	**4,028**
Top 20%	**R701-R6,400**	**55**	**180**	**R801-R6,400**	**275**	**973**

Source: Thrive by Five Index 2024 data

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 Gauteng 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 Gauteng. 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

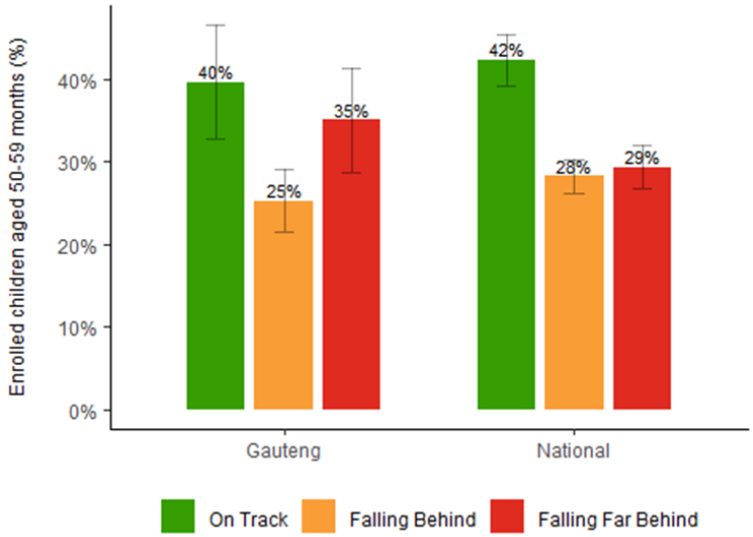
Early learning

Percentage children On Track

The *Thrive by Five Index* assesses children's early learning using the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM4&5), which measures children's development across five domains that are important for school readiness.

Overall, 40% of four-year-old children attending ELPs in Gauteng are developmentally **On Track** for their age, while 25% are **Falling Behind** and 35% 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. Gauteng'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 Gauteng compared with the national average.*



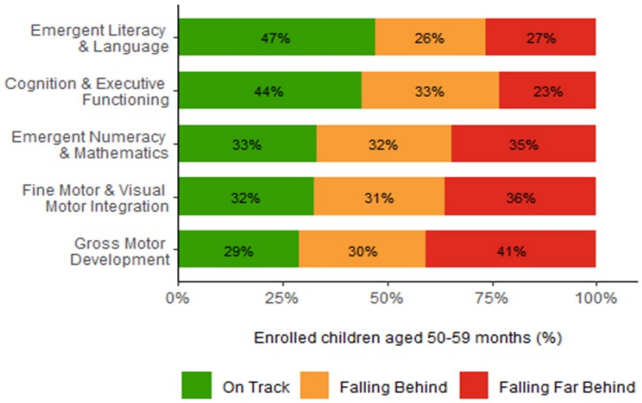
Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

Performance across developmental domains

Children's performance varies across the five developmental domains assessed by the ELOM. The strongest performance is in Emergent Literacy and Language, where 47% of children are On Track, followed by Cognition and Executive Functioning (44%). Performance is weaker in Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (33%), Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (32%), and Gross Motor Development (29%), making Gross Motor Development the weakest-performing domain in Gauteng. In every domain, fewer than half of children are developmentally On Track, highlighting broad-based challenges in children's readiness for school.

The overall pattern is broadly similar to the national findings. However, children in Gauteng perform slightly better than the national average in Cognition and Executive Functioning, while performing below the national average in Emergent Literacy and Language. The largest difference is observed in Gross Motor Development, where Gauteng performs significantly below the national average, identifying this as a key area for improvement.

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

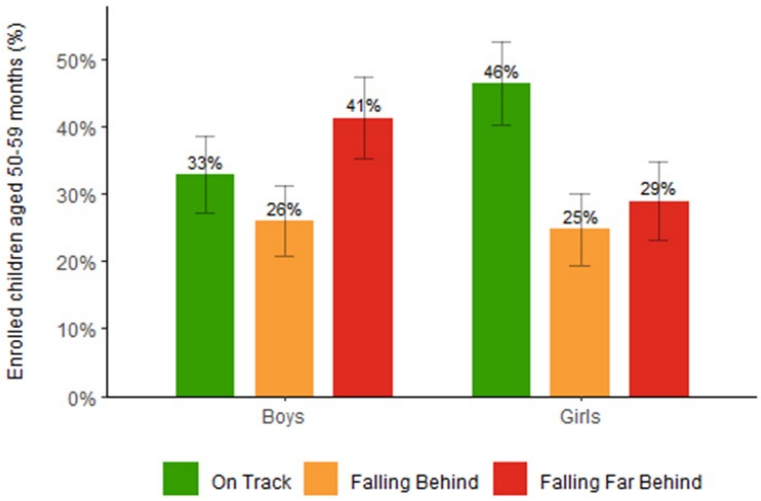


Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.

Gender differences in learning outcomes

Clear differences in developmental outcomes are evident between girls and boys. Overall, 46% of girls are On Track for overall early learning compared with 33% of boys. Girls outperform boys across most developmental measures, and boys are substantially more likely to be Falling Far Behind. This pattern is consistent with the national findings, where girls also perform better across most developmental measures.

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



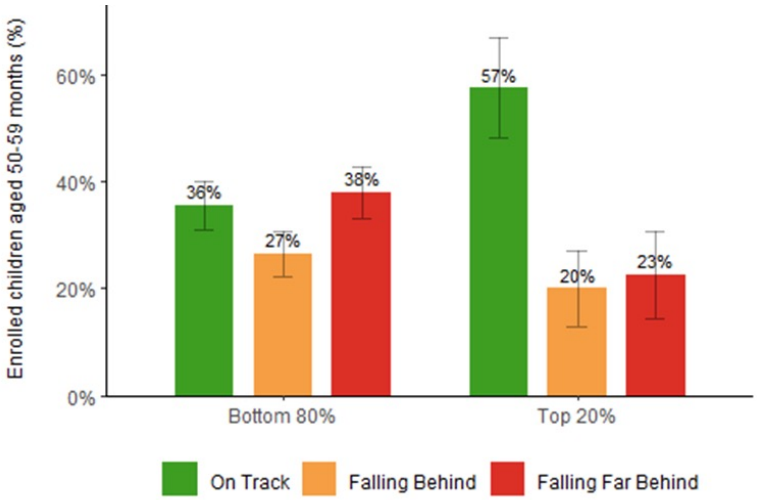
Source: Weighted estimates based on Thrive by Five Index 2024 data. Error bars show the 95% confidence interval around the estimates.

Differences by ELP fee group

Large differences in children's developmental outcomes are evident across ELP fee groups. Among children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs, 57% are On Track for overall early learning, compared with 36% of children attending the remaining 80% of ELPs. Children attending higher-fee ELPs perform better across almost every developmental domain. The largest differences are observed in Emergent Literacy and Language and Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration, while Gross Motor Development is the only domain in which children attending lower-fee ELPs perform slightly better than those attending higher-fee ELPs.

These findings highlight substantial socio-economic inequalities in children's early learning outcomes across Gauteng, 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 (97% 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 40% of enrolled children in Gauteng are developmentally On Track for early learning.

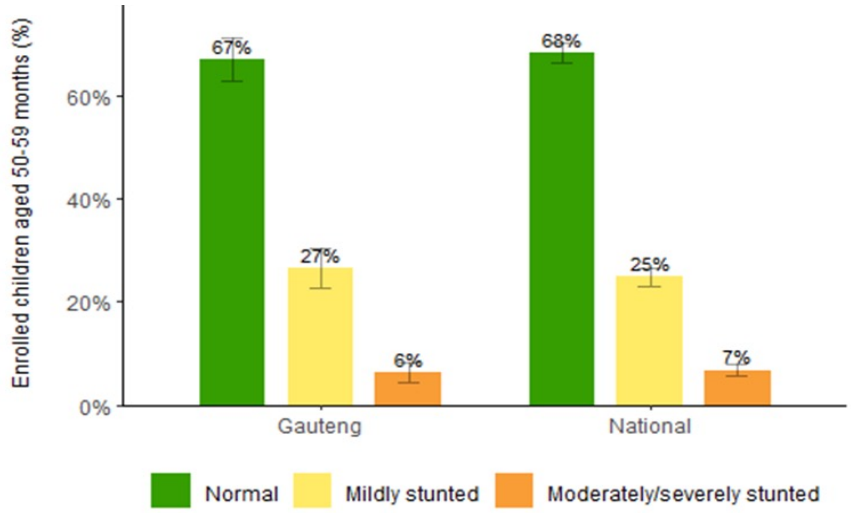
There are several likely reasons for this difference between perceived and actual performance. Firstly, PCGs were asked how their child was developing relative to other children of the same age, rather than whether they believed their child was meeting age-expected developmental milestones. This means 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 Gauteng, 6% of children aged 50-59 months enrolled in ELPs are moderately or severely stunted. A further 27% 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 Gauteng 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 Gauteng, 54% of children meet the expected standard for emotional readiness for school, while 57% meet the standard for social relations with peers and adults. While girls slightly outperform boys in Emotional Readiness, both perform similarly in Social Relations.

However, performance in social relations was very similar for boys and girls, with 58% of boys and 57% of girls meeting the standard. This differs slightly from the national pattern, where girls tend to hold a small advantage in this domain. Although these differences are not statistically significant, they suggest that girls may be developing emotional awareness slightly earlier than boys, while both genders are building social skills at a similar pace.

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 Gauteng.

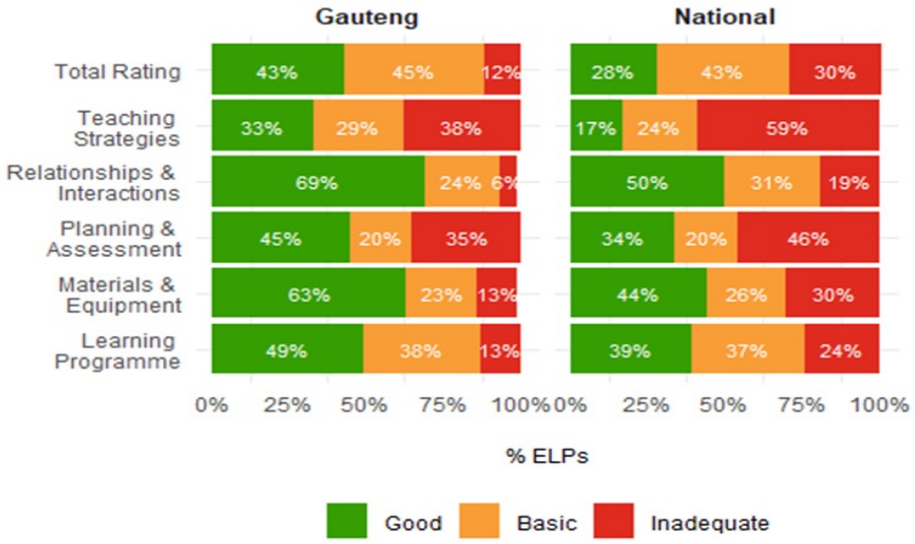
Programme quality

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.

Gauteng performs relatively well in warm, responsive relationships and classroom resources, but fewer than half of programmes achieve a "Good" rating for teaching strategies, learning programmes and planning and assessment, suggesting considerable room for improvement in instructional quality.

Figure 6: *LPQA ratings, Gauteng compared with the National average.*



Source: Thrive by Five Index 2024 data.

Teaching Strategies represent the province's weakest LPQA domain: only 33% of ELPs received a Good rating, while 38% were rated Inadequate. This is particularly important because Teaching Strategies was the only LPQA domain significantly associated with children's ELOM4&5 outcomes in the national analysis. Overall, however, Gauteng appears to be performing better than the national average across all the quality domains.

ELP characteristics

Table 5 summarises the key characteristics of the 275 ELPs included in the Gauteng sample, with national figures provided for context. On average, ELPs in Gauteng have been operating for 15 years, with the majority (81%) having been open for at least six years. Most ELPs (93%) were founded by either the current principal or a previous principal, underscoring the micro-enterprise nature of the province's early learning sector.

The average enrolment per ELP was 43 children, while attendance on the day of the survey averaged 38 children. The gap between reported enrolment and observed attendance likely reflects a combination of factors, including child absence, weak record-keeping, and potentially inflated enrolment figures by some ELPs.

A large proportion of ELPs in Gauteng operated from a private home (43%), while just over a third (35%) were located in purpose-built ECD centres, and only 3% were based on school premises. A further 14% operated from the garage of a private home. Encouragingly, most ELPs had access to tap water within the building (87%), a flush toilet on site (92%), and an outdoor play area (89%), all of which exceeded the corresponding national averages

Table 5: *ELP origin, size and infrastructure, Gauteng compared to National*

Indicator	Gauteng	National
General		
Average years in operation	15 years	17 years
% More than 6 years in operation	81%	84%
Founded by current / past principal	93%	85%
Average number of enrolled children	43	45
Average attendance on day of survey	38	36
Average class size (observed)	15	19
Average hours open per week	54	46
N range	**268 -275**	**1,381-1,388**
Infrastructure		
Purpose built ECD centre	35%	57%
In someone's house	43%	22%
On school premises	3%	8%
In the garage of someone's house	14%	5%
At a place of worship	2%	3%
Community hall / centre	1%	2%
Municipal building	0%	1%
Other	2%	1%
N range	**274-275**	**1,277-1,384**
Amenities		
Tap water in building	87%	52%
Flush toilet on site	92%	59%
Outdoor play area	89%	87%
N range	**275**	**1,386-1,388**

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.

ELP registration and income

Just over a third (34%) of principals in Gauteng reported having full registration, while a further 7% reported conditional registration. This is below the national average, with 55% of ELPs nationally reporting full registration. Nearly a third (29%) of ELPs were in the process of registering, while 24% were not registered. Among ELPs reporting full or conditional registration, 93% were able to provide a valid registration certificate. These findings indicate that a substantial proportion of ELPs are either still progressing through the registration process or remain outside the formal regulatory system, which may limit access to public funding, subsidies and other forms of government support.

Parent fees were the primary source of income for 99% of ELPs in Gauteng. At the time of the study, 23% of all ELPs received the government ECD subsidy of R17 per child per day. Reports of subsidy receipt were notably higher among ELPs with full or conditional registration, with 48% reporting that they received the subsidy.

Among subsidised ELPs, 63% reported always receiving the subsidy on time and 65% reported always receiving the expected amount. Overall, 45% reported receiving the expected amount both reliably and on time, compared with 38% nationally.

Lastly,61% of ELPs offered Grade R. Of these, 37% reported that their Grade R classes were registered with the Department of Basic Education.

Table 6: *Registration and income, Gauteng compared to National*

Indicator	Gauteng	National
Partial Care Facility Registration		
Fully Registered	34%	55%
Conditionally Registered	7%	8%
In Process	29%	18%
Not Registered	24%	15%
Lapsed Registration	5%	3%
Don't know	1%	1%
Of those who reported full / conditional registration - Able to provide evidence of registration (certificate)	93%	91%
N	**275**	**1,388**

Income		
Receives the ECD subsidy (% of ELPs with full or conditional PCF registration)	48%	67%
Receives ECD subsidy (% of ELPs)	23%	44%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving subsidy on time	63%	53%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving expected subsidy amount	65%	60%
% subsidised ELPs always receiving expected subsidy amount, and on time	45%	38%
Parent fees cited as the primary source of income	99%	96%
N range	**67-275**	**546-1,370**
Grade R		
Offers Grade R	61%	26%
Grade R registered with DBE	37%	48%
N range	**162-275**	**399-1,388**

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 Gauteng employed an average of six paid staff, including five paid teaching staff. Practitioners worked an average of 42 hours per week. Almost all principals and practitioners were women, with 99% of principals and 100% of practitioners being female.

Employment conditions varied across the province. In Gauteng, 63% of practitioners had an employment contract, 50% received paid sick leave and 57% received paid holiday leave. Only 8% reported monthly earnings of R5,000 or more for full-time employment.

Principals had worked at their current ELP for an average of 12 years. Practitioner tenure was shorter: 23% had worked at their ELP for less than one year and a further 45% for one to four years. Nearly one in four (24%) practitioners reported that they were considering leaving the ECD profession.

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

Indicator	Gauteng	National
Conditions of employment		
Number of paid staff (average of all paid staff)	6	6
Number of paid teaching staff (average)	5	4
Average hours worked per week	42	40
Practitioners earn above minimum wage	8%	9%
Practitioner has employment contract	63%	57%
Practitioner gets paid sick leave	50%	52%
Practitioner gets paid holiday leave	57%	48%
ELP is member of ECD Forum	75%	75%
% of principals who are female	99%	95%
% of practitioners who are female	100%	96%
N range	**251-275**	**1,107-1,388**
Retention and stability		
Principals - average years at current ELP	12	12
Practitioners - years at current ELP:		
<1 year	23%	20%
1-4 years	45%	36%
5-10 years	22%	27%
>10 years	7%	15%
% Practitioners thinking of leaving the ECD profession	24%	26%
N range	**259-275**	**1,206-1,383**

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 Gauteng, 30% of principals had an NQF Level 5 or higher ECD qualification, compared with 15% of practitioners. A further 43% of principals and 27% of practitioners had an NQF Level 4 qualification. However, 19% of principals and 39% of practitioners reported no formal ECD training.

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

Indicator	Gauteng	National
Highest ECD qualification of principal		
None	19%	15%
NQF 1 / Accredited skills programme	7%	9%
NQF 4	43%	38%
NQF 5	15%	25%
Above NQF 5	15%	12%
N	**275**	**1,382**
Highest ECD qualification of practitioner		
None	39%	34%
NQF 1 / Accredited skills programme	19%	14%
NQF 4	27%	33%
NQF 5	10%	14%
Above NQF 5	5%	4%
N	**259**	**1,216**

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 Gauteng, 69% of practitioners reported using a curriculum, compared with 77% nationally. Among those using a curriculum, 88% reported having accompanying learning resources. Of the curricula used, only 41% were based on national curricula or standards (NCF/CAPS/ELDA/NELDS), while 43% were using other curricula and 16% were developed by the ELP.

During 2023 and 2024, 48% of principals and 53% of practitioners received in-service training. Among practitioners who received training, 55% were trained by non-governmental organisations and 19% by the national or provincial Department of Basic Education.

Table 9: *Curricula and training reported in use, Gauteng compared to National*

Indicator	Gauteng	National
Training		
Principal received in-service training in past 2 years	48%	47%
Practitioner received in-service training in the past 2 years (2023-2024)	53%	50%
Training provided to practitioners by NGOs	27%	36%
Training provided to practitioners by DBE (national / provincial)	19%	35%
Training provided to practitioners - all other training providers	55%	39%
N range	**142-275**	**590-1,388**
Curriculum use		
Practitioners use curriculum	69%	77%
Of those with a curriculum, what % have accompanying learning resources	88%	56%
Type of curriculum used		
National curriculum / standards (NCF/CAPS/ELDA/NELDS)	41%	58%
Other	43%	39%
Own curriculum	16%	3%
N range	**182-259**	**944-1,179**

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.

Less than half (44%) of ELPs in Gauteng 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. Almost all ELPs in Gauteng provide meals/snacks (98%).

During 2023 and 2024, more than half of ELPs in Gauteng reported receiving immunisation services (57%), deworming services (55%) and Vitamin A supplementation (51%). Fewer ELPs received growth monitoring (24%), developmental screening (17%), vision screening (15%) or hearing screening (13%), while only 12% reported providing nutrition training or support. One in four ELPs (25%) reported receiving none of these services. These findings suggest opportunities to strengthen the reach of preventative health and nutrition services across the province.

These findings are particularly important given that 6% of children attending ELPs in Gauteng are moderately or severely stunted, with a further 27% showing signs of mild stunting. The integration of nutrition, health monitoring and early learning therefore provides an important opportunity to improve children's health and developmental outcomes through coordinated service delivery. The findings also demonstrate that ELPs can serve as effective platforms for delivering essential child health services, particularly for vulnerable children.

Table 10: *DoH official visited ELP in 2023 or 2024, Gauteng compared to National*

Indicator	Gauteng	National
Vision screening	15%	17%
Hearing screening	13%	16%
Developmental screening	17%	21%
Growth monitoring	24%	25%
Immunisations	57%	65%
Deworming	55%	61%
Vitamin A	51%	60%
Provide nutrition training / support	12%	15%
Other	4%	2%
None	25%	19%
N	**275**	**1,387**

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.

Gauteng is characterised by considerable linguistic diversity, with children speaking a wide range of languages. The Index therefore examined the alignment between children's home language and the language used by practitioners in ELPs.

For 44% of children, the language used by the practitioner matched the child's main home language. When children's full multilingual language profiles were considered, 79% of children had at least one home language that matched the language used in the classroom. This was 75% among children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs and 97% among those attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs.

These findings suggest that most children experience learning in at least one language they understand. However, fewer than half of the children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs are taught in their primary home language. The substantially higher levels of language matching in higher-fee ELPs also point to inequalities in children's access to linguistically responsive learning environments. Given the importance of home language during the early years, strengthening language matching and multilingual teaching practices could further enhance children's learning and school readiness.

Table 11: *Alignment between home language and language of learning and teaching (LoLT), Gauteng compared to National*

Language combinations	Gauteng			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)	39%	68%	44%	71%
Any of the child's home languages match the language that the practitioner uses in the classroom (as observed by the assessor)	75%	97%	79%	90%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**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 738 of the 923 assessed children in Gauteng, representing 80% of the provincial child sample. Most PCGs were the child's biological mother (79%); 9% were the biological father, 6% a grandmother and 6% 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%.Overall, 69% of primary caregivers (PCGs) in Gauteng had completed Grade 12. This ranged from 64% among PCGs of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs to 93% among those attending the highest-fee 20%. PCG unemployment was 33% overall, 36% in the lower-fee group and 17% in the highest-fee group.

Access to a working cellphone was universal at 100%. However, access to other household assets differed markedly by fee group. A functional laptop or computer was available in 37% of households in the lower-fee group and 77% in the highest-fee group. Internet access through a connection in the dwelling was reported by 34% and 80% of households, respectively, while ownership of a working motor vehicle was reported by 42% and 75%.

Overall, 58% of households had a tap inside the dwelling, higher than the national estimate of 27%. This was reported by 55% of households in the lower-fee group and 72% in the highest-fee group.

Table 12: *Employment, assets and basic services, Gauteng and national*

Indicator	Gauteng sample			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
PCG completed grade 12	64%	93%	69%	56%
PCG is unemployed	36%	17%	33%	45%
Household has access to a working cellphone	100%	99%	100%	100%
Functional laptop/computer in the home	37%	77%	44%	29%
Internet is mainly accessed by connection in the dwelling	34%	80%	43%	23%
HH has a motor-car in working order	42%	75%	48%	36%
Main water source: tap inside dwelling	55%	72%	58%	27%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**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 Gauteng, **19%** of sampled households had no children's books, **17%** had one book, **51%** had between two and five books, and only **13%** had more than five children's books.

Among households whose children attended the lower-fee 80% of ELPs, **20%** had no children's books and only **9%** had more than five. In contrast, among households in the highest-fee 20%, **12%** had no children's books, while **31%** had more than five.

Overall, **41%** of primary caregivers (PCGs) in Gauteng reported reading to their child at least three times a week. This was reported by **38%** of PCGs in the lower-fee group and **57%** in the highest-fee group.

Fathers had lived in 49% of sampled households at some point during the previous six months. Nearly half **(46%)** were not involved in any of the measured home learning activities, while **30%** had participated in home learning activities at least three times during the previous week. 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 that access to books was positively associated with children's Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM4&5) scores after accounting for child age, child gender and ELP fee level. Children living in households with 10 or more books scored an average of **6.6 points** higher than those living in households with no books, a meaningful and statistically significant difference.

Table 13: *Home learning environment (HLE), Gauteng and National*

Indicator	Gauteng sample			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
Books and reading				
No children's books in the home	20%	12%	19%	26%
1 children's book in the home	19%	6%	17%	19%
2-5 children's books in the home	51%	50%	51%	45%
More than 5 children's books in the home	9%	31%	13%	10%
PCG reads books to child ≥3×/week	38%	57%	41%	36%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**3,841**

Father involvement				
Father lives in the household	47%	60%	49%	45%
Father not involved in HLE activities	51%	25%	46%	60%
Father did HLE activities 3+times in the past week	26%	47%	30%	18%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**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

The Index collected information on children's health, household food security and access to social protection.

At the time of the survey, the means-tested Child Support Grant (CSG) provided R530 per child per month and reached 59% of enrolled children in Gauteng. Pro-poor targeting is evident, with 68% of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs receiving the grant, compared with 21% of children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs. 96% of primary caregivers (PCGs) of enrolled children reported that their child had a birth certificate.

Food insecurity remains a concern in Gauteng, with 6% of PCGs reporting that an adult in the household had gone hungry during the previous three months and 2% reporting that a child under 18 had skipped meals over the same period. These experiences were only common among households in the lower-fee 80% of ELPs, highlighting the continued vulnerability of many families despite relatively high levels of urbanisation.

In Gauteng, 11% of enrolled children were born with a low birth weight (less than 2,500 grams). National findings indicate that low birth weight was significantly associated with lower early learning scores, with children born with low birth weight scoring an average of 2.9 points lower on the ELOM 4&5 than their peers. In addition, 16% of children in Gauteng were born prematurely (before 37 completed weeks), a condition associated with an increased risk of developmental delays. Reports of alcohol and tobacco use during pregnancy were 6% and 3% respectively. These figures should be interpreted with caution, as self-reported behaviours that carry social stigma are often subject to underreporting.

Table 14: *Health, hunger and social protection, Gauteng and National*

Indicator	Gauteng sample			National
	Bottom 80% ELP Fees	Top 20% ELP Fees	Total	
Social protection				
Child has birth certificate	95%	98%	96%	98%
Child receives Child Support Grant	68%	21%	59%	78%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**3,841**
Hunger				
Household member skipped meals due to food shortage (past 3 months)	8%	0%	6%	6%
Child skipped meals (past 3 months)	2%	0%	2%	2%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**3,841**
Pregnancy related risks				
Mother smoked during pregnancy	3%	1%	3%	3%
Mother consumed alcohol during pregnancy	7%	0%	6%	4%
Premature birth (<37 weeks)	18%	4%	16%	13%
Low birth weight (<2.5 kg)	12%	4%	11%	11%
Overweight (>4kg)	6%	10%	7%	6%
Exposure to at least one pregnancy / birth risk factor	22%	12%	20%	18%
N	**609**	**129**	**738**	**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 is often constrained by structural stressors such as poverty, gender inequality, and unsafe communities, while strong social support can help buffer these pressures and support responsive caregiving.

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 the four statements shown in Table 15.

Overall, the indicators of PCG wellbeing in Gauteng were similar to those observed nationally. Most caregivers (82%) agreed that their family tries to help them, while just over half (51%) agreed that they could count on friends when things go wrong. Most caregivers also reported low levels of difficulty with daily functioning, although 38% found taking care of things at home to be either somewhat, very or extremely difficult, and 22% reported some level of difficulty getting along with other people.

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 results suggest that a substantial proportion of caregivers may be experiencing constraints that could affect their ability to support children's early learning and development.

Table 15: *Primary caregiver social connectedness and daily functioning, Gauteng and National*

Social functioning indicator		Gauteng Responses	National Responses
Social connectedness	**"My family tries to help me"**		
	Agree/strongly agree	82%	85%
	Disagree/strongly disagree	18%	15%
	"I can count on my friends when things go wrong"		
	Agree/strongly agree	51%	51%
	Disagree/strongly disagree	49%	49%
Daily functioning	**"In the last 4 weeks, I found taking care of things at home"**		
	Not difficult	62%	61%
	Somewhat difficult	26%	26%
Social functioning indicator		**Gauteng Responses**	**National Responses**
Daily functioning	**"In the last 4 weeks, I found getting along with other people"**		
	Not difficult	78%	82%
	Somewhat difficult	14%	13%
	Very/extremely difficult	8%	5%
N		**729-738**	**3,836-3,841**

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 Gauteng findings present a mixed provincial picture. Although children in Gauteng perform above the national average in Cognition and Executive Functioning, fewer than half (40%) of four-year-old children attending ELPs are On Track for overall early learning.

Outcomes are strongest in Emergent Literacy and Language and Cognition and Executive Functioning, while Gross Motor Development is the weakest-performing domain. Girls perform better than boys across most developmental measures, and children attending the highest-fee 20% of ELPs have substantially stronger early learning outcomes than those attending the remaining 80%.

These differences are reflected in the environments surrounding children. Household access to education, books, digital resources, transport and basic services differs markedly by ELP fee group. ELP conditions also vary: parent fees are the main source of income for almost all ELPs, only 23% receive the ECD subsidy, and most practitioners do not earn above the minimum wage. At the same time, Gauteng records strengths in practitioner employment conditions, with relatively high levels of employment contracts and paid holiday leave, as well as widespread access to basic amenities such as tap water, flush toilets and outdoor play areas in ELPs.

The evidence therefore points to inequalities that extend across children's early learning outcomes, ELP resources and household learning opportunities. These inequalities coexist with continuing concerns about children's physical growth and social-emotional functioning: 6% of children are moderately or severely stunted, 54% meet the standard for emotional readiness and 57% meet the standard for social relations. 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 a central quality-improvement priority.**
   Focus practitioner training, coaching and support on practical Teaching Strategies that extend children's thinking, participation and independence. Teaching Strategies are the weakest LPQA domain in Gauteng, with 33% of ELPs achieving a Good rating. Although this is higher than the national figure of 17%, national analysis identified Teaching Strategies as the only observed programme-quality domain significantly associated with ELOM 4&5 outcomes. Gauteng already reaches 53% of practitioners through in-service training, slightly above the national figure of 50%. The priority should therefore include strengthening the practical content and application of training to improve classroom practice.

2. **Target support for developmental domains where Gauteng children struggle most.**
   Strengthen play-based activities, practitioner support and learning opportunities for Gross Motor Development, where only 29% of children are On Track, as well as Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration (32%) and Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics (33%). Particular attention should also be given to boys: only 33% are On Track overall compared with 46% of girls, with substantial gender differences across most developmental domains.

3. **Prioritise quality improvement and resources in lower-fee ELPs.**
   Developmental outcomes differ substantially by ELP fee group: 36% of children attending the lower-fee 80% of ELPs are On Track compared with 57% in the highest-fee 20%. Household resources also differ markedly by fee group, including access to computers, internet connectivity and books. Quality improvement, practitioner support and learning and play materials should therefore be targeted towards lower-fee and under-resourced ELPs to narrow inequalities in children's early learning opportunities.

4. **Strengthen registration pathways, subsidy access and practitioner working conditions.**
   Only 34% of Gauteng ELPs are fully registered, 29% are in the process of registration, and 24% are not registered. Parent fees are the primary source of income for 99% of ELPs, while only 23% receive the ECD subsidy. Among subsidised ELPs, payment reliability is strong, with 45% reporting that they always receive the expected amount on time. Provincial action should therefore focus on supporting ELPs through registration and expanding subsidy access, while strengthening workforce conditions. Only 8% of practitioners earn above the minimum wage, despite 63% having employment contracts.

5. **Strengthen health, nutrition and developmental screening through ELPs.**
   Gauteng ELPs provide an important platform for child health and nutrition, with 98% providing meals or snacks. However, health outreach remains uneven: 57% of ELPs received immunisation services, 55% deworming and 51% Vitamin A supplementation, while only 15% received vision screening, 13% hearing screening, 17% developmental screening and 24% growth monitoring. Strengthening health-service reach and screening through ELPs would support earlier identification of developmental and health needs. This remains important given that 6% of children are moderately or severely stunted and a further 27% mildly stunted.

6. **Mobilise families around home learning and developmental milestones, while recognising Gauteng's linguistic diversity.**
   Support caregivers with simple activities such as reading, storytelling, counting, drawing and play, while deliberately including fathers and father figures. Overall, 19% of households have no children's books and only 41% of PCGs read to their child at least three times a week. Support needs to be prioritised in lower-fee households where 20% have no children's books and only 38% of caregivers read at least

three times a week. Findings suggest an awareness gap: 97% of PCGs believe their child is developing at the same rate as, or faster than, peers, compared with only 40% of children who are On Track. Given Gauteng's high levels of multilingualism, caregiver and practitioner support should also recognise language: only 44% of children have a match between their main home language and the language used in the classroom, compared with 71% nationally.

7. **Reach children who remain outside organised early learning.**
   According to the 2024 General Household Survey, approximately 25% of four-year-old children in Gauteng are not enrolled in an ELP. Expanding access should therefore continue alongside efforts to improve the quality of ELPs serving children who are already enrolled.

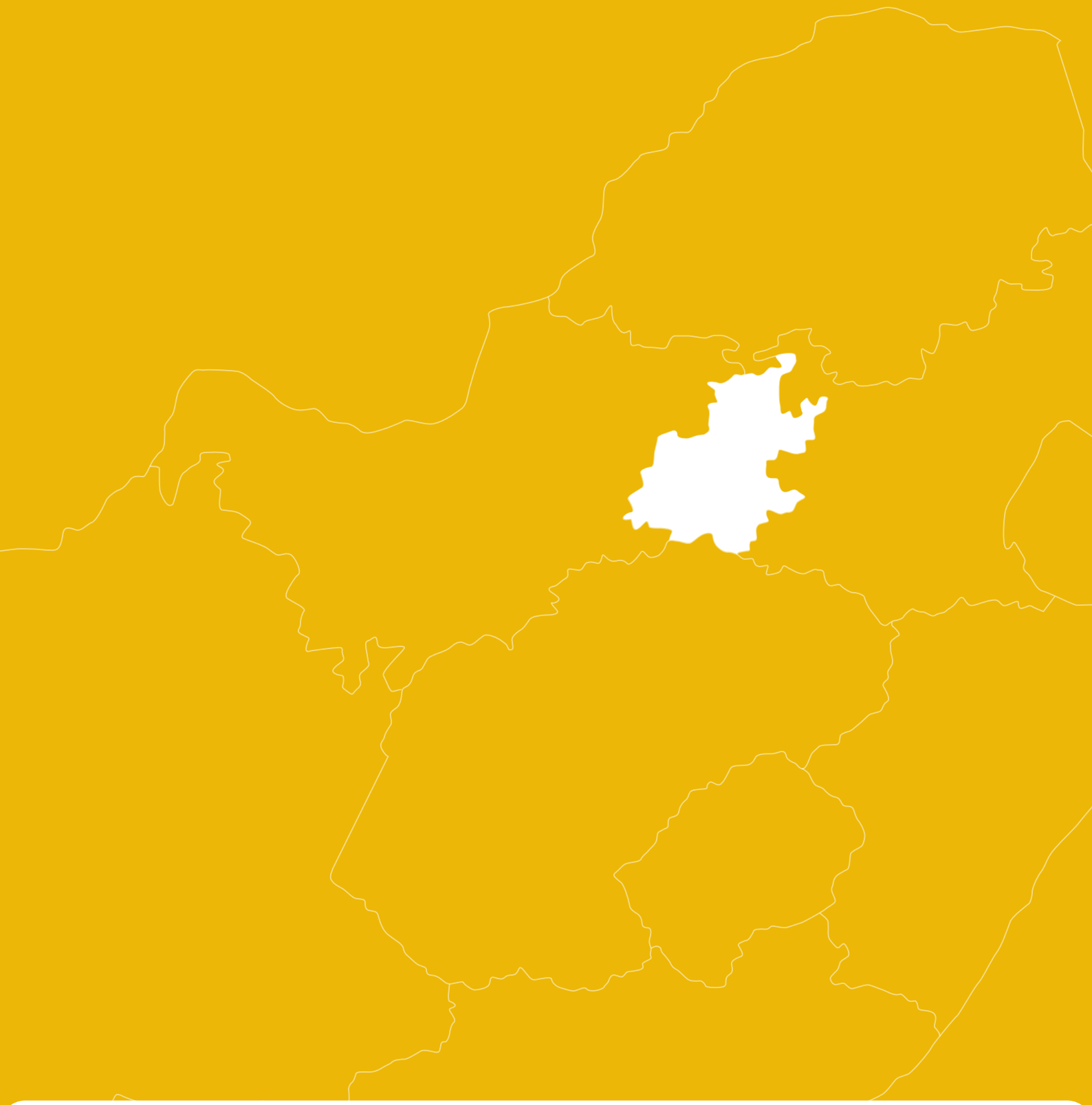
The recommendations presented above reflect the key priorities emerging from the Gauteng findings and stakeholder engagement. They should be read alongside the national Thrive by Five Index 2024 recommendations, which provide a broader framework for strengthening early learning across South Africa. The 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 Gauteng

District	Municipality	Ward ID	# sampled ELPs	# sampled children
City of Johannes -burg	City of Johannesburg Metropolitan Municipality	79800001	3	11
		79800003	4	13
		79800004	3	12
		79800006	4	12
		79800012	4	11
		79800015	4	14
		79800017	4	13
		79800018	3	12
		79800024	5	16
		79800027	3	10
		79800033	4	13
		79800049	4	10
		79800050	4	14
		79800053	4	10
		79800054	4	14
		79800056	4	14
		79800060	3	12
		79800064	4	13
		79800070	3	10
		79800072	4	11
		79800078	1	2
		79800080	4	10
		79800082	4	14
		79800087	2	3
		79800094	1	4
		79800102	4	17
		79800109	3	13
		79800121	5	14
		79800124	4	15
		79800128	4	16
		79800129	4	14
		79800131	3	12

District	Municipality	Ward ID	# sampled ELPs	# sampled children
City of Tshwane	City of Tshwane Metropolitan Municipality	79900008	4	16
		79900013	4	13
		79900014	4	15
		79900015	3	12
		79900017	4	14
		79900023	3	12
		79900024	3	12
		79900031	3	12
		79900040	4	11
		79900049	3	12
		79900053	4	13
		79900061	3	13
		79900064	3	11
		79900067	4	14
		79900068	1	4
		79900072	5	14
		79900073	3	12
		79900074	3	12
		79900086	4	16
		79900089	4	11
		79900090	4	14
		79900107	3	12
Ekurhuleni	Ekurhuleni Metropolitan Municipality	79700001	4	11
		79700015	4	10
		79700053	3	10
		79700075	4	14
		79700081	4	13
		79700082	3	11
		79700087	4	11
Sedibeng	Emfuleni Local Municipality	74201010	3	12
		74201012	2	7
		74201015	4	11
		74201017	3	12
		74201019	4	15
		74201021	4	12
		74201023	4	14

District	Municipality	Ward ID	# sampled ELPs	# sampled children
West Rand	Merafong City Local Municipality	74804009	3	12
		74804010	4	13
		74804018	4	12
		74804023	2	7
	Mogale City Local Municipality	74801002	4	12
		74801007	4	10
		74801008	2	5
		74801009	2	5
		74801010	3	12
		74801014	2	3
		74801020	1	4
		74801026	1	2
		74801033	3	9



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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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