Children's access to education

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Section 29 (1)(a) of the South African Constitution states that "everyone has the right to a basic education", and section 29 (1)(b) says that "everyone has the right to further education" and that the state must make such education "progressively available and accessible".[1]

Article 11 (3)(a) of the African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child says "States Parties to the present Charter shall take all appropriate measures with a view to achieving the full realization of this right and shall in particular ... provide free and compulsory basic education".[2]

Article 28 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child recognises "the right of the child to education" and also obliges the state to "make primary education compulsory and available free to all".[3]

Children attending an educational institution

This indicator shows the number and percentage of children aged 7 – 17 who are reported to be attending a school or educational facility. It is different from 'enrolment rate', which reflects the number of children enrolled in educational institutions, as reported by schools to the national Department of Basic Education (DBE) early in the school year.

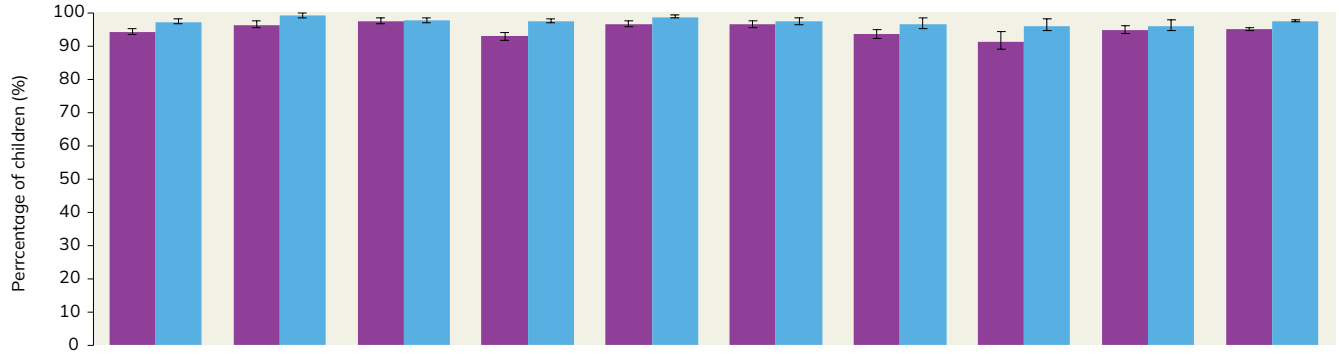
Education is a transformative socio-economic right that provides the foundation for lifelong learning and economic opportunity. All children have a right to basic education, which the Constitutional Court has ruled extends to Grade 12.[4]

Historically, basic education has been compulsory from Grade 1 (the year in which a child turns seven). The Basic Education Laws Amendment (BELA) Act was signed by the President on 13 September 2024 and came into effect on 24 December 2024.[5, 6] The BELA Act means that from 2025, Grade R has been formally integrated into the foundation phase and has become compulsory for children in the year that they turn six. Because this indicator gives a retrospective view of attendance rates, it still measures attendance against the previous compulsory starting age for children. The compulsory stage ends on completion of Grade 9 or when the child turns 15. After this, children may leave school, but the state has a responsibility to provide basic education up to the end of Grade 12 for those who want to complete school.

South Africa has high levels of school enrolment and attendance. Among children of school-going age (7 – 17 years), the vast majority are reported to attend some form of educational facility. There was a small but significant increase from 2002 when the reported attendance rate was 95%, to 2018 when reported attendance rates were 98%. The overall increase was mainly due to the growth in reported attendance rates for African and Coloured children, and in 2018 for the first time since this indicator was tracked, there were no significant differences in attendance rates across race groups.

All schools were closed between March and June 2020, due to the outbreak of COVID-19 and the resultant lockdown. From

Figure 4a: School-age children (7 – 17-year-olds) attending an educational institution, by province, 2002 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2002	94,2%	96,3%	97,4%	92,9%	96,6%	96,4%	93,6%	91,2%	94,8%	95,0%
	1,811,000	603,000	1,763,000	2,470,000	1,525,000	917,000	671,000	221,000	944,000	10,926,000
2024	97,2%	99,0%	97,7%	97,5%	98,7%	97,3%	96,5%	95,9%	95,8%	97,4%
	1,507,000	645,000	2,872,000	2,609,000	1,519,000	1,073,000	829,000	249,000	1,287,000	12,590,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003, 2025) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2024*. Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

June, schools partially re-opened, but only for specific grades. Schools re-opened for all grades from late August 2020, but even then, they operated at reduced capacity with rotational timetabling of classes.

Statistics South Africa (Stats SA) ran its 2020 General Household Survey (GHS) later than usual, from September to December. The survey included the usual question about whether household members were attending an educational institution but did not ask whether they were attending every day. Thus, reported attendance rates do not reflect the regularity of attendance, even at a time when it is known that learners were unlikely to be attending every day. Reported attendance rates in the last quarter of 2020 were at a similarly high level as previous years, with just a small decrease of one percentage point from 2019, to 97%. Wave three of the National Income Dynamics Study – Coronavirus Rapid Mobile Survey (NIDS-CRAM) survey, conducted in November 2020, asked whether children had attended school at any time in the last seven days. The overall estimate was 98%, a similar attendance rate to that reported in the GHS. Attendance rates earlier in the year had been much lower, and varied substantially by grade, ranging from 88% for Grade 12 learners to as low as 11% for Grade 9 learners.[7] This was due to the staggered re-opening of grades and prioritisation of those approaching the end of the primary or secondary school. Reported attendance rates remained at 97 – 98% in 2021 – 2024. Of the 12.9 million children aged 7 – 17 years in 2024, 12.6 million were reported to attend school (97%), while 330,000 were not attending. Attendance rates were similarly high across all provinces.

Overall attendance rates tend to mask dropout among older children. Analysis of attendance among discrete age groups shows that attendance remains at 95% for children aged 16, dropping to 93% among 17-year-olds. At age 18 there is a substantial drop: to around 85% among young people who have not completed Grade 12. Differences in reported school attendance rates between boys and girls are not statistically significant.

The GHS asks about reasons for non-attendance for those who are not attending an educational institution. The main reasons for non-attendance can be divided into three main categories: system failures (including exclusions and quality problems); financial barriers; and illness or disability. Together, these account for nearly two thirds of non-attendance.

Of the school-age children who were not attending any school in 2024, 11% were "unable to perform at school", 5% left because "education is useless or not interesting" while a nominal 1% dropped out because they failed their exams. Worryingly, 10% of those not attending were not accepted for enrolment, up from 4% in 2022 and suggesting that capacity constraints may be an emerging obstacle to the realisation of this important right. Together, these reasons signal failures in the education system and account for nearly 30% of all reported non-attendance.

The second main barrier to education is financial or accessibility constraints. These include the cost of schooling (the reason given for 14% of children not attending schools in 2024) and difficulties in reaching school (2% were not attending because the school is too far). Six percent of those not attending were too busy due to work or domestic responsibilities, suggesting that for some families the opportunity cost of education is a barrier. Disability is also an important reason, accounting for 8% of non-attendance in 2024 and again pointing to a failure in the education system to accommodate children with disabilities. Illness accounted for an additional 4% of the non-attendance rate.

Pregnancy accounts for 3.5% of all non-attendance, and 8.5% of non-attendance among teenage girls who are not attending school.[8-10]

Although the costs of education are cited as a barrier to attendance, the overall attendance rate for children in the lower income quintiles is not substantially lower than those in the wealthier quintiles, although there is a statistically significant difference in reported attendance rates for children in the poorest income quintile (97%) compared with the richest income quintile (99%).

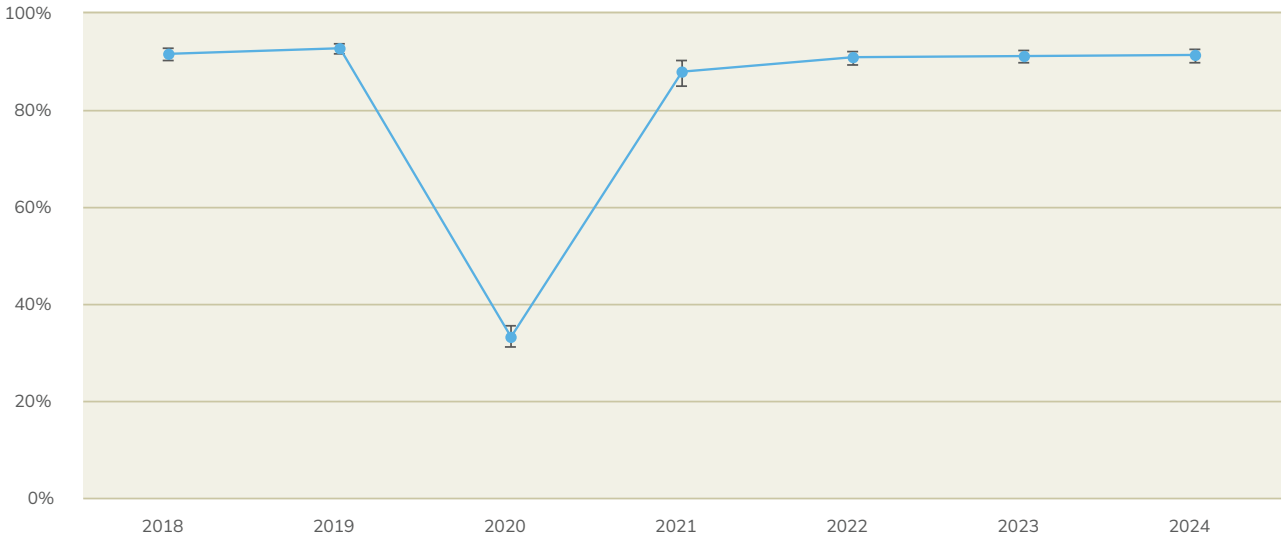
Attendance rates alone do not capture the regularity of children's school attendance or their progress through school. Research has shown that children from more disadvantaged backgrounds – with limited economic resources, lower levels of parental education, or who have lost their mother – are more prone to dropping out or progressing more slowly than their more advantaged peers. Racial inequalities in school advancement remain strong.[11, 12] Similarly, school attendance rates tell us nothing about the quality of teaching and learning.[13] Inequalities in learning outcomes are explored through standardised tests such as those used in the international SAQMEC,[14] TIMMS and PIRLS[15] studies. The DBE's controversial Annual National Assessments[16] were discontinued in 2017, meaning that the only national standardised assessment is matric.

Access to early learning programmes and Grade R

This indicator shows the number and percentage of children aged 5 – 6 who are reported to be attending Grade R or any other early learning programme (ELP) – in other words, those attending out-of-home group care and learning facilities including early childhood development (ECD) centres, pre-Grade R or Grade R. While all these facilities provide care and stimulation for early learning for young children, the emphasis on providing learning opportunities through structured learning programmes differs by facility type. Given that Grade 1 starts in the year that a child is six turning seven, the measure includes some six-year-olds who are attending Grade 1 in ordinary schools.

Educational inequalities are strongly associated with socio-economic (and therefore also racial) inequalities in South Africa.[17, 18] These inequalities are evident from the early years, even before entry into primary school.[19] They are exacerbated by an unequal schooling system,[20, 21] and are difficult to reverse. But early inequalities can be reduced through pre-school exposure to developmentally appropriate activities and programmes that stimulate cognitive development.[14, 22]

Figure 4b: Children aged 5 – 6 years attending school or ECD facility, 2018 – 2024



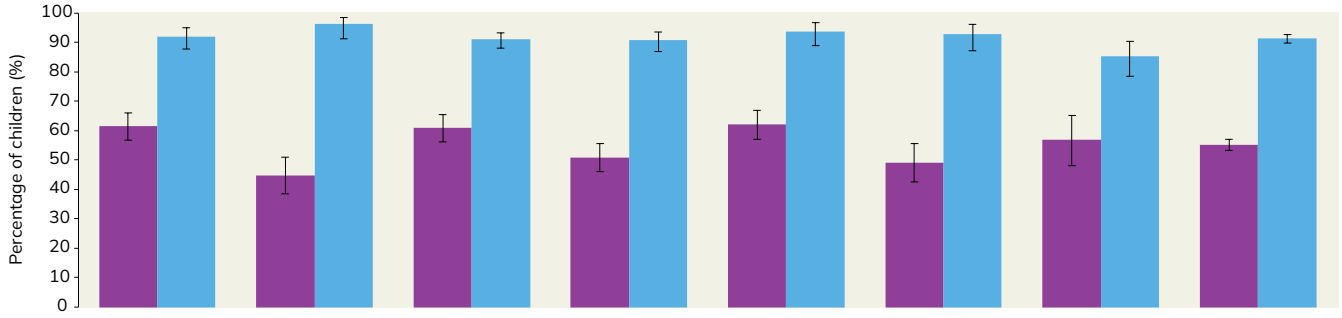
Source: Statistics South Africa (2019 – 2025) *General Household Survey 2018 – 2024;* Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall, Children's Institute, UCT.

Evidence suggests that quality group learning programmes are beneficial for cognitive development from about three years of age.[23] Provided that they are of good quality, early learning programmes are an important mechanism to interrupt the cycle of inequality by reducing socio-economic differences in learning potential between children before they enter the foundation phase of schooling.

The National Development Plan (NDP) priorities, cited in the DBE's 2030 ECD Strategy,[24] include universal access to two years of early childhood development programmes. The DBE funds and monitors thousands of private and community-based ELPs in addition to school-based Grade R classes. The NDP proposes the introduction of a second year of pre-school education, and that both years be made universally accessible to children.[25] It therefore makes sense to monitor enrolment in learning programmes for 5 – 6-year-olds.

According to the DBE's administrative data, 860,000 learners were attending Grade R at ordinary schools in early 2024, of whom 95% were in public (government) schools. Of the 26,000 learners attending pre-Grade R in ordinary schools, just over half (52%) were enrolled in independent schools, while 48% were at public schools.[26] These would include some private ECD centres which are registered as schools, but would exclude many other independent and unregistered facilities. Government schools are therefore providing the large bulk of education services for children in Grade R, but not for pre-Grade R.

Figure 4c: Children aged 5 – 6 years attending school or ECD facility, by province, 2002 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2002	61,4%	44,7%	61,0%	50,8%	62,2%	49,1%	49,1%	34,7%	56,9%	55,2%
	194,000	49,000	188,000	220,000	158,000	80,000	63,000	16,000	97,000	1,064,000
2024	92,1%	96,5%	91,1%	90,8%	93,8%	93,0%	91,7%	86,1%	85,4%	91,3%
	261,000	101,000	498,000	458,000	293,000	178,000	136,000	46,000	186,000	2,157,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2002; 2025) *General Household Survey 2002, 2024;* Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.
Note: Prior to 2009, enrolment in crèches, playgroups and ECD centres would have been under-reported as the survey only asked about attendance at "educational institutions". More specific questions about ECD facilities were introduced from the 2009 survey onwards and are likely to have resulted in higher reporting of attendance rates (for a more detailed technical explanation, see childrencount.uct.ac.za).

In 2019, 93% of children (nearly 2.2 million) in the pre-school age group (5 – 6-year-olds) were reported to be attending some kind of educational facility, mostly in Grade R or Grade 1. This was double the 2002 level, signifying substantial gains in access to ELPs over the years. Unlike many other child indicators, this measure of ECD access is not associated with significant inequalities across provinces.

Similar patterns were found in analyses of the 2007 Community Survey and the 2008 National Income Dynamics Study, which also did not find strong provincial disparities.[27] Given the inequalities in South Africa, it was also pleasing to see that as access to education increased among 5 – 6-year-olds, the inequalities in access across races and income quintiles reduced.

The effect of COVID-19 and lockdown on early learning was dramatic: the year 2020 saw a rapid reversal of the gains made over nearly two decades in early learning access for 5 – 6-year-olds. Young children could not attend ELPs during lockdown because of the closure of schools and ECD centres. The impacts extended later in the year due to administrative challenges in registering and funding the reopening of schools. In late 2020, when the GHS was conducted, only 33% of children aged 5 – 6 were attending any kind of educational centre, down 60 percentage points from 93% from the year before. Alongside the sharp fall in attendance was an apparent increase in racial inequality in ECD access (60% of White children aged 5 – 6 years were reported to be accessing some kind of learning facility, compared with only 33% of African and 26% of Coloured children). Similarly, income inequalities became more pronounced, with attendance rates ranging from 28% in the poorest income quintile to 43% in the wealthiest quintile. The large numbers of young children who lost access to early learning programmes during lockdown are now among the cohort of foundation phase learners, but it is not yet known how the early learning deficit will play out in school readiness and learning outcomes in the foundation phase and beyond.

Attendance rates rose again after 2020, and by 2022 the pre-lockdown attendance rate had been regained, with 91% of 5 – 6-year-olds reported to be attending early learning programmes. The inequalities across income quintiles and races had also reduced. This level of access remained static in 2023 and 2024.

This indicator tells us nothing about the quality of care and education that young children receive at educational facilities or the resources available at those facilities. Attendance provides a unique opportunity because almost all children in an age cohort can be reached at a particularly important developmental stage; but this is a lost opportunity if the service is of poor quality.

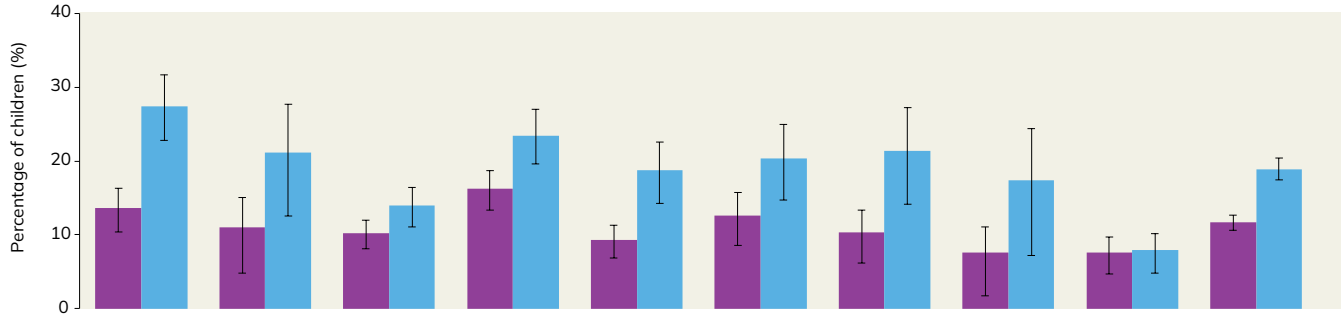
Children living far from school

This indicator monitors the share of school-going children who have to travel far to get to school. Distance is measured as the length of time travelled to reach school. The school the child attends is defined as 'far' if a child has to travel more than 30 minutes to reach it, irrespective of mode of transport. Children aged 7 – 13 are defined as primary school age, and children aged 14 – 17 are defined as secondary school age.

Access to schools and other educational facilities is a necessary condition for achieving the right to education. A school's location and distance from home can pose a barrier to education. Access to schools is also hampered by poor roads, transport that is unavailable or unaffordable, and danger along the way. Risks may be different for young children, for girls and boys, and are likely to be greater when children travel alone.

For children who do not have schools near to their homes, the cost, risk and effort of getting to school can influence decisions about regular attendance, as well as participation in extramural activities and after-school events. Those who travel

Figure 4d: School-age children living far from school, by province, 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
Primary	13,6%	11,0%	10,2%	16,2%	9,4%	12,6%	10,3%	7,7%	7,6%	11,7%
	135,000	45,000	186,000	279,000	97,000	90,000	58,000	13,000	64,000	967,000
Secondary	27,5%	21,1%	14,0%	23,5%	18,8%	20,4%	21,4%	17,4%	7,9%	18,9%
	154,000	51,000	156,000	224,000	95,000	79,000	63,000	17,000	39,000	881,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2025) *General Household Survey 2024*. Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

long distances to reach school may wake very early and risk arriving late or physically exhausted, which may affect their ability to learn. Walking long distances to school may also lead to learners being excluded from class or make it difficult to attend school regularly.

Questions about distance and means of travel to school were not asked in the 2020 or 2021 GHS as the number of questions was reduced during lockdown. The question was resumed from 2022. Of the 12.6 million children who were attending school in 2024, nearly eight million (62%) walked to school, while 15% travelled in vehicles hired by a group of parents, 10% travelled in private cars and 6% used public transport (bus, minibus, taxi or train). Only 5% used school transport. The vast majority of White learners (78%) were driven to school in private or hired cars, compared with only 21% of African children. And while 66% of African children walk to school, only 6% of White children do so. These figures illustrate pronounced disparity in child mobility and mode of access to school.

Assuming that schools primarily serve the children living in communities around them, the ideal indicator to measure physical access to school would be the distance from the child's household to the nearest school. This analysis is no longer possible due to question changes in the GHS. Instead, the indicator shows the number and percentage of children who travel far (more than 30 minutes) to reach the actual school that they attend, even if it is not the closest school.

Overall, the vast majority (86%) of the 12.6 million children who attended school in 2024, travelled less than 30 minutes to reach school while nearly two million took more than 30 minutes to get to school. Children of secondary school age are more likely than primary school learners to travel far to reach school. In 2024 there were 8.3 million children of primary school age (7 – 13 years) in South Africa. A million of these children (12%) travelled more than 30 minutes to and from school every day. In KwaZulu-Natal, this percentage is significantly higher than the national average, at 16%. Of the 4.7 million children of secondary school age (14 – 17 years), 19% travel more than 30 minutes to reach school, and again children in KwaZulu-Natal are most likely to travel far (24%), along with children in the Eastern Cape (27%). The majority of these children live in rural areas: 25% of secondary school age children in the former homelands and 24% living on farms travel far to school, compared to 12% of children living in urban areas.

Physical access to school remains a problem for many children in South Africa, particularly those living in more remote areas where public transport to schools is lacking or inadequate and where households are unable to afford private transport for children to get to school. There were 24,850 schools in South Africa in 2024, of which 90% were public and 10% independent.[26] Over 4,000 government schools (16% of all public schools) have closed since 2002 as the DBE consolidated smaller schools and closed down underperforming and resource-poor schools as well as rural schools with low numbers of learners. While the concentration of more children into fewer schools may be an advantage from a school management perspective, the rationalisation policy and closure of 'non-viable' schools may mean that children in remote areas have more difficulty in accessing school. Over the same period, the number of independent schools in the country has more than doubled, from 1,158 to 2,469.[28]

Children's progress through school

School attendance rates are very high during the compulsory schooling phase (Grades 1 – 9). However, attendance tells us little about the quality of education that children receive, or their progress through the education system.

Previous systemic evaluations by the DBE have recorded very low pass rates in numeracy and literacy among both Grade 3 and Grade 6 learners,[29] and internationally comparative studies have repeatedly found South Africa's performance to be poor even when compared with other countries in the region. Both the 2016 and 2021 international PIRLS studies, which assessed literacy among Grade 4 learners, found that four out of five Grade 4 children in South Africa could not read for meaning in any language.[30, 31] In the international TIMMS study, which assessed numeracy among Grade 5 learners, South Africa was placed second last out of 49 countries. Three out of five learners could not do basic arithmetic calculations like addition and subtraction.[32] Despite measures to address the inherited inequities in the education system through revisions to the legislative and policy frameworks and the school funding norms, continued disparities in the quality of education offered by schools reinforce existing socio-economic inequalities, limiting the future work opportunities and life chances of children who are born into poor households.[13, 21, 33]

High rates of grade repetition have been recorded in numerous studies. An analysis of grade promotion, repetition and dropout using administrative data showed that in 2019, 12% of Grade 1 learners were not promoted to the next year and repeated the grade. In the same year 9% of Grade 2s and 7% of Grade 3s repeated their grade. Repetition rates are much higher in the senior phase, where 17% of Grade 8s and 14% of Grade 9s repeated the year.[34] Progression rates were considerably higher in 2020, perhaps because the criteria for grade promotion were relaxed in light of extensive disruption of the teaching programme during lockdown. For those who are not properly evaluated at foundation and intermediate phase, automatic promotion may lead to higher rates of repetition and dropout in the upper grades and affect matric pass rates down the line.

A study of children's progress at school, using 2008 data from the National Income Dynamics Study, found that only about 44% of young adults (age 21 – 29) had matriculated, and of these less than half had matriculated "on time".[35] In 2016, only 51% of young people aged 20 – 24 had completed a matric or matric equivalent.[36] In South Africa, the labour market returns to education only start kicking in on successful completion of matric, not before. However, it is important to monitor progress and grade repetition in the earlier grades as slow progress at school is a strong determinant of school dropout.[9]

The South African schooling system is divided into three-year phases: the foundation phase (Grades 1 to 3), the

intermediate phase (Grades 4 to 6), the senior phase (Grades 7 to 9) and the further education and training phase (Grades 10 to 12). Assuming that children are enrolled in primary school at the prescribed age (by the year in which they turn seven) and assuming that they do not repeat a grade or drop out of school, they would be expected to have completed the foundation phase (Grade 3) by the year that they turn nine, and the general education phase (Grade 9) by the year they turn 15.

This indicator allows a little more leeway and therefore provides a generous estimate of school progress: it measures the number and percentage of children aged 10 and 11 who have completed a minimum of Grade 3, and the percentage of those aged 16 and 17 who have completed a minimum of Grade 9. In other words, it allows for the older cohort in each group to have repeated one grade.

In 2024, 94% of all children aged 10 and 11 were reported to have completed Grade 3, up from 78% in 2002. An improvement in progress through the foundation phase was evident across most of the provinces, with significant advances in the Eastern Cape (from 64% in 2002 to 90% in 2024), Mpumalanga (75% to 93%), Limpopo (80% to 97%), KwaZulu-Natal (75% to 97%), and Gauteng (85% to 96%). These improvements have narrowed the gap between provinces, although it is uncertain to what extent this reflects real improvements in education or arises from stricter rules limiting the number of grades that can be repeated within a school phase.

As would be expected, the rate of progression through the entire general education and training band (up to Grade 9) is lower, as there is more time for children to have repeated or dropped out by the end of Grade 9. In 2024, 78% of children aged 16 – 17 years had completed Grade 9, while 22% had not attained this level of schooling. This represents an overall improvement of nearly 30 percentage points over the two decades, from 50% in 2002. Provincial variation is slightly more pronounced than for progress through the foundation phase with Gauteng having the highest rate of Grade 9 progression (85%), followed by KwaZulu-Natal (82%). Progress was poorest in the Northern Cape, North West and the Free State, where less than 70% of children had completed Grade 9 by the expected age.

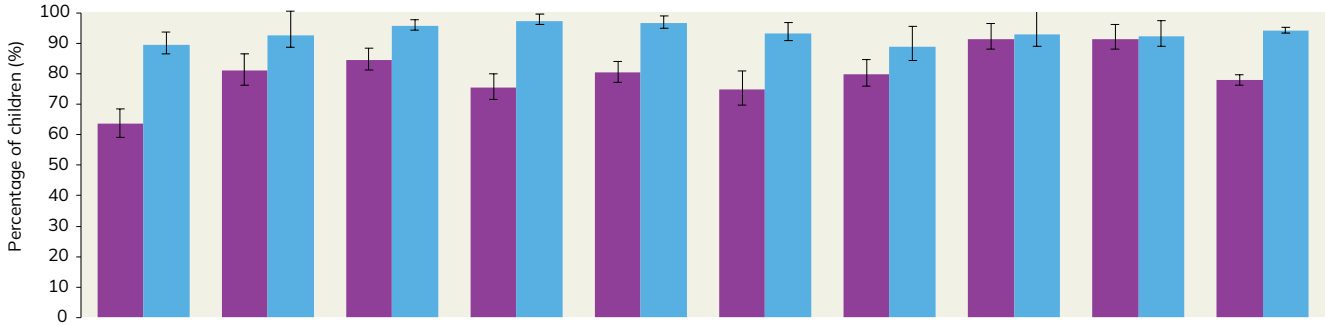
As found in other analyses of transitions through school[17, 18, 27] educational attainment (measured by progress through school) varies along socio-economic and racial lines. These differences become more pronounced as children advance through the grades. Gender differences in school progression have remained consistent and even widened over the years: girls are more likely than boys to progress through school at the expected rate and the difference becomes more pronounced in the higher grades. In 2024, the gender difference in grade progression for Grade 3 learners was not significant (96% for girls versus 93% for boys). But in the same year, 85% of 16 – 17-year-old girls had completed Grade 9, compared with only 71% of boys in the same age cohort – a statistically significant difference. These findings are consistent with previous analyses from different data sources.[9, 37]

There are differences in grade completion across income quintiles too, especially among children who have completed Grade 9: in 2024, 73% of 16 – 17-year-olds in the poorest 20% of households had completed Grade 9, compared to 93% of those in the richest 20% of households.

The most striking improvements in grade progression, at both Grade 3 and Grade 9 level, occurred through the years between 2002 and 2010. The rate of improvement has slowed and stabilised since then.

Grade progression and grade repetition are not easy to interpret. Prior to Grade 12, the promotion of a child to the next grade is based mainly on assessment by teachers, and the measure may be confounded by the teacher's competence to assess the performance of the child, as well as pressure on teachers and/or schools to promote children through the system. Analyses of the determinants of school progress and dropout point to a range of factors. There is huge variation in the quality

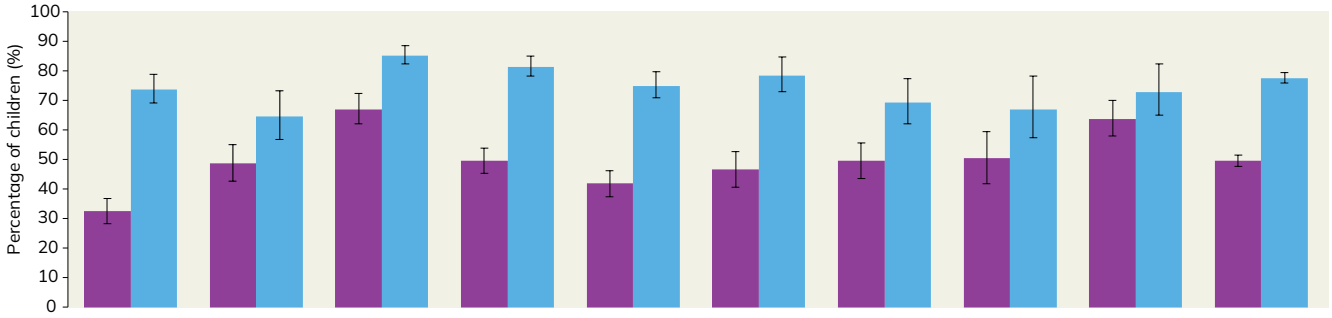
Figure 4e: Children age 10 – 11 years who passed Grade 3, by province, 2002 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2002	63,7%	81,0%	84,5%	75,4%	80,5%	74,8%	79,9%	91,5%	91,3%	77,9%
	215,000	94,000	272,000	374,000	223,000	136,000	108,000	46,000	169,000	1,637,000
2024	89,5%	92,6%	95,7%	97,3%	96,5%	93,3%	88,8%	92,8%	92,3%	94,1%
	270,000	94,000	500,000	469,000	302,000	194,000	161,000	47,000	209,000	2,247,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2025) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2024.* Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

Figure 4f: Children age 16 – 17 who passed Grade 9, by province, 2002 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2002	32,7%	48,9%	67,1%	49,6%	41,9%	46,8%	49,7%	50,7%	63,8%	49,6%
	113,000	55,000	225,000	238,000	122,000	80,000	64,000	21,000	120,000	1,037,000
2024	73,9%	64,7%	85,2%	81,6%	75,1%	78,4%	69,4%	67,2%	72,9%	77,8%
	191,000	78,000	493,000	370,000	194,000	152,000	95,000	30,000	191,000	1,795,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2025) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2024.* Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

of education that largely reflects the historic organisation of schools into racially defined and inequitably resourced education departments. Household-level characteristics and family background also account for some of the variation in grade progression. For example, the level of education achieved by a child's mother explains some of the difference in whether children are enrolled at an appropriate age and whether they go on to complete matric successfully.[35] This in turn suggests that improved educational outcomes for children will have a cumulative positive effect for each subsequent generation.

Youth not in employment, education or training (NEETs)

'NEETs' is a term used to describe young people who are 'not in employment, education or training'. The definition used here includes youth aged 15 – 24 who are not attending any educational institution and who are not employed or self-employed.[38]

Widespread concerns about the large numbers of youth in this situation centre on two main issues: the perpetuation of poverty and inequality, including intergenerational poverty; and the possible implications of a large 'idle' youth population for risk behaviour, social cohesion and the safety of communities.

Little is known about what NEETs do with their time. Young people who are neither learning nor engaged in income-generating activities may nevertheless be 'productive' within their households, for example by helping to maintain the home or looking after children and others in need of care. However, in the absence of income, NEETs remain dependent on the earnings of other household members, and on grants that are directed to children and the elderly. The Old Age Pension in particular has been found to support job-seeking activities for young people[39] and it has been argued that this unenvisaged expenditure of the grant could be addressed by extending social security to unemployed youth.[40]

The large number of NEETs in South Africa is linked to underlying problems in the education system and the labour market. Young people in South Africa have very high participation rates in education, including at secondary level. Enrolment rates for Grades 11 and 12 have increased in recent years and more young people attain Grade 12 (and at an earlier age).[41] But there is still a sharp drop-off in enrolment numbers after Grade 10 and only about half of young people in their early twenties have successfully completed Grade 12.[36, 41] This reduces prospects for further study or employment.[35] Low quality and incomplete education represent what are termed the 'supply-side' drivers of youth unemployment, where young people do not have the appropriate skills or work-related capabilities to be employable or to set up successful enterprises of their own, and so struggle to make the transition from education to work.[42, 43] The 'demand-side' driver relates to a shortage of jobs or self-employment opportunities for those who are available to work.

In 2024, there were 10.4 million young people aged 15 – 24 in South Africa, according to the GHS when population weights are applied. Of these, 36% (3.7 million) were neither working nor enrolled in any educational programme at a school, university or college. The number of young people nationally who are not in education, training or employment has remained remarkably consistent over the last decade, but has increased since the beginning of democracy when only two million NEETs were recorded in 1996.[44] South Africa has made no progress towards what is now an explicit target of the Sustainable Development Goals, namely to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2030.[45] If anything, the number of NEETs has increased marginally.

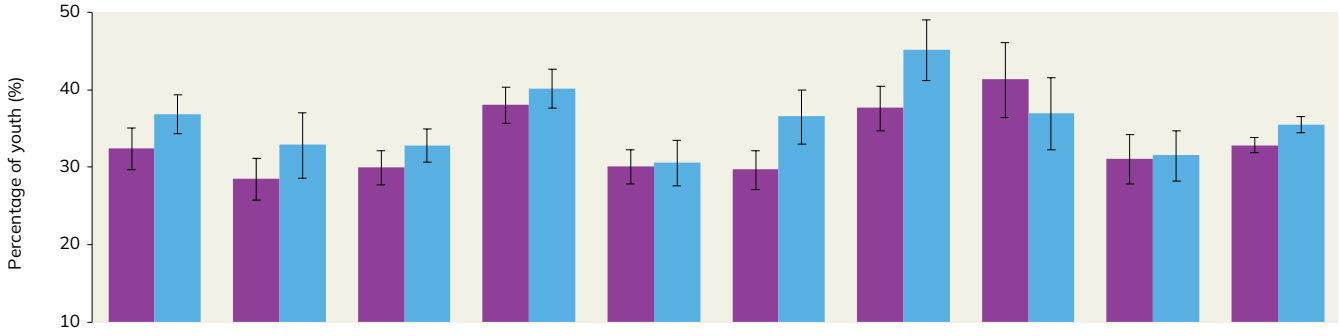
The NEET rates are quite consistent across the provinces. This is hard to interpret without further information. Limpopo, for example, is a very poor and largely rural province where one might expect high rates of unemployment. It is possible

that the slightly lower-than-average percentage of NEETs in that province is partly the result of young people migrating to cities in Gauteng or other provinces in search of work and those unemployed youth therefore being counted among the NEETs elsewhere. It is also possible that young people who are not employed in the labour market may nevertheless be employed in small-scale agriculture if their household has access to land, and this could also help to smooth the provincial and spatial inequalities that are characteristic of many other indicators.

There is enormous variation within the broad youth group of 15 – 24 years. Only 6% of children aged 15 – 17 are classified as NEET because the majority of children in this age group are attending school. Within the 18 – 20 age band, 41% are NEETs, and more than half (58%) of those in the 21 – 24 age band are neither working nor in education or training.

While education attendance rates are fairly even for males and females, the gender disparity among NEETs is significant. Thirty-eight percent of young women are not in employment, education or training – compared with 33% of young men.

Figure 4g: Youth (15 – 24 years) not in employment, education or training (NEETs), by province, 2002 & 2024



	EC	FS	GT	KZN	LP	MP	NW	NC	WC	**SA**
2002	32,4%	28,5%	30,0%	38,1%	30,1%	29,7%	37,6%	41,3%	31,1%	32,8%
	436,000	150,000	568,000	783,000	338,000	213,000	229,000	76,000	294,000	3,086,000
2024	36,8%	32,9%	32,8%	40,2%	30,6%	36,5%	45,1%	37,0%	31,5%	35,5%
	388,000	166,000	914,000	822,000	322,000	311,000	314,000	82,000	376,000	3,695,000

Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2025) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2024.* Pretoria: Stats SA.
Analysis by Katharine Hall and Sumaiyah Hendricks, Children's Institute, UCT.

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