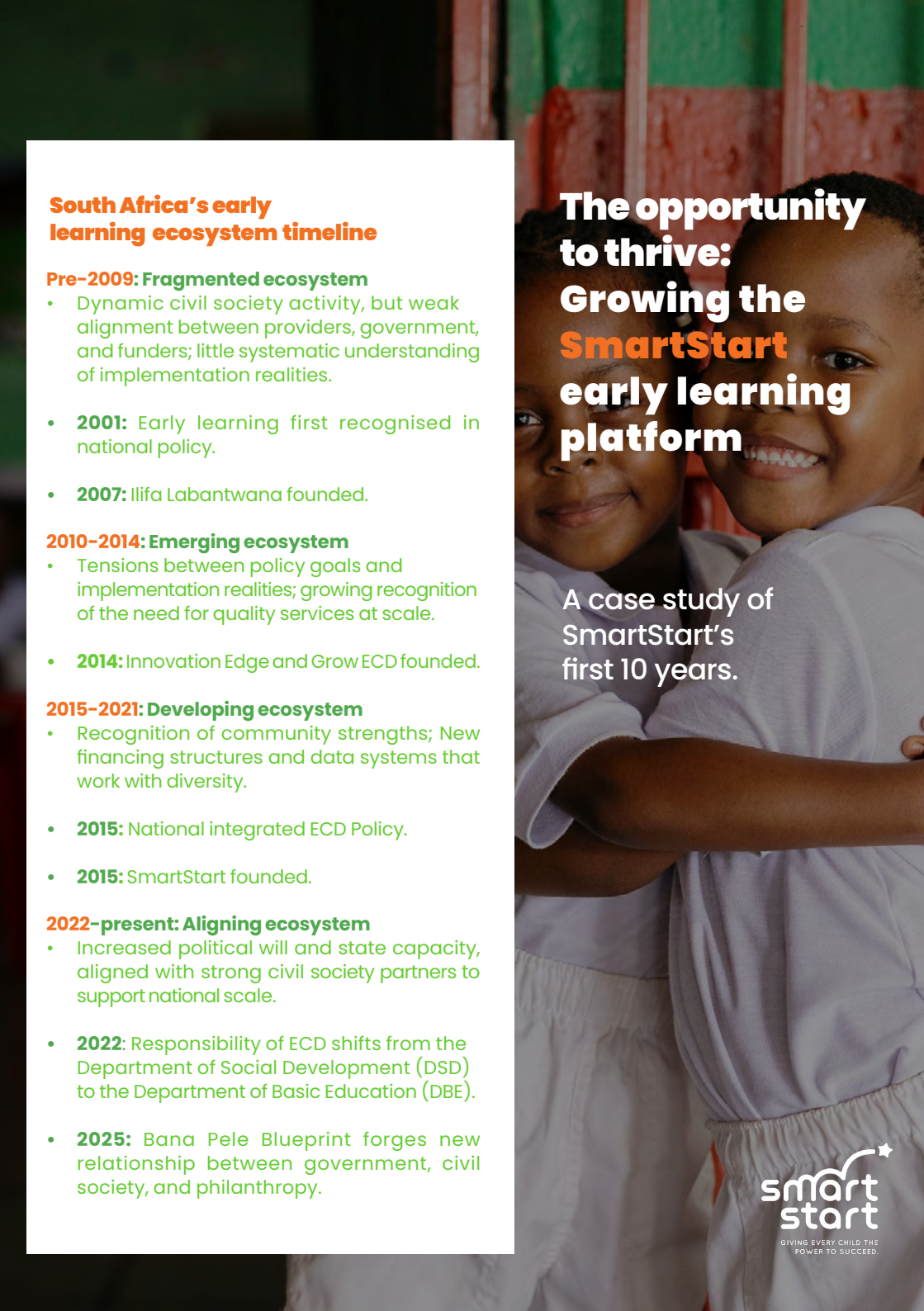


South Africa's early learning ecosystem timeline

Pre-2009: Fragmented ecosystem

- Dynamic civil society activity, but weak alignment between providers, government, and funders; little systematic understanding of implementation realities.
- **2001:** Early learning first recognised in national policy.
- **2007:** Ilifa Labantwana founded.

2010-2014: Emerging ecosystem

- Tensions between policy goals and implementation realities; growing recognition of the need for quality services at scale.
- **2014:** Innovation Edge and Grow ECD founded.

2015-2021: Developing ecosystem

- Recognition of community strengths; New financing structures and data systems that work with diversity.
- **2015:** National integrated ECD Policy.
- **2015:** SmartStart founded.

2022-present: Aligning ecosystem

- Increased political will and state capacity, aligned with strong civil society partners to support national scale.
- **2022**: Responsibility of ECD shifts from the Department of Social Development (DSD) to the Department of Basic Education (DBE).
- **2025:** Bana Pele Blueprint forges new relationship between government, civil society, and philanthropy.

The opportunity to thrive: Growing the SmartStart early learning platform

A case study of SmartStart's first 10 years.

smart start
GIVING EVERY CHILD THE POWER TO SUCCEED.

1. Background

Investments in early learning offer strong returns for societies and economies. In South Africa, early learning opportunities before children enter formal schooling are crucially important to address the historical inequities of apartheid and prepare the future leaders of a democratic nation. Currently, access to quality early learning programmes (ELPs) remains uneven: more than one million children currently lack a place to go for early learning. However, growing political will and the recognition of the importance of early learning has opened a unique window of opportunity to provide quality early learning at scale for all South African children.

Building a thriving ecosystem for early learning in South Africa means embracing diversity. Early learning in the country is not provided through a formal government system, but rather through small, independent providers, predominantly women, who run early learning enterprises embedded in local communities. South Africa's early learning landscape is "multi-modal," meaning that programmes occur in a variety of settings, including dedicated centres as well as community playgroups, faith-based organisations, mobile libraries, and private homes. This diversity is critical to achieving scale, since services can reach more children and meet the various needs of families. Diversity also contributes a powerful "triple benefit": quality care for children, sustainable livelihoods for entrepreneurial women, and increased economic participation for parents and caregivers. Current estimates show that scaling up early learning in South Africa would create 300 000 new jobs, mainly in low-income townships and rural areas, while reducing childcare burdens for up to two million women.

With the opportunities of diversity, however, also come challenges. Current policies and systems, while well-intentioned, do not match the needs of on-the-ground realities. ELPs often operate in informal settings with limited resources and struggle to meet the registration requirements to access much-needed subsidies for children. Subsidies designed to supplement fees that parents often cannot afford are inadequate to cover the costs of delivering quality programmes. ELPs also require structured pedagogy and ongoing practitioner training to ensure consistent, developmentally appropriate learning experiences for all children. This fragmentation points to the need for a systems approach that supports practitioners throughout their journey, enabling expanded access to quality early learning at scale.

Within this context, SmartStart was established in 2015 with a vision to provide one million children access to quality early learning. Today, SmartStart's network of 16 000 ELPs delivers quality early learning to more than 200 000 children weekly with the aim of doubling the number of children served by 2028. Based on this journey, SmartStart is now shifting its focus to building the systems, capabilities, and partnerships for South Africa's early learning ecosystem to deliver universal access to early learning by 2030.

"In South Africa, the gap in access to quality early learning is 1.3 million, three-to-five year olds out of 3.5 million children. In order to close the early childhood care and education gap, we have to understand what assets we already have in these communities that we want to work with, and that's where we find amazing women who are loving, and interested in ensuring that all children thrive".

– Grace Matlhape, CEO, SmartStart Early Learning (Skoll Foundation Video)





2. SmartStart's 10-year learning journey

SmartStart was founded in 2015 with a vision to identify a scalable model for early learning in South Africa. It was seeded by investments from three local foundations: The DG Murray Trust, ELMA Foundation, and Yellowwoods Social Investments. Since that time, SmartStart has journeyed along a swift learning curve, starting as an experiment to develop a prototype for early learning, to adapting its model and growing a network of partners, and now opening its platform to support South Africa's ambition to achieve universal access. SmartStart's journey has been anchored by a strategic commitment to early learning's "triple benefit" to society: quality learning and care for children, sustainable livelihoods that empower women, and economic participation opportunities for parents and caregivers.

Visual summary: SmartStart results to-date

Figure 1: Proportion of children 'on track' at baseline and endline by domain

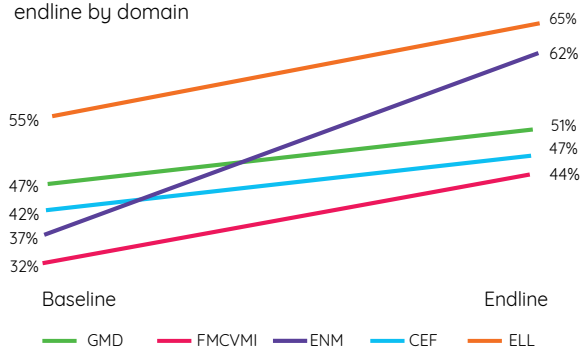


Figure 2: Proportion of children 'on track': Comparison of SmartStart and the Thrive by Five Index

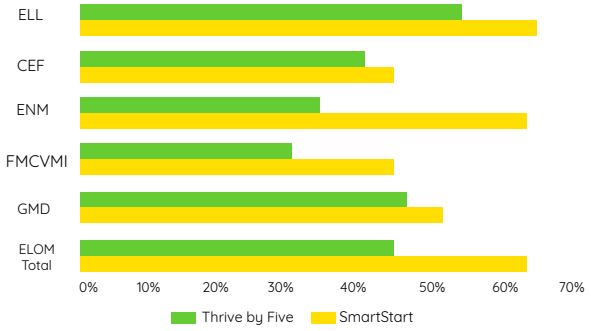
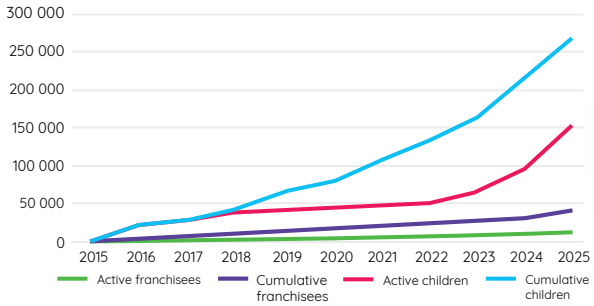


Figure 3: Scaling early learning provision



Phase One: Designing and demonstrating (2015–2019)

SmartStart set out with an early mission to identify a model for quality early learning that could scale in the context of South Africa. Prior to launch, the SmartStart team conducted a landscape analysis to comprehensively understand the early learning context in the country. This analysis confirmed that children living in the most marginalised conditions (children in the lowest income quintiles and in rural areas) had little to no access to ELPs. Based on this analysis, SmartStart began with the belief that a "light-touch" model for delivering quality programming would be the best way to offer a solution that could scale to meet demand quickly.

The first delivery model designed by SmartStart was a playgroup prototype that offered a three-hour structured curriculum for children ages three to five. This prototype delivered a "minimum dose" of early learning exposure in homes, community spaces, and faith-based venues in small groups of six to 12 children. Over this period, SmartStart concentrated on building an evidence-based pedagogical approach ("The Daily Routine") and a strong brand that could be easily recognised in communities. SmartStart worked to train practitioners to deliver a high-quality, standardised programme while also keeping costs affordable for families.



By 2019, SmartStart was supporting 13 partners to deliver high-quality early learning through 3 897 practitioners, reaching 36 795 children every week.

Lessons learned: Over five years, SmartStart developed its playgroup model and tested the franchise approach. This period revealed several learnings:

- **The playgroup prototype significantly increased school readiness**: An independent evaluation conducted in 2018 confirmed that the structured playgroup approach significantly improved developmental and learning outcomes for participating children. Using the Early Learning Outcome Measure (ELOM), a quality assessment tool developed in South Africa, the evaluators showed that the percentage of SmartStart children achieving the ELOM age progression standard increased from 32 percent at baseline to 62 percent at endline.
- **However, playgroups faced a "product-market fit" challenge in that they didn't meet the needs and preferences of parents and caregivers**: Parents and caregivers preferred full-time programmes offering care for children of working parents, and did not fully understand the value of paying for early learning if caregivers were already present in the home.
- **Fees paid by families were inadequate to sustain programmes**: Depending on fees alone to support high-quality, sustainable programmes proved financially unviable in low-income communities where families could not consistently afford the full cost of delivery. In the South African Early Childhood Review 2017, this issue is described as a 'ceiling' effect, with a child from a wealthy household having a 90 percent chance of attending an ELP compared with just 50 percent for children from the poorest households.
- **Building partnerships with civil society required trust-building**: In a competitive landscape, many organisations initially perceived SmartStart as a potential competitor for funding and influence rather than as a partner. Over time, consistent engagement and a demonstrated commitment to enabling the broader sector helped shift these perceptions.

Key shifts: Based on these learnings, SmartStart embarked on several shifts:

- **Redesigned the delivery model for multiple modalities**: With parent and caregiver preferences in mind, SmartStart redesigned its model to encompass multiple delivery modes, including playgroups, day mothers, and stand-alone early learning centres.
- **Built systems for scale, not just growth**: SmartStart began to invest in the systems, support structures, and technology that would enable economies of scale across diverse settings. For example, SmartStart developed a Programme Quality Assurance (PQA) tool with 34 ELP quality measures, including items such as how the learning space is resourced, consistent use of the Daily Routine, warm and respectful interactions, rich use of language, and interactive storytelling. This tool enables coaches to assess ELP developmental needs and provide targeted support on areas for improvement.
- **Grew partnerships rather than "delivery relationships"**: SmartStart realised that growing collaborative partnerships with franchisors was essential to ensuring long-term sustainability and local ownership.

Guiding framework: During this phase, SmartStart used the guiding framework of social franchising to design its approach to scale. Social franchising operates with the principles of commercial franchising, but with the aim to maximise social impact rather than profit. It features proven and replicable models, often with a set of minimum viable standards, that reliably deliver standardised outcomes. Social franchises build strong brands equated with quality and consistency as well as robust systems that ensure consistent service delivery through well-trained and supported franchisees.

"In South Africa, quality in early learning has historically been the focus. So SmartStart and our network of partners came in to push access and quality at the same time, making sure that we're not only solving for the children that already have access, but also building solutions for children that don't have access so they can catch up quite quickly with the children that do, especially in the hardest to reach communities".

Phase two: Adapting and partnering (2020 – 2024)

In this phase, SmartStart adapted its model, moving beyond the part-time playgroup prototype to incorporate multiple modalities serving families and communities with diverse needs. By expanding to include full-time offerings, SmartStart discovered that the demand for ELPs was far greater than anticipated, highlighting the need for programmes that met family budgets and care needs.

SmartStart also reconceptualised its relationship with franchise partners, building on the deep experience and contextual knowledge that these organisations had gained over time. Through this process, SmartStart developed a clearer understanding of how best to support partners and practitioners. They created structured processes and tools for each stage of the practitioner journey (which SmartStart calls the "value chain") including recruitment, selection, training, ongoing support, and evaluation of children's learning outcomes.

While SmartStart was adapting and partnering, important developments in the South African early childhood landscape were underway. In 2022, the responsibility for early childhood development moved from the Department of Social Development to the Department of Basic Education. This function shift underscored a growing government commitment to early learning, revealing a new set of possibilities for building a national platform that bridged public and private systems.

By 2024, SmartStart was supporting 13 partners to deliver high-quality early learning through 11 000 practitioners, reaching more than 98 000 children every week.

Lessons learned: This period revealed several learnings:

- **Structured quality support systems can improve child outcomes at scale**: A new independent evaluation conducted in 2023 found that 65 percent of children in SmartStart programmes were developmentally on track and the proportion of children categorised as "Falling far behind" decreased by nearly half. The performance gap between the poorest and wealthiest households decreased from 25 percent to just six percent over the study period. This evaluation was particularly significant because the evaluators were able to link SmartStart programme quality measures with child outcomes: for example, fidelity to the SmartStart Daily Routine and frequency of coach visits had measurable positive effects on early learning gains.
- **Leadership needs to be distributed throughout the system**: Quality and scale depend on shared ownership across regions and partners. Partners need more direct support at the regional level, while coaches and clubs provide ongoing, practical support on the ground.
- **Government partnership is essential for sustainable national scale**: A privately funded delivery platform will not be sufficient to achieve universal access given the current gap to early learning. SmartStart's experience over the past decade has shown that while philanthropic investment has been critical in demonstrating and refining an effective delivery model, it is not designed nor sufficient to finance universal access over the long term. Achieving population-level coverage requires government, as the constitutional duty bearer for early childhood development, to progressively assume responsibility for financing and sustaining the systems that enable quality early learning. This is supported by recent policy and financing shifts, including increased national investment in ECD, the expansion of the Conditional Grant, and government commitments to universal access. SmartStart's role is therefore evolving from demonstrating what works to supporting government and the broader ecosystem to make quality early learning sustainable at scale.

Key shifts: Based on these learnings, SmartStart made significant changes to its approach:

- **Moved away from scale as a "buzzword"**: Rather than treating scale as expansion alone, SmartStart focused on changing how the system functions in practice. This meant ensuring leadership at every level and providing support and accountability so that quality delivery can be maintained consistently as the system grows.

- **Developed a comprehensive delivery platform**: SmartStart invested in strengthening its underlying infrastructure, including training, knowledge sharing, and technology. By conceptualising the national coordinating function as a "Hub," SmartStart standardised its approach with partners and practitioners, providing structured start-up and delivery support and enabling expansion at a sustainable cost per child. SmartStart also strengthened the use of evidence to inform programme improvement and strategic decision-making. Findings from child outcomes evaluations demonstrated that children participating in SmartStart programmes made significant developmental gains, and higher programme quality and more effective coaching were associated with stronger child outcomes. These findings informed continued investment in practitioner coaching, quality assurance processes, and practical support. In addition, ongoing implementation research and programme experiments have been used to refine practitioner onboarding, support systems, and delivery approaches.

- **Engaged with government**: SmartStart positioned itself as a strong partner to the DBE, helping to ensure that the implementation of the National Integrated ECD Policy reflected on-the-ground realities, particularly for home-based early learning. These efforts emphasised the challenges of registration and compliance faced by smaller, early-stage practitioners and contributed to elevating these needs and bringing greater attention to these issues in national policy discussions.

Guiding framework: During this phase, SmartStart relied upon the guiding framework of *doers and payers at scale* to consider how to transition from a pilot programme funded by philanthropy to a scalable model that could deliver early learning for the entire country. With this framework, nonprofit organisations or the private sector (the "doers") take on the "heavy lifting" of implementation while entities with financial capacity (the "payers")—often government—sustain the model with long-term funding. Importantly, the "doers" must build a model that is cheap enough, simple enough, and adaptable enough to scale exponentially. With the growing commitment from government and increased capacity from the DBE, it was increasingly possible to envision a national system supported by public subsidies and delivered through a robust network of civil society partners and community entrepreneurs.

Phase three: Reimagining for societal scale (2025 and beyond)

In its current phase, SmartStart is shifting its attention from growing a proprietary platform for its own network to instead conceptualising a national delivery platform that can achieve the South African government's priority of universal access to early learning by 2030. In this process, SmartStart is considering how to open its platform so that others who are not directly affiliated with the organisation can use its tools and processes to develop their own operations and capacities.

SmartStart's role is transforming from growing a network of partners and practitioners directly, to acting as a platform steward, helping to create the conditions for the entire ecosystem of actors in South Africa to deliver quality early learning at scale. Rather than focusing primarily on building and scaling a recognisable organisational brand, SmartStart is reviewing how to contribute to a shared national infrastructure for early learning.

The reimagining process includes expanding access to the assets that SmartStart has created over the last decade—including technology, materials, data, processes, and protocols—so that they can be used by regional organisations and independent early learning practitioners in the country. It also means working alongside ecosystem organisations, partners, and government to design and rollout new systems that work and are adaptable for the entire country, not just their own network.

In 2025, SmartStart is supporting 12 partners to deliver high-quality early learning through 16 000 practitioners, reaching more than 200 000 children every week.

Lessons learned: This period is revealing ongoing learnings for how South Africa can achieve universal access to early learning by 2030. SmartStart is contributing to this learning process through applying what it has learned thus far, and rethinking its role in the larger ecosystem:

- **Achieving universal access requires coordinated ecosystem action rather than organisational scale**: Expanding access to quality early learning at a national level requires government, civil society, funders, and practitioners to work together on universal access, rather than each organisation trying to solve a subset of this challenge alone.

- **Scale does not mean growing into a bigger organisation**: SmartStart is reenvisioning scale not as developing its own organisational reach, but rather enabling all the other actors across South Africa's early learning system to access more children with higher quality programmes.

- **The greatest impact comes from building shared assets, not organisational assets**: SmartStart has learned that sustainable national scale is achieved by stewarding capabilities that strengthen the entire early learning ecosystem rather than expanding organisation-specific assets. This phase involves reconsidering what "belongs" to SmartStart and what should instead be designed for broader ecosystem use. Rather than building assets solely for the SmartStart Network, the organisation is increasingly focused on creating tools and systems that can be adapted, governed, and sustained collectively over time. This has meant reconsidering what should remain proprietary to the organisation and what should instead become shared infrastructure that others can adopt, adapt and improve.

Guiding framework: During this phase, SmartStart is utilising the guiding framework of societal thinking to reimagine scale beyond growing a single organisation. Societal thinking is based on the idea of distributing the ability to solve throughout a system by building public goods that enable all actors in an ecosystem to reach more people with greater quality. Rather than concentrating delivery within one organisation, this approach focuses on strengthening the wider ecosystem through shared infrastructure, tools, standards, and partnerships that enable many diverse actors to contribute to a common goal.

We're not trying to make everything the same. We don't want a policy that says this is what it should look like. Rather, what we want to do is get everyone swimming in the same direction. They can swim whatever stroke they want to swim, but they need to move in the same direction.

SmartStart through the years





3. The SmartStart network and delivery platform

Over time, SmartStart has developed two important aspects of its work to support early learning programmes: the Network and the Delivery Platform. One way to visualise this is to imagine a community of people standing upon a strong foundation. The Network is the community of people who work together to make early learning happen, and the Delivery Platform is the strong foundation that elevates those people and gives a solid footing for the work that they do.



The SmartStart network

Through SmartStart, a community of people **(the "Network")** come together to support early learning. This community consists of:

Children

Children attend SmartStart programmes between the ages of three to five. The first five years of life represent the most rapid period of brain development, with neural connections forming at a pace that will never be repeated across the lifespan. During these years, children's brains are shaped by responsive relationships, language-rich interactions, play, exploration and everyday experiences.

Research consistently shows that nurturing care including talking, reading, storytelling, singing, play and warm, responsive interactions with caring adults provides the foundation for cognitive, language, social-emotional and physical development, and strongly influences children's readiness for school and later learning.

Parents and caregivers

Parents and caregivers are recognised by SmartStart as children's first and most important teachers. This sets the tone for respectful collaboration and makes early learning a shared community effort. Practitioners engage parents and caregivers in daily, informal conversations about child progress and run monthly meetings to provide practical tips for home learning, ensuring that learning is a two-way effort. Parents and caregivers also receive materials to support storytelling, play-based learning, everyday conversations, and simple literacy and numeracy activities at home, helping to extend children's learning into daily family life. SmartStart also maintains regular engagement with parents through WhatsApp groups, sharing practical play ideas, storytelling activities and simple everyday learning opportunities that families can use at home, reinforcing the important role caregivers play as children's first teachers. Parents also share photos and videos of the activities they will be engaging with, making these groups interactive.

Practitioners

SmartStart practitioners (also known as "SmartStarters" or "Franchisees") are caring and enterprising women leaders from within their own communities. They are recruited, supported, and trained by SmartStart partners to run ELPs, delivering high-quality early learning. Beyond expanding access to quality early learning, the model creates livelihood opportunities by enabling women to establish and grow locally owned early learning enterprises. As members of the community, practitioners understand families well and are able to build strong, trusting relationships with parents and caregivers while supporting children's preparedness for formal schooling.

Through SmartStart training, coaching, business development support and access to networks, practitioners build sustainable income-generating opportunities. The experience of one practitioner, Mphoza, described in "A Day in the Life" (page 14) illustrates how these different forms of support together in practice.

In addition, the role of women leaders in SmartStart reverses traditional expectations that care work should be unpaid or undervalued, recognising practitioners as skilled professionals and economic contributors in their communities. In many communities, these enterprises also create additional employment through assistant practitioners and stimulate local economic activity.

Partners

SmartStart partners (also known as "franchisors") are independent nonprofit organisations that support and grow the SmartStart Network. They recruit, train, and mentor SmartStarters, helping them set up and run quality early learning programmes in their communities. Partners provide ongoing training and coaching, resources, and quality assurance to ensure practitioners have the capacity and knowledge to deliver high-quality, sustainable micro enterprises.

Coaches

SmartStart coaches support SmartStarters to run quality programmes. They provide regular guidance, mentoring, and practical advice to help practitioners improve their daily activities and interactions with children and parents. Coaches observe sessions, give feedback, and help solve challenges as they arise. Findings from the SmartStart child outcomes study in 2023 showed that frequency and quality of coaching visits were positively associated with increased programme quality and learning gains. Through ongoing support and encouragement, coaches build practitioners' confidence and skills, helping ensure children receive the best possible early learning experience.

The Hub

The SmartStart Hub is the central support system that connects and strengthens the whole network. It provides training, tools, and resources to partners, coaches, and practitioners, helping them run quality early learning programmes. The Hub also sets standards, tracks progress, and shares data and insights to improve impact. Importantly, the Hub uses the evidence it generates to influence policy and to facilitate partnerships with government and social investors. By coordinating network engagement, building the SmartStart brand, and offering ongoing support and communication, the Hub helps ensure that the SmartStart model is consistent, effective, and able to reach more children and families.




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The SmartStart delivery platform

The SmartStart delivery platform provides the skills, materials, and capacities necessary for practitioners to deliver high-quality early learning programmes to children. The components of the delivery platform include:

Practitioner journey ("Value chain")

SmartStart supports partners to systematise the practitioner journey. Partners run selection and orientation events called "Matching Days" where prospective practitioners learn about the programme and begin the vetting process, including background checks. New SmartStarters then attend a five-day training run by SmartStart partners where they learn how to engage with children and families, run a high-quality programme, and the practicalities of running an early learning business, including identifying prospective families, registering children, securing a venue, and developing a fee structure.

Coaching and clubs

New practitioners are paired with SmartStart coaches who visit practitioners and observe their programmes, providing coaching and individualised support for issues as they arise. Coaches provide regular mentoring and practical support through individual visits and practitioner clubs.

Practitioners also join peer-based SmartStart Clubs where they meet regularly with fellow practitioners from their area. Clubs are composed of 10-16 practitioners; with a peer Club Leader.

These clubs have evolved beyond professional development sessions into communities of practice where practitioners learn from one another, share challenges and practical solutions, and build professional networks. In many areas, practitioners have also established informal savings groups ("stokvels") through these relationships, enabling them to save collectively and invest in improving and expanding their early learning centres.

Curriculum

SmartStarters are trained to deliver the Daily Routine, a structured three-hour programme of ten consecutive activities that prepares children for success in school and life. The Daily Routine focuses on three areas: strong and healthy attachments with adults; thinking and communicating with a great focus on listening, reasoning and speech; and fundamental emotional skills and regulation needed for living and learning.

Planning and budgeting

After being recruited as a SmartStarter, the practitioners receive a 24-month startup subsidy to help them run their micro-enterprises effectively. The training they receive from SmartStart provides them with planning and budgeting skills supporting them for long-term sustainability, including setting affordable fees, estimating monthly costs, managing supplies, keeping basic records, and planning and saving for long-term growth.

Once practitioners are Silver registered with the Department of Basic Education, they can also qualify for government subsidies which enable practitioners to grow their programmes further and provide spaces for children with greater needs.



Operations and technology

SmartStart's operations and technology are divided into two components: practitioner-facing and partner-facing. For practitioners, SmartStart provides stipends, startup packs (including play materials, books, health and safety equipment, and signage), and a mobile-based app, called FundaApp, which supports daily operations such as enrolment, attendance, and curriculum planning. The signage clearly identifies the early learning programme as a recognised centre, displaying the programme name, operating hours and key information, helping practitioners establish a visible, trusted and professional presence within their communities.

For partners, SmartStart provides programmatic and support tools, including CoachApp (a mentoring and coaching tool) and SmartLink (a data platform and dashboard that enables partners to see the operations of their practitioners in real-time).

Monitoring and evaluation

SmartStart's monitoring and evaluation system is designed to be developmental, working alongside partners and practitioners on their programmatic and professional journey. Through the practitioner-facing FundaApp, SmartStart receives data from practitioners which is then aggregated across partners and provinces. Coaches provide a second level of monitoring by observing sessions against a standardised tool called the Programme Quality Assurance (PQA). Coaches use the PQA to assess practitioners' delivery of the Daily Routine as well as compliance to measures such as adult-child ratios and health and safety requirements. Annually, a coach assesses the ELP delivery and provides a PQA rating. A below par rating (orange) triggers for follow up within six months to assess if the centre has addressed the observed negative issues.

Finally, SmartStart uses the Early Learning Outcomes Measure (ELOM) a suite of standardised assessment tools developed in South Africa, to evaluate children's development across domains such as early literacy, numeracy, executive functioning, and social-emotional development.

The following example brings together many of the elements described in this section from practitioner training and coaching to family engagement, digital tools and quality improvement to show how the SmartStart model is experienced in the daily life of a practitioner and the families she serves.

Morning arrival

It's early in the morning, and Tshepo puts on his backpack and waits impatiently at the door. Lerato, Tshepo's mother, walks with him to Kamogelo Day Care Centre. For Lerato, the day centre makes a big difference. Without it, Tshepo would have to stay at home, and Lerato wouldn't be able to keep her job. She says, "He's a very energetic person, but ever since he came here, all his energies are channelled. He learns so much. I'm happy as a parent".

Getting ready for the day

Mphoza, the founder and principal at Kamogelo, has already been at the centre for an hour. She's set up simple activity areas, checked her materials, and is ready to welcome each child. When Tshepo arrives, she greets him with a smile and checks in briefly with Lerato—how is Tshepo today? Is anything different that she should know about as the day begins?

Through Lima Rural Development Foundation, a SmartStart partner, Mphoza learned to organise the day according to the Daily Routine, which the children now know by heart. She also knows how to build relationships with families and make sure that parents are aware of their child's progress. She received support to conditionally register her centre, which will allow her to work toward full registration and receive government subsidies for children who attend regularly.

The daily routine in action

Once everyone has arrived, the day settles into a routine. The Daily Routine starts with Greeting Time, continues with Small Group Time and Free Play, and ends with Clean Up Time. The structure is consistent, but flexible enough to respond to the children's needs.

Mphoza and her assistant teachers have gleaned ideas for activities from members of the SmartStart Club. These activities are part of the SmartStart approach, which focuses on simple but effective ways to support early learning: talking, playing, and building relationships. Mphoza also keeps parents involved by sharing updates and ideas they can use at home.

Accessing support when needed

Challenges are part of the job and Mphoza has experienced many of them. She is still working toward full registration, which requires additional funding to improve her facility. Often parents will tell her that they can't afford the month's fees, and many times she has accepted a smaller amount because she wants to make sure that their child can still attend.

If she has a question or feels overwhelmed, Mphoza reaches out to Poppy, her coach, for support. She also attends Club meetings with fellow SmartStarters in Soshanguve. With the long days at the centre, it is sometimes difficult to attend meetings every month, but every time she goes, she learns something new and brings back ideas for growing Kamogelo.

End of the Day

At the end of the day, Lerato returns to pick up Tshepo. Mphoza shares that Tshepo "read" a wordless book to her today and that he has a wonderful imagination. She encourages Lerato to ask Tshepo to tell her the story on the way home. After everyone leaves, Mphoza and her assistant teachers reset the space for the next day. Mphoza shifts to administrative tasks—she inputs attendance into her SmartStart app and makes stipend payments to her staff. She feels a small moment of pride. Without this opportunity, she and her assistants would be unemployed or working at jobs that barely pay the bills.

It's a normal day, but over time, these activities add up. Mphoza knows that Kamogelo provides children like Tshepo with a safe place to learn and play and mothers like Lerato with peace of mind and time to earn an income. Alongside SmartStart and Lima Rural Development Foundation, she is able to grow a business that supports herself as well as others. In this way, she is creating a "triple benefit" that ripples positively through her community.

5. An open platform for South Africa's early learning ecosystem

As SmartStart moves into the next phase of its work, it is explicitly shifting its focus from growing its own network and delivery platform to developing an open platform for universal access. This shift is both an organisational strategy as well as a societal shift resulting from concerted efforts—by SmartStart and other ecosystem actors—to build political momentum and government capacity to lead the way for early learning in South Africa.

Building on strong political will with budgetary backing

In the last decade, strong political will—built through concerted efforts by SmartStart and many other actors in the ecosystem, including government, civil society, and private sector partners—has steadily turned early learning into a national priority. The 2022 function shift from the DSD to the DBE created momentum and brought resources and capacity to the sector. This was strengthened with data and learnings from the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive, bringing nearly 20 000 unregistered early learning providers into the national network.

In 2025, the President contributed strong executive-level backing which was followed by a significant Treasury budget allocation to further accelerate progress. This unique window of opportunity calls on all actors across the ecosystem to respond differently while aligning efforts, rethinking roles, and collectively shaping how universal, quality access is achieved going forward.

Working with government in strong collaboration with ecosystem partners

With strong leadership from the DBE, the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive has now evolved into a collaboration between government, civil society, and the private sector, anchored by the Bana Pele Shared Blueprint. The Blueprint was created through a collaborative process to create much-needed alignment across the early learning ecosystem and offer a shared framework to help all actors coordinate their efforts more intentionally. Importantly, it puts children—and by extension, practitioners—at the centre of the effort, rather than any single organisation. Due in part to SmartStart's government engagement efforts, the Blueprint places a strong emphasis on an inclusive and diverse ECD system while recognising and strengthening multiple modalities, including home-based early learning.

To successfully work together, each ecosystem organisation will need to lean into its strengths. SmartStart, due to its close association with the contextual realities of practitioners, is able to create important linkages from grassroots implementation to policy and advocacy at the national level. The challenge will be to construct genuinely equal collaboration, where no single organisation dominates, with trust ensuring that historical competition for resources and influence does not undermine collective progress.

Co-creating public goods that serve the entire country

Now, SmartStart is reconceptualising the assets and platform it has built for its own network as public goods the whole sector can benefit from—including curriculum, training, practitioner support resources, and digital tools. This does not imply a single uniform system, but rather a portfolio of tools and approaches developed in different parts of the ecosystem to collectively support more coherent delivery. SmartStart is working to better understand how these shared assets—across ecosystem organisations, partners, and practitioners—can strengthen the national infrastructure overall, rather than serving just a small proportion of the early learning practitioner community.

This transition requires SmartStart to think differently about its identity and work: learning to partner differently with other organisations; maintaining a "doer" culture while trusting communities to solve for themselves; embracing new perspectives; and being cognisant of each context's distinctive requirements. It will also require support from funders with appetite and understanding of systems change rather than direct delivery.

Avoiding competition among actors that could delay or disrupt

As the national system strengthens, there is also growing recognition that organisations will need to shift their roles in ways that reduce duplication and avoid competition that could slow collective progress. For SmartStart, this will mean moving from a model centred primarily on its own partner network towards one that enables and supports a wider range of actors to take the work further in different contexts. SmartStart is thinking about how to create more space for provinces, regional NGOs, and other partners to implement shared principles in ways that respond to local realities, all while moving toward universal access.

Making this shift will require SmartStart to carefully balance its organisational sustainability, while also letting go of ownership over certain aspects of delivery and scale while ensuring quality is maintained. It calls for a stronger emphasis on collaboration, distributed leadership, and trust, particularly contexts where organisations have overlapping mandates and constrained resources.

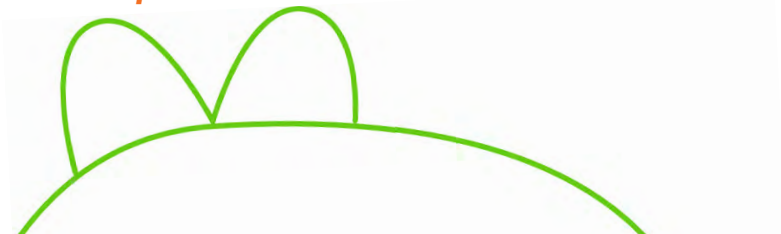
Maintaining momentum to achieve universal access by 2030

While the current moment presents a significant opportunity for early learning in South Africa, there is recognition that sustaining momentum over time will require reforms to become deeply embedded within government systems and financing structures, beyond the priorities of any single political administration. Encouragingly, the transition across two education ministers has already demonstrated a degree of continuity, and the national ECD strategy provides a long-term framework to 2030.

SmartStart and other ecosystem organisations will play an important role in helping to translate these policies and investments into delivery at scale. This work will include- supporting implementation, designing and strengthening systems, and ensuring that data continues to be a driving force in planning and budgeting. In many ways, the immediate risk is not lack of funding, but whether the sector is sufficiently prepared to manage and deploy large-scale resources in such a diverse context. SmartStart is preparing for an equal partnership with government and fellow ecosystem partners to ensure this opportunity is fully realised, translating into real, measurable gains in access and quality of early learning for young children across the country.

"It's taken us a decade of really committed, strong capability, plus adequate resourcing, to get 160 000 children. To get to a million, if you multiply all those factors by 10, then that's not reasonable. We don't have 100 years. The big challenge for us as a country, not just for SmartStart, but for the whole country, is how do we in five years get to a million children?

The Department of Basic Education has shifted and accelerated scale and impact for early learning, their leadership has really accelerated the work. It's at a stage where all of us have to respond to the opportunity that's presently open, and all of us have to think differently about how that works. We're rethinking and resetting how we respond to this opportunity in a very careful way. There is a moment of change that's presently underway: we have to think about the whole puzzle rather than just the one piece".





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