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JOIN US IN USING DATA TO DRIVE CHANGE

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Dear partner,

The 2026 State of the Nation Address reaffirmed the early years as fundamental to South Africa's long-term economic and social outcomes.

As the government focuses on expanding access to early childhood development, increasing subsidies, and strengthening early learning pathways, **delivery depends on strong systems that can track progress and guide action. And data plays a central role.**

At **DataDrive2030**, we work with government and other partners to strengthen how early learning data is **generated, connected, and used** – so that decisions about access, quality, and equity are grounded in evidence.

Turning early learning commitments into impact depends on **how data is translated into action across the system**.

In this edition, we highlight

- new research emerging from the **Thrive by Five Index dataset**,
- partnerships working to strengthen the early learning system, and
- practical tools designed to support data-informed programme improvement.

FEATURED

Opening up the Thrive by Five Index 2026 dataset

In March, DataDrive2030, in partnership with the Department of Basic Education, released the **Thrive by Five Index 2026 dataset** - opening up nationally representative early learning data for wider use for the first time.

The dataset, hosted via DataFirst at the University of Cape Town, draws on information from over 5,000 four-year-olds across 1,398 early learning programmes. It offers a detailed picture of how children's development is shaped by the environments around them – from household conditions to programme quality and broader structural context.

The response to the release made it clear that this kind of evidence is in demand. The launch webinar drew over **500 registrants** from across research, government, and the early learning sector.

To begin exploring the data, a small group of researchers worked closely with the dataset ahead of its release. Their work forms the basis of a six-paper series, examining questions ranging from enrolment and programme quality to inequality, climate exposure, and system performance. These papers offer an initial set of insights, and point toward the wider possibilities that emerge when the data is explored further.

What this early work makes clear is that children's outcomes don't hinge on one factor alone. They reflect a set of conditions working together, often in complex ways.

The dataset offers a snapshot rather than definitive answers – and that is where its value lies: in how it is explored and extended over time.

By opening up access, DataDrive2030 is inviting researchers and others across the sector to engage more deeply – to test new questions, challenge assumptions, and extend a growing body of evidence on early learning in South Africa.

➡ Explore the dataset and working paper series.

PARTNER SPOTLIGHT

Bana Pele – Strengthening the National ECD System

Over the past year, DataDrive2030 has been working closely with government and sector partners to strengthen how South Africa understands and improves early learning outcomes.

A key part of this work has been our contribution to the Bana Pele Roadmap – a national reform process led by the Presidency through the Inter-Ministerial Committee on ECD, and grounded in the Bana Pele Blueprint for achieving universal access to quality early learning.

DataDrive2030 was part of the Bana Pele Reference Group, providing technical guidance and expertise throughout the development of the roadmap. Our involvement in this process reflects our broader role in supporting how data and evidence are used within national reform processes.

At the centre of Bana Pele is a shift toward aligning the system around child outcomes. The **Thrive by Five Index** has played an important role in anchoring this shift – supplying more grounded conversations about early learning quality, inequality, and system performance.

The Index is now formally adopted across government as a shared accountability mechanism and is explicitly referenced in the Bana Pele Roadmap as a core outcomes measurement tool. Through national and provincial forums, it is helping to align how different parts of the system understand progress, gaps, and collective responsibility.

This work is closely connected to the ECLM suite of tools, which is also referenced in the roadmap as part of South Africa's national measurement approach. Together, these tools support a move away from tracking inputs alone, toward understanding whether children are learning and developing as expected.

As part of this broader reform agenda, DataDrive2030 is also supporting the development of a National Data Observatory. This is not intended as a standalone database, but as a system-level intelligence layer that integrates multiple data sources, supports shared sense-making, and enables more responsive decision-making across the system.

What is beginning to take shape through Bana Pele is a more connected way of working – where government, funders, and implementation partners are not only generating data, but using it together. This creates the foundation for a system that can learn, adapt, and respond more effectively to the needs of young children.

➡ **Read the** Bana Pele Shared Blueprint

Building a National ELDM Learning Community

Across South Africa, many organisations are working every day to support young children – often collecting valuable data on how children are developing, but with few opportunities to learn from one another.

The HCI Foundation and the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust are convening a national ELDM Learning Community to address this by bringing together organisations that support early learning programmes across the country.

DataDrive2030 developed the model for this learning community and leads the shared learning process across participating organisations. The aim is simple: to help organisations move beyond isolated data use and turn evidence into practical improvements in teaching and learning.

The urgency of this work is clear. Findings from the Thrive by Five Index show that many children in South Africa are not developmentally 'On Track' by the time they enter school, with significant gaps in foundational skills such as early numeracy, fine motor coordination and visual motor integration.

Through this learning community, organisations use a shared measurement system to better understand how children are developing, test small, practical improvements, and learn from what is working across different contexts.

In KwaZulu-Natal, for example, six organisations – ZandiDwa Trust, LETCEE, Lulwanjeko, Midlands Community College (MCC), Singawenza and Tlanda – are participating in a Community of Practice as part of the broader initiative. Supported by the HCI Foundation and the Oppenheimer Memorial Trust, and facilitated by DataDrive2030, these partners are sharing insights, challenges and practical innovations across urban and rural districts.

DataDrive2030 supports this work end-to-end by:

- Designing and supporting ECLM studies
- Processing and analysing data through its platform
- Producing baseline and endline reports
- Convening learning sessions where organisations reflect on results and test practical micro-changes

At its core, this work is about building a more connected early learning system – where data is not just collected, but shared, understood, and used to improve outcomes for children.

NEW RESOURCES

A stronger tool for measuring programme quality

The Learning Programme Quality Assessment Tool (LPQA v2) introduces a more objective scoring approach designed to improve consistency and reliability.

Key improvements include:

- Clear scoring for what is observed in programmes
- Improved quality areas based on testing and evidence
- Automatic reports that show results and suggest how to improve

The updated tool helps organisations better understand – and improve – the quality of early learning environments.

LEARN MORE

New tools to bring data to life

Working with data should not feel too technical or distant from everyday practice. Our new **Practice Tools** help programme teams explore **their data** together, ask new questions, and translate insights into practical improvements.

Two tools are now available:

➡ How to Host an ELDM Data Party

A facilitation guide that helps teams review ELDM results together and identify concrete next steps.

➡ Playful Provocations

A set of facilitation cards designed to spark new conversations about programme data and practice.

Together, these tools help organisations move from simply interpreting **data to using it.**

UPCOMING EVENTS

Webinar

ELDM in Practice: Can LPQA Data Unlock Genuine Centre Quality?

20 May 2026 | 11 am (SAST)

Join us as we unpack what "quality" really looks like in early learning – and how LPQA data can help bring it into focus.

In this session, we explore how the **Learning Programme Quality Assessment (LPQA)** goes beyond scoring to capture what children actually experience – from interactions and teaching practices to the structure of the learning day.

REGISTER

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