

South African Early Childhood Review 2024



6. Stimulation for early learning

Hall K, Almeleh C, Giese S, Mphaphuli E, Slemming W, Mathys R, Droomer L, Proudlock P, Kotze J, and Sadan M. South African Early Childhood Review 2024. Cape Town: Children's Institute University of Cape Town and Ilifa Labantwana

Significant data developments in early learning

Initiatives have largely been spearheaded by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) after assuming responsibility for ECD from the Department of Social Development in 2022.

The ECD Census: Mapped every early learning programme (ELP) in the country. Data collected from August 2021 to February 2022 covered various aspects such as location, operations, income, resources, registration status, enrolments, staffing, teaching practices, and infrastructure at 42,420 sites.

The Thrive by Five Index: Launched in April 2022, this index monitors the development of preschool children in early learning, physical growth, and socio-emotional functioning. The initial assessment, conducted between September and November 2021, involved 5,139 children aged 50 to 59 months from 1,247 ELPs. The next data collection is set for late 2024.

The ELP Baseline Assessment: Conducted alongside the Thrive by Five Index, this assessment involved interviews with principals and practitioners at 545 ELPs, with analyses based on 522 ELPs. Observations and ratings of the learning environment and interactions provided insights into provisioning quality in various areas. Future assessments will include all participating ELPs.

Access to early learning programmes remains skewed across provinces and income groups

- **68% of children aged 3-5 years attended a group learning programme** of some kind in 2022; with 45% of 3-5 years olds attending ECD centres, crèches, and playgroups; and 23% attending primary school.
- **Around 1.15 million children aged 3-5 years are not enrolled in any kind of early learning programme.**

TABLE 9: ACCESS TO EARLY LEARNING AMONG 3-5-YEAR-OLDS

	N	%
School (Grade R or higher)	802 000	22.6%
Centre-based (crèche/ECD centre/nursery school)	1 582 000	44.6%
Home-based play group	4 000	0.1%
Day mother / gogo / child minder	62 000	1.8%
Other / unspecified	32 000	0.9%
None	1 062 000	30.0%
TOTAL (aged 3-5)	3 544 000	100.0%

Group Learning Programmes

Enrolment in ELPs ranges across provinces

FIGURE 20: PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN AGED 3-5 YEARS ATTENDING A GROUP LEARNING PROGRAMME BY PROVINCE

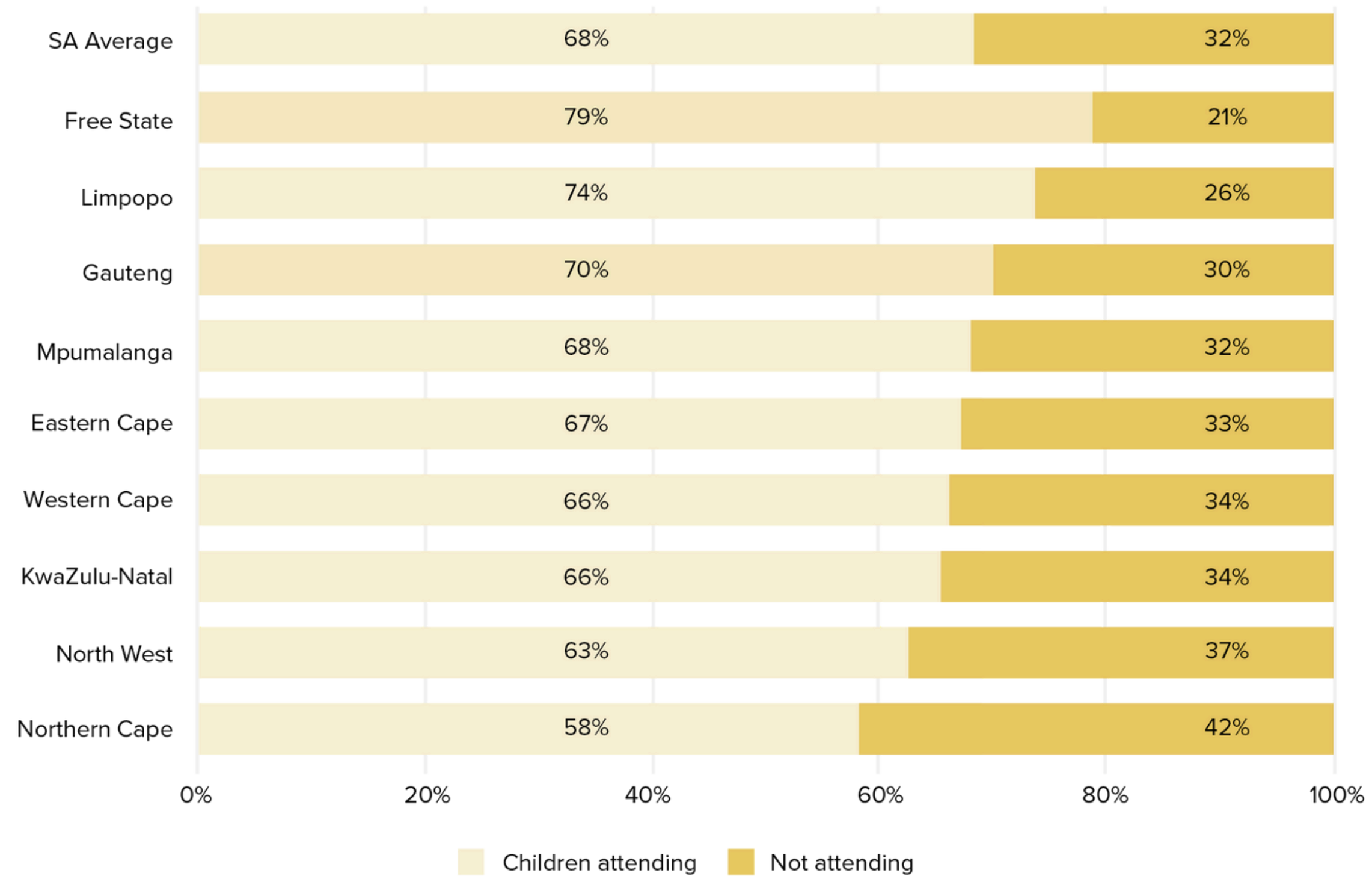
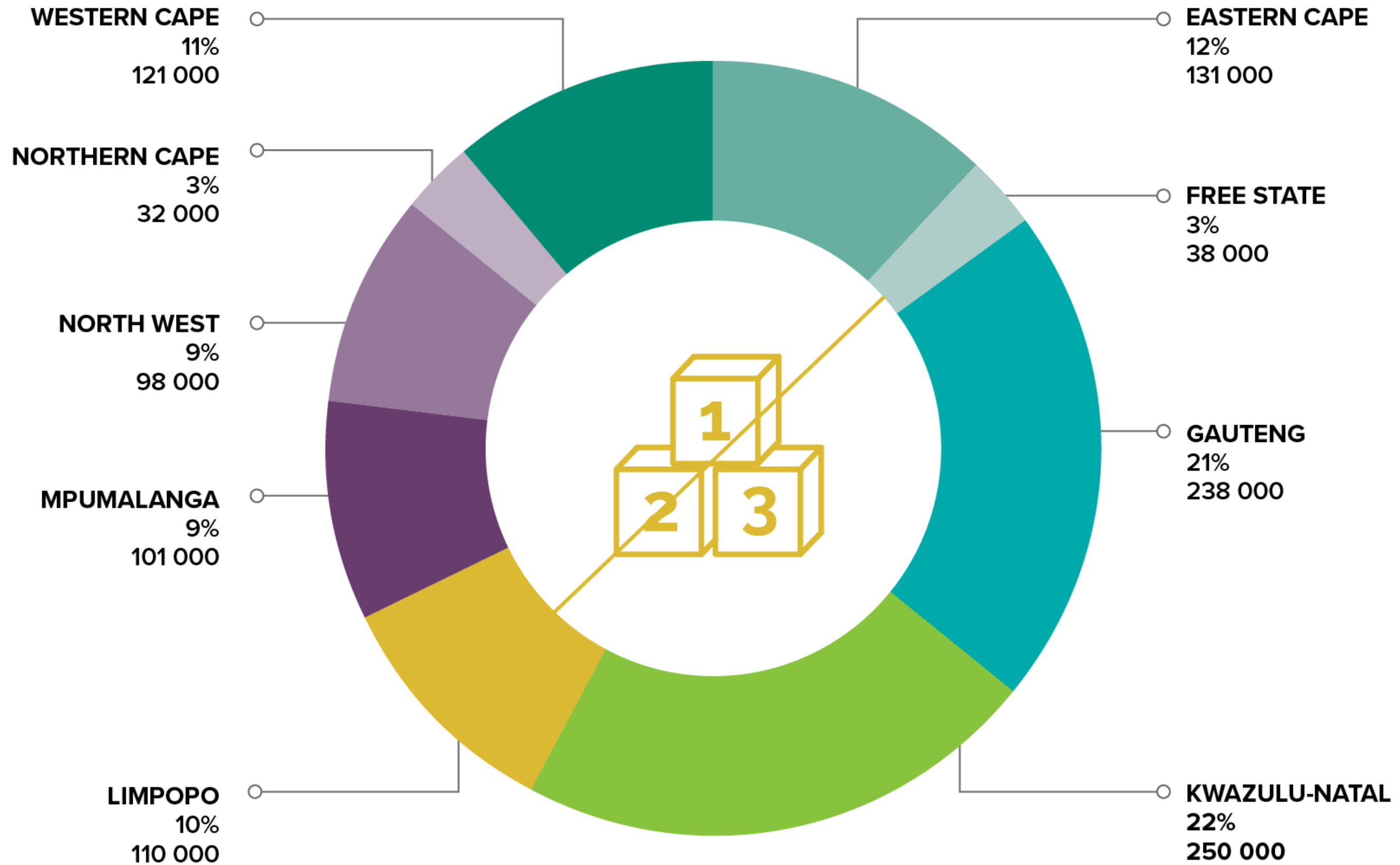


FIGURE 21: PROVINCIAL SHARE OF THE ACCESS GAP IN EARLY LEARNING ENROLMENT FOR CHILDREN AGED 3-5 YEARS

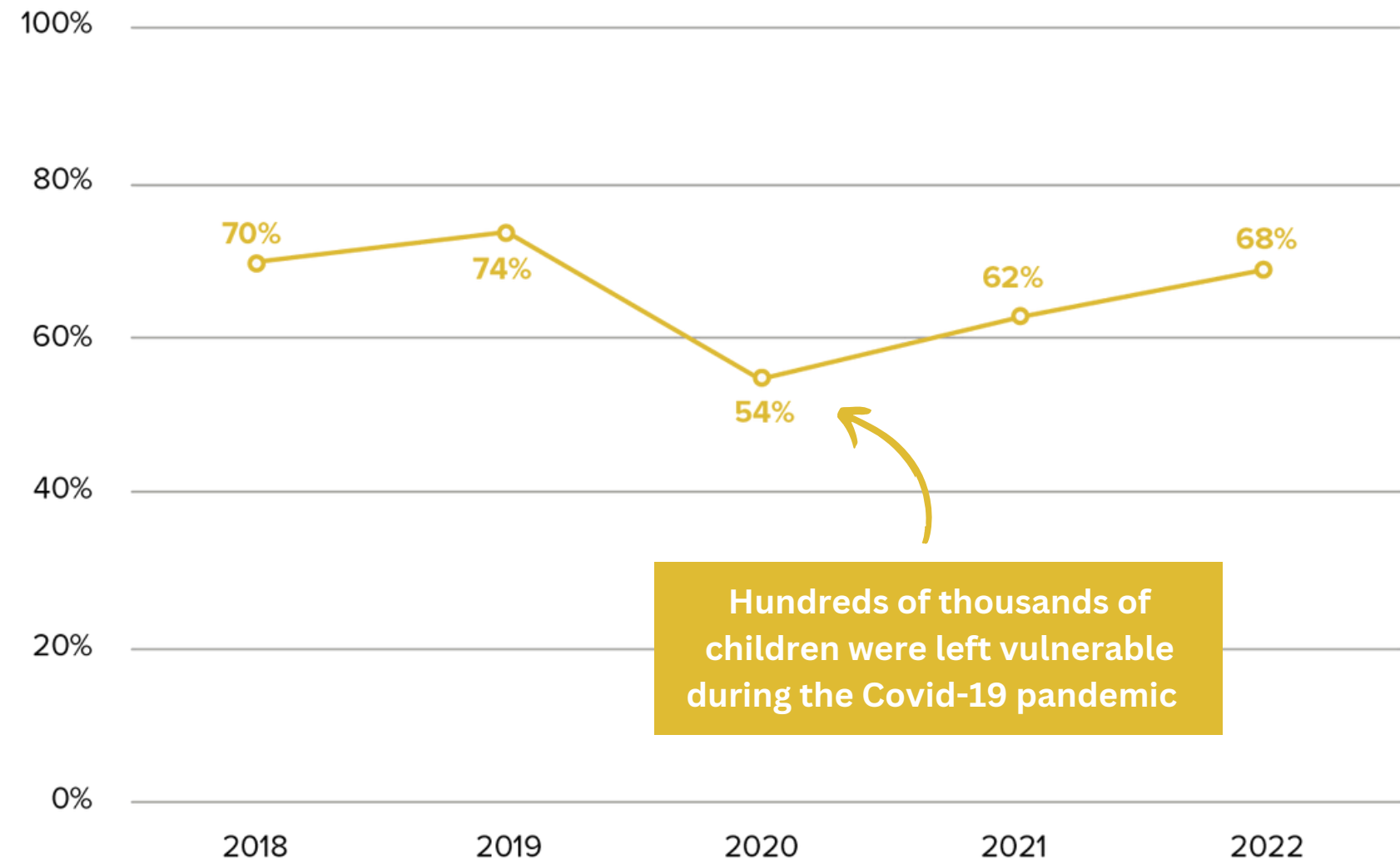


Source: K Hall. Analysis of Stats SA General Household Survey 2022.

COVID-19's impact on ELP enrolment rates

- 18 March 2020, **ELPs were instructed to close** due to COVID-19. In July 2020, ELPs were **legally permitted to reopen**, provided they **met health and safety standards**.
- **ELPs could not resume their services for much of 2020** because many parents were unable to pay fees, there were delays in government ECD subsidy payments and the costs of the health and safety protocols were prohibitive.
- There was **some recovery in 2021**, but enrolment rates remained lower than 2014.
- By 2022, attendance rates had improved but had **still not entirely caught up to pre-COVID-19 levels**

FIGURE 22: CHILDREN AGED 3-5 YEARS ATTENDING ANY FORM OF GROUP LEARNING PROGRAMME



Source: K Hall analysis of Stats SA General Household Survey 2022.

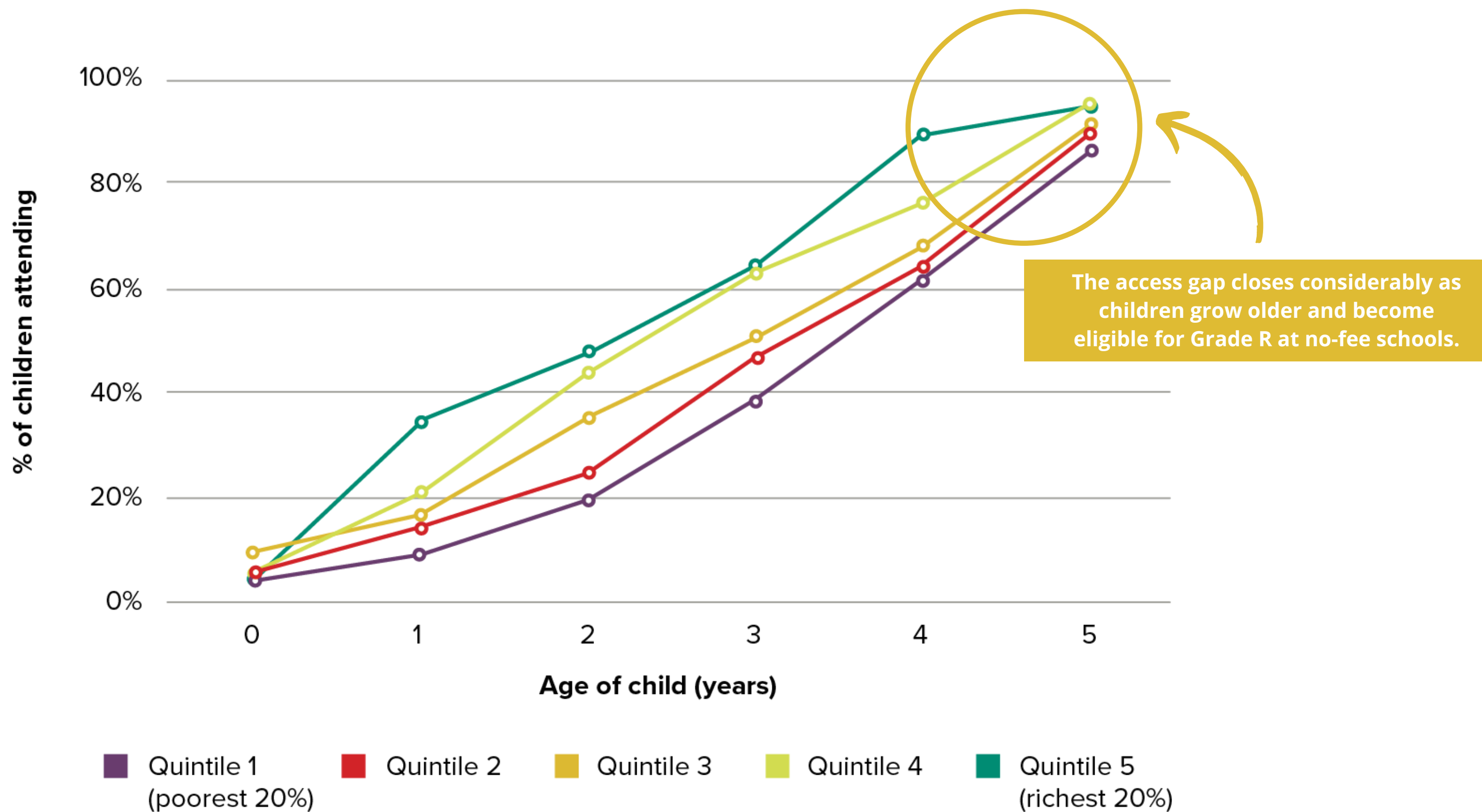
Insufficient funding for early learning burdens providers and parents



Only one-third of early learning programmes in the ECD Census reported receiving a government subsidy.

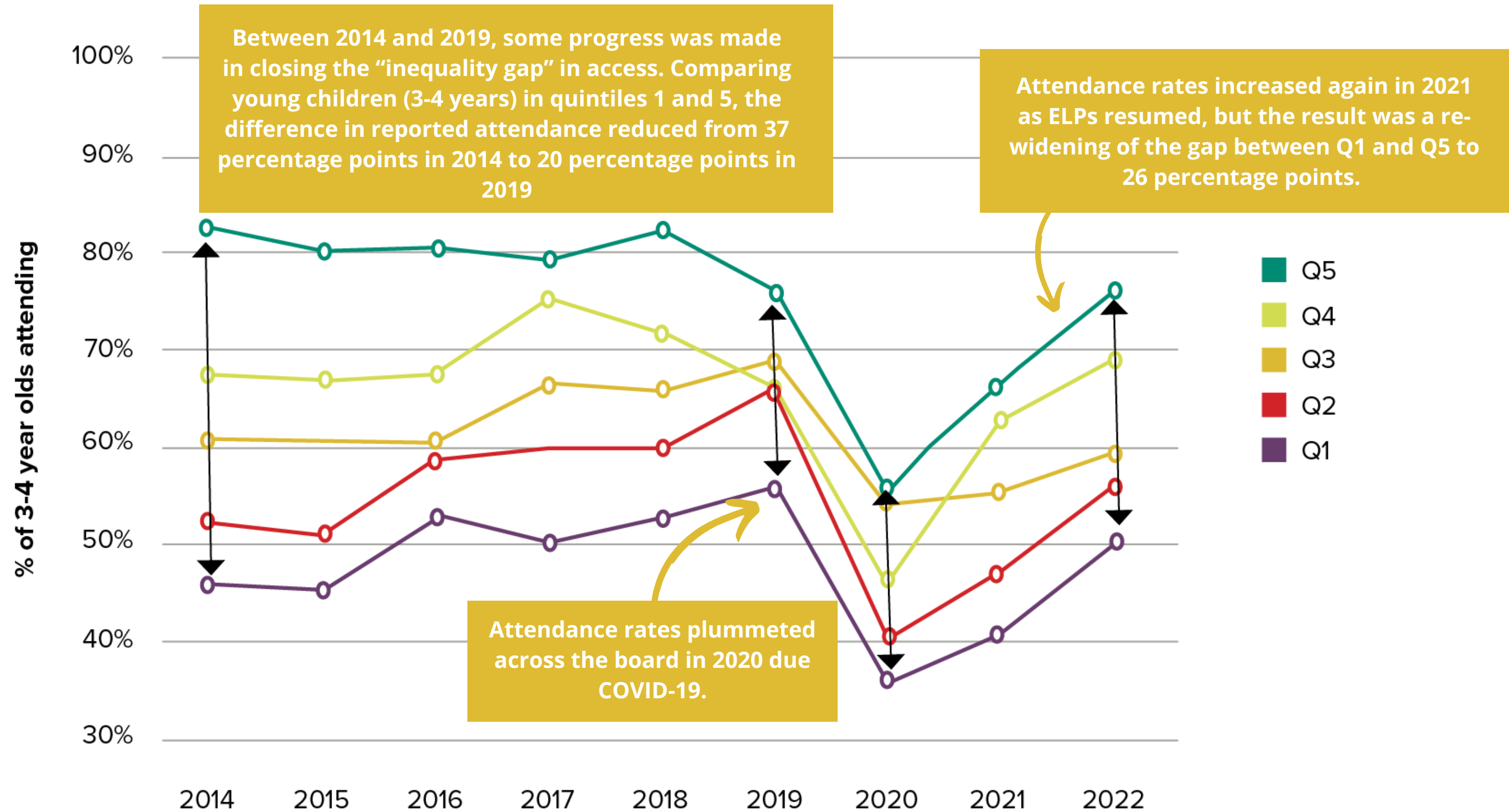
- In 2020/2021, **government expenditure on early learning amounted to R9.5 billion**, of which 59% was allocated to Grade R provision and the remainder to pre-Grade R services, including the ECD subsidy (R2.8 billion), ELP infrastructure, and practitioner training.
- In contrast, **approximately R14 billion in ELP fees was paid by households** over the same period, with approximately **R3.7 billion spent by the poorest 60% of households**.
- **Only one-third of ELPs** report receiving a government subsidy. The vast majority of ELP income is raised through fees.
- A three-year-old child in the wealthiest quintile is 1.6 times more likely to attend an ELP than their same-age peer in quintile 1 (the poorest quintile).

FIGURE 23: INEQUALITY IN ENROLMENT OF CHILDREN IN GROUP LEARNING PROGRAMMES



Source: K Hall. Analysis of Stats SA General Household Survey 2022.

FIGURE 24: TRENDS IN ELP ATTENDANCE AMONG 3-4 YEAR-OLDS BY INCOME QUINTILE (2014-2022)



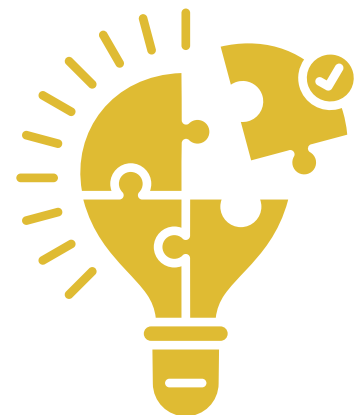
Source: K Hall analysis of Stats SA General Household Survey 2014 - 2022.

Early learning subsidy needs to increase for greater equity in access

- Early learning programmes serving poor communities who can access the subsidy **charge 45% less** than ELPs serving the same communities who are not accessing the subsidy.
- The **2023 Budget Bill provides increased allocation to the early learning conditional grant** of 4.2% in 2023/24, 51% in 2024/25, and a further 24% in 2025/26. In addition, just under R300 million in 2024/25 and R400 million in 2025/26 are set aside for a nutrition support pilot for ELPs and piloting a results-based financing model to expand ELP access and quality.
- The budget provision over the Medium-Term Expenditure Framework **enables an increase of 20% in the number of children subsidised**, from a 2023 baseline of 625,000 children to 757,903 children in 2025/26.
- The **value of the subsidy has been severely eroded by inflation**, and the tabled budget is insufficient to bring the subsidy in line with real costs.
- Increasing the value of the R17-per-child-per-day subsidy could **enable 'no-fee ELPs' for the poorest children, eliminating the fee barrier and opening the way for greater equity in access.**

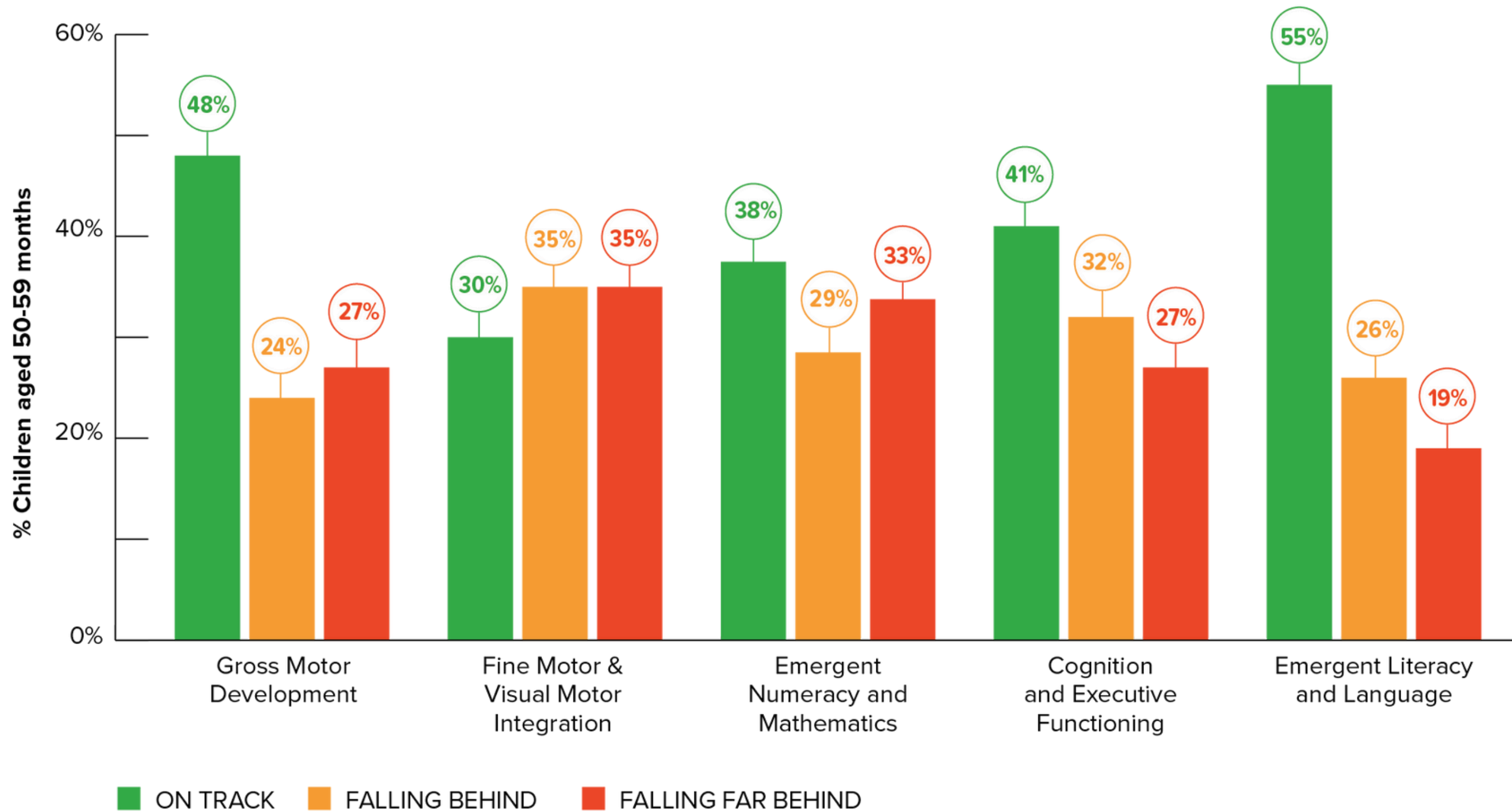
Less than half of children aged 50-59 months enrolled in ELPs are On Track for early learning

- The **ELOM 4&5 Assessment Tool** categorises children into those On Track for their development, Falling Behind, or Falling Far Behind in five key developmental domains
- The 2021 Thrive by Five Index found that **only 46% of children aged 50 to 59 months attending an ELP in South Africa can do the learning tasks expected of a child their age** (On Track), with 28% of children Falling Far Behind the expected standard.
- Performance was **particularly poor** in three key areas of development. For **Fine Motor Coordination and Visual Motor Integration**, only three out of every ten children were found to be developmentally On Track, and just four out of ten children were On Track in the **Cognition and Executive Functioning and Emergent Numeracy and Mathematics** domains.
- The Index finds a strong association between levels of **stunting and learning outcomes**, as well as a relationship between children's **socio-emotional functioning and ELOM scores**.



Young children need access to the full package of services and support necessary for their healthy development.

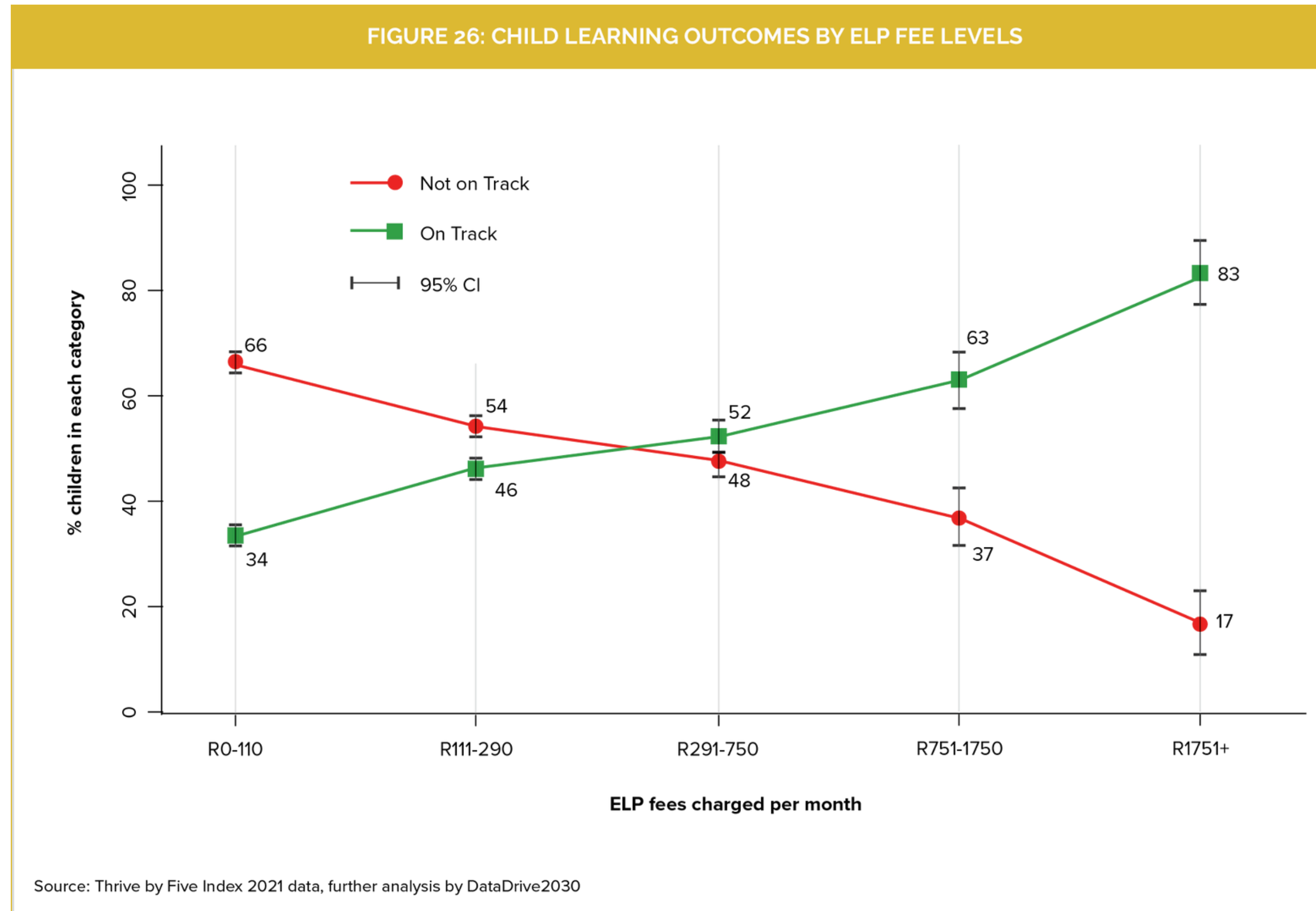
FIGURE 25: THE PERCENTAGE OF CHILDREN (50-59 MONTHS) ENROLLED IN ELPS WHO ARE ON TRACK, FALLING BEHIND, AND FALLING FAR BEHIND IN EARLY LEARNING



Source: Giese S, Dawes A, Tredoux C, Mattes F, et al. (2022). Thrive by Five Index Report. Revised August 2022, Innovation Edge, Cape Town. www.thrivebyfive.co.za

Strong relationship between poverty and early learning

- Children who attend **ELPs with higher fees** are more likely to be **developmentally On Track** for their age than those who attend ELPs with low fees.
- Only **3 out of 10 children in the lowest fee band (up to R110 per month)** are **On Track** in their total ELOM scores, compared to 8 out of 10 children in the highest fee band (over R1,750 per month).
- Disparities are likely to be even greater if one includes **children not enrolled in ELPs**, with the vast majority likely amongst the poorest.



Access to quality is key

- Poor outcomes for poor children are not inevitable. **High-quality programmes can and do significantly improve early learning outcomes** for poor children in South Africa.
- Achieving access to quality at scale will require far **greater investment in material and human resources**. Only 23% of all teaching staff at ELPs have a level of education above the completion of secondary school. Nine out of 10 practitioners report earning below the minimum wage, with more than half receiving less than R1,000 monthly.
- While responsibility for registration, funding, and oversight of ELPs has moved from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education, the actual **provision of ELPs remains primarily with the non-governmental sector**.
- The Department of Basic Education can **leverage data to increase investment in early learning** and drive long overdue **systems reform in partnership with a dynamic sector**.



TABLE 12: EARLY LEARNING INDICATORS, BY PROVINCE








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3 Year change	Indicator	SA	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	Data year	source	
Population	↔	Children aged 0-2 years	3 432 000	395 000	157 000	777 000	675 000	434 000	301 000	260 000	78 000	355 000	2022	a
	↔	Children aged 3-5 years	3 544 000	403 000	180 000	796 000	727 000	421 000	317 000	263 000	77 000	360 000	2022	a
Service access/delivery	↔	Early care and education 0-2 years Children 0-2 years reported to attend a preschool, nursery school, creche, educare centre or playgroup	568 000	45 000	26 000	162 000	125 000	71 000	29 000	29 000	10 000	71 000	2022	b
		Children 0-2 years reported to be in the care of a daymother / childminder / gogo	190 000	12 000	12 000	46 000	6 000	55 000	7 000	1 000	7 000	45 000	2022	b
		Children 0-2 years cared for at home / not with a childminder or in a group environment	2 674 000	338 000	120 000	569 000	545 000	309 000	264 000	230 000	62 000	238 000	2022	b
	↓	Early care and education 3-5 years Children 3-5 years reported to attend an early learning group programme or Gr R	2 424 000	272 000	142 000	558 000	477 000	311 000	216 000	165 000	45 000	239 000	2022	b
		68%	67%	79%	70%	66%	74%	68%	63%	58%	66%		continued	

TABLE 12: EARLY LEARNING INDICATORS, BY PROVINCE

3 Year change	Indicator	SA	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	Data year	source
↑	No access to early learning programmes Children 3-5 not attending any early learning group programme	1 119 000	131 000	37 000	237 000	250 000	110 000	101 000	99 000	33 000	121 000	2022	b
		32%	33%	21%	30%	34%	26%	32%	37%	42%	34%		
?	Fees paid for ECD / childcare Children <6 attending ECD / daycare (excl Gr R), for whom fees are paid	2 502 000	229 000	145 000	651 000	487 000	290 000	225 000	180 000	42 000	256 000	2022	b
		84%	73%	86%	90%	82%	76%	92%	93%	77%	83%		
?	Numeracy among 4 year olds attending early learning prog (ELPs) Percentage “On Track”	38.4%	28.0%	31.0%	40.0%	23.0%	53.0%	58.0%	41.0%	36.0%	47.0%	2021	k
	Percentage “Falling Far Behind”	33.1%	38.0%	39.0%	33.0%	51.0%	22.0%	13.0%	26.0%	38.0%	25.0%		
	Literacy & language among 4 year olds attending ELPs Percentage “On Track”	54.7%	48.9%	47.3%	58.8%	48.7%	52.7%	65.6%	50.2%	40.6%	70.9%	2021	k
ome	Percentage “Falling Far Behind”	19.3%	19.7%	25.2%	18.9%	21.1%	22.1%	12.1%	19.5%	33.6%	10.7%	continued	↓

TABLE 12: EARLY LEARNING INDICATORS, BY PROVINCE

3 Year change	Indicator	SA	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	Data year	source
Out	 Early learning overall score among 4 year olds attending ELPs Percentage “On Track”	46.0%	38.0%	32.0%	52.0%	31.0%	46.0%	65.0%	46.0%	39.0%	66.0%	2021	k
		28.0%	34.0%	42.0%	27.0%	37.0%	25.0%	11.0%	25.0%	38.0%	15.0%		
	 Foundation phase through-put Percentage of children aged 10-11 who have passed grade 3	93%	90%	93%	95%	93%	96%	96%	89%	82%	93%	2022	b

  numbers have increased or decreased since the pre-COVID baseline
  no significant change between pre-COVID baseline and most recent data
 worsening / negative
  improving / positive
  no significant change
  no discernible change due to lack of comparative data

Data gaps

- Longitudinal data are needed to understand the extent to which the **developmental gains made for children attending high-quality ELPs are sustained** as children progress through primary school and the necessary conditions for this.
- Data on the development outcomes of the 30% of 3-5-year-old children **not attending ELPs are needed.**
- There are limited data on the development of **children younger than 4 years.** Investment is needed in developing scalable measurement tools that reliably and affordably assess key developmental domains in younger children.
- There are also limited data on the proportion of **young children with disabilities** and the extent to which these children can meet key developmental milestones.
- There is a need to **strengthen routine administrative data on ELP enrolment, attendance and subsidisation** to enable the government to monitor and plan for population-level coverage.