

School Readiness Initiative in South Africa



What are the reasons for getting involved?

The school system in South Africa is built up in three levels. The first level is early childhood development (ECD) for children between 0 and 6 years of age. Children 4 years of age and under attend ECD centres, while children aged between 5 and 6 years are enrolled in pre-Grade R and Grade R, which are reception programmes to equip learners for primary school. The number of children under five attending an Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre or pre-school has increased to one in three from one in ten since 2002. Government policy on ECD is that it is a fundamental and universal human right to which all young children are equally entitled without discrimination. Currently, ECD facilities in South Africa vary in quality and level of operations. These services are mostly delivered by private service providers, non-profit organisations, day parents, and through community development programmes that offer mobile ECD programmes such as book and toy libraries and community playgroups. However, early learning and care programmes are not universally available or equitably accessible to vulnerable children

Thus, the government has set a target for 2030 to establish universal access to Grade R and improve the quality of ECD as a primary priority. While access to ECD centres has increased, the quality of early learning and development programmes remain a challenge. Since 2011, learning outcomes from children in South Africa has stagnated, based on the Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMSS) and Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) results. An underqualified workforce combined with the poor implementation of appropriate early learning approaches (in play-based learning) impact ECD outcomes, especially in poor communities. In terms of quality teaching, there is still no monitoring system in place, which collects school readiness or other child development data. There is not even national standardized assessment on Grade R level to determine whether children are ready for school. Furthermore, there are no formalized structures, processes or policies to facilitate children's transition to Grade R or Grade 1.

Another concern for early learning is the lack of government expenditure in the basic education budget compared to the increase in spending in the tertiary education sector. The UNICEF Education Budget Brief 19/20 states that basic education's share of the consolidated government budget is expected to decline marginally from 14.8% in FY2015 to 14.2% in FY2021. Even though basic education expenditure is projected to remain flat in real terms over the FY2015–2021 period, increasing demands



are being placed on the education sector. More learners are entering the education system, and they require a deeper skills base to participate in South Africa's knowledge and service-based economy.

Source: Education Budget Brief South Africa 18/19
<https://www.unicef.org/esaro/UNICEF-South-Africa-2018-Education-Budget-Brief.pdf>
Source: Education Budget Brief South Africa 19/20
<https://www.unicef.org/esa/media/4981/file/UNICEF-South-Africa-2019-2020-Education-Budget-Brief.pdf>
Source: Education UNICEF South Africa Website
https://www.unicef.org/southafrica/education#_ftnref2

What does the programme include?

The School Readiness Initiative is rolled out in three districts in South Africa; Limpopo, Mpumalanga and Gauteng Province. The over-all goal of the project is to secure a good start into primary education for vulnerable children to access quality pre-primary schooling. The School Readiness Initiative of the Roger Federer Foundation will not only enhance the children's readiness for school, but also the schools' readiness for the children. The programme will run from January 2019 until December 2025.

The initiative will mainly focus on the improvement of the quality of Grade R, which is the one-year pre-primary education before the transition to Grade 1. We will do this by increasing the capacity of Grade R teachers, establish a peer-to-peer mentoring system, sensitize and engage relevant stakeholders such as school inspectors, principals, early grade teachers and parents to the children's need in the phase of transition, and mobilize them to ensure that schools are in a better position to accommodate young learners. In interviews with Government officials, it was revealed that an estimated 90% of teachers do not have the proper qualification for Grade R teaching.

Thus, to enhance the quality of early childhood education in Grade R we developed a monitoring system. With the Early Learning Kiosk App, developed by the Roger Federer Foundation and our partners, a Child Monitoring Systems will track the development of children and respond to their individual needs. The focus lies in the domains of language, numeracy, physical, socioemotional and cognitive development. The School Readiness Initiative will have the potential to increase the number of children who are participating in one year organized learning before transitioning into primary school and thus increase the readiness of families and schools for the children who are of primary school age. In addition, it can potentially lead to a decrease in early grade repetitions and drop outs. The whole package will contribute to a better start to education and enhances a world where children living in poverty are able to take control of their future and actively shape it.

Beneficiaries

The School Readiness Initiative will reach out to 2000 primary schools and an average of 4000 Grade R classes. There is an average of 35 children per Grade R class. In addition, there will be a minimum of 4,000 Grade R teachers benefitting from the e-learning.

What impact are the measures having?

- Currently in phase II
- Reached a total of: 1,037 school communities and various stakeholders in Limpopo, 660 school communities and various stakeholders in Mpumalanga and a total of 1,268 school communities and various stakeholders in Free State province
- The total estimate of Grade R learners who will benefit will be approximately 63,157 in Limpopo, 46,200 in Mpumalanga and 88,760 in Free State province.