



— FROM THE DESK OF —
THE PRESIDENT

• **Monday, 19 October 2026** •

Our nation’s future begins with early childhood development

Dear Fellow South African,

This week, the second Bana Pele Leadership Summit is taking place in Gauteng. Bana Pele means ‘children first’ in Sesotho. It is a campaign led by the Department of Basic Education to strengthen and transform the delivery of early learning in the country.

Early Childhood Development (ECD) shapes a child’s cognitive, social, emotional and behavioural development. Quality early learning introduces the foundations of literacy and numeracy, such as recognising letters and numbers, building vocabulary, counting and solving simple problems. Children who start school with these skills are ready to read, write and work with numbers from their first year.

Grade R is now compulsory, so these skills are needed by the time a child turns five. Yet more than 1.3 million children aged three to five are not enrolled in any early learning programme.

Most of these children live in poorer communities, where paying even a low fee for a child to attend an ECD centre is a challenge. In contrast, children in better-resourced communities are far more likely to enter the foundation phase able to read for meaning and handle basic numeracy. Expanding access to early learning is therefore a development priority and a way of addressing historical inequalities. Every child, regardless of the circumstances of their birth, deserves the chance to learn and grow.

The second Bana Pele Summit brings together government, practitioners, communities, business, funders and civil society. It will take stock of progress towards our goal of ensuring that all children between the ages of three and five have access to affordable, equitable and quality early learning programmes by 2030.

Over the past two years, we have substantially increased investment in early learning. We have increased the subsidy for ECD attendees and committed further resources to expand access. Through these efforts, we aim to reach an additional 300,000 children by 2027 and a further 900,000 by 2030.

But investment alone is not enough. Public resources must reach the programmes and communities where they are needed most.

Through the Bana Pele Mass Registration Drive, thousands of previously unregistered early learning programmes have taken their first step towards formal registration. The drive is bringing more providers into the national system, giving us a clearer picture of where programmes are located and helping us identify where further support is needed.

I have often said that we are starting late in building a formalised early childhood development system. Yet starting late should not mean starting slowly. The reforms we have embarked upon in early learning are part of a broader effort to renew South Africa's socio-economic architecture.

Early learning touches on education, health, social protection, employment and the economy, and it is in these interconnected areas that its benefits will be felt most widely. By investing in our youngest children, we are laying the foundations for stronger schools, healthier communities, more inclusive growth and a more capable workforce for the decades ahead.

Early learning is a vital part of our care economy. These programmes do more than sustain the livelihoods of the people, mostly women, who run them. They also free parents and caregivers in communities where employment opportunities are often scarce to work, study or simply to provide for their families.

Strengthening early learning is therefore an investment not only in our children, but also in families, local economies and the people whose work sustains their care.

Credit must go to the people who care for and teach our children every day. A few years ago, I visited an early learning centre in Bizana in the Eastern Cape where I met with staff who had kept the centre going even when they could not be paid. I was deeply moved when they told me that they would not turn away a child simply because their family could not afford to pay an already low fee.

Across South Africa, countless practitioners show this same dedication. Many are women who have built small enterprises of their own to care for children in their communities. We are committed to supporting them and to ensuring they get the recognition they deserve. Early childhood development practitioners play a vital role in the future educational outcomes of young learners.

We can further accelerate access to ECD through the support of the private sector. Many companies already incorporate education in their Environmental, Social and Governance strategies, but much of it is on basic education and not specifically targeting early learning.

Corporate support, whether in the form of subsidising fees, upgrading facilities or funding practitioner training, will help us to achieve our early learning goals.

Advancing early learning is a shared national responsibility. Our efforts to support our youngest citizens today are a solid investment not only in their future, but in the very growth and progress of our country.

With best regards,

Cyril Ramaphosa



THE PRESIDENCY
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

Copyright 2026. The Presidency. All Rights Reserved
The Presidency, Union Buildings, Government Avenue, Tshwane, 0002

Subscribe to our newsletter