

Environmental Scan

Prepared for: The Learning Trust

Executive Summary

Children in South Africa face many challenges from malnutrition and unequal access to early learning to widely varying schooling experiences that still strongly align with income. With nearly universal primary school enrollment, schools absorb children who already have substantial gaps in their development and school readiness and, while improving over time, still face substantial quality challenges and low learning outcomes.

South Africa's education crisis is well-documented with PIRLS 2021 and TIMSS 2023 showing South African children underperforming in basic literacy and numeracy relative to peers in similarly resourced contexts. These studies show that 81% of Grade 4 children are unable to read for meaning and 63% of grade 5 children lack basic numeracy skills. Rates of grade repetition are high and Grade 11 still serves as a gate-keeper to matric with 31% of Grade 11 learners dropping out without completing matric. Despite the high drop-out rate, 64% of youth aged 15-24 have completed matric, which remains a significant indicator of employment and better wages.

Half of the 10.2 million individuals aged 15-24 years in South Africa find themselves not in education, employment, or training (NEET). Despite improved educational attainment over the past decade, they enter into an economy that is not growing fast enough to absorb them and a post-secondary education and training sector that has also not kept pace with the growing number of school leavers. The NEET rate is more pronounced for African youth, females, those in urban areas, and young parents.

Policy frameworks, including the National Development Plan, National Youth Policy, Presidential Employment Stimulus and Basic Education policy focus areas create a rich youth-focused environment to respond to these challenges while placing the needs of children and youth at the forefront of national policy. These policy frameworks are also supported by a dynamic, but uncertain, funding landscape that is prioritising youth and learning reform.

After school programmes are in a unique position to address many challenges faced by children and youth in South Africa with supportive programmes that help close foundational learning gaps, foster social and emotional wellbeing, and broaden pathways to future study and work. [The Learning Trust](#) (TLT) works to strengthen South Africa's after school sector — the network of community-based organisations that provide safe, structured learning and enrichment opportunities for children and youth outside of regular school hours. As an intermediary funder and sector-convenor, TLT has an opportunity to leverage its role and global best practice to continue growing the after school sector to impact the lives of children and youth most at risk of poverty and exclusion.

This rapid review environmental scan provides a contextual foundation for The Learning Trust's strategic planning and development process.

Acronyms

ASP	After School programme	NSFAS	National Student Financial Aid Scheme
BEEI	Basic Education Employment Initiative	NYP	National Youth Policy
COVID	Coronavirus Disease	PEP	Public Employment Programme
DBE	Department of Basic Education	PES	Presidential Employment Stimulus
ECD	Early Childhood Development	PIRLS	Progress in International Reading Literacy Study
FLN	Foundational Literacy and Numeracy	PSET	Post Secondary Education and Training
GDP	Gross Domestic Product	SEF	Social Employment Fund
GER	Gross Enrollment Ratio	TIMSS	Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study
HEI	Higher Education Institutions	TLT	The Learning Trust
MYPE	Mid-Year Population Estimates (SA)	TVET	Technical and Vocational Education and Training
NEET	Not in Employment, Education, or Training	YES	Youth Employment Initiative

Introduction

South Africa's after school ecosystem sits at the intersection of post-COVID education recovery, persistent youth unemployment, and a constrained resource environment in public schooling with budgetary spend per learner decreasing in real terms for the past few years. Fortunately, there are policy trends putting foundational learning, learning recovery, and youth pathways to productivity at the centre of reform, but the challenges are many.

[The Learning Trust](#) (TLT) works to strengthen South Africa's after school sector — the network of community-based organisations that provide safe, structured learning and enrichment opportunities for children and youth outside of regular school hours. By offering grant funding, organisational capacity-building, and sector-wide convening, The Learning Trust supports programmes that help close foundational learning gaps, foster social and emotional wellbeing, and broaden pathways to future study and work. Their initiatives include leading the Catch-up Coalition for learning recovery and developing Quality Standards and Tools that build sustainability and amplify the collective impact of after school programmes in under-resourced communities.

The Learning Trust commissioned this rapid review to inform its strategic planning and development process. The environmental scan intends to provide contextual insight on the factors affecting youth and children in South Africa to assist internal and external stakeholders to position The Learning Trust's work in relation to the most pressing needs in society. This review also maps key actors in the after school sector and summarises funding trends relevant to intermediaries to help TLT's stakeholders position its work and ongoing strategy development within the broader landscape.

The research has been completed using a rapid review approach centred on publicly available documents. A combination of government documents, academic articles, news media, and organisational websites and documents have been reviewed to compile the report. The research was completed by Kristen Thompson and Ros Clayton.

The report begins with an overview of the state of children and youth in South Africa with a focus on wellbeing and educational attainment followed by a description of the policy trends and socio-economic factors affecting children and youth. The review shifts to a summary of funder priorities and trends with a focus on intermediaries like TLT, then moves on to a sector-specific reflection and highlight of key actors and closes with key questions and strategic implications for TLT.

Overview of Children and Youth in South Africa

The Learning Trust in collaboration with its network of partners works to develop the after school sector to improve educational outcomes of young people living in poverty and exclusion. The following section provides an overview of the state of children and youth in South Africa and outlines key factors that influence learning outcomes as well as key measures of those outcomes. The review takes a broad view of children, starting with early childhood development considering the inequality of early development that feeds into the basic education system.

Population Estimates: Variability and Resource Implications

It is difficult to reliably establish exactly how many children and youth live in South Africa as data is limited and inconsistent. Estimates vary depending on the source – school enrollment figures, mid-year population estimates (MYPE), United Nations population estimates, and the Thembisa model which factors in HIV transmission rates. School enrollment data shows slower growth over time, while demographic projections indicate faster, possibly overstated, increases in school-aged children over the past 15 years, which makes planning and resource allocation difficult.¹ Current estimates suggest a 20% increase in school-age children between 2011 and 2028 with half of that growth already realised by 2023 and the remaining growth yet to be seen. Such discrepancies complicate planning and highlight ongoing resourcing challenges.

Early Childhood

Early childhood, broadly defined as the age from 0-4 years, has risen as a key focus area for policymakers, researchers, and funders in recent years as it lays a foundation for future learning, wellbeing, and productivity, with this phase of life widely recognised as the most impactful time for interventions.² Overall, the picture of early childhood wellbeing in South Africa is cause for concern, despite improvements in some key figures over time. Approximately 5.5 million children aged 0-4 live in South Africa.³

Infant Mortality

Reductions in the infant and early childhood mortality rates are promising with infant mortality dropping significantly from 2002 to 2025 – from 61.9 deaths per 1,000 live births to 23.1; similarly, the under-five mortality rate has also fallen from 79.9 to 26.1 deaths per 1,000 live births during the same period.⁴ Despite this improvement in basic survival, the outlook for infant and childhood wellbeing is less encouraging.

Poverty, Malnutrition, and Basic Sanitation

More than two thirds of young children live in households that cannot provide for their basic needs of food, clothing, and shelter.⁵ Food poverty remains high even with the wide disbursement of the child support grant and is still higher than pre-COVID years. Stunting is the most common form of

¹ Department of Basic Education, 2024.

² Carneiro, P. M., et al. 2003.

³ Statistics South Africa, 2025

⁴ Statistics South Africa, 2025.

⁵ Hall, K., et al., 2024.

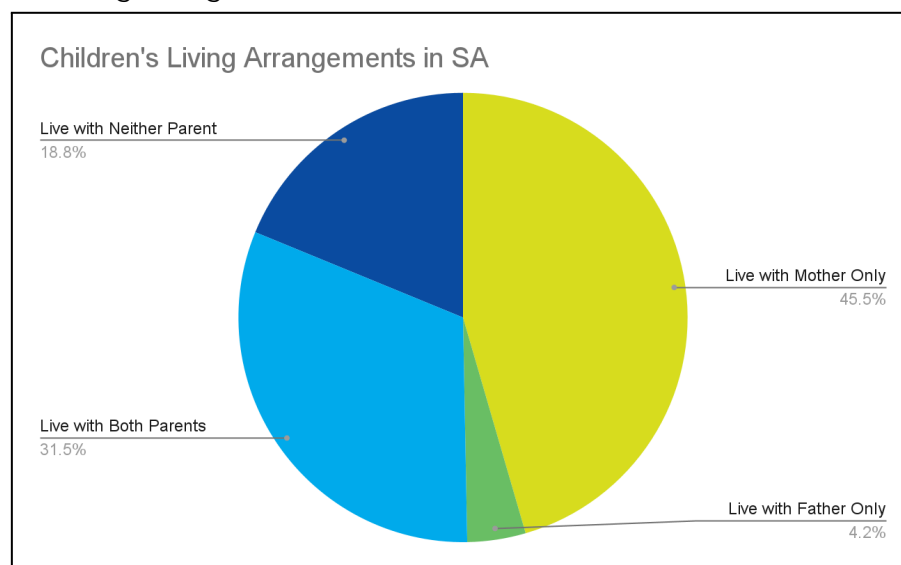
malnutrition in South Africa and affects 29% of children under five years old,⁶ affecting both physical and cognitive development and impacting long-term trajectories of children.⁷

Limited service delivery of basic sanitation also affects children, and is particularly pronounced in rural settings where basic services are more challenging to access. Nearly a third of children (29%) live in homes without piped water on site where traveling to collect water from a communal tap, tanker, or natural source is required.⁸ Only 35% of children under six have a flush toilet at home leaving the remainder to use some other form of sanitation.⁹

Living arrangements for Children

In addition to basic physical needs, emotional wellbeing and supportive caregiving are key for development of children in the early years, with families and household caregiving forming an important early support structure. In South Africa, almost one in five children (18.8%) live with neither of their biological parents. Nearly half of children (45.5%) live with only their mothers and less than a third live with both parents.¹⁰ Not living with either parent is most common in the Eastern Cape and KZN and least common in the Western Cape and Gauteng. Twice as many children in urban areas live with both parents (40.2%) compared to their peers in rural areas where only 19.3% live with both parents.¹¹

Figure 1: Children's living arrangements in South Africa



Data Source: General Household Survey

Figure 2. Children's Living Arrangements by Province

⁶ Simelane, T., et al. 2023.

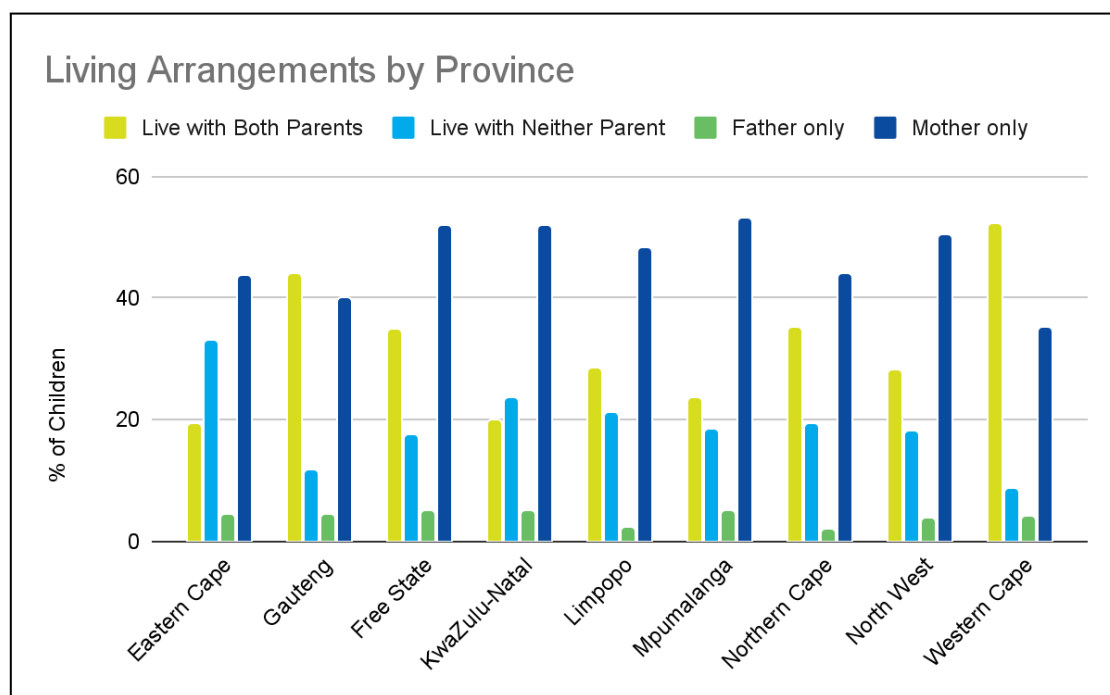
⁷ Grantham-McGregor, S. et al. 2007

⁸ Hall et al., 2024

⁹ Hall et al., 2024

¹⁰ Statistics South Africa, 2025b

¹¹ Statistics South Africa, 2025b.



Data Source: General Household Survey

Reading

Only half of South African children are being read to at home, up from only 35% in 2016 and reading happens in homes across rural-urban, race, and class divides. Despite an increase in reading at home, access to reading materials still lags with 65% of homes with children under 10 years old not having a single picture book.¹²

Access to Early Learning Programmes

An estimated 60% of four year olds in South Africa attend an early learning programme, while approximately 29% were not attending any group learning programme in 2024, the remaining children either stay with a child minder (2%) or enrol early for Grade R or Grade 1 in a public or private school (9%).¹³ Attendance at early childhood development (ECD) centers is most common in the Western Cape, Free State, and Gauteng and least common in Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal.¹⁴ Evidence on the impact of attending ECD centers is still developing, but research suggests that they have significant positive impacts on the development of children, including those from poor backgrounds.¹⁵ For children who do attend early learning programmes, quality correlates strongly with the family income levels, which starts children on an unequal learning trajectory from the earliest learning years.¹⁶ Furthermore, of the children who are able to access early learning programmes, over half of them are not on track with early learning milestones by the time they enter Grade R¹⁷ with deficiencies in some combination of five key areas: gross motor development, fine

¹² Polzer-Ngwato, T., et al. 2023

¹³ Giese, S., et al. 2022. And Giese, S., et al. 2025.

¹⁴ Statistics South Africa, 2025.

¹⁵ van der Berg, S., 2021.

¹⁶ Giese, S., et al. 2022. And Giese, S., et al. 2025.

¹⁷ Giese, et al. 2022. And Giese, S., et al. 2025.

motor coordination and visual motor integration, early numeracy and mathematics, early literacy and language, and cognition and executive functioning. These figures are even more pronounced for children who are not able to access early learning programmes with fewer than one in five unenrolled children able to do basic tasks expected of children their age.¹⁸ There is also evidence of a gender gap by age 5, with fewer boys than girls on track.

Access to supportive and nurturing environments in the first few years of life are critical to a child's wellbeing and lays an important foundation for future learning and development. Many children live apart from one or both parents, access to early learning is uneven, and poverty and limited services affect nutrition and development. These factors set the stage for unequal learning outcomes and highlight the need for targeted support during schooling.

Implications for the After School Sector

Children enter schooling with **significantly unequal rates of school readiness** and prospects for further learning.

- **Early disadvantage carries into schooling and beyond.** High levels of poverty, malnutrition, weak sanitation, and limited access to early learning programmes mean children are already behind when they enter school, so basic education absorbs a challenge to meet these needs. ASPs play a critical role in helping close learning gaps.
- **Wealth gaps affect quality of early learning and access.** ASPs particularly targeting more disadvantaged learners play a critical equity role, providing key opportunities and support they are unlikely to access on their own.
- **Weak early literacy and numeracy foundations will require enrichment.** With the impact of unequal early learning having far-reaching effects and limited reading happening at home, after school programmes can prioritise literacy and numeracy to assist children with catching up.
- **Gender disparities are clear early.** Boys are less prepared for school from day one, which may influence after school programme approaches to address this gap.
- **Safe, nurturing relationships with adults.** With many children growing up not living with both parents, after school programmes can provide safe and nurturing environments for children and connections with caring adults.

Basic Education and School-Aged Children

An estimated 17.3 million children aged 0-14 live in South Africa and comprise over a quarter of the population.¹⁹ Due to historical fertility rates, as well as the impact of the HIV pandemic, the demographic group of children aged 0-14 grew about 1% per year for the past 15 years, but growth has reduced to about 0.2% per year, which eases stress on education resourcing, including learner educator ratios. This easing follows from a significant increase in the birth rate from 2003 to 2005, which caused substantial and unplanned-for growth in Grade 1 enrollments of 13% between 2009 and 2015.²⁰

It is estimated that, between 2021 and 2026, Gauteng and Western Cape will experience significant in-migration of approximately 750,000 and 300,000 respectively, while the Eastern Cape and Limpopo provinces will experience significant out-migration of approximately 300,000 and 175,000 individuals respectively.²¹ This significantly affects education planning and resourcing, because while

¹⁸ Giese, et al. 2025.

¹⁹ Statistics South Africa, 2024a.

²⁰ Gustafsson, 2018

²¹ Statistics South Africa, 2024.

the equitable share formula adjusts for enrollment changes, it excludes capital allocations, leaving provinces to make up the shortfall.²² Meanwhile in shrinking provinces the out-migration of learners creates educational inefficiencies especially in sparsely populated rural areas where it is difficult to consolidate schools.

School Enrollment

With significant imbalances in children's access to quality early learning and resulting unequal learning foundations when they start school, it is encouraging to see nearly universal primary school enrollment. For children over 5 years old, school enrollment is very high with 87% of 5 year olds attending either a pre-school or primary school, 96% of 6 year olds, and 99% of 7 year olds²³ enrolled in schooling. This trend continues until 15 years old with nearly universal school enrollment to that point.

Nutrition

Access to nutrition is also connected to school attendance with more than three of every four learners (78,4%) who attended public schools benefitting from school feeding schemes in 2024, up from 63,1% in 2009. Over 80% of learners in Eastern Cape, Northern Cape, KwaZulu-Natal, North West, Mpumalanga and Limpopo benefitted from school nutrition programmes at public schools, while only 58,0% of learners in Western Cape and 60,9% in Gauteng are eligible for this type of programme, further revealing income disparities across the country.²⁴

Basic Education - Learning Outcomes and Policy Trends

Since 2021 the education budget has been declining in real terms, and combined with increased enrollments this has resulted in declining real per-learner expenditure.²⁵ Rather than retrenching teachers, the books have been balanced through reductions in the real wages of teachers, through below-inflation increases.

Basic education in South Africa (that is, schooling from ages 5-18) is characterised by low and highly unequal levels of performance, with the Quintile 5 school system performing adequately, and the Quintile 1-4 system failing to meet its challenges.

Nonetheless it is important to note that between 2002 and 2018, South Africa made significant improvements in international benchmark tests (TIMSS, PIRLS) of Grade 5 literacy and numeracy and Grade 9 numeracy, with close to the highest improvement rate of any country in the database.

"... there is indeed strong evidence of systematic improvement in the school system, both at the primary and high school level." - Servaas van der Berg & Martin Gustafsson, 2019.

However, the level of learning started from an extremely low base, and remains very low despite the improvements, with 81% of Grade 4 learners unable to read for meaning and 63% of grade 5 children lacking basic numeracy skills.²⁶ Furthermore, the COVID-related learning losses decreased

²² Mail and Guardian, 2021.

²³ Statistics South Africa, 2025b.

²⁴ Statistics South Africa, 2025b.

²⁵ Böhmer and Kruger, 2024.

²⁶ Department of Basic Education, 2023a.

attainment levels further, and while these recovered among Grade 9 learners by 2023, they did not amongst Grade 3 and 4 learners, where further reductions in attainment were observed.²⁷ Learning attainment in South Africa is also very unequal along socioeconomic and racial lines, and this inequality begins before children turn five.²⁸ Additionally, girls do better than boys throughout the schooling system, from age five where girls out-perform boys in terms of academic and socio-emotional measures,²⁹ to matric where 100,000 more girls than boys sit the NSC exams each year.³⁰

Figure 3. Maths and Reading Trends over time.

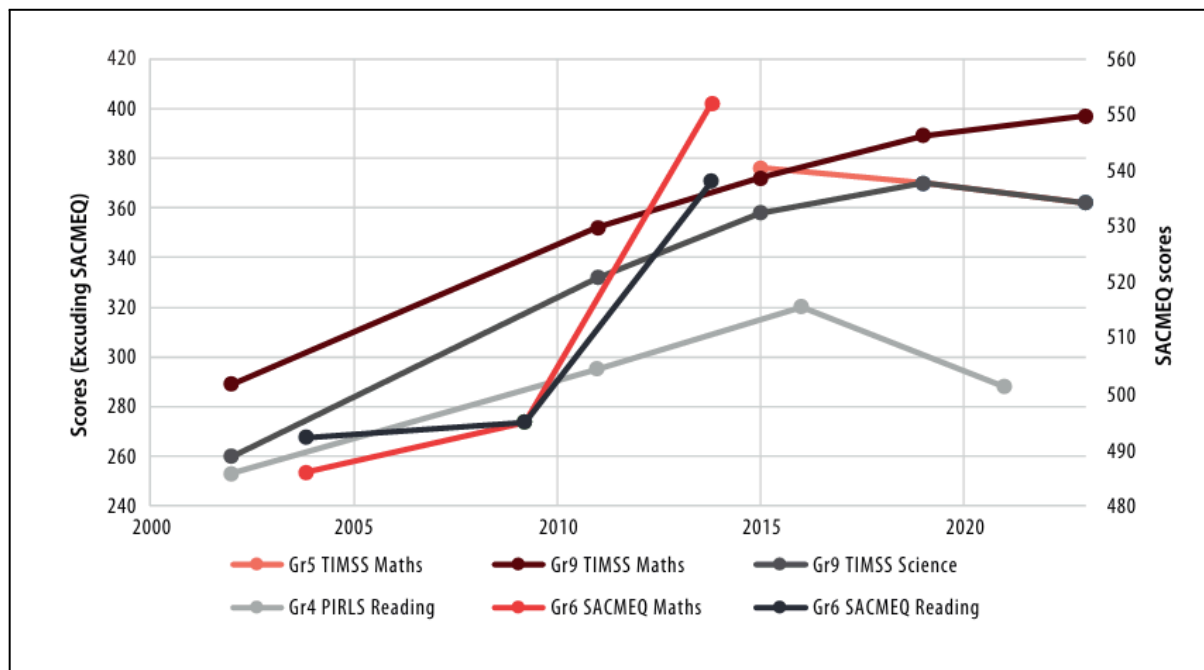


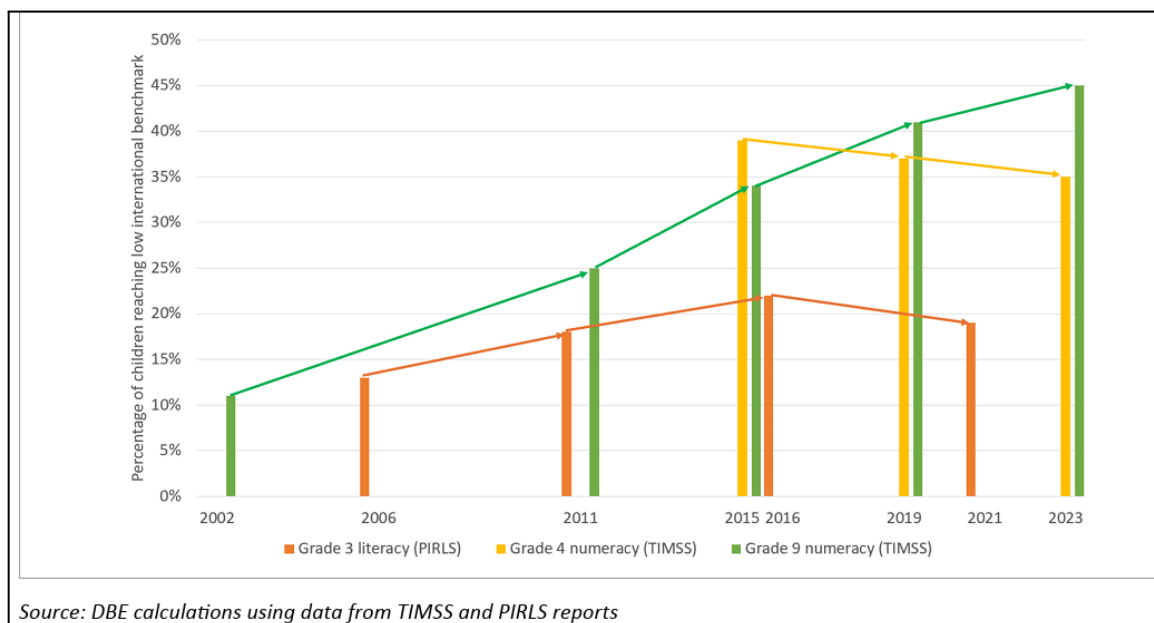
Figure 4. South Africa Performance in International Assessments since 2002

²⁷ Department of Basic Education, 2024.

²⁸ Giese, S. et al. 2022.

²⁹ Giese, S. et al. 2022.

³⁰ van der Berg et al, 2025



In light of these challenges, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) has several focus areas for improving learning outcomes.³¹ Firstly, the department is pushing for universal access to quality ECD with a target of 85% of four year olds enrolled in ECD within five years, in conjunction with compulsory Grade R, with substantial budget allocated to the roll-out of Grade R. The DBE identifies the lack of qualified ECD educators as a significant risk to the successful expansion of ECD programmes. The school nutrition programme continues to be a focal point, with an emphasis on procuring fruit and vegetables locally.³²

The DBE views mother-tongue education as a key factor for improving learning, and is rolling out mother-tongue education in mathematics, science and technology. Numeracy is also a core focus, and it is African-language and numeracy educators that are in short supply.³³

Much of these reforms have been codified in the BELA Act of 2024,³⁴ including Grade R becoming compulsory, schooling attendance required until Grade 9 or 15 years old (whichever comes first), South African sign language added as a language of teaching and learning in schools, prohibition of corporal punishment, initiation practices, and possession of drugs in schools, and requirements for governance of school governing bodies to reduce corruption.

Upcoming Teacher Retirements

The education system faces a significant wave of teacher retirements over the next decade, and this is a challenge but also an opportunity for renewal in the education system.³⁵ These retirements should be met by the current supply of teachers; in fact at present as few as 50% of new graduates are employed by provincial education departments.³⁶ There is an oversupply of secondary school

³¹ Department of Basic Education, 2024a.

³² Department of Basic Education, 2024a.

³³ Department of Basic Education, 2024a.

³⁴ South Africa, 2024.

³⁵ van der Berg et al, 2024

³⁶ Ntaka, 2022

teachers³⁷, and due to constrained budgets and substantial wage bills,³⁸ there has been very little growth in the number of teachers employed, resulting in growing learner-teacher ratios.

Grade Repetition

Rates of grade repetition in South Africa are high, even compared to other developing countries. During the COVID-19 pandemic, repetition rates were drastically reduced, thus resulting in many more learners progressing through the system and a spike in the number of matriculants, and a corresponding increase in the numbers of NSC and Bachelor's passes. Repetition rates are now returning to their previous (very high) levels.³⁹ These temporary increases also feed into the NEET rate, and increase competition for jobs and tertiary placements amongst matriculants. This increase in NSC and Bachelor's passes may have significantly impacted tertiary access, with the ratio between the number of students at a higher education institution (HEI) to the number of Bachelor's passes dropping from over 100% (since students could have matriculated in previous years) in the previous five years to 71% in 2021 and 75% in 2022.⁴⁰

First-time entering Public HE Students a Proportion of:	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021	2022
Matriculants	37%	39%	50%	54%	47%	48%	34%	35%
Bachelor Passes	102%	107%	130%	126%	104%	101%	71%	74%

Throughput and Dropout Rates

South Africa has near-universal primary school enrollment, with more than 99% of children completing schooling up to Grade 6, and 92.6 % completing up to Grade 9.⁴¹

Survival rates, that is the proportion of learners starting Grade 1 who complete a given grade, have been improving over recent decades, reaching a 54.2% Grade 12 survival rate for those born between 1997 and 1999 and reaching matric between 2021 and 2023.⁴² That being said, throughput rates are still low, with **Grade 11 continuing to play a gate-keeping role with 31.0% of Grade 11 learners dropping out without completing Grade 12.** During the COVID pandemic, dropout rates in fact decreased significantly in Grade 10 and 11 (due to more lenient promotion requirements), resulting in unprecedented numbers of learners writing the NSC in 2021 and 2022.⁴³ Dropout rates have since started to return to higher levels, which has resulted in a temporary decrease in throughput rates from 65.5% in 2022 to 63.0% in 2023.⁴⁴

³⁷ van der Berg et al, 2024

³⁸ Ntaka, 2022

³⁹ Wills & Qvist, 2024

⁴⁰ Kruger, 2024

⁴¹ Department of Basic Education, 2023b

⁴² Department of Basic Education, 2023b

⁴³ Wills and Qvist, 2023

⁴⁴ DBE 2023, DBE 2024b

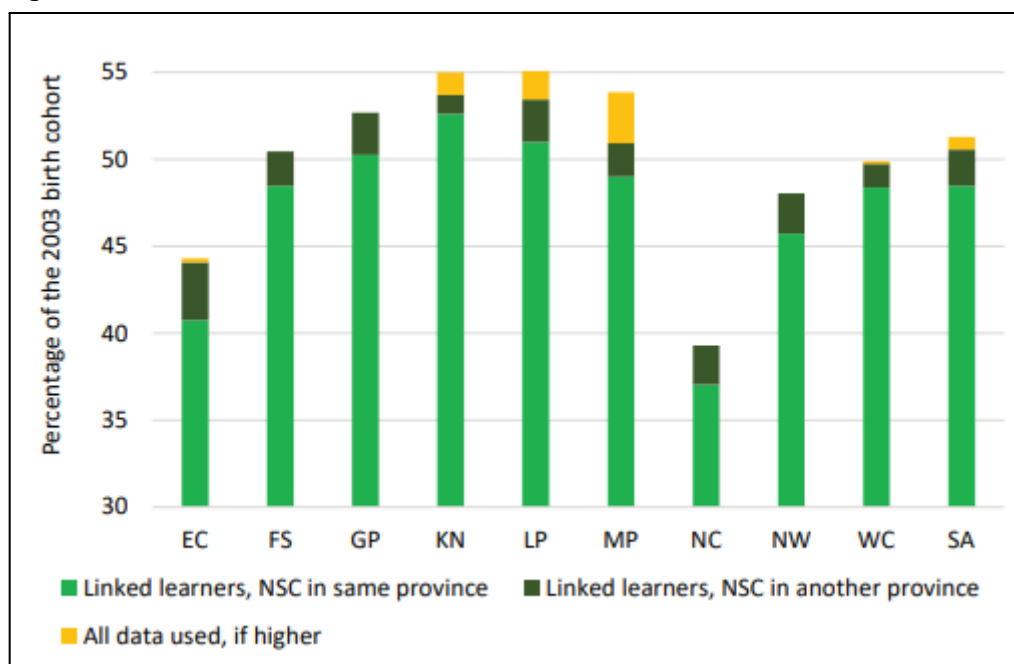
Figure 5. Survival and dropout rates by grade and birth cohort

	2003-2005 (Born 1979 - 1981)		2012 - 2014 (Born 1988 - 1990)		2021-2023 (Born 1997 - 1999)	
	Survival Rate	Percentage dropping out with this Grade attained	Survival Rate	Percentage dropping out with this Grade attained	Survival Rate	Percentage dropping out with this Grade attained
Total cohort	100%		100%		100%	
No schooling		1.8%		0.7%		0.5%
Grade 1	98%	0.3%	99.3%	0.4%	99.5%	0.0%
Grade 2	98%	0.4%	98.9%	0.4%	99.5%	0.1%
Grade 3	98%	0.9%	98.5%	0.4%	99.4%	0.1%
Grade 4	97%	1.3%	98.1%	0.5%	99.3%	0.4%
Grade 5	95%	1.7%	97.7%	0.7%	98.9%	0.6%
Grade 6	94%	2.9%	97.0%	1.1%	98.4%	1.1%
Grade 7	91%	4.9%	95.9%	2.6%	97.3%	2.0%
Grade 8	87%	6.9%	93.4%	4.3%	95.3%	2.9%
Grade 9	81%	10.3%	89.4%	8.4%	92.6%	5.5%
Grade 10	72%	16.8%	81.9%	15.0%	87.5%	10.2%
Grade 11	60%	36.3%	69.6%	36.3%	78.5%	31.0%
Grade 12	38%		44.4%		54.2%	

Source: DBE (2023b) using General Household Survey 2023 data.

Figure 6 below presents the survival rates from Grade 1 to matric by province, also showing the proportion of learners who migrated out of the province by their NSC. The yellow bars show learners who wrote the NSC but could not be linked to EMIS data. Clearly, survival rates vary significantly across provinces, with fewer than 40% of learners who started Grade 1 in the Northern Cape completing matric.

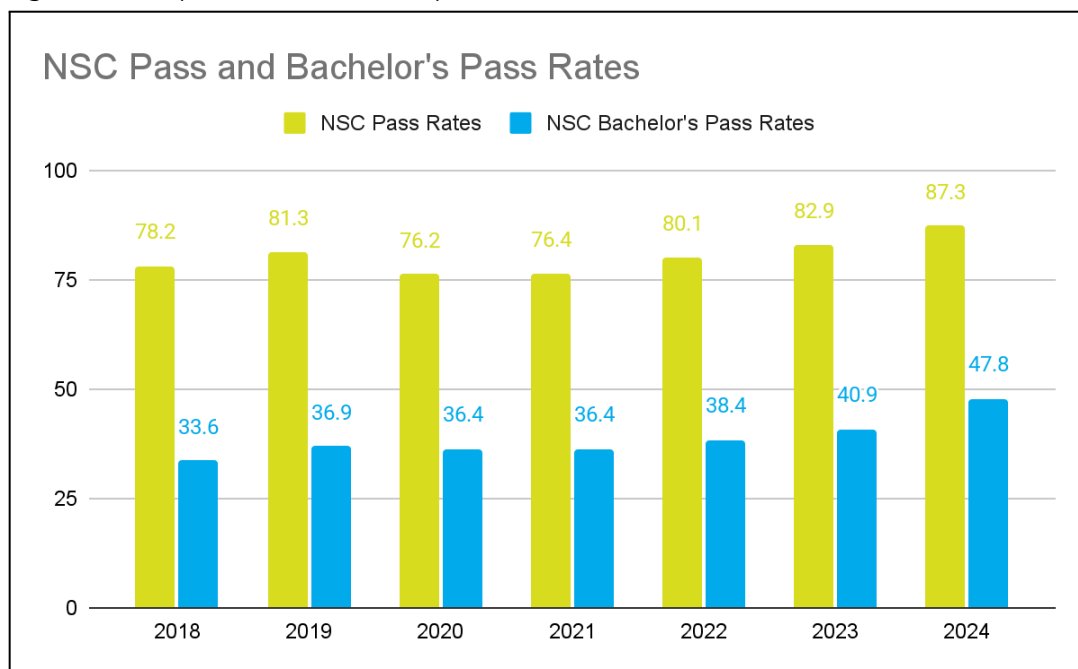
Figure 6. NSC Survival rates of the 2003 birth cohort



Source: DBE (2024) using linked NSC and EMIS data..

NSC pass and Bachelor's rates have both been increasing in recent years (albeit with a slight dip in 2020/2021 - likely due to increased throughput), peaking at 87.3% and 47.8% respectively in 2024.⁴⁵

Figure 7. NSC pass and bachelor's pass rates



Source: NSC Data.

South Africa has achieved near universal primary and early high school school enrollment with improvements in learning outcomes and survival rates in recent years, but continues to experience highly unequal and low learning outcomes.

Implications for the After School Sector

- **Early literacy and numeracy.** With many children lacking basic literacy and numeracy skills, ASPs can fill a major gap by supporting children's progress in reading and maths.
- **Nutrition is key.** ASPs working with children in public schools should take note of the number of learners relying on schools for basic nutrition.
- **High enrollment but unequal foundations.** Nearly universal primary school enrollment can mask early learning gaps, ASPs play a critical role in responding to them.
- **Inequality.** With learning outcomes aligned with socio-economic status, after school programmes targeting learners from lower-income communities play a key role in remedying this inequality.
- **DBE-aligned priorities.** The DBE has outlined several priority areas, including mother-tongue instruction in maths, science, and technology and after school programmes can align with this priority to magnify impact.
- **Grade repetition.** After school programmes can assist with learner retention and supporting learners who repeat grades.
- **Dropout rates in late secondary school.** ASPs play a role in reducing learner dropout and can particularly play a role in late secondary school when dropout rates increase substantially.

⁴⁵ Department of Basic Education, 2025.

Youth and NEET trends in South Africa

As of mid-2024, approximately 16% of the population (10.2 million individuals) are youth aged 15-24 years. The youth (15-24) demographic has been growing at increasing rates since 2020 and grew by about 2% in 2024;⁴⁶ this, in the absence of increased employment or education opportunities, has contributed to the rise in NEET rates since 2020.

NEET Trends

The growing proportion of youth not in education, employment or training, also known as the NEET rate, has been identified as a cause for concern globally, as this is a crucial transition period for youth (usually defined as 18-24). NEET rates in South Africa are comparable to our neighbouring countries, but high compared to other middle-income countries.⁴⁷ NEET rates have risen significantly over the past decade from about 45% in 2014 to 50% in 2024,⁴⁸ with matriculants contributing an increasing share. NEET rates vary significantly by location, with the Western Cape and Gauteng having the lowest NEET rates (33% and 41% respectively), while rates are highest in Mpumalanga (61%) and North West (68%).⁴⁹

Youth who drop out of school without completing matric are among the most vulnerable members of society. They are less connected to the labour market and remain unemployed for longer, and dropouts from poorer households have the worst outcomes; and these extended periods of unemployment negatively impact mental health and self-esteem.⁵⁰ Opportunities such as TVET do exist for these youth, but they are not taking them up.⁵¹

Academic attainment in South Africa has grown significantly over the last decade and as of 2024 is the highest it has ever been, with almost 64% of youth having completed matric.⁵² This growth has been largest for the most marginalised groups, thereby reducing educational inequality by 40%.⁵³

This rise in the NEET rate is largely due to decreases in employment probabilities, with matriculants today approximately as likely to find employment as non-matriculants were a decade ago.⁵⁴ Nonetheless, higher educational attainment remains protective against NEET, with NEET rates at 64% for those with no matric, 48% for those with Matric only, and 32% for those with a post-matric qualification.⁵⁵ In addition to employment rates, factors impacting youth unemployment include lack of information (from school subject choice, to how to prepare a CV); discouragement and mental health; geography and costs of work seeking; lack of work experience; and limited social capital⁵⁶. Additionally, NEET rates are higher among African youth, females (a marked turnaround of the pro-female gender gap seen throughout schooling), those in urban areas, and youth with children below the age of 7.⁵⁷ In fact, 44% of NEET individuals are homemakers, with 83% of these

⁴⁶ Statistics South Africa, 2024.

⁴⁷ Wills, 2024.

⁴⁸ Wills, 2024. Note: The author uses the NEET classification adopted by Statistics South Africa and defines NEET rates as the number of 15-24-years-old who are NEET divided by the total youth population aged 15-24-years-old. This results in NEET estimates that are slightly higher than those reported in other papers, but the trends remain consistent.

⁴⁹ Wills, 2024.

⁵⁰ Branson, et al., 2019.

⁵¹ Branson, 2018.

⁵² Selkirk & Wills, 2024

⁵³ Kohler, 2024.

⁵⁴ Wills, 2024

⁵⁵ Wills, 2024

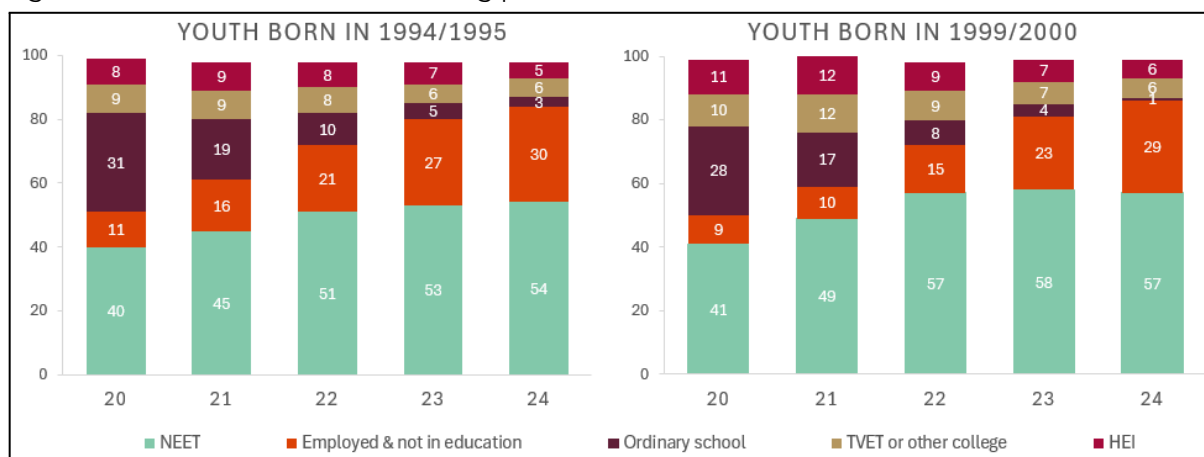
⁵⁶ De Lannoy et al, 2020

⁵⁷ Mudiriza and Lannoy, 2023

homemakers being female. Health challenges are also indicated as a substantial cause of being NEET, with 21% of NEET individuals giving this as the reason, with no further distinction of the types of health challenges experienced by NEET youth. Despite these challenges, more than two-thirds of NEET youth want to work.⁵⁸

As Figure 8 shows, the increase in NEET rates over the last five years is due to lower employment rates and lower ordinary school participation (among overage scholars), accompanied by very small increases in the proportion of youth enrolled in TVET and HEI institutions.

Figure 8. Youth education and training profiles over time



Source: Wills (2024), using QLFS data.

Notes: The "Employed & in education" and "Other education" categories are excluded, as they have contain either 0% or 1% of the cohort in every period. HEI = Higher Education Institution. X-axis figures based on when each cohort aged to 20-24 years.

Educational attainment is well established as a pathway to employment and income opportunities. Longitudinal data shows that more educated individuals in South Africa are more likely to find employment and find it more quickly, while those without matric are more likely to find precarious work if they do secure employment.⁵⁹ Before reaching matric (i.e. up to 11 years of education), each additional year of education does not significantly impact the expected employment or wage rates; but at 12 years (matric) both of these increase significantly,⁶⁰ showing that **the labour market continues to value the matric**. While employment rates have fallen over the last 20 years, the real return to each additional year of education has risen, especially for those with the lowest wage levels, but also for those at the top of the wage distribution.

These high returns to tertiary education demonstrate the importance and value of obtaining tertiary education in South Africa. However, enrollment in the Post Secondary Education and Training (PSET) sector, which includes public and private tertiary institutions, as well as TVET colleges, has declined from a high of 2.3 million enrollments in 2017, to just over 2 million by 2022.⁶¹ In 2020, the Gross Enrollment Ratio (GER) stood at 27.2%, which is low relative to other middle-income countries.⁶² This decline in enrollment has persisted despite modest real increases in funding to the post-school sector in recent years, because the majority of additional resources have been allocated to the National Student Financial Aid Scheme (NSFAS), with limited impact on expanding overall enrollment.⁶³ As a result, new matriculants face increasing competition for limited post-secondary

⁵⁸ Mudiriza and Lannoy, 2023

⁵⁹ Mlatsheni and Ranchhod, 2017

⁶⁰ Kohler, 2024.

⁶¹ Department of Higher Education and Training, 2023

⁶² Kruger, 2024.

⁶³ Kruger, 2024.

education opportunities. The Post-School Education and Training (PSET) sector has not kept pace with the growing number of school-leavers, many of whom also face declining employment prospects, thereby contributing to rising rates of youth not in employment, education, or training (NEET).

Additionally public universities are highly inefficient, with 6-year completion rates (of 3 year Bachelor degrees) ranging from 58% in the Western Cape, to 29% in the Eastern Cape and Limpopo.⁶⁴ Qualitative data suggests that the experience of tertiary education is especially challenging for young people who migrate from rural areas to study at urban universities.⁶⁵

Being NEET is strongly associated with mental health issues,⁶⁶ although most of this research has been conducted in developed countries.

Implications for the After School Sector

- **Bridge NEET gap.** High NEET rates show the need for ASPs to build job readiness skills, provide mentorship, and link youth with relevant pathways to productivity.
- **Support vulnerable groups.** Girls, rural youth, youth with children and those without matric are more likely to be NEET.
- **Education support.** ASPs create support for improved learning outcomes, which may assist youth with accessing higher levels of education and reducing likelihood of becoming NEET.
- **Promote mental health and wellbeing.** NEET youth are at higher risk of mental health issues; ASPs create spaces to support mental wellbeing for children and youth.
- **Partnership potential.** Linking with schools, TVETs, HEIs, and potential employers can provide more pathways for youth.
- **Linking multiple societal needs.** Unemployed youth and the need for support in ASPs and early learning present a unique opportunity to solve multiple challenges with concentrated support.

Policy and Employment Landscape

Policy Frameworks Shaping Youth Development

Considering the broad-reaching challenges facing children and youth in South Africa, the policy landscape is supportive and puts youth and children at the forefront of national policy. The National Development Plan⁶⁷ sets a macro-level foundation for addressing South Africa's structural challenges of poverty, inequality, and youth unemployment through policy shifts and system-wide reforms and the National Youth Policy for 2020-2030 provides a strategic action plan to empower and equip youth in South Africa. Both see children and youth as key stakeholders in policy, and position challenges related to these groups as critical to the development of the country, though some critique the government's engagement with youth in implementation.⁶⁸ Led by the Department in the Presidency for Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities, key policy pillars of the National Youth Policy⁶⁹ (NYP) are quality education, skills and second chances; economic transformation,

⁶⁴ van Broekhuizen et al, 2017.

⁶⁵ Walker and Mathebula, 2020

⁶⁶ Gariépy et al, 2022

⁶⁷ National Planning Commission. 2012.

⁶⁸ Rebello, S. P., 2022.

⁶⁹ Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. 2021.

entrepreneurship and job creation; physical and mental health promotion; social cohesion and nation building; and effective and responsive youth development machinery. The NYP is rooted in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic and its impact on social wellbeing of youth in particular.

Economic Context and Youth Employment Challenges

From an economic perspective, South Africa's growth has been slow with gross domestic product (GDP) increasing by an average of 0.7% over a ten year period.⁷⁰ Growth has been constrained by power cuts, weak infrastructure development, and a weak business environment. The COVID-19 pandemic further exacerbated socio-economic challenges. Fortunately, both GDP and job growth have recovered to pre-pandemic levels, but job growth continues to be outpaced by a growing labour force, resulting in high levels of unemployed young people. With the consumer price index (CPI) ranging from 3.3 to 6.9 over the past ten years⁷¹ and showing signs of decreasing recently, inflation is well contained, but tight monetary and fiscal policies do not give promising prospects that growth trends will improve in the near future.

Public Employment Programmes (PEPs)

Public employment initiatives have become a focus of budget allocation and policy for the presidency in a post-COVID recovery context. While public employment programmes existed prior to COVID, they have taken a front seat in the post-COVID reality to help young people and the economy recover. Collectively, PEPs provide over 750,000 job opportunities per year⁷² and the Presidential Employment Stimulus (PES), the bundle of employment initiatives launched in 2020, has provided more than two million jobs since its launch with 72% of participants being young people and 66% women.⁷³ Some PEPs have already scaled up or down since inception with SEF growing, some scaling back, and budget allocations ranging from one to three years across all existing PEPs.

Particularly relevant to the work of TLT are the Basic Education Employment Initiative (BEEI) , National Youth Service (NYS), Social Employment Fund (SEF), and Youth Employment Service (YES).

The BEEI is the largest ever public employment initiative with nearly all schools in the country receiving support, reaching 23,000 schools and employing 1,117,392 people in the first four phases.⁷⁴ The DBE implements the BEEI, which employs 18-34 year olds and provides whole-school support ranging from groundskeeping to supporting classroom instruction with a goal of improving learning outcomes. NPOs registered on provincial lists may be engaged as training partners, but these partnerships can be difficult and time-consuming to establish. This may change as the procurement of training shifts to the International Development Corporation.⁷⁵

The National Youth Service (NYS) places youth with selected NPOs and accepts youth without matric qualifications. It is positioned as a stepping stone to full time employment, but is currently limited to ten NPO partner organisations providing about 15,000 job opportunities.

The Social Employment Fund (SEF) is particularly relevant to TLT as a Strategic Implementing Partner (SIP) with its broad mandate of work for the common good. It is positioned to both support

⁷⁰World Bank. 2025. South Africa overview. Online.

⁷¹ Statistics South Africa. 2024.

⁷² Binding Constraints Lab, 2025.

⁷³ The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa, 2025.

⁷⁴ Binding Constraints Lab, 2025

⁷⁵ Olivier, J., 2024.

NPOs to do what they do best with additional support and provide work opportunities for young people. Budget allocation for SEF has expanded substantially over time and the SEF was allocated R1.29 billion in the 2025/26 budget.

Not strictly a PEP, but relevant for the potential to create pathways for youth, the Youth Employment Service (YES) provides private-sector funded quality work opportunities through approximately 22 implementing partners who are able to absorb 200 youth each year. Demand is driven by private funder priorities.

NPOs working with PEPs need strong administrative capacity, the ability to manage high turnover, and may handle volatility best by partnering with existing implementing partners. All NPOs who work with PEPs should be concerned with the long term employability of and trajectory of PEP participants as this is a key priority of all PEPs.⁷⁶

In addition to the potential of PEPs, the social development sector provides the largest number of employment opportunities in the country, providing a strong motivation to strengthen civil society and social development actors.

Funding Landscape - Trends and Priorities

This section provides an evidence-based reflection on best practice for intermediary funders, then outlines trends and priorities of various funding sources.

Role of Intermediary Funders

As an intermediary funder – an organisation that receives grants from one or more funders and redistributes funds to other, typically smaller community-based, organisations and projects – TLT is a bridge and experiences the tension of dual accountability as it raises funds and complies with various structures while being a fair and equitable funding partner to those it supports. Globally, there is limited publicly available literature on intermediary funders and varying definitions of what they are and what they do.⁷⁷ Given this limitation, existing best practices suggests that intermediary funders are in a unique position to:

1. **Build trust.** Few small, start-up community-based organisations have the capacity to build relationships directly with well established funders, but intermediaries can develop relationships and build trust and bridges between local organisations and various funding mechanisms.⁷⁸
2. **Apply deep contextual knowledge.** Intermediaries often have a deeper level of awareness of the local context on the frontlines of their work.
3. **Co-create solutions.** With deep contextual knowledge and trusted partnerships at the community and funder levels, intermediaries are uniquely positioned to co-create solutions at multiple levels.
4. **Strengthen ecosystems.** Intermediary funders can shift traditional funding power dynamics and empower grassroots organisations.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Binding Constraints Lab, 2025

⁷⁷ Childress, S., et al. 2024.

⁷⁸ Rojas Murga, D. et al. 2025.

⁷⁹ Collective Abundance

5. **Provide agile and innovative funding.** Intermediaries are often able to act more quickly than traditional funding mechanisms and can respond quickly when needs change.⁸⁰
6. **Expand access and equity.** Intermediaries can shift traditional power dynamics and direct funds to locally-rooted movements and activities.⁸¹

While they are simultaneously under pressure to raise funds to reinvest in their partners, there are some key themes emerging in the intermediary, convening, and network-driven space. The same strengths that intermediaries have above allow them to **apply values-based structures to decision-making, build and maintain trust networks, address complex problems with multiple stakeholders, and strengthen networks and ecosystems for greater and more sustainable change.**

The Humanitarian Advisory Group suggests the role of intermediaries should be to “empower local and national organisations to drive, define and deliver principled humanitarian responses to needs in their communities.”⁸² They also propose a model for the role of intermediaries with six core capabilities to empower local organisations, uniting motivation, opportunity and capability. Motivation (the why) focuses on encouraging the thinking to support action and involves clear communication, clear targets, rewarding good practice, incentives, and a culture of learning. Opportunity (the what) involves creating an enabling environment for collaboration and to build and strengthen partnerships, including flexible funding, access to networks, collaboration and mutually agreed plans. Capability (the how) refers to the factors that make a change possible and identifying the most fit-for-purpose vehicle for change, including capacity building, organisational strengthening, local expertise and risk management.

Figure 9. Proposed Model for Role of Intermediaries.

⁸⁰ Childress, S., et al. 2024.

⁸¹ Childress, S., et al. 2024.

⁸² Humanitarian Advisory Group, et al. 2024.



Source: Humanitarian Advisory Group

Innovative approaches to Grantmaking

As TLT considers its role as an intermediary funder and the ways it manages its sub-granting process, it is useful to explore innovative grantmaking approaches.

The Equality Fund is a significant intermediary funder focused on shifting gender power dynamics and investing in women's rights organisations. Its programmes, *Catalyze* and *Activate*, reimagined traditional grantmaking by shifting decision-making power to local leaders and questioning the need for competition in grant-making while reducing administrative burdens and strengthening trust-based funding ecosystems founded on clear values. Their Step up/Step Back approach applied community-created criteria and saw half of potential investees "stepping back" from a round of funding to make space for others in their community.⁸³

Feedback from Grantees

The Centre for Effective Philanthropy conducted a robust study to gauge grantees' experiences of working with originating funders and intermediary funders. Key differences included:⁸⁴

- Grantees perceive intermediary funders offering more open and frequent communication, but lower levels of trust and understanding of grantees' work compared to originating funders.

⁸³ Equality Fund, 2022.

⁸⁴ Yang, E., 2024.

- Grantees perceive originating funders being slightly more respectful in interactions, having slightly better understanding of grantees' work and having greater compassion for their beneficiaries.
- Grantees perceived a better understanding of how their work fits into intermediary funders' broader efforts and see intermediaries as having a greater understanding of grantee's fields.
- Intermediary grants are perceived to be smaller and less likely to be multi-year or unrestricted compared with grants from originating funders.

Taking grantees' perceptions into consideration may build more effective relationships and provide valuable insight into how to improve.

Funding Landscape

Funding streams most relevant to the work of TLT and its partners are listed below.

Philanthropic Funding

Private philanthropy is estimated to invest R10 billion annually into the social economy in South Africa, community foundations contribute R15.6 billion, and high net-worth individuals invested R23.7 billion in 2020.⁸⁵ These funders have a variety of motivations and focus areas.

The Independent Philanthropy Association of South Africa conducted a review of basic education funders and found that investments ranged from R3 million - R300 million annually, with 63% of respondents funding exclusively in South Africa. Evidence of impact, opportunities for innovation, and areas of need were the most important factors considered when developing funding strategies with a focus on initiatives that align with government priorities and broader frameworks such as the NDP and SDGs.⁸⁶

Education funders tend to prefer interventions that target literacy, numeracy, mathematics, and languages with a focus on teacher development and school leadership based on measurable strategies to drive systemic change. A shift toward mother-tongue instruction, teacher education, blended digital strategies, and psychosocial support were highlighted as focus areas. Recommendations for funders included: 1. Strategy development both locally and systemically to guide decisions; 2. Strong relationships across the ecosystem; 3. A focus on knowledge sharing and improved communication; and 4. Improved impact measures.

Specifically relevant to TLT's work and the broader education sector is the development of the Foundational Literacy and Numeracy (FLN) Donor Group, a group of like-minded and strategically aligned donors aimed at improving foundational literacy and numeracy. They will invest roughly R100 million per year from 2025-2027 to co-create and support province-led interventions.⁸⁷ Key funders including Zenex Foundation, Epoch, Optima Trust, and the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust, have united efforts with funding from the Gates Foundation to review existing literacy interventions. Several key funders recently reviewed their funding strategies and prioritised early literacy and numeracy.⁸⁸

⁸⁵ Rossouw, R., 2025.

⁸⁶ Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa (IPASA), 2024.

⁸⁷ Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2024

⁸⁸ Trialogue Knowledge Hub, 2024.

Corporate Social Investment

In 2024, the total corporate social investment (CSI) expenditure was R12.7 billion⁸⁹ with the three largest contributing industries being basic materials, consumer services, and financials. Most companies (78%) have a CSI strategy that is “very much aligned” with its overall business strategy. 69% of companies support more than 10 CSI projects with 87% of companies reporting doing their own research to inform their strategy and practice. More than half of companies support three or more flagship projects and those projects receive about 61% of their CSI budget allocations. Roughly two-thirds (63%) of companies partnered with NPOs to implement their flagship projects while just over a third (37%) implemented their flagship projects themselves. Nearly all companies (92%) invested in education, but the average CSI spend in education was reduced by 3 percentage points between 2023 and 2024. Social and community development is the second most supported focus area with 75% of companies reporting it as a focus area and allocating an average of 15% of CSI spend to it. Food security, health, and entrepreneur and small business support are the next most supported focus areas. Arts and culture and sports development are among the lower-spend sectors, receiving just an average of 1% of CSI budget allocations each.

Geographically, 59% of companies support national projects, which received an average of 56% of CSI expenditure per company. Gauteng was the most supported province, followed by the Western Cape.

NPOs are the largest recipient of CSI funding with public institutions such as schools, universities, hospitals, and other government institutions being the second most supported recipient group.

Foreign Development Aid

With the sudden departure of USAID funding in early 2025, the funding landscape has shifted substantially and has left organisations and the South African government seeking to meet budget requirements from alternative sources. The abrupt funding freeze resulted in cancellation of contracts for various local reading initiatives and has resulted in incomplete projects, and unpaid staff with possible reversal of previous progress resulting from such an abrupt end to many projects. A rapid survey of 111 organisations in February 2025 found that nearly half had suffered direct or indirect financial losses with some holding debt for costs already incurred. 178 core staff members were retrenched as a result of the abrupt funding halt with hundreds more at risk of losing their jobs as well.⁹⁰

The reduction in USAID funding has further impacted overseas development funding with many developed countries also reducing their contributions to foreign aid.⁹¹ This puts the South African government in a difficult position as it needs to provide basic services previously covered by aid funding while servicing a sizable debt.⁹²

Government

Local government spending is constrained by debt servicing, but the prospect of better debt negotiation going into the G20 round at the end of 2025 may ease this burden into the future. The current budget has allocated funding to several pressing needs, including early childhood development and youth unemployment. The per-child ECD subsidy was increased from R17 to R24,

⁸⁹ Trialogue, 2024

⁹⁰ Williams, B., & Polzer-Ngwato, T., 2025.

⁹¹ Rossouw, R., 2025.

⁹² National Treasury. 2025. Budget Overview.

the first increase since 2019; additional funding aims to unlock ECD access for an additional 700,000 and early nutrition allocations were increased.⁹³ Public employment programmes continue to receive funding allocations to impact youth unemployment since 2020 as part of the PES.

Funding Trends

These funding trends provide some hope for sector-specific improvements while also creating uncertainty of overall funding into the future. In this context, TLT's unique blend of collaboration, capacity-building, intermediary funding, and cross-sectoral focus areas will be more important than ever to magnify impact in the after school sector.

Building Capacity and Networks in the After School Sector

Schools face increasing pressure from rising learner-teacher ratios and upcoming teacher retirement within the context of high drop-out and relatively low learning outcomes by international standards. At the same time, the economic benefits of obtaining a matric highlight the opportunity for ASPs in supporting academic, mental health, and social benefits for children and youth in South Africa.

Convening and Collective Impact

TLT works as a convenor and facilitates cooperation and collaboration in the after school sector. Successful collective action is best supported by a backbone entity that provides ongoing support of an initiative with dedicated staff who drive community transformation anchored in a clear and compelling *why*, clarity on who should be brought together, and supported by a strong facilitation entity that cultivates relationships to advance the work.⁹⁴ It is important to note that a backbone entity does not necessarily have to be an intermediary funder, though these roles often overlap.⁹⁵ For organisations, like TLT, that serve as both a backbone entity and intermediary funder, it is important to see these roles as distinct and overlapping with unique skills required for each and complex pressures on both roles.

One of the most widely cited frameworks for collective impact cites five key conditions:

1. **Common Agenda.** All participants have a shared vision including a common understanding of the problem and a joint approach to solving it through agreed upon actions.
2. **Shared Measurement.** Collecting data and measuring results consistently across all participants ensures efforts remain aligned and participants hold each other accountable.
3. **Mutually Reinforcing Activities.** Participant activities must be differentiated while still being coordinated through a mutually reinforcing plan of action.
4. **Continuous Communication.** Consistent and open communication across many players to build trust, assure mutual objectives, and create common motivation.
5. **Backbone Support.** Creating and managing collective impact requires a separate organisation(s) with staff and a specific set of skills to serve as the backbone for the entire initiative and coordinate participating entities.⁹⁶

To complement these conditions, a further focus on mindset shifts required for collective action, including considering 1. who is involved and making sure the right people are at the table; 2. how

⁹³ Minister of Finance, 2025.

⁹⁴ Touzin, J., 2023.

⁹⁵ Lynn, et al. 2015.

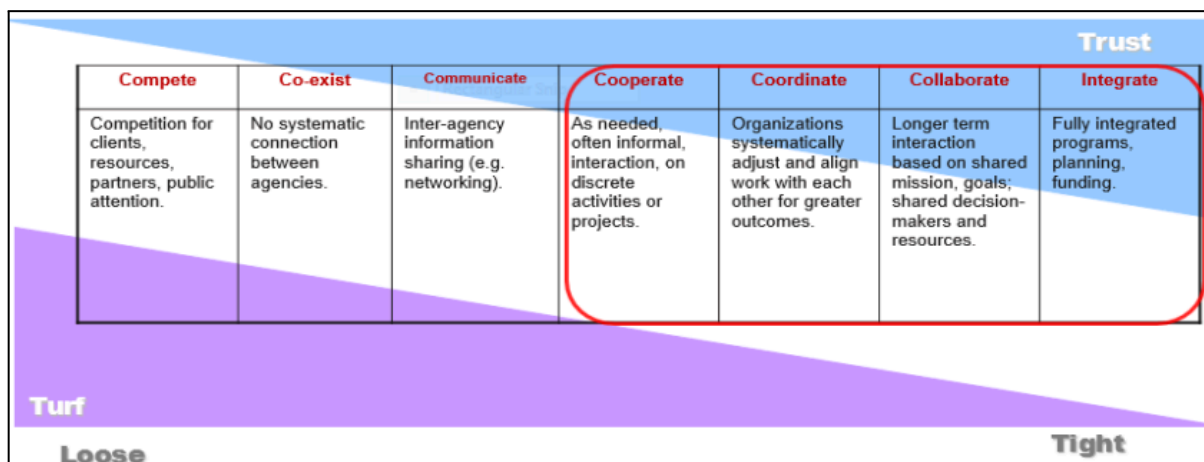
⁹⁶ Kania, J. & Kramer, M., 2011.

people work together by valuing relationships, trust, and collaborative learning in a structure that allows for collective reflection and shares credit; and 3. acknowledging how progress happens by focusing on adaptive work and iterative solutions. A suggestion to focus on the “silver buckshot” rather than “silver bullet” and try many coordinated interventions rather than a single major initiative.⁹⁷

Collaboration Tools and Frameworks

The Tamarack Institute is a Canadian organisation that drives sustainable change through collective impact, community engagement and capacity-building. They have created a self-assessment tool (in Figure 10) to help organisations assess where they are and where they would like to be in the collaboration process. It outlines seven steps in the process to full integrated impact. A similar tool could assist TLT with assessing its progress in various collaborative projects.

Figure 10: Collaboration Self-assessment Tool



Source: Tamarack Institute⁹⁸

Key actors and networks

There are some active and well-respected convening bodies in the education sector, but very few focused specifically on convening and capacity-building in the after school sector. The Learning Trust has an opportunity to continue playing a pivotal role in the ecosystem, with a focus on the after school sector. The following is a brief (non-exhaustive) overview of key convening bodies.

Non-profit Organisations

The [National Association of Social Change Entities in Education \(NASCEE\)](#) is a membership-driven organisation focused on building capacity, fostering collaboration, and advocating on behalf of actors in the education ecosystem in South Africa. It runs several professional learning communities along cross-cutting themes for its members, including monitoring and evaluation, fundraising, human resources, and financial management, intended to build capacity across its members for a strong-running sector. Based on the frameworks above, it is more of a backbone entity and not an intermediary funder.

⁹⁷ Kania, J., Hanleybrown, F., & Juster, J. S., 2014.

⁹⁸ Tamarack Institute, 2017.

From 2009-2023, BRIDGE provided a space for convening and knowledge sharing in the education ecosystem.⁹⁹ NASCEE has absorbed BRIDGE's knowledge hub, so the learnings of the convening body are publicly available and widely shared. Most of BRIDGE's communities of practice have gone dormant. BRIDGE worked along five focus areas: school leadership, teacher development, early childhood development, learner support, and cross-cutting themes. The Teacher Internship Collaboration South Africa (TICZA) has emerged as a leader in convening various entities focused on pre-service teacher development. [Penreach](#) continues to host quarterly communities of practice for the ECD sector in Mpumalanga with desire to grow these to other provinces.

The [Binding Constraints Lab](#) is a new and growing initiative focused on bringing together education stakeholders to solve system-wide challenges with a key focus on literacy and numeracy. It commissions research, sub-grants, and incubates potential solutions to persistent challenges in South African education.

[Assitej](#) is a strategic implementing partner (SIP) of the SEF and convenes organisations involved in arts-focused education activities as part of its core work.

Provincial Governments

Both the Western Cape and Gauteng governments are involved in supporting after school programming at various levels. The after school sector has been a focus area of the Western Cape government through the premier's office as a "gamechanger", and subsequently in the Western Cape government in the youth and after school programme office. The Western Cape Education Department has further invested R1.2 billion in a "Back-on-Track" programme with significant positive results specifically in mathematics and language with some interventions seeing a year of learning recovery after only nine sessions.¹⁰⁰ The Gauteng government has implemented the Secondary School Improvement Programme (SSIP) since 2010, which has been successful in improving matric pass rates with higher quality passes in participating learners despite logistical and tutor training challenges..¹⁰¹

TLT's Role and Opportunities

With the education system under pressure and learning improvements being central to government policy, after school programmes present a unique opportunity to provide additional support to a constrained system, yielding substantial gains for children and youth. Participation in after school programmes is connected with lower rates of drop-out and higher levels of academic success.¹⁰² TLT's unique position as an intermediary funder, capacity-builder, and convenor, positions it to coordinate cross-sectoral interventions to target the most urgent needs of children and youth in South Africa.

Strategic Implications for TLT

From the rapid review, a number of opportunities and questions emerge for The Learning Trust team and board as it reflects on its existing strategy and prepares for building its next strategic focus areas.

⁹⁹ NASCEE, 2024

¹⁰⁰ Van der Berg, S., van Wyk, C., & van Biljon, C. 2024.

¹⁰¹ Ntsobi, M., et al. 2025.

¹⁰² Numeric, 2024.; McLean, C., & van der Berg, S., 2017.

Opportunities for TLT

- Leverage the growing interest in youth and NEET-focused funding
- Continue working with PEPs to magnify impact
 - The SEF partnership is well established and successful, does TLT have an appetite to collaborate with other PEPs including BEEI, NYS, and YES?
 - BEEI presents possibly presents a training opportunity or way to connect youth who are working in schools with ASPs
- Identify needs and opportunities of a maturing ASP ecosystem
 - Interest in collaborative approaches and need to develop collaborative capacity
 - Development of sector-wide support and impact goals
- Review themes/portfolios within partners to align with funder priority areas or push relevant narratives to gain momentum/interest
- Identify priority areas of DBE that may be opportunities for TLT and its partners (Grade R, ECD, mother-tongue instruction, foundational literacy and numeracy)
- Own the role it has established for itself as a convenor and advocate for the After School Sector
- Clarify its roles as backbone entity and intermediary funder with acknowledgement of the overlap, skills required, and tensions of each

Strategic Questions for TLT

1. Capacity-building and sub-granting

- a. Is there an opportunity to position TLT as a civil society strengthener in addition to its role as capacity-builder and early-stage investor?
- b. Does TLT have clear funding values to assist with decision-making and reflection? (in addition to or as an extension of its organisational values)
- c. Is there an opportunity to build capacity for further collaboration in more established organisations?
- d. What internal capacity might TLT need to advance its strategy?

2. Convening

- a. How does TLT see its role as a convenor within the existing ecosystem and education challenges?
- b. What role does TLT want to play in driving sector coordination and learning?
- c. What support does TLT want to offer to more established actors in the sector (if any)?

3. Advocacy and Research

- a. What research could TLT commission that would benefit the sector and provide the information and tools required for the advocacy part of its work?
- b. What role does TLT want to play in the knowledge, data, and research landscape?

4. Partnerships

- a. What relationships might TLT want to build to implement its strategy?

5. Focus areas

- a. Does TLT want to broaden or narrow its focus in terms of age groups and thematic focus of its/its partners' work?
- b. Could these focus areas benefit from additional clarity?

Conclusion

In 2025 in South Africa, after school programmes are not a nice-to-have, they are pivotal to closing learning gaps, safeguarding learners, and expanding pathways to connect youth to work and study opportunities. For TLT, this means leveraging its role as an intermediary funder, capacity-builder, and convener to continue strengthening the extended learning sector and the civil society organisations that drive it. By doing so, TLT can help deepen and expand the proven impact of after school programmes on improving educational outcomes for children most affected by poverty and exclusion.

References

- Binding Constraints Lab. (2025). *Public employment programmes (PEPs) and foundation phase literacy: A rapid scan of PEP design and compatibility* (Compiled by K. Huston). Binding Constraints Lab.
- Böhmer, B. & Kruger, J. (2024). *Spending and Budget Trends in the South African Basic Education Sector*. Teacher Demographic Dividend Research Note. Stellenbosch University.
- Branson, N. (2018). *An analysis of out of school youth who have not completed matric: What can available data tell us?* (SALDRU Working Paper No. 232). Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town.
- Branson, N., De Lannoy, A., & Kahn, A. (2019). *Exploring the transitions and well-being of young people who leave school before completing secondary education in South Africa* (SALDRU Working Paper 244 / NIDS Discussion Paper 2019/11). Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town.
- Carneiro, P. M., & Heckman, J. J. (2003). *Human Capital Policy*. (IZA Discussion Paper No. 821). Institute for the Study of Labour (IZA). Available at SSRN: <https://ssrn.com/abstract=434544>
- Childress, S., Driver, S., Amaru Gallardo, A., Goldfarb, J., Mallillin, A., Mease, L., Sanchez Gill, A., & Vo, A. (2024, April 18). *How movement-accountable intermediaries can change philanthropy*. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*. <https://ssir.org/articles/entry/movement-accountable-intermediaries-philanthropy>
- Collective Abundance. (n.d.). *The Abundance Fund*. Retrieved September 3, 2025, from <https://www.collectiveabundance.org/abundance-fund/>
- De Lannoy, A., Graham, L., Patel, L., & Leibbrandt, M. (2020). Why is youth unemployment so intractable in South Africa? A synthesis of evidence at the micro-level. *Journal of Applied Youth Studies*, 3(1), 115–131.
- Department of Basic Education. (2025). *2024 National Senior Certificate: Examination report*. Department of Basic Education. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2024/2024NSC%20Examination%20Report.pdf?ver=2025-01-14-090227-007>
- Department of Basic Education. (2024). *Review of progress in the basic education sector to 2024: Analysis of key statistics*. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria.
- Department of Basic Education. (2024a). *Annual performance plan 2025/2026*. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria.
- Department of Basic Education. (2024b). *2023 NSC exam results technical report*. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021NSCReports/NSC23%20Technical%20Report.pdf?ver=2024-01-18-161615-123>
- Department of Basic Education. (2023a). *PIRLS 2021: South African main report*. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria. <https://repository.up.ac.za/bitstreams/e8a8b73a-a6f8-43a9-9f7d-fcd40772a42d/download>
- Department of Basic Education. (2023b). *The impact of basic education on South Africans: Report on the 2023 General Household Survey*. [Online] Department of Basic Education: Pretoria. <https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2025/General%20Household%20Survey%202023.pdf?ver=2025-06-13-155216-727>
- Department of Basic Education (2023c). *National Senior Certificate 2022: Examination report*. Department of Basic Education: Pretoria.

<https://www.education.gov.za/Portals/0/Documents/Reports/2021NSCReports/NSC%20Exam%20Report%202022.pdf?ver=2023-01-24-110624-167>

- Department of Basic Education. (2021). *Thrive by five Index*. Department of Basic Education. https://thrivebyfive.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/Index-report-w-addendum_singles-May-2023.pdf
- Department of Higher Education and Training. (2023). *Annual report 2022/2023*. Pretoria: Department of Higher Education and Training.
- Department of Women, Youth and Persons with Disabilities. 2021. *National Youth Policy 2020–2030*. Pretoria: Republic of South Africa. Online.
- Equality Fund. (2022). *Reimagining non-competitive grantmaking in community* [Activate Report]. Equality Fund. Retrieved from <https://equalityfund.ca/wp-content/uploads/2022/07/Activate-Report-ENGLISH-.pdf>
- Gariépy, G., Danna, S. M., Hawke, L., Henderson, J., & Iyer, S. N. (2022). The mental health of young people who are not in education, employment, or training: a systematic review and meta-analysis. *Social Psychiatry and Psychiatric Epidemiology*, 57(6), 1107–1121.
- Giese, S., Dawes, A., Tredoux, C., Mattes, F., Bridgman, G., van der Berg, S., Schenk, J., and Kotzé, J. (2022) *Thrive by Five Index Report* Revised August 2022, Innovation Edge, Cape Town. www.thrivebyfive.co.za
- Giese, S., Pettersson Gelande, G., Cook, C., Carnegie, T., Tredoux, C., Dawes, A., Biersteker, L., Beukes, S., Pahla, Z., and Kika-Mistry, J. (2025). *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National Findings*. DataDrive2030, Cape Town.
- Grantham-McGregor, S., Cheung, Y., Cueto, S., Glewwe, P., Richter, L., & Strupp, B. (2007). Developmental potential in the first 5 years for children in developing countries. *The Lancet*, 369(9555), 60–70.
- Hall, K., Almeleh, C., Giese, S., Mphaphuli, E., Slemming, W., Mathys, R., Droomer, L., Proudlock, P., Kotze, J., & Sadan, M. (2024). *South African Early Childhood Review 2024*. Children's Institute, University of Cape Town & Ilifa Labantwana. <https://ilifalabantwana.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/SA-early-childhood-review-2024-FINAL.pdf>
- Humanitarian Advisory Group, GLOW Consultants, PIANCO, & International Council of Voluntary Agencies (ICVA). (2024, October). *Crossing the bridge: A practical guide to support good intermediary practice* (Guidance Note). Humanitarian Horizons. <https://www.icvanetwork.org/uploads/2024/10/HH2-PPLL-Crossing-the-bridge.pdf>
- Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa (IPASA). (2024). *Basic Education Early Grades Funders Research Report: Empowering those committed to empowering others* (Research Report). IPASA.
- Kania, J., & Kramer, M. (2011). Collective impact. *Stanford Social Innovation Review*, 9(1), 36–41. https://ssir.org/articles/entry/collective_impact
- Kania, J., Hanleybrown, F., & Juster, J. S. (2014, Fall). *Essential mindset shifts for collective impact*. Stanford Social Innovation Review.
- Köhler, T. (2024). *A paradox of progress: Rising education and unequal labour market returns in post-apartheid South Africa* (COVID-Generation Working Paper). Research on Socio-Economic Policy, Stellenbosch University.
- Kruger, J. (2024). *Post-school education and training and youth unemployment* (COVID-Generation RESEP Working Paper). Research on Socio-Economic Policy, Stellenbosch University.
- Lynn, J., Breckinridge, K. M., Denault, A., & Marvin, C. (2015). When backbone organizations become the funder: The use of fiscal intermediaries in the context of collective impact. *The Foundation Review*, 7(4), 81–95.

- Mail & Guardian. (2021, June 12). Learners moving to other provinces puts education departments under pressure. *Mail & Guardian*.
<https://mq.co.za/education/2021-06-12-learners-moving-to-other-provinces-puts-education-departments-under-pressure/>
- McLean, C., & van der Berg, S. (2017). Succeeding against the odds: A quantitative assessment of the effectiveness of IkamvaYouth (RESEP Working Paper WP05/2017). Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP), Stellenbosch University. <https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/wp052017.pdf>
- Minister of Finance, Enoch Godongwana. (2025, May 21). *Budget Speech 2025*. Government of South Africa. Retrieved from <https://www.gov.za/news/speeches/minister-enoch-godongwana-budget-speech-2025%20A021-may-2025>
- Mlatsheni, C., & Ranchhod, V. (2017). *Youth labour market dynamics in South Africa: Evidence from NIDS 1–2–3* (REDI3x3 Working Paper No. 39). University of Cape Town.
- Mudiriza, G., & De Lannoy, A. (2023). *Profile of young people not in employment, education or training (NEET) aged 15–24 years in South Africa: An annual update* (SALDRU Working Paper No. 298). Southern Africa Labour and Development Research Unit, University of Cape Town.
- National Association for Social Change Entities in Education (NASCEE). (2024, January 31). *The Bridge Story: Learning through Communities of Practice*. Retrieved from https://nascee.org.za/resources/nascee-resources/bridgestory_final_20240131.pdf
- National Planning Commission. (2012). *National development plan: Our future – make it work*. The Presidency, Republic of South Africa.
- National Treasury. (2025). *May 2025 Budget Overview*. Pretoria: National Treasury. Retrieved from <https://www.treasury.gov.za/documents/National%20Budget/2025May/review/May%202025%20Budget%20Overview.pdf>
- Ntaka, P. (2022). *Are provinces hiring the additional teachers that universities produce?* (TDD Research Note 4). Stellenbosch University.
[https://tdd.sun.ac.za/downloads/notes/Note%204%20-%20Are%20provinces%20hiring%20teachers%20\(TDD%201%20Dec%202022\)_v3.pdf](https://tdd.sun.ac.za/downloads/notes/Note%204%20-%20Are%20provinces%20hiring%20teachers%20(TDD%201%20Dec%202022)_v3.pdf)
- Ntsobi, M., Mwale, B. J., Nyamkure, B., & Zulu, V. (2025). Transforming Education in Gauteng: Impact Analysis of the Secondary School Improvement Programme. *Language, Literature and Education: Research Updates* Vol. 4, 122–154.
- Numeric. (2024). *From Grade 7 arithmetic to matric: A quantitative evaluation of the Numeric afterschool maths program* (Compiled by R. Clayton). Numeric.
- Olivier, J. (2024, September 17). *Leveraging public-private partnerships to deliver foundation phase learning outcomes at scale*. Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa (IPASA). Retrieved from <https://ipa-sa.org.za/public/leveraging-public-private-partnerships-to-deliver-foundation-phase-learning-outcomes-at-scale/>
- Polzer-Ngwato, T., Shilakoe, L., Morse, K., & Huston, K. (2023). *National Reading Survey 2023 Findings Report*. Nal'ibali Trust. Retrieved from [https://www.readingbarometersa.org/system/files/resourcefiles/FINAL%20National%20Reading%20Survey%202023%20Findings%20Report%202023-06-11_0%20\(1\).pdf](https://www.readingbarometersa.org/system/files/resourcefiles/FINAL%20National%20Reading%20Survey%202023%20Findings%20Report%202023-06-11_0%20(1).pdf)
- Rebello, S. P. (2022). *Youth inclusion in the development of South Africa's National Youth Policy (2020-2030): Reflections and Recommendations* (Policy brief). Centre for the Study of Violence and Reconciliation.

- Rojas Murga, D., Vega, H., Blasingame, S., & Gigler, A. M. (2025, April 22). *Intermediaries: Not just philanthropy middlemen*. Alliance Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.alliancemagazine.org/analysis/intermediaries-not-just-philanthropy-middlemen/>
- Rossouw, R. (2025, May). *Trends and insights for the social economy in South Africa 2025/2026: Creating the future we want* [Research report presentation]. Next Generation Consultants. Retrieved from <https://nextgeneration.co.za/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/2025-Research-Report-Presentation-Final.pdf>
- Selkirk, R. & Wills, G. (2024). *Trends in school completion and matric results in South Africa before, during, and after COVID-19* (COVID-Generation RESEP Working Paper). Stellenbosch University.
- Simelane, T. Mutanga, S.S. Hongoro, C. Parker, W. Mjimba V. Zuma, K. Kajombo, R. Ngidi, M. Masamha, B. Mokhele, T. Managa, R. Ngungu, M. Sinyolo, S. Tshililo, F. Ubisi, N. Skhosana, Ndinda, C. Sithole, M. Muthige, M. Lunga, W. Tshitangano, F. Dukhi, N., F. Sewpaul, R. Mkhongi, A. Marinda, E., 2023. National Food and Nutrition Security Survey: National Report: HSRC: Pretoria.
- South Africa. (2024, September 16). Basic Education Laws Amendment Act, 2024 (Act No. 32 of 2024). Government Gazette, 51258. Retrieved from https://www.gov.za/sites/default/files/gcis_document/202409/51258basiceducationlawsamendmentact32of2024.pdf
- Statistics South Africa. (2024a). *P0302 – Mid-year population estimates, 2024* (Statistical Release). Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. (2024b). *Consumer price index: CPI history* (Statistical Release P0141). Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. (2025a). *Mid-year population estimates, 2025* (Statistical Release P0302). Statistics South Africa.
- Statistics South Africa. (2025b). *General household survey 2024* (Statistical Release P0318). Statistics South Africa.
- Tamarack Institute. (2017, July). *The Collaboration Spectrum Tool*. Tamarack Institute. Retrieved from <https://www.tamarackcommunity.ca/hubfs/Resources/Tools/Collaboration%20Spectrum%20Tool%20July%202017.pdf>
- The Presidency of the Republic of South Africa. (2025, June 17). From the desk of the President – Creating work and opportunities for young people. Retrieved from Presidency of the Republic of South Africa website.
- Touzin, J. (2023). *Going far together: Cultivating catalytic partnerships to fuel and sustain community transformation* (Order No. 30486944). Available from Education Database. (2821135059). Retrieved from <http://ez.sun.ac.za/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/going-far-together-cultivating-catalytic/docview/2821135059/se-2>
- Dialogue. (2024). *Corporate giving trends in South Africa: A comprehensive analysis* [Report]. Dialogue Knowledge Hub.
- Dialogue. (2024). *Business in society handbook 2024*. Dialogue.
- Dialogue Knowledge Hub. (2024, November 7; updated December 4). *Donor collective to tackle South Africa's foundational education challenge*. Dialogue Knowledge Hub. Retrieved from <https://dialogueknowledgehub.co.za/donor-collective-to-tackle-south-africas-foundational-education-challenge/>

- Walker, M., & Mathebula, M. (2020). Low-income rural youth migrating to urban universities in South Africa: Opportunities and inequalities. *Compare: A Journal of Comparative and International Education*, 50(8), 1193–1209.
- Wills, G. (2024). *Transitioning beyond matric in South Africa* (COVID-Generation RESEP Working Paper). Stellenbosch University.
- Wills, G., & Qvist, J. (2023). *Repetition and dropout in South Africa before, during and after COVID-19* (COVID-Generation RESEP Working Paper). Stellenbosch University.
- World Bank. (2025). *South Africa overview*. World Bank. Retrieved from <https://www.worldbank.org/en/country/southafrica/overview>
- van Broekhuizen, H., van der Berg, S., & Hofmeyr, H. (2017). Higher education access and outcomes for the 2008 national matric cohort. SSRN. https://resep.sun.ac.za/wp-content/uploads/2018/07/wp-16-2016_1.pdf
- van der Berg, S. (2021). *Estimating the impact of five early childhood development programmes against a counterfactual* (Ilifa Labantwana-RESEP Working Paper). Stellenbosch University.
- van der Berg, S., & Gustafsson, M. (2019). Educational outcomes in post-apartheid South Africa: Signs of progress despite great inequality. In S. van der Berg, & M. Gustafsson (Eds.), *South African schooling: The enigma of inequality: A study of the present situation and future possibilities* (pp. 25–45). Cham: Springer International Publishing.
- van der Berg, S., Gustafsson, M., Smith, A., & Pampallis, I. (2024). *Strengthening South Africa's teacher workforce of tomorrow: Insights & recommendations from the Teacher Demographic Dividend Project (2022–2024)*. RESEP.
- van der Berg, S., van Wyk, C., Gustafsson, M., Clayton, R., Böhmer, B., Meyer, H., Qvist, J., Mkhombo, T., Euston-Bown, A., Claassen, J., & de Gouveia, D. (2025). *What SA-SAMS and Lurits data tells us about education: New insights from administrative data*. Stellenbosch: Research on Socio-Economic Policy, Stellenbosch University.
- Van der Berg, S., van Wyk, C., & van Biljon, C. (2024, November 22). *The impact of the 2023 Back-on-Track Programme on learning: A report to the Western Cape Education Department*. Research on Socio-Economic Policy (RESEP). Retrieved from <https://resep.sun.ac.za/the-impact-of-the-2023-back-on-track-programme-on-learning-a-report-to-the-western-cape-education-department>
- Williams, B., & Polzer-Ngwato, T. (2025, April 24). *USAID funding cuts could derail important education improvement initiatives*. Independent Philanthropy Association South Africa. <https://ipa-sa.org.za/public/usaaid-funding-cuts-could-derail-important-education-improvement-initiatives/>
- Yang, E., Grundhoefer, S., & Smith Arrillaga, E. (2024). *Bridging the gap: Grantee perspectives on intermediary funders*. Center for Effective Philanthropy. https://cep.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/09/CEP_Bridging-the-Gap_Intermediaries_2024.pdf