

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 UN 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 years 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 central socio-economic right that provides the foundation for lifelong learning and economic opportunities. Children have a right to basic education and are admitted into grade 1 in the year they turn seven. Basic education is compulsory in grades 1 – 9, or for children aged 7 – 15. Children who have completed basic education also have a right to further education (grades 10 – 12), which the government must take reasonable measures to make available.

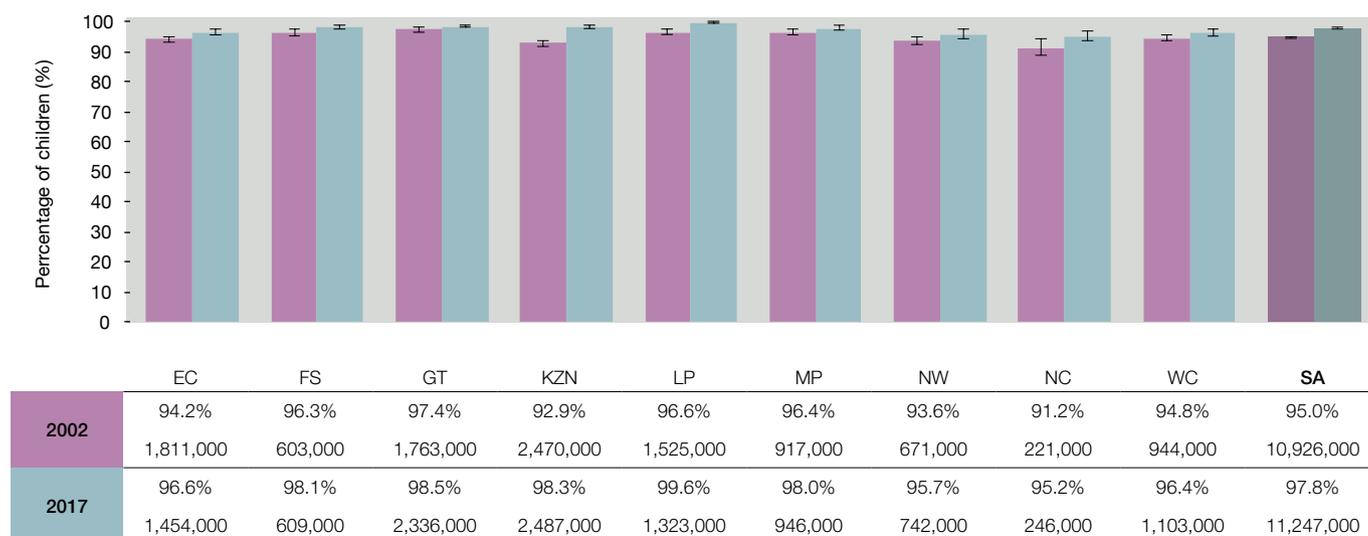
South Africa has high levels of school enrolment and attendance. Amongst children of school-going age (7 – 17 years), the vast majority (98%, or 11.2 million children) attended some form of educational facility in 2017. This is a small but significant increase from 2002, when the reported attendance rate was 95%.

The overall increase is mainly due to a small but real growth in reported attendance rates for African and Coloured children over the 16-year period. Out of a total of 11.5 million children aged 7 – 17 years, 254,000 were reported as not attending school in 2017. Attendance rates for Coloured children remained slightly below the national average in 2017, at 95%.

At a provincial level, the Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal have seen the most significant increases in attendance rates between 2002 and 2017. In the Northern Cape, attendance increased from 91% to 95% while in KwaZulu-Natal attendance increased from 93% to 98%.

Overall attendance rates tend to mask drop-out among older children. Analysis of attendance amongst discrete age groups shows a significant drop in attendance amongst children older than 15. This also coincides with the end of the compulsory schooling age. Whereas around 99% of children in each age year from seven to 14 are reported to be attending an educational institution, the attendance rate drops to 97% for 15-year-olds and 96% for 16-year-olds and 91% for 17-year-olds, and only

Figure 4a: School-age children (7 – 17-year-olds) attending an educational institution, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003, 2018) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

82% of 18-year-olds are reported to be attending school (based on those who have not completed grade 12). Reported school attendance rates between boys and girls are not statistically significant.

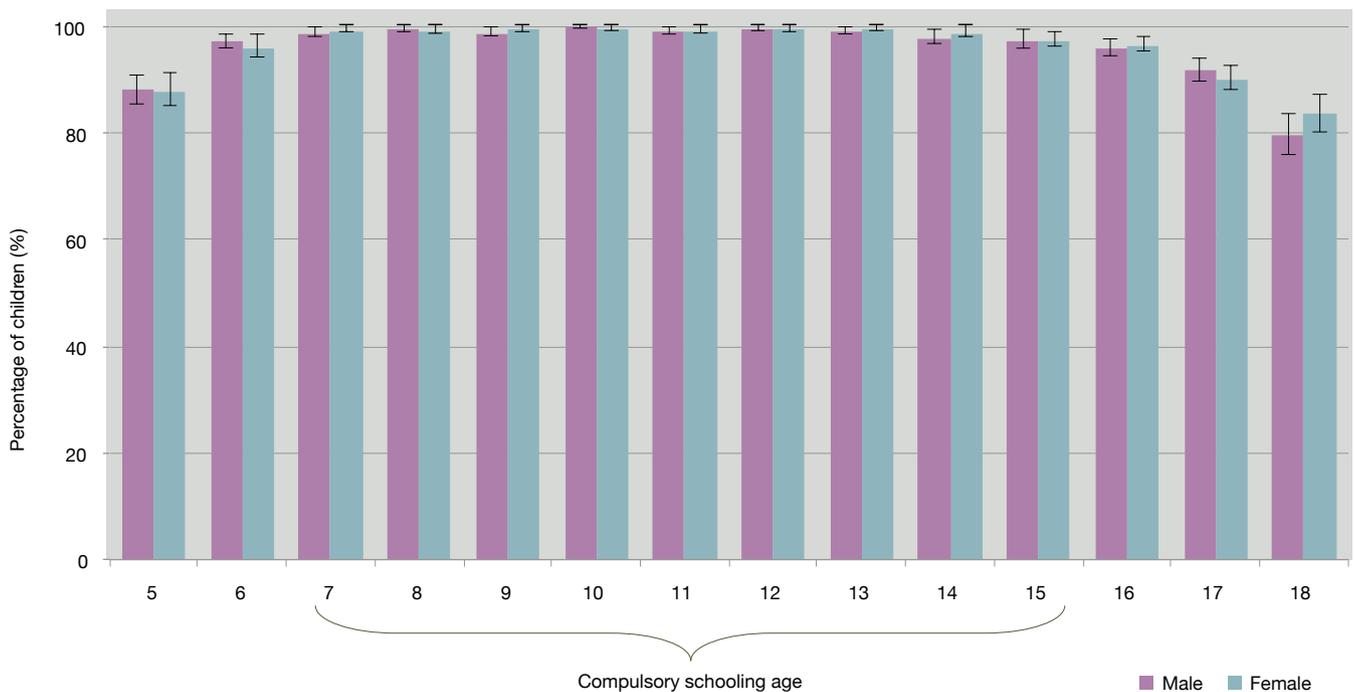
Amongst children of school-going age who are not attending school the main set of reasons for non-attendance relate to financial constraints. These include the cost of schooling (12%) – which would also include related costs such as uniform and transport – and the opportunity costs of education where children have family commitments such as childminding (7%) or are needed to work in a family business or elsewhere to support household income (4%). The second most common set of reasons is related to perceived learner or education system failures, such as a perception that “education is useless” (8%), feeling unable to perform at school (7%), or exam failure (5%). Other reasons for drop-out are disability (16%) and illness (4%). Pregnancy accounts for around 7% of drop-out amongst teenage girls not attending school (or 3% of all non-attendance).⁴ Another 3% were not in

school because they were not accepted for enrolment, signifying barriers to institutional access.

Although the costs of education are cited as a barrier for those who are not attending (and who tend to be older), the overall attendance rate for children in the lower income quintiles is not significantly lower than those in the wealthier quintiles.

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.⁵ Similarly, school attendance rates tell us nothing about the quality of teaching and learning.⁶ Inequalities in learning outcomes are explored through standardised tests such as those used in the international SAQMEC,⁷ TIMMS and PIRLS⁸ studies, and the DBE’s Annual National Assessments.⁹

Figure 4b: Reported attendance at an educational institution, by age and sex, 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: StatsSA.

Access to early childhood learning programmes

This indicator shows the number and percentage of children aged 5 – 6 years who are reported to be attending an early childhood development (ECD) programme or educational institution – in other words, those attending out-of-home care and learning centres including ECD centres, pre-grade R, grade R or grade 1 in ordinary schools. 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.

Educational inequalities are strongly associated with structural socio-economic (and therefore also racial) inequalities in South Africa.¹⁰ These inequalities are evident from the early years, even before entry into primary school. They are exacerbated by an unequal schooling system,¹¹ and are difficult to reverse. But early inequalities can be reduced through preschool exposure to developmentally appropriate activities and programmes that stimulate cognitive development.¹² 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 Five-year Strategic Plan¹³ of the DBE includes a broad goal to improve the quality of ECD provisioning and specifically to improve access to grade R through the supply of learning materials and improving the quality of grade R educators. Evidence suggests that quality group learning programmes are beneficial for cognitive development from about three years of age¹⁴ and the National Development Plan (NDP) priorities, cited in the DBE's strategic plan, include universal access to two years of early childhood development programmes. The DBE funds and monitors thousands of community-based grade R centres in addition to the school-based grade R classes. The NDP proposes the introduction of a second year of preschool education, and

that both years be made universally accessible to children.¹⁵ It therefore makes sense to monitor enrolment in early learning programmes of children in the 5 – 6-year preschool age group.

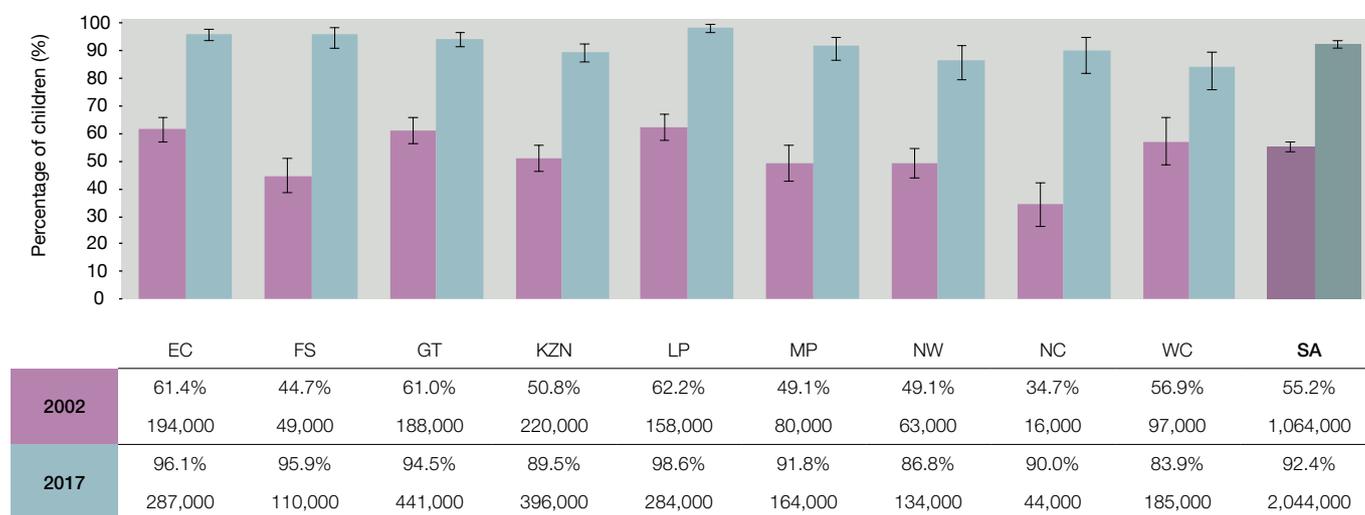
In 2015, there were 288,212 learners attending 4,058 ECD centres in South Africa, according to the DBE's administrative data.¹⁶ The number of learners in ECD centres rose by 7% between 2013 and 2014 and then declined slightly again. Preliminary results from DBE, based on data from the Learner Unit Record Information and Tracking System (LURITS) and other provincial data sources show that, in addition to children in ECD centres, 862,200 learners were attending grade R or pre-grade R at ordinary primary schools in 2017, of whom 95% were at public (government schools) while 5%, or 40,240 learners, were at independent schools.¹⁷

In 2017, 92% of children (2 million) in the preschool age group (5 – 6-year-olds) were reported to be attending some kind of educational institution, mostly in grade R or grade 1. This was almost double the 2002 level, when 1.1 million in the same age group were reported to be attending an educational institution.

Attendance rates are high across all provinces. The highest attendance rates in 2017 were in Limpopo (99%), Eastern Cape and Free State (both at 96%) and Gauteng (95%) while the lowest rates were in the North West province (87%) and Western Cape (84%). This pattern differs from many other indicators, where the Western Cape usually outperforms poorer and more rural provinces like the Eastern Cape and Limpopo. Similar patterns were found in analyses of the 2007 Community Survey and the 2008 National Income Dynamics Study.¹⁸

Given the inequities in South Africa, it is pleasing to see that there are no substantial racial differences in access to educational institutions by African and White children of preschool age, although levels of attendance among Coloured children remain below the national average, at 83%. It is also encouraging that,

Figure 4c: Children aged 5 – 6 years attending school or ECD facility, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2002; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: StatsSA. Analysis by Katharine Hall and Winnie Sambu, 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 in the 2009 survey and are likely to have resulted in higher response rates. (For a more detailed technical explanation, see www.childrencount.uct.ac.za).

as with formal school attendance, there are no strong differences in preschool enrolment across the income quintiles. There are also no significant gender differences in access to preschool.

As with the indicator that monitors school attendance, it should be remembered that this indicator tells us nothing about

the quality of care and education that young children receive at educational facilities. High rates of attendance provide 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 reflects the distance from a child's household to the school s/he attends. 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 live far from schools, 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 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.

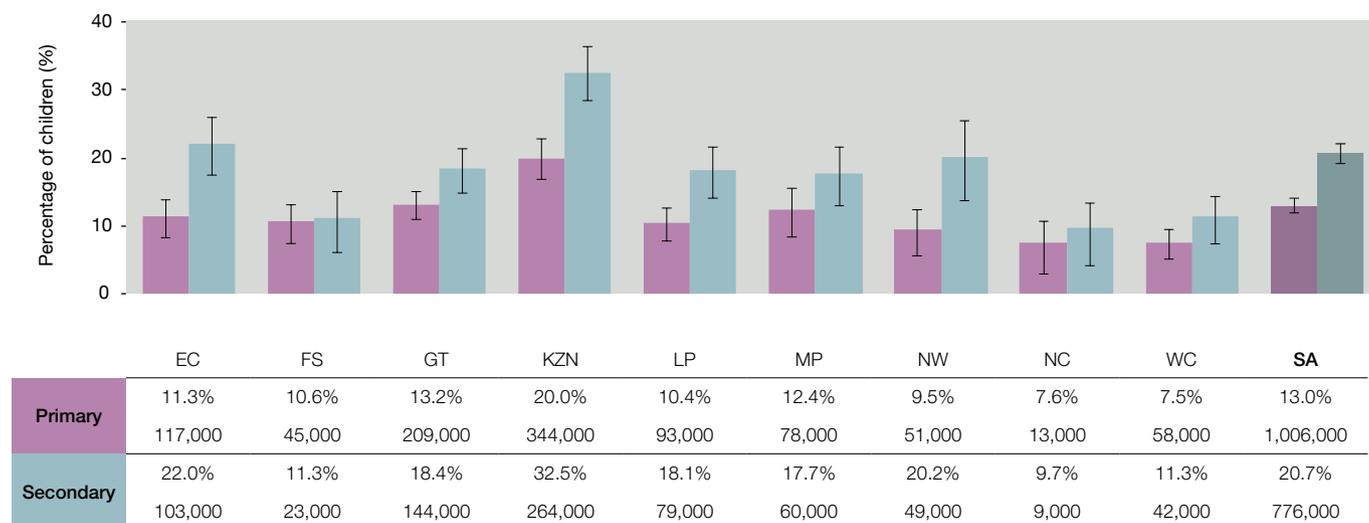
Two-thirds (66%) of South Africa's learners walk to school, while 12% travel in vehicles hired by a group of parents, 9% travel in private cars and 8% use public transport. Only 3% report using school buses or transport provided by schools or the government. The majority (79%) of White children are driven to school in private cars, compared with only 16% of African children.¹⁹ These figures illustrate pronounced disparity in child mobility and means 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 General Household Survey. 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. Eighty-three percent of school-going children attend their nearest school. School-age children not attending school are therefore excluded from the analysis.

Overall, the vast majority (85%) of the 11 million children who attend school travel less than 30 minutes to reach school. Children of secondary school age are more likely than primary school learners to travel far to reach school. In 2017 there were nearly 7.8 million children of primary school age (7 – 13 years) in South Africa. More than a million of these children (13%) travel more than 30 minutes to and from school every day. In KwaZulu-Natal this percentage is significantly higher than the national average, at 20%. Of the 3.7 million children of secondary school age (14 – 17 years), 21% travel more than 30 minutes to reach school, and again it is children in KwaZulu-Natal who are most likely to travel far (33%). The majority of these children live in rural areas: 28% of secondary school age children in the former homelands travel far to school, compared to 15% of children living in the 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 to get

Figure 4d: School-aged children living far from school, by province, 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children's Institute, UCT.

children to school.²⁰ There are nearly 26,000 schools in South Africa, of which 24,000 are public and 2,000 are independent.²¹ A number of rural schools have closed since 2002, meaning that children in these areas may find it more difficult to access school. Nationally, the number of public schools has dropped

by 10% (2,693 schools) between 2002 and 2017, with the largest decreases in the North West, Free State, Gauteng and Limpopo. Over the same period, the number of independent schools in the country has increased by 808.²²

Children's progress through school

Systemic evaluations by the Department of Education have recorded very low pass rates in numeracy and literacy among both grade 3 and grade 6 learners.²³ 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.²⁴

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

South Africa has poor educational outcomes by African and international standards,²⁵ and high rates of grade repetition have been recorded in numerous studies. For example, a study of children's progress at school found that only about 44% of young adults (aged 21 – 29) had matriculated, and of these, less than half had matriculated "on time".²⁶ This was based on 2008 data from the National Income Dynamics Study. In 2016, only 51% of young people aged 20 – 24 had completed a matric or matric equivalent.²⁷ 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 drop-out.²⁸

Assuming that children are enrolled in primary school at the prescribed age (by the year in which they turn seven) and

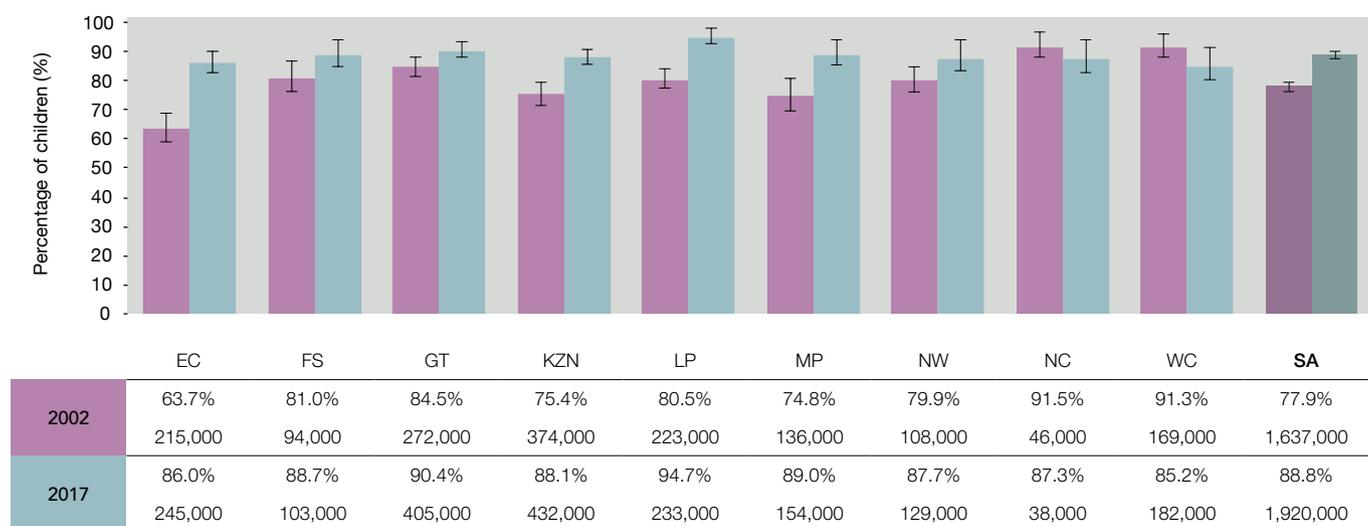
assuming that they do not repeat a grade or drop out of school, they would be expected to have completed the foundation phase (grade 3) by the year that they turn nine, and the general education phase (grade 9) by the year they turn 15.

This indicator allows a little more leeway: it measures the number and proportion of children aged 10 and 11 years who have completed a minimum of grade 3, and the proportion of those aged 16 and 17 years 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, or more if they started school in the year before they turned seven.

In 2017, 89% of all children aged 10 and 11 were reported to have completed grade 3. This was up from 78% in 2002. This improvement in progress through the foundation phase was evident across most of the provinces, with significant advances in the Eastern Cape (from 64% to 86%), Limpopo (80% to 95%), Mpumalanga (from 75% to 89%), and KwaZulu-Natal (from 75% to 88%). These improvements have narrowed the gap between provinces: most provinces record a progression rate of more than 89% and the lowest performing provinces are the Eastern Cape and Western Cape – at 86% and 85% respectively.

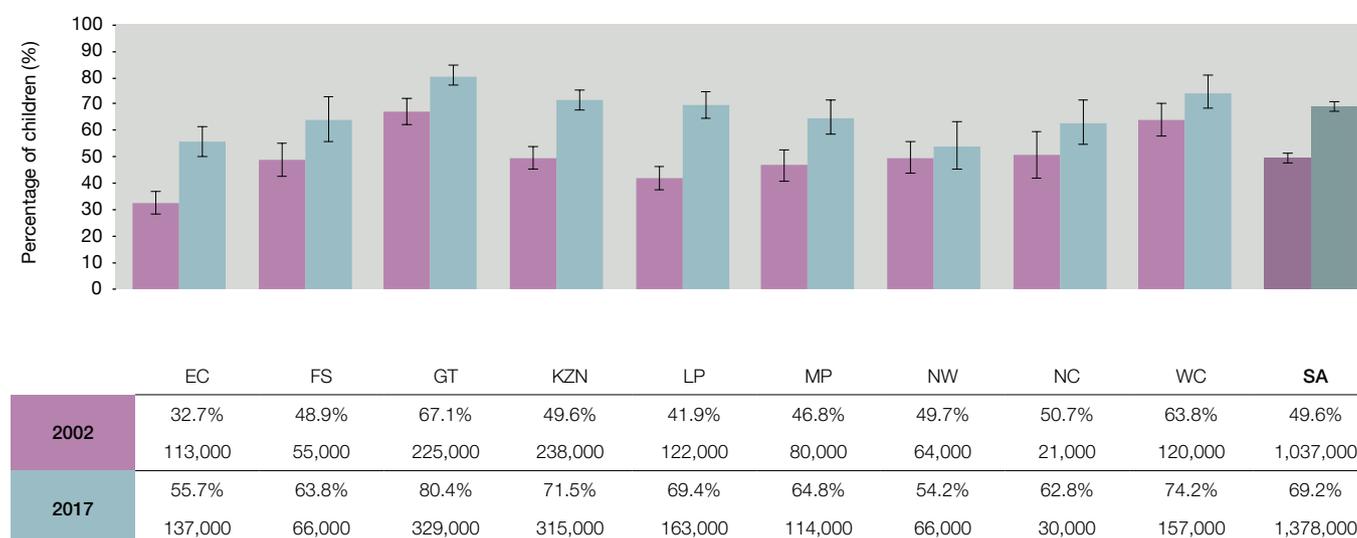
As would be expected, the rate of progression through the entire general education and training band (grades 1 – 9) is lower, as there is more time for children to have repeated or dropped out by grade 9. Nearly 70% of children aged 16 – 17 years had completed grade 9 in 2017. This represents an overall improvement of 20 percentage points over the 16-year period, from 50% in 2002. Provincial variation is slightly more pronounced than for progress through the foundation phase: Gauteng had

Figure 4e: Children aged 10 – 11 years who passed grade 3, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children's Institute, UCT.

Figure 4f: Children aged 16 – 17 years who passed grade 9, by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA.
 Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

the highest rate of grade 9 progression (80%), followed by the Western Cape (74%). Progress was poorest in the Northern and Eastern Cape, where just over half (54% and 56% respectively) of children had completed grade 9 by the expected age.

As found in other analyses of transitions through school,²⁹ educational attainment (measured by progress through school) varies along economic and racial lines. These differences become more pronounced as children advance through the grades. Gender differences in school progression, on the other hand, 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 2017, 91% of girls aged 10 – 11 had completed grade 3, compared with 87% of boys; in the same year, 77% of 16 – 17-year-old girls had completed grade 9, compared only 61% of boys in the same age cohort. This finding is consistent with analyses elsewhere.³⁰

There are significant differences in grade completion across income quintiles, especially amongst children who have completed grade 9: in 2017, 64% of 16 – 17-year-olds in the

poorest 20% of households completed grade 9, compared to 88% in the richest 20% of households.

Of course, 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 the assessment of teachers, so the measure may be confounded by the extent of the teacher’s competence to assess the performance of the child. Analyses of the determinants of school progress and drop-out point to a range of factors, many of which are interrelated: there is huge variation in the quality of education offered by schools. These differences largely reflect 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.³¹ 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.³²

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 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 people³³ and it has been argued that this unenvisioned expenditure of the grant could be addressed by extending social security to unemployed youth.³⁴

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).³⁵ 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 This reduces their prospects for further study or employment.³⁷ 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

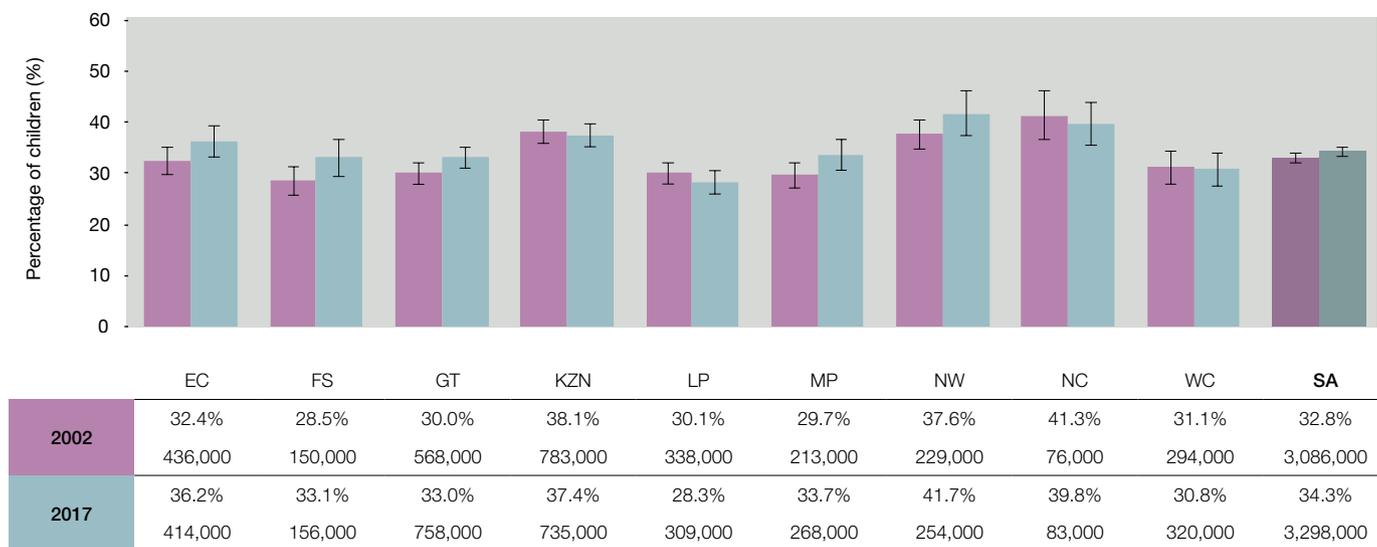
transition from education to work.³⁸ The “demand-side” drivers include a shortage of jobs or self-employment opportunities for those who are available to work.

In 2017 there were 9.6 million young people aged 15–24 in South Africa. Of these, 34% (3.3 million) were neither working nor attending an education institution such as a school, university or college. The number of young people who are not in education, training or employment has remained remarkably consistent over the last decade, but has increased since 1996 when only two million NEETs were recorded.³⁹ South Africa has made no progress towards the Sustainable Development Goal target to substantially reduce the proportion of youth not in employment, education or training by 2020.⁴⁰ If anything, the number of NEETs has increased marginally.

The NEET rates are fairly even across the provinces. This is hard to interpret without further analysis. Limpopo, for example, is a very poor and largely rural province. It is possible that the slightly lower-than-average proportion of NEETs in that province is partly the result of many young people migrating to cities in search of work and they are therefore counted among the NEETs in more urban provinces. It is 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 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 NEETs because the majority are attending school. Within the 18–20 age band, 35% are NEETs, and more than half (54%) 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 more pronounced. Thirty-seven percent of young women are not in employment, education or training – compared with 31% of young men.

Figure 4g: Youth aged 15–24 years not in employment, education or training (NEETs), by province, 2002 & 2017



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2018) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2017*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children’s Institute, UCT.

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