

GROW ECD



Report
2024/2025

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The Grow ECD Approach

A PARADIGM SHIFT IN EARLY LEARNING

Grow ECD started in 2014 as part of the Taking Care of Business group.

We have set out to create a holistic model that makes running a sustainable 5-star Early Childhood Development (ECD) centre possible for all. We do that by equipping and connecting ECD businesses with the technology, skills, support and resources they need to provide quality early learning, at scale, sustainably.

We are shifting the narrative in the ECD sector by altering the mindset of ECD centre owners from charity-focused to that of social entrepreneurs.

This increases self-esteem and agency among centre owners. As a result, they become determined to offer a quality service, use business principles to run a more professional centre, comply with legislation, and begin to understand that financial sustainability is a crucial part of their potential success.

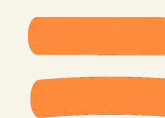
OUR UNIQUE APPROACH TO EARLY LEARNING INCORPORATES SMALL BUSINESS PRINCIPLES

This formula becomes a tangible mantra from which we can engage ECD centre owners on the components of a 5-star ECD centre.

Heart for children



Head for business



Sustainable ECD business

- Professional, competent teachers
- Play-based curriculum and structured daily programme
- Relevant educational resources
- Safe, conducive learning environment
- Learner development assessment
- Engaged parents
- Compliance with ECD programme registration requirements

- Management and leadership skills
- Money management skills
- Compliance with Partial Care registration requirements
- Compliance with applicable laws
- Efficient administration and reporting
- Investing in the business for growth and quality

- Businesses are financially viable
- Teachers are paid a living wage
- Centres are registered
- Qualifying centres can apply for a government subsidy
- Cashflow is well managed
- Parents value and pay for the service
- 5-star quality education for every child

Services we offer ECD Centres



Free Mobile App

Tools, resources and online training to run a professional preschool, save time on admin and engage parents.

- Android app for owners, teachers and parents.
- Admin and reporting tools.
- Hundreds of free downloads.
- Data-free online learning.
- App Helpdesk.



Free Online Curriculum

Digital NCF-aligned, play-based curriculum for 0-2 and 2-5 year olds.

- Easy-to-use daily teacher's guide with step-by-step instructions.
- Includes videos, voice notes, photos, songs and rhymes.
- Data-free.
- Only available through the Grow mobile app.



ECD Business Accelerator Training

6-part in-person course. Learn how to run your preschool like a business and provide quality education.

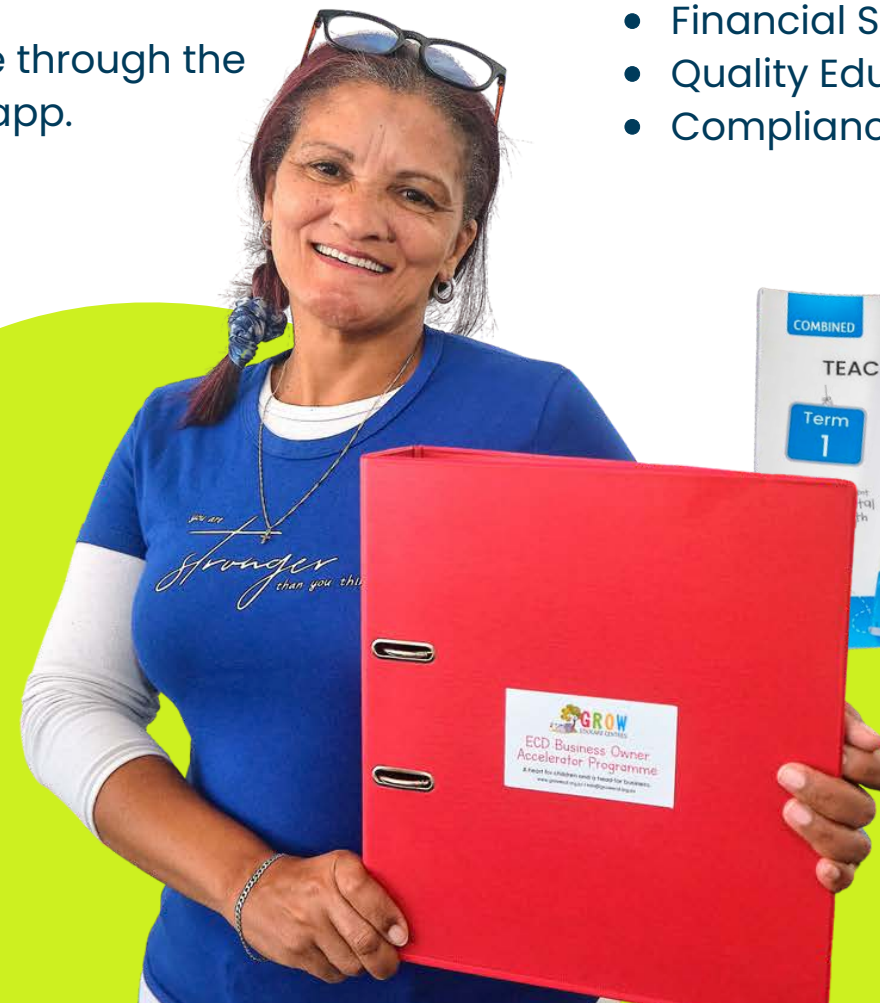
- Leadership
- Me and My Money
- Financial Sustainability
- Quality Education
- Compliance and Registration



ECD Small Business Programme

3-year support programme to improve your business sustainability and education quality. Includes:

- **Education Support**
 - Curriculum
 - Classroom kit
 - Teacher training
 - Education mentoring
 - Baby programme (optional extra)
- **Business Support**
 - Business training
 - Business mentoring
 - Registration guidance
 - Low-cost ECD finance



GROW ECD

2024/25 Key Stats

Technology Platform

5,924 Active App Users (Centre Owners, Teachers and Parents)

3,572 ECD Centres Actively Using Our App

82,057 Learners Enrolled on The App

2,108 People Accessed Online Training

1,128 Teachers Used Our Online Curriculum

54,746 Resources Downloaded

ECD Small Business Accelerator

449 Centre Owners Completed Our ECD Accelerator

4 Provinces Hosted Accelerator Training

Sector Collaboration

25 Organisations collaborating with Grow ECD

Small Business Programme

232 ECD Centres in The Grow ECD Programme Network (includes 185 Active And 47 Graduates)

11,332 Children at Grow Programme Centres

1,552 Owners and Teachers Trained In Person

84% Of 4-5-year-old learners met expected developmental milestones.

70% ELOM Results

53 Loans Issued

R1,8m In Micro-finance Loans Provided

R392k In Grant Funding Provided

Introduction

QUALITY EARLY LEARNING CAN UNLOCK OUR NATION'S POTENTIAL

Access to quality early learning is one of the most powerful levers for breaking the cycle of poverty. In South Africa, too many children still enter Grade R developmentally unprepared, and too many early learning centres still operate without the resources and skills to address the issue. In a country where inequality is high and meaningful work is scarce, especially for women, we need to **help South Africans operate quality early learning centres as a viable business opportunity** so that we can address under-employment while also providing quality education for our youngest citizens.

Grow ECD has been operating for over a decade, and our vision is to see 5-star early learning happening in every neighbourhood. We do this by equipping and connecting preschool owners and teachers with the skills, tools, and resources they need to provide quality education and run successful, sustainable preschools.

In 2025, Grow ECD continued to scale its operations and impact, while remaining fully committed to excellence, service delivery, and sustainable outcomes for its ECD centres, learners, and our partners. We grew our Small Business network by 69 new ECD centres (our centres now support over 11,300 children every day). Our free mobile apps have become the most popular ECD apps in South Africa with over 5,900 active users. Our diverse collaborations with partner organisations across the country have unlocked opportunities and resources for thousands of learners and are helping to strengthen the ECD sector through data-driven decision-making. Grow ECD has also partnered with the Government to support the Bana Pele registration drive and secured accreditation from DBE for our curriculum.

We believe that investing in early education is not just a moral imperative, it's a strategic one. The earlier we invest in human potential, the bigger the return.

GIRAFFE: OUR MOBILE TECHNOLOGY PLATFORM

The Giraffe, Meerkat and Lion Apps continue to be Grow's most scalable and inclusive tool, providing ECD centre owners, teachers and parents with free access to online training, interactive curriculum content, classroom, business and financial management tools, assessment templates, downloadable resources and more.



South Africa's most popular ECD app:

- ✓ Over 5,900 active users across all provinces.
- ✓ Top-used features: lesson planning tools (curriculum), daily attendance tracking, learner assessments, and downloadable resources.
- ✓ Great content: 15 online training modules and over 450 downloadable resources.
- ✓ Play-based curriculum: Free, media-rich curriculum for 0-5-year-olds to guide teachers with structured, theme based lesson plans.
- ✓ High data usage sections such as downloadable resources, online curriculum and online training is data free across all major mobile networks, making the app accessible and affordable for all South Africans.

This year, we were proud to join the Injini EdTech Fellowship, which supported our tech development, mentorship, and research. With the growing demand for the Giraffe app, we've completed scoping for Giraffe 2.0, the next-generation version being developed in collaboration with The Reach Trust, set to launch in 2026.

FREE DIGITAL CURRICULUM

Grow ECD's play-based curriculum and online teacher training modules continue to be a highly valued component of our support model. It's popularity and effectiveness led us to move from providing the curriculum as a paid-for subscription service to a free resource for all ECD centres using our app in February 2025. This is our way of expanding access to high quality, locally relevant resources at scale, and is our gift to the ECD sector. Since then, **the 0-2-year-old and the 2-5-year-old curriculum has been used by 1,128 teachers to plan and prepare their daily classroom activities.**

This year the Grow ECD curriculum received 2 accreditations:

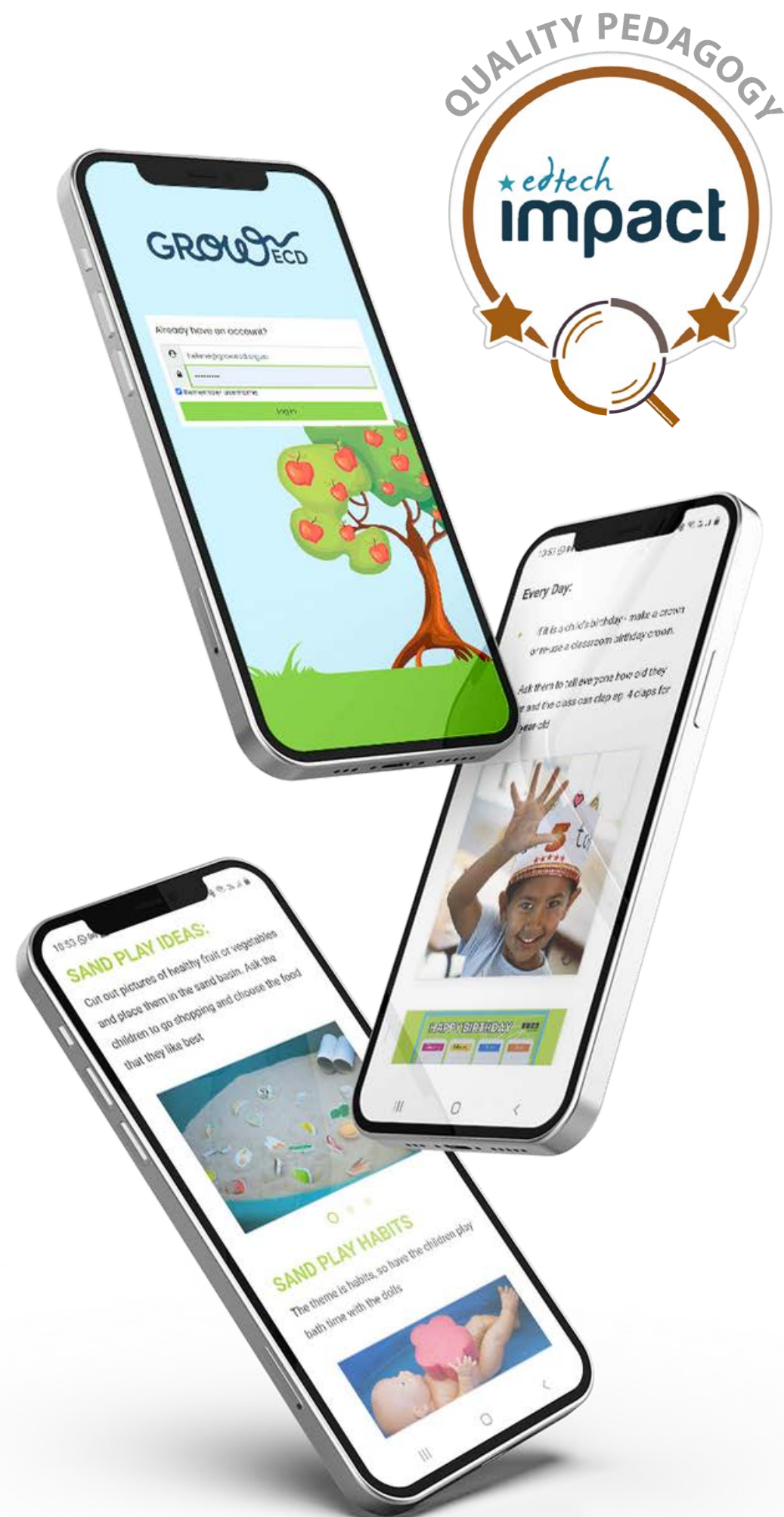
1. A 93% pedagogical score from Education Alliance Finland
2. Curriculum approval and registration with the Department of Basic Education, Western Cape

Many teachers in low-tech settings still face barriers to digital access, requiring consistent access to data, smart devices and more technical training and support. We continue to see a gap in content confidence among under-qualified teachers, especially those new to play-based methodologies. In response, Grow has expanded its use of voice notes, visuals, video content and interactive workshops combined with our in-person mentoring strategies to support teachers of every level. We have also developed practical "how-to" resources to guide centres that have resource constraints. These guides show teachers how to make educational equipment alternatives from everyday and upcycled items.

Before Grow, our school had some resources and a curriculum, but the teachers were not using them correctly. To cut down on the teachers' workload, we really needed a tried and tested curriculum.

Grow ECD was able to offer us a play-based curriculum with all lessons explained online. Now, my teachers do not stress looking for activities to do with the kids. They have become super confident and handle their lessons with enthusiasm.

Shireen Jacobs
HAPPY HEARTS PRE-SCHOOL



ECD ACCELERATOR

Our ECD Business Accelerator has been a remarkable success, meeting the needs of ECD owners while addressing critical gaps in the sector. It's more than just a course; it's a journey that has empowered ECD centre owners who are passionate about children to develop their business skills and mindset.

This year, 449 centre owners attended and completed the accelerator, bringing the total number of ECD centre owners who have benefited since the launch in 2023 to 1,169.

The Grow ECD Accelerator is also an effective gateway into the Grow ECD ecosystem, offering centre owners a six-week introduction to the business, leadership, and compliance fundamentals needed to run a successful preschool, as well as the practical requirements for providing quality education. During the accelerator training course, we help centre owners realise that they are indeed social entrepreneurs and unlock the principles behind having a heart for children and a head for business.





SMALL BUSINESS PROGRAMME

Building sustainable ECD centres, one step at a time

In 2025, the SBP (Small Business Programme) welcomed 69 new centres, and we now support 232 centres, resulting in over 11,300 children benefitting each day. We also celebrated the graduation of several centres, who will remain part of the Grow ECD network and our community of practice.

The Grow SBP is more than a training intervention, it's a three-year transformation journey that helps preschool owners become confident social entrepreneurs who understand what it takes to offer 5-star early learning. In a sector where most centres struggle with compliance, funding, and management systems, the SBP provides the building blocks for long-term sustainability.

Each participating SBP centre receives a powerful bundle of support, combining:

- **Access to low-cost loans** for infrastructure, resources, and compliance.
- A **free play-based curriculum**, available online and in printed kits.
- Our **classroom kit** of educational equipment.
- Ongoing practical **business and education training**.
- Ongoing **mentorship and coaching** to bring theory to practice.
- **Registration guidance** and support.

This wraparound support ensures that centre owners aren't just learning, they're acting and growing with each engagement. While our Small Business Programme is heavily subsidised to ensure accessibility, we require our participants to invest to access the service and show their commitment. Shared investment increases ownership, responsibility and implementation follow-through. On average, Grow ECD invests R200 000 worth of programmatic interventions into an ECD centre over three years.

We ask ECD centres to contribute by purchasing their classroom kit. This year we were able to make our classroom kit even more affordable, reducing the price from R40 000 to R27 000 per classroom of 30 learners. We were able to achieve this massive cost reduction thanks to significant support from our supplier, Grow Learning Company.

IMPACT STORY

Bavumile Goba, Sithokozile Play Group, KwaZulu-Natal

Before joining Grow ECD, Bavumile's centre faced many of the common struggles plaguing under-resourced preschools: a lack of structured curriculum, minimal access to training or materials, overwhelming administrative burdens, and a deep sense of isolation. "We were doing our best," she recalls, "but without guidance, structure, or support, it was hard to know if we were truly giving children what they needed." Her passion for early childhood development never wavered, but she knew she needed help to transform that passion into consistent quality.

"Since joining the programme, we've seen a big transformation! The school now has from a well-structured curriculum, access to educational materials, and better administration. With the support of Grow ECD, our preschool has become more organised, efficient, and professional. I feel proud because we have a more engaging and stimulating learning environment for the children.

**The programme helped me become a better leader,
and my centre now runs with professionalism and purpose."**

"Previously, I felt so overwhelmed by admin, uncertain about curriculum planning, and I felt alone in my professional journey. However, with the support and guidance of Grow, I have gained confidence, knowledge, and a sense of community. I am now better equipped to lead my school."

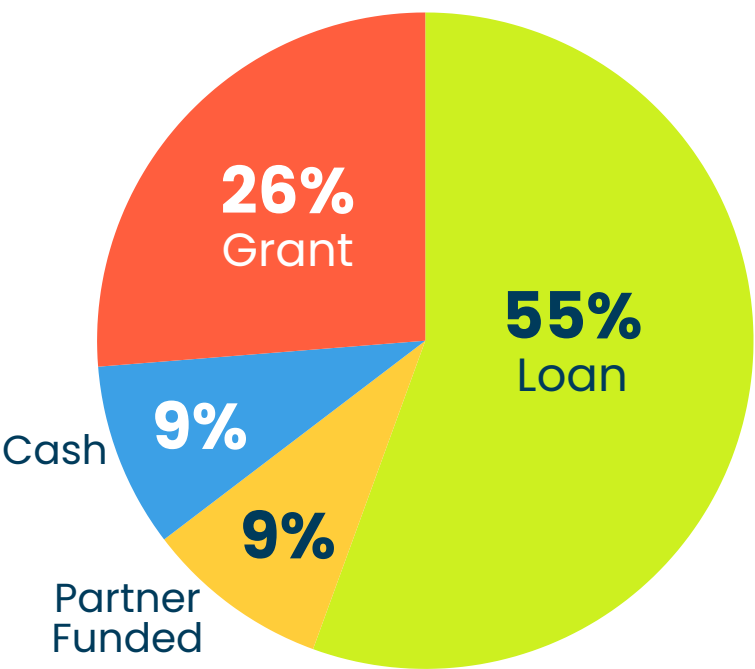
Bavumile Goba
SITHOKOZILE PLAY GROUP



LOW-COST ECD FINANCE IMPROVES FINANCIAL INCLUSION

This year we helped to unlock R2,9mill in investments in our SBP centres through our blended low-cost ECD Finance options. This includes a combination of loans (R1,88mill), grants and partner funding (R845,000) and cash (R245,000) invested by ECD centres directly into classroom kits and infrastructure upgrades.

To make this investment more accessible and affordable for ECD small businesses, we offer blended finance options through radical new risk-assessment models in partnership with Spoon Money, a registered credit provider. This year, we worked together to provide 53 new loans. We continue to have an excellent loan repayment rate of 90%, and since inception of our low cost ECD finance services we have only written off 2 loans, both with severe mitigating circumstances. This initiative is helping us to set a new narrative on the investability of the ECD sector.



Total Blended Finance 2024-25

LEARNER OBSERVATION RESULTS DRIVE DATA-DRIVEN DECISION MAKING

4,427

Learners observed by teachers in 2024.

Twice a year, our Small Business Programme centres complete learner assessments and observations to help us understand learners’ developmental journeys. This year, 4,427 learners were observed across the 2-to-6-year-old age groups, using our in-app learner observation tool, which helps teachers review progress, for each child , against their age group. During the observation periods, our education team assist teachers with these reviews, ensuring accuracy and consistency in scoring. Teachers also receive training in advance to help them use the learner observation tools and rubric effectively and to help them turn their results into practical reports straight from the app (for easy sharing with parents) and insights (to help them address gaps).

84%

Of 4-5 year old learners met expected developmental milestones.

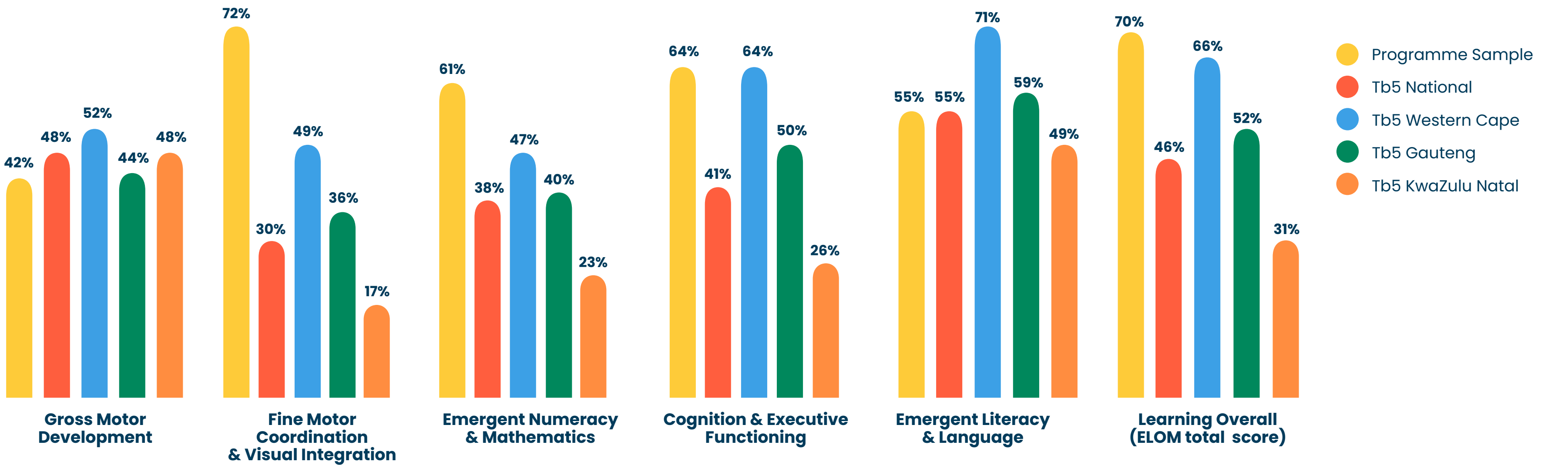
The feedback from results have been mainly positive, notably for the 4-5 years age group (with 84% of learners assessed “on track” for meeting expected developmental milestones) and the 5-6 years age group (90% on track).

Grow ECD also uses the observation feedback, combined with our ELOM results and our mentor-visit feedback reports, to identify risk areas and concerns. Data-driven decision making allows us to respond fast and deploy resources where they are most needed, while also customising our implementation plan for each classroom and region.

This year the observations highlighted gross motor integration as areas needing improvement, consistent with feedback we have received from our mentors. To address this, a new teacher training module focusing on this domain has been developed, along with additional mentorship and support for teachers.

ELOM RESULTS SHOW OUR CHILDREN ARE THRIVING

In 2024, Grow ECD conducted a formal dipstick assessment of 91 learners across three provinces using the **ELOM (Early Learning Outcomes Measure)**, South Africa’s standardised tool for measuring school readiness in children aged 4–5. The results were deeply encouraging: **70% of children in Grow-supported centres were developmentally on track**, significantly ahead of the national average of 45.7% reported in the Thrive by Five Index.



Grow ECD programme results vs. 4 sets of Thrive by Five Data

Children performed particularly well in fine motor coordination (72%), cognition (64%), and numeracy (61%), affirming the strength of our play-based curriculum and educator development model. The ELOM also surfaced areas for focused improvement, particularly in gross motor development, where only 42% of learners met the age-appropriate benchmark.

Notably, 80% of learners demonstrated strong social-relational skills, and 76% showed emotional readiness for school, a testament to the nurturing, holistic environments created by Grow-supported centres. These results not only validate our model but also provide us with a roadmap for targeted programme refinement in 2026 and beyond.

OUR STAR CENTRE ASSESSMENT

Shining a light on what quality looks like

The STAR Assessment Tool was developed as a structured, standardised, and practical way to evaluate the **business, operational, and educational health of ECD centres**. Previously, we had monitored these components, but often through separate, disjointed documents and processes conducted at different times. We realised the need for a single monitoring and evaluation system that would provide us, our centres, and our funders with a consistent, cross-functional view of centre performance across all the key aspects of running a successful ECD centre.

Our assessment framework was built on our learnings from ELOM, QAAS, the national Vangasali registration frameworks and input from several other ECD support organisations. The framework was refined through partner use cases and practical trials, then formally rolled out in 2024 as STAR, a more comprehensive and purpose-fit instrument aligned to the new DBE registration standards (Bana Pele) already embedded.

STAR ("Support, Track, Assess, Reflect") was designed as a baseline-to-graduation assessment tool used throughout a centre's three-year journey in the Small Business Programme (SBP).

The STAR Assessment tool evaluates centres across five key dimensions:



Evaluations are conducted by trained external assessors who understand the realities of running an ECD centre. This independent process ensures objectivity and trust. Importantly, assessors provide immediate feedback during the site visit, helping centre owners understand their results in real time, even before their debrief with the Grow ECD team. This year we have already conducted 162 assessments (53 baseline, 65 at 12 months, 30 at 24 months, six at 36 months and eight ad hoc assessments for partners).

This assessment enables Grow and its partners to:

- 1 Identify support needs at the outset (baseline).
- 2 Track progress at 12-, 24-, and 36-month intervals.
- 3 Give actionable feedback and guidance to centre owners, increasing co-ownership.
- 4 Measure growth in both compliance and quality.
- 5 Help centre owners stay motivated as they can see progress made (not just results).

The STAR Assessment is helping us all grow stronger

STAR results often spark powerful “aha” moments, helping centre owners shift from reactive to proactive thinking. This shows that external evaluations are not only beneficial for ECD service providers but for centre owners too.

- For Grow: it enables data-driven decision-making and tailored support.
- For centres: it offers clear goals, structure, and encouragement.
- For the sector: it sets a benchmark for ECD enterprise performance and accountability.
- For partners: it provides peace of mind that their investments are unlocking measurable impact.

We believe the STAR Assessment Tool will become an invaluable system-wide resource, enabling us to measure what matters, allocate resources wisely, and keep every stakeholder focused on what truly supports thriving ECD centres. It is a scalable, credible tool that aligns with national ECD priorities while also speaking to the hearts and minds of the centre owners who run these vital pre-schools every day.



Initial insights from STAR:

- At baseline, the lowest-rated areas are typically governance and legal requirements, learning programme quality, and policies and procedures.
- Within 12 months, the most significant gains are often seen in learning programme quality and implementation.
- By 36 months, the strongest improvements are typically in governance and legal compliance, policies and procedures, followed by staffing and learning programmes.

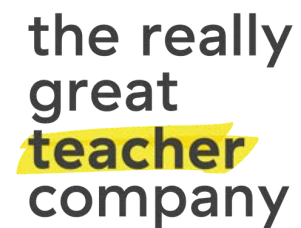
PARTNERSHIPS THAT POWER IMPACT

Grow ECD's work would not be possible without the powerful partnerships we've built across the public, private, and nonprofit sectors.

- ✓ Grow ECD joined the National Intersectoral Forum and has signed up as an official NPO partner to the DBE Bana Pele mass registration drive.
- ✓ We have strategic collaborations with CLEAR, IMBE, Penreach and other umbrella organisations to expand reach and build capacity in the sector.
- ✓ We hosted satellite ECD Accelerators with partners Zensar and VW Community Trust to reach more rural preschools.
- ✓ A collaboration with Environ is currently benefiting 1,500 children with a daily healthy breakfast.
- ✓ Our Book Dash literacy initiative has distributed over 15,000 books to families.
- ✓ JET Education Services is working with Grow ECD to validate the reliability of Grow's learner observation and assessment tool.
- ✓ Kaizenvest is making our ECD Accelerator affordable by subsidising the cost and supporting our low-cost ECD finance initiatives.
- ✓ Spoon Money, a registered credit provider, is co-creating our microfinance lending programme.
- ✓ Grow Learning Company has been a long-standing strategic partner and supplier of equipment.
- ✓ Michaelhouse Community Partnership Trust and Wild Tomorrow engaged Grow ECD as a service provider for 8 ECD centres in Pietermaritzburg and 2 ECD centres in Hluhluwe, respectively.
- ✓ ShareForce funded regional training competitions and resource subsidies aligned with STAR assessment gaps.
- ✓ Care for Education supported our centres with invaluable Lego Playboxes, which we integrate into our teacher training and play-based curriculum.
- ✓ Grow ECD was proud to represent the voice of implementing organisations on the National ECD Alliance board this year. Our participation brought a practical lens to qualifications, policy and training discussions, grounded in the realities and needs of ECD centres on the ground.



OUR ECD PARTNERS



Contact us

 021 531 2134

 info@growecd.org.za

 growecd.org.za

