

Compulsory Grade R under BELA: What are the Implications for Early Learning Programmes in South Africa?

Dr. Gabrielle Wills | October 2026



Policy Brief

Key messages

- Grade R participation in South Africa was widespread before the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (BELA) made school-based Grade R compulsory. For example, among a cohort of Grade 3 and 6 learners in 2022, approximately 92% of had attended Grade R.
- With widespread Grade R participation before BELA, the main effect of BELA is unlikely to be a substantial increase in Grade R participation, but rather a shift in Grade R provision from early learning programmes (ELPs) into schools.
- While there was an approximate shortfall of **201,000 Grade R places in public and independent schools**, much of this gap was already being met through ELPs.
- Roughly **123,000 learners** who entered Grade 1 in 2024 are estimated to have attended Grade R in ELPs rather than schools.
- Around **78,000 learners (8% of the first-time 2024 Grade 1 cohort)** attended neither school-based Grade R nor Grade R in ELPs. This group should be the primary focus of Grade R expansion efforts.
- Non-school-based Grade R is concentrated among learners from **middle- and upper-income households, particularly in Gauteng**.
- Based on an estimated 123,000 Grade R learners in ELPs, Grade R-related fees and ECD subsidies could contribute up to **R1.3 billion annually** to the sector. According to the Thrive by Five Index 2024, approximately 14% of ELPs offer unregistered Grade R classes. These ELPs are most financially exposed to enrolment displacement under BELA, with an estimated R500 million in annual income at risk.

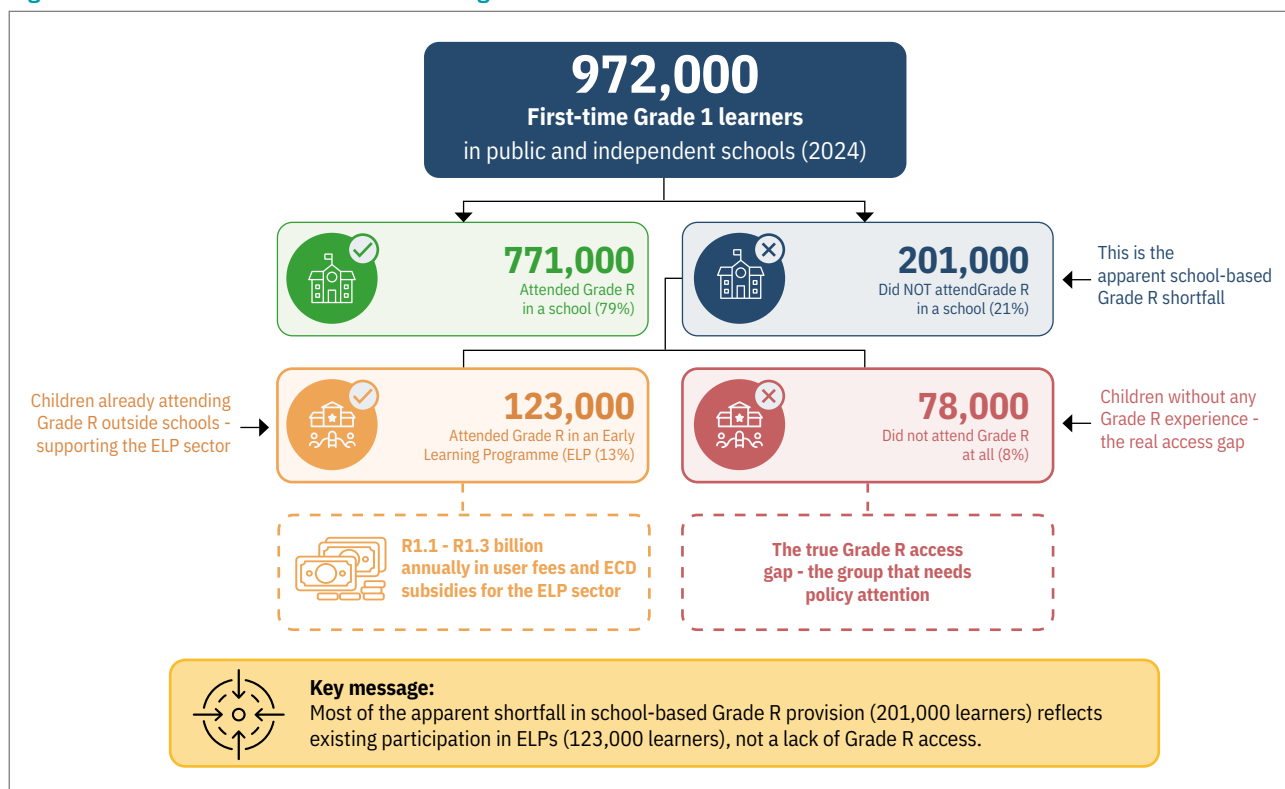
What did we find?

This policy brief summarises findings from a new study, Gaps, capacity, and displacement: Understanding Grade R provision in South Africa, by Gabrielle Wills and Grace Leach (2026). The study used administrative school records from the Learner Unit Record Information Tracking System (LURITS), learner survey data from the 2022 South African Systemic Evaluation (SASE), and ELP data from the Thrive by Five Index 2024 (Giese et al., 2025) to examine the extent of Grade R provision outside schools in South Africa.

While the administrative data reflected an approximate shortfall of 201,000 Grade R places in public and independent schools, SASE 2022 suggests that much of this gap was already being met through ELPs. Using sample-survey data, we estimated that around 123,000 (61%) of this apparent shortfall in Grade R places was accommodated through non-school-based Grade R provision.

The evidence implies that the remaining unmet need is considerably smaller than often assumed. We estimate that around 78,000 learners nationally entered Grade 1 in 2024 without having attended either school-based Grade R or Grade R in an ELP. This represents about 8% of the first-time Grade 1 cohort in public and independent schools.

Figure 1: Estimated Grade R attendance among first-time Grade 1 learners in 2024



Sources: Anonymised LURITS 2023-2024 data, SASE 2022, Thrive by Five Index 2024. Own calculations.

Table 1: First-time Grade 1 learners not accommodated in any school-based Grade R, with rough estimates of those not attending Grade R at all and attending Grade R outside of school, by province

	A. Number of first-time Grade 1s in all schools in 2024a	First-time Grade 1s not accommodated in any school-based Grade R ^a		Rough estimate: Did not attend Grade R at all ^b		Rough estimate: Attended Grade R outside of school (in ELP) ^b	
		Number	Percent of A	Number	Percent of A	Number	Percent of A
EC	122,482	15,466	13%	7,023	6%	8,443	7%
FS	48,662	11,620	24%	5,163	11%	6,457	13%
GP	206,365	79,723	39%	18,925	9%	60,798	29%
KZ	196,216	28,286	14%	10,804	6%	17,482	9%
LP	128,365	6,025	5%	13,236 c	10% c	-7,211 c	-6% c
MP	83,592	16,104	19%	5,817	7%	10,287	12%
NC	23,068	3,527	15%	2,286	10%	1,241	5%
NW	65,070	11,316	17%	9,113	14%	2,203	3%
WC	98,272	28,820	29%	7,489	8%	21,331	22%
SA	972,267	201,075	21%	77,919	8%	123,156	13%

Notes:

^aBased on anonymised LURITS 2023–2024 administrative data. Own calculations from Wills & Leach (2026) and briefly described in Box 1.

^bBased on corroborating anonymised LURITS 2023-2024 data against sample-based SASE 2022 parent and learner self-reported data on Grade R attendance. Own calculations from Wills & Leach (2026) and briefly described in Box 1.

^cSASE 2022 estimates are sample-based and subject to estimation error. Grade R coverage may have improved between when the SASE 2022 Grade 3 and 6 cohorts attended Grade R (2016 and 2019) and the year 2023 when the 2024 Grade 1 cohort attended Grade R. This timing mismatch may also account for the negative ELP Grade R estimates for Limpopo province.

Box 1: Method used to calculate the estimates in Table 1

The analysis estimates how first-time Grade 1 learners can be divided into three groups according to where, or whether, they attended Grade R: (1) school-based Grade R; (2) Grade R outside of school (e.g. in an ELP); and (3) no Grade R.

We first estimate the number of first-time Grade 1 learners in public and independent ordinary schools in year *t* using anonymised LURITS 2023-2024 data. This is calculated by subtracting estimated Grade 1 repeaters from total Grade 1 enrolment. Following Gustafsson (2024), adjustments are made for learners lost between years in the administrative data.

We then estimate the number who attended school-based Grade R. Again, anonymised administrative learner records are used to identify the number of learners moving from Grade R in a public or independent school in year *t*-1 into Grade 1 in year *t*, with adjustments for Grade R and Grade 1 repetition and inconsistencies in longitudinal administrative records. Subtracting this group from the first-time Grade 1 cohort provides an estimate of the apparent shortfall in school-based Grade R provision.

Not all learners in this apparent shortfall, however, did not attend Grade R. To estimate the number who attended Grade R in an ELP, we use survey-based estimates from SASE 2022 of the proportion of Grade 3 or 6 learners who previously attended Grade R. Applying this participation rate to the first-time Grade 1 cohort gives an estimate of total Grade R participation. We then subtract the number estimated to have attended school-based Grade R. The remainder represents learners who attended Grade R outside the school system, primarily in ELPs.

Finally, the number who did not attend Grade R at all is calculated as the remainder after subtracting estimated school- and ELP-based Grade R participation from the total first-time Grade 1 cohort.

The resulting figures should be interpreted as estimates rather than precise counts. Estimates of prior Grade R attendance are derived from sample-based survey responses, while differences in the timing and coverage of the survey and administrative datasets introduce additional uncertainty.

Why does this matter?

The requirement that compulsory Grade R be located within schools creates significant new implementation and resourcing challenges for provincial education departments. Of a first-time national cohort of 972,000 Grade 1 learners in 2024, about 201,000 had not attended Grade R in a school. This gap of 201,000 Grade R places represents about 6,700 Grade R classrooms in schools - assuming 30 Grade R learners in a class and that this average applies across all schools. If we focus on first-time Grade 1 learners in public schools, about 181,500 (20%) were not accommodated in public school-based Grade R the previous year.

Provincial education departments may face pressure to expand school-based Grade R provision for children who are already participating in ELPs (and can afford the fees in those ELPs), rather than focusing resources on those who remain excluded.

The consequences are likely to vary across contexts.

Non-school-based Grade R provision is concentrated in relatively better-resourced communities. Over half of learners (66,000) attending Grade R outside schools ultimately enrol in Quintile 4 and 5 public schools, and about half (60,000) of all those attending non-school-based Grade R are located in Gauteng.

This suggests that compulsory school-based Grade R legislation may disproportionately affect ELPs serving middle- to upper-income households, particularly in Gauteng. These families may also have preferences for Grade R provision in ELPs rather than schools for reasons including the convenience of ECD centres being located closer to home, established relationships of trust between caregivers and practitioners, the play-based nature of Grade R programming in ECD centres and the greater flexibility of operating hours, which allows working parents to drop children off earlier and collect them later (Meterlerkamp, 2026). This may be a particularly important consideration in provinces like Gauteng with higher employment rates. BELA fails to recognise these important realities.

BELA addresses Grade R access at a time when participation is already widespread, while disrupting the mixed system of school- and non-school-based provision that has supported these high participation rates.

Implications for the ELP sector

If ELPs offering quality Grade R do not register as schools, the annual financial losses to the national ELP system – through lost user fees and ECD subsidies – could be substantial. According to the Thrive by Five Index 2024, around 27% of principals in ELPs reported that their programme had Grade R classes.

The prevalence of Grade R offerings is much higher in wealthier ELP settings. Only 4% of ELPs charging less than R150 per month offered Grade R, compared with 37% of those charging R300–R600, 58% of those charging R600–R1,680, and two-thirds of those charging R1,680 or more per month. Fee amounts of R150, R600 and R1,680 correspond approximately to the 25th, 75th and 90th percentiles of the monthly fee distribution, respectively. Based on our estimate of 123,000 learners in ELPs, Grade R-related user fee and ECD subsidy income could be as much as R1.3 billion annually. The 14% of ELPs offering unregistered Grade R classes are most financially exposed to the displacement of Grade R enrolment arising from the new BELA provisions, with an estimated R500 million in annual income at risk.

More research is needed to determine whether the displacement of older children from ELPs may undermine the financial sustainability of some programmes, leading to potential concerns about “crowding out” enrolments in ELPs (Bassok et al. 2014). Income generated through fees and subsidies for Grade R learners may help cross-subsidise services for younger children. However, the extent to which this occurs depends on existing income received, existing cost structures – particularly how much is paid to Grade R practitioners – and whether ELPs register as schools offering Grade R.

Policy recommendations

The findings point to six considerations for the implementation of compulsory Grade R and future expansion of early learning provision:

- 1. Prioritise the remaining access gap.** Expansion efforts should focus on the approximately 78,000 children who remain outside all forms of Grade R provision.
- 2. Retain a mixed provisioning model.** ELPs currently play an important role and should continue to form part of South Africa's Grade R system. This is particularly important in Gauteng, where ELPs play a significant role in Grade R provision. Furthermore, Grade R enrolment makes a significant contribution to the financial sustainability of ELPs and their capacity to support access to early learning.
- 3. Support ELP registration.** Provincial education departments should provide practical assistance to ELPs seeking registration as independent schools, particularly where public school capacity to support Grade R provision is constrained.
- 4. Target expansion where need is greatest.** New Grade R investment should prioritise poorer communities and areas with genuine supply shortages, rather than replacing existing provision through ELPs serving middle-income households.
- 5. Monitor unintended consequences.** Government should track the impact of BELA on ELP enrolment, financial sustainability and access to programmes for younger children.
- 6. Locate future pre-Grade R expansion within the ELP sector.** Efforts to expand access for 3–4-year-olds should build on the existing ELP system rather than extending compulsory schooling downward into earlier years. Introducing a compulsory pre-Grade R year in schools would risk further destabilising the ELP sector and place South Africa outside prevailing global norms in early childhood education policy (UNESCO, 2021).

Conclusion

Grade R participation in South Africa is already widespread and approaching universal coverage. The policy challenge is therefore increasingly to close the remaining gaps in access through targeted approaches, improve quality, and ensure that changes to Grade R policy do not inadvertently undermine the ELP sector. A coordinated approach that recognises the complementary roles of schools and ELPs offers the best prospect for expanding equitable access to quality early learning.

References

Bassok, D., Fitzpatrick, M. & Loeb, S. (2014). Does state preschool crowd-out private provision? The impact of universal preschool on the childcare sector in Oklahoma and Georgia. *Journal of Urban Economics*, 83, 18–33.

Giese, S., Pettersson Gelande, G., Cook, C., Carnegie, T., Tredoux, C., Dawes, A., Biersteker, L., Beukes, S., Pahla, Z., & Kika-Mistry, J. (2025). *Thrive by Five Index 2024: National Findings*. Cape Town: DataDrive2030.

Gustafsson, M. (2024). To what extent are learners targeted for Grade R currently not in school? (unpublished report).

Metelkamp, T. (2026) Early childhood development sector remains 'vital' but underresourced partner in provision of compulsory Grade R. *Daily Maverick*, 1 February 2026. Available: <https://www.dailymaverick.co.za/article/2026-02-01-early-childhood-development-sector-remains-vital-but-underresourced-partner-in/>

UNESCO. (2021). *Right to pre-primary education: A global study*. Paris: UNESCO. Available: <https://doi.org/10.54675/NWYU4732>

Wills, G & Leach, G. (2026) *Gaps, capacity, and displacement: Understanding Grade R provision in South Africa*. Cape Town: Ilifa Labantwana.

 www.ilifalabantwana.co.za

 info@ilifalabantwana.co.za

 [Ilifa Labantwana](#)

 [@ilifalabantwana9729](#)

 Cape Town, South Africa

