

Why govt needs to review access to early learning

The government has allocated R3.7bn for the early childhood development (ECD) grant over the next three years. This means that they will be able to subsidise about 60,000 more children in total. With the access gap for children up to four years old sitting at around 3.5-million, this leaves a massive shortfall in terms of the provision of early learning to South Africa's youth.



Image source: Getty Images

“Government aims to achieve universal access to early learning by 2030. As an enabler of early learning, SmartStart is fully supportive of this bold vision. However, if year-on-year budget increases stay at the current level, as a country, this goal is off track. To realise this vision, we need to see a significant increase in budget allocations for ECD,” says Sane Mdlalose, acting-CEO at SmartStart, a non-profit organisation that focuses on increasing access to early learning for children aged three to five.

Low growth rate

For the 2022 to 2023 period, R1.1bn has been set aside for ECD subsidies to provide for and increase the number of children accessing subsidised ECD services. Of this, R97.9mn is allocated for maintenance improvements to support ECD providers and to pilot the construction of new, low-cost ECD centres. This represents an average growth rate of 1.7% – well below inflation, and one of the lowest growth rates in the basic education budget.



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During his State of the Nation Address, President Cyril Ramaphosa said that the government will work harder to ensure South African learners get the quality education they need. “The main challenge for government lies in figuring out how to create these opportunities and improve access. Currently, over one-million South African children do not have access to

any form of early learning – an issue that all people, including our communities, interested organisations, and government, need to work together to address before we can move forward,” says Mdlalose.

Reasons for limited access

Access to early learning programmes, particularly in under-served communities, is limited for a number of reasons - including the complex legislation processes involved in setting them up. “For example, to register an early learning programme, the building you use must meet certain requirements. This can make it difficult for those in informal and other low-income communities to register and receive subsidies from government. As a result, children are left out,” says Mdlalose.

Cost is another major factor, as many South African parents and caregivers cannot afford to school their children from such an early age – even at a nominal rate. “Economists tell us that the return on investment for every rand spent on the early years is substantially higher than for every rand spent on primary, secondary or tertiary education. This should encourage government and corporates to invest in early learning and subsidise programme attendance for those in need,” says Mdlalose.

Shift to the DBE

In April 2022, South Africa’s Early Childhood Development (ECD) sector will move to the Department of Basic Education. This gives the government an opportunity to relook how the sector is structured and make changes necessary to improve the development of children and the quality of early childhood education.



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“Over the past decade, despite the excellent work of many non-profit organisations and dedicated ECD practitioners, the dial has barely moved in terms of improved access to quality ECD. The knock-on impacts on educational outcomes and jobs and business are substantial, but underappreciated. More of the same will not achieve the step change that is our children’s right and our economy’s necessity. The government needs a new strategy and now is the time,” says Mdlalose.

Operating as a social franchise, SmartStart’s early learning model is focused on overcoming structural barriers that prevent access to not only early learning, but to quality early learning. The NPO operates in all nine provinces and has built a network of over 90 000 parents and caregivers, whose children are enrolled and active in one of SmartStart’s programme formats. By 2030, SmartStart aims to reach one-million children between the ages of three and five annually.

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