



For an Equitable Sharing
of National Revenue



POLICY BRIEF

Reducing Barriers to Inclusive Early Learning Education



The Financial and Fiscal Commission

The Commission is a body that makes recommendations and gives advice to Organs of State on financial and fiscal matters. As an institution created in the Constitution, it is an independent, juristic person subject only to the Constitution itself, the Financial and Fiscal Commission Act, 1997 (Act No 99 of 1997) (as amended) and relevant legislative prescripts and may perform its functions on its own initiative or on request of an Organ of State.

The vision of the Commission is to provide influential advice for equitable, efficient and sustainable intergovernmental fiscal relations between the national, provincial and local spheres of government. This relates to the equitable division of government revenue among the three spheres of government and to the related service delivery of public services to South Africans.

Through focused research, the Commission aims to provide proactive, expert and independent advice on promoting the intergovernmental fiscal relations system, using evidence-based policy analysis to ensure the realisation of constitutional values. The Commission reports directly both to Parliament and the Provincial Legislatures, who hold government institutions to account. Government must respond to the Commission's recommendations and the extent to which they will be implemented at the tabling of the annual national budget in February.

The Commission consists of women and men appointed by the President: the Chairperson and Deputy Chairperson; three representatives of provinces; two representatives of organised local government; and two other persons. The Commission pledges its commitment to the betterment of South Africa and South African's in the execution of its duties.

For an equitable sharing of national revenue.



Policy Brief

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21 January 2021

Executive Summary

Quality early childhood development (ECD) education enables children to grow and develop to their full potential, and narrows the gap between high- and low-income families. However, South Africa's investment in early learning programmes is inadequate, and large numbers of mainly poor and vulnerable children are still unable to access quality ECD education services. In addition, government has proposed a second compulsory year of schooling before Grade 1, which adds pressure to the ECD sector. Research by the Financial and Fiscal Commission (the Commission) identified the bottlenecks that are hampering the delivery of ECD education to all. The main factors are the lack of a legislative mandate, poorly targeted funding, unreliable and out-of-date data, and a high level of untrained teachers. Addressing these fundamental issues would strengthen the ECD sector, and so the Commission recommends that an audit and mapping of ECD education services in South Africa be conducted, the ECD legislation (and implementation plan) be finalised, funding be targeted at non-centre-based ECD programmes, and a professional training and development path be developed for ECD teachers.

Background

Investing in early childhood development (ECD) education is an integral part of the human and economic development of a country, enabling children to grow and develop to their full potential. It yields significant long-term benefits that narrow the gap between high- and low-income families. Children who receive quality ECD education stay in school for longer, enjoy better health, are more likely to remain outside the criminal justice system, earn higher salaries than their peers, and contribute far more to the economy than those who do not benefit from quality ECD.

The importance of investing in a child's early development cannot be overstated, as children who miss this window of opportunity struggle to catch up to their peers in later schooling.

Access to ECD is crucial in a country such as South Africa whose population is ever-increasing and includes about 8.1 million children under the age of seven years. In South Africa, ECD covers the social, emotional, cognitive and physical development of children prior to enrolment in Grade 1, which usually means children up to the age of six years. ECD education is provided through either formal ECD centres, which include Grade R classes in formal schools and preprimary schools, or non-centre-based ECD programmes, which include informal playgroups, day mothers and toy library programmes. These non-centre-based ECD programmes tend to serve the poorest and youngest children.

Government has recently announced a possible second compulsory year of schooling before Grade 1, which adds pressure to ensure that ECD education is able to meet the needs of the South Africa's youngest citizens and so secure the country's future. Therefore, the Commission undertook research to identify the implementation obstacles and propose recommendations that would catapult ECD education onto a higher developmental trajectory.

Research Findings

Addressing four key factors will result in improved access to and quality of ECD education.

1. **Lack of approved legislation.** In 2015, the National Integrated ECD policy, which most ECD experts consider to be a good and progressive policy, was approved. However, the policy has not been translated into legislation that outlines clear accountability. This exacerbates the challenges faced by the sector in implementing the policy and in accessing funding.
2. **Insufficient and poorly targeted funding.** When compared to basic and higher education, funding of ECD education has improved, but ECD education still represents a minute 1.6% of total education spending. Further, the programmes that most need subsidies – the non-centre-based ECD programmes – are unable to access funds. To qualify for subsidies, ECD programmes need to be registered. However, to register, certain requirements (some which are infrastructural), must be met, which costs money. Although the existing ECD grant includes a component for improving infrastructure, to enable non-centre-based programmes to register, the amount is too small to meet the need.

3. **Lack of up-to-date data to inform decision-making.** The last full audit of ECD programmes was done in 2000. Currently, South Africa does not have a database of all registered and funded ECD programmes, and the number of children who have access to these programmes. Without credible and reliable data, informed, sound decision-making is not possible.
4. **Inadequate training of ECD teachers.** Access to ECD education programmes is crucial, but access alone will not improve child outcomes. Quality teaching is also required, as the main predictor of an ECD programme's quality is the quality of teacher-child interactions. Yet currently fewer than 40% of ECD teachers in South Africa have an ECD qualification, and South Africa does not have a professional training and development path for ECD teachers.

Conclusion and Recommendations

South African policy recognises that quality ECD education results in multiple positive outcomes and contributes to the country's sustainable development. However, the provision of ECD education faces many challenges, including the lack of a firm legislative mandate, inadequately targeted funding, unreliable and out-of-date data, and high levels of untrained ECD teachers. Addressing these fundamental issues would strengthen the ECD education sector, enabling access to be extended to those who need it.

The Commission recommends that:

- The DSD conduct a nation-wide audit and mapping of ECD services currently being rendered.
- The DSD, with relevant stakeholders, take the lead in finalising ECD legislation, as well as a fully costed, time-bound implementation plan.
- The DSD finalise with haste the simplification of the registration process and requirements for non-centre-based ECD programmes.
- Government take urgent steps to strengthen funding for ECD in South Africa, prioritising the funding of all non-profit, non-centre-based ECD programmes serving quintiles 1 to 3. Funding should cover infrastructure upgrades, to enable the centres to register and receive subsidies, and basic early education equipment, to enhance early learning and prepare young children for formal schooling.
- The departments of basic education, social development and higher education and training prioritise the upskilling of existing ECD practitioners and develop a plan to professionalise the ECD career path, through a comprehensive and harmonised professional development system.

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