

# 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".<sup>1</sup>

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".<sup>2</sup>

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".<sup>3</sup>

## 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.

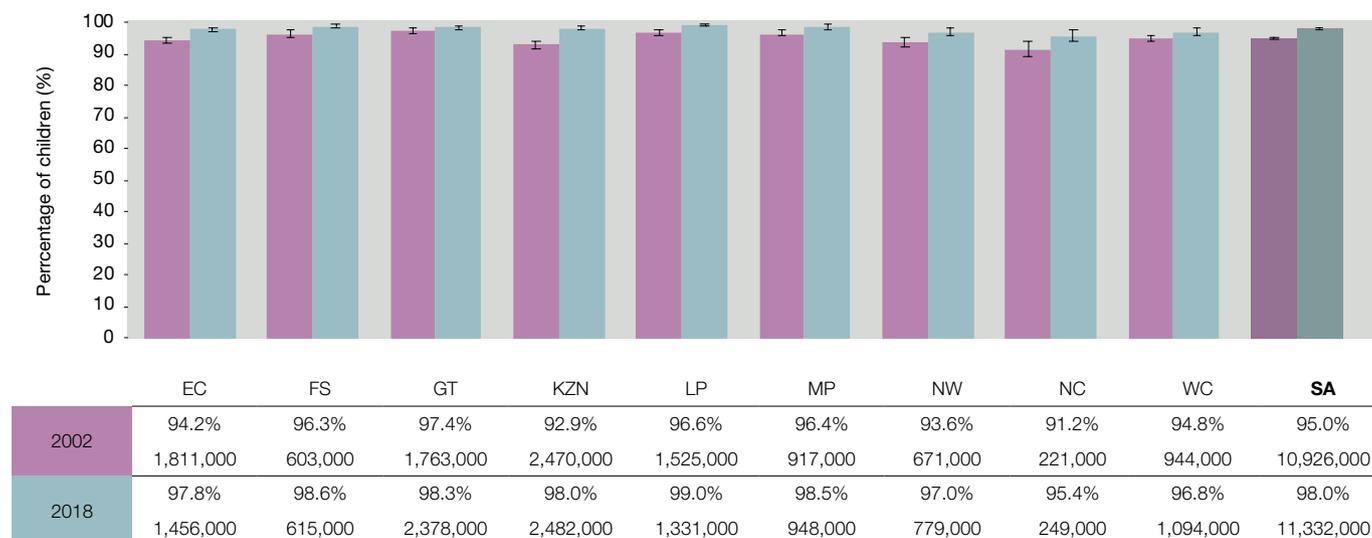
Education is a central socio-economic right that provides the foundation for lifelong learning and economic opportunities. Children have a right to basic education and are admitted into grade 1 in the year they turn seven. Basic education is compulsory in grades 1 – 9, or for children aged 7 – 15. Children 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 11.3 million children) attended some form of educational facility in 2018. 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 17-year period. In 2018, for the first time since this indicator was tracked, there are no significant differences in attendance rates across race groups. Of a total of 11.6 million children aged 7 – 17 years, 232,000 were reported as not attending school in 2018. At a provincial level, the Northern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal have seen the most significant increases in attendance rates between 2002 and 2018. 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 among discrete age groups shows a significant drop in attendance amongst children older than 15. This also coincides with the end of compulsory schooling. 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 98% for 15-year-olds, 96% for 16-year-olds, 92% for 17-year-olds, and 83% of 18-year-

Figure 5a: School-age children (7 – 17-year-olds) attending an educational institution, by province, 2002 & 2018



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003, 2019) *General Household Survey 2002*; *General Household Survey 2018*. Pretoria: Stats SA. Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children's Institute, UCT.

olds are reported to be attending school (based on those who have not completed grade 12). Differences in 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 the quality of education or the learners ability to progress: "Education is useless or not interesting" is the reason given for 10% of those not attending school. Another 9% are "unable to perform at school" while 5% dropped out because they failed the exams. These signals of failures in the education system account for a quarter of all reported non-attendance. A further 7% of children not attending school are excluded because they were not accepted for enrolment.

The second main barrier to education is financial constraints. These include the cost of schooling (the reason given for 13% of children not attending schools) – which would also include related costs such as uniform and transport – and the opportunity costs of education where children have family commitments such as child minding (4%) or are needed to work in a family business or elsewhere to support household income (2%).

Disability is also an important reason, accounting for 15% of non-attendance, while illness accounts for an additional 5% of the non-attendance rate.

The main reasons for non-attendance can therefore be divided into three main categories: system failures (including exclusions and quality problems); financial barriers; and illness or disability. Together, these account for over 70% of non-attendance.

Pregnancy accounts for around 7% of drop-out amongst teenage girls not attending school, and only 3% of all non-attendance.<sup>4-6</sup>

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 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.<sup>7-9</sup> Similarly, school attendance rates tell us nothing about the quality of teaching and learning.<sup>10</sup> Inequalities in learning outcomes are explored through standardised tests such as those used in the international SAQMEC,<sup>11</sup> TIMMS and PIRLS<sup>12</sup> studies. The DBE's Annual National Assessments<sup>13</sup> have been discontinued.

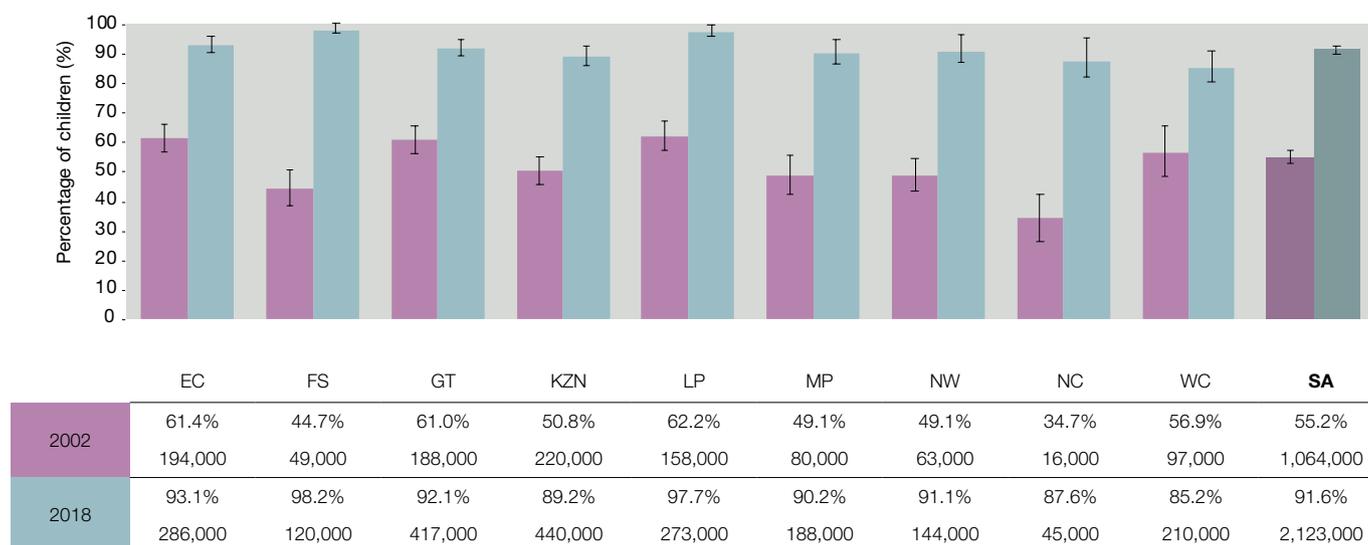
### Access to early childhood learning programmes

This indicator shows the number and percentage of children aged 5 – 6 who are reported to be attending an early childhood development (ECD) programme or educational institution – in other words, those attending out-of-home group 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.<sup>9, 14</sup> These inequalities are evident from the early years, even before entry into primary school.<sup>15</sup> They are exacerbated by an unequal schooling system,<sup>16, 17</sup> and are difficult to reverse. But

**Figure 5b: Children aged 5 – 6 years attending school or ECD facility, by province, 2002 & 2018**



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2019) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2018*. 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](http://www.childrencount.uct.ac.za)).

early inequalities can be reduced through pre-school exposure to developmentally appropriate activities and programmes that stimulate cognitive development.<sup>18, 19</sup> 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 Plan<sup>20</sup> 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 age<sup>21</sup> 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 pre-school education, and that both years be made universally accessible to children.<sup>22</sup> It therefore makes sense to monitor enrolment in early learning programmes of children in the 5 – 6-year pre-school age group.

In 2015, there were 288,212 learners attending 4,058 ECD centres in South Africa, according to the DBE's administrative data.<sup>23</sup> 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, 824,000 learners were attending grade R or pre-grade R at ordinary primary schools in 2018, of whom 94% were at public (government schools) while 6%, or 46,000 learners, were at independent schools.<sup>24</sup>

In 2018, 92% of children (2.1 million) in the pre-school 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 double the 2002 level, when slightly fewer than 1.1 million children in the same age group were reported to be attending an educational institution. Nearly 200,000 children in this age group are not attending any kind of educational facility.

Attendance rates are high across all provinces. The highest attendance rates in 2018 were in the Free State and Limpopo (both at 98%), the Eastern Cape (93%) and Gauteng (92%). The lowest rates were in the Western Cape (85%) and Northern Cape (88%). This pattern differs from many other indicators, where the Western Cape often out-performs 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.<sup>25</sup>

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 pre-school age, although levels of attendance among Coloured children remain below the national average, at 83%. It is also encouraging that, as with formal school attendance, there are no strong differences in pre-school enrolment across the income quintiles. There are also no significant gender differences in access to pre-school.

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 or the resources available at those 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.

## 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.<sup>26</sup>

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.

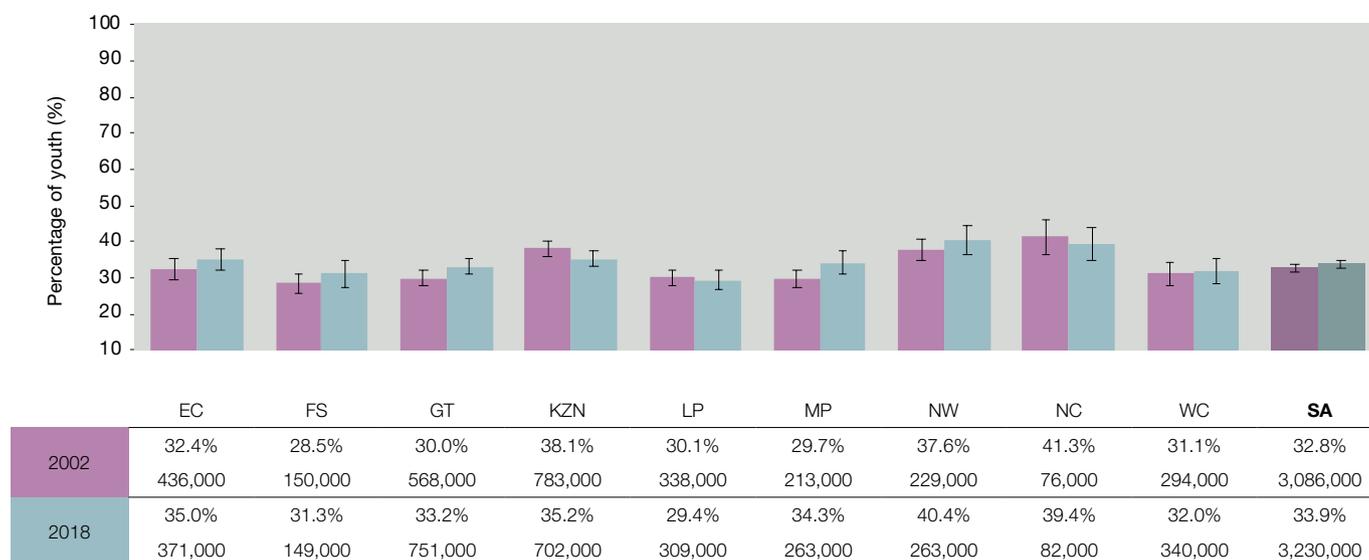
Little is known about what NEETs actually do with their time. Young people who are neither learning nor engaged in income-generating activities may nevertheless be "productive" within their households, for example by helping to maintain the home or looking after children and others in need of care. However, 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<sup>27</sup> and it has been argued that this unenvisioned expenditure of the grant could be addressed by extending social security to unemployed youth.<sup>28</sup>

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).<sup>29</sup> 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.<sup>29, 30</sup> This reduces prospects for further study or employment.<sup>31</sup> 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.<sup>32, 33</sup> The "demand-side" driver relates to a shortage of jobs or self-employment opportunities for those who are available to work.

In 2018 there were 9.5 million young people aged 15 – 24 in South Africa. Of these, 34% (3.2 million) were neither working nor enrolled in any education institution such as 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 over the two decades since 1996 when only two million NEETs were recorded.<sup>34</sup> South Africa has made no progress towards

**Figure 5c: Youth (15 – 24 years) not in employment, education or training (NEETs), by province, 2002 & 2018**



Source: Statistics South Africa (2003; 2019) *General Household Survey 2002; General Household Survey 2018*. Pretoria: Stats SA.  
 Analysis by Katharine Hall & Winnie Sambu, Children's Institute, UCT.

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 2020.<sup>35</sup> 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 percentage 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 5% of children aged 15 – 17 are classified as NEET because the majority are attending school. Within the 18 – 20 age band, 34% are NEETs, and more than half (53%) 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.

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