Every Child Learns
UNICEF Education Strategy 2019–2030

Early childhood education; system strengthening; data and evidence

Strengthening early childhood education in the national education plan and budget in Lesotho to help children succeed in primary and beyond

Background:
Lesotho is one of four countries participating in a UNICEF-Global Partnership for Education pilot programme called BELDS, Building Early Learning and Development at Scale. This initiative seeks to support the scalable expansion of quality early childhood education (ECE).

Problem:
Only 46% of children in Lesotho have access to ECE to prepare them for the transition to primary school. Children who lack school preparedness lag behind. The vast majority – 90% – of these services are provided by the private sector. Access is inequitable, with greater uptake in cities and among families who can afford the fees. Only 0.4% of the education budget is allocated to ECE.

Solution:
Capitalise on the opportunity provided by the update of the national education sector plan and budget to strengthen ECE on a national scale. UNICEF is doing so through a small catalytic investment (consultancy) to support the Government of Lesotho in the revision of its education sector plan (2016-2026). In this way, UNICEF is acting as advocate, convener, and technical advisor to build a broad consensus on a guiding vision for expansion of quality ECE at scale, and technical support for integration of this vision into the national education sector plan and budget.
ECE sub-sector diagnostic workshop

ECE is an effective strategy for improving learning outcomes in primary education and beyond. UNICEF supported a comprehensive ECE diagnostic workshop, which examined: the governing legislative, policy and budgetary frameworks; curriculum, workforce, family and community engagement, and quality assurance per the conceptual framework excerpted from the 2019 report, *A world ready to learn – Prioritizing quality early childhood education*, p. 69.

The workshop highlighted several bottlenecks impeding the expansion of the sub-sector in Lesotho:

- low prioritization of ECE and budget allocation in the national education sector plan;
- outdated curriculum,
- shortage of qualified ECE teachers, and
- inadequate quality assurance of ECE services.
Preliminary results

The relatively small catalytic investment from BELDS for technical support in the update of the national education plan (2016-2026) resulted in ECE being more firmly rooted within this critical document. UNICEF’s support built momentum around critical initiatives, such as the development of a new ECE curriculum, the launch of a new teacher training diploma course, a new school readiness assessment and quality standards. Discussions about how to scale up ECE with a costed multi-year plan are underway. These achievements were predicated on:

- the engagement of a broad range of ECE stakeholders and partners through the creation of the ECE technical working group,
- technical assistance to produce a costed ECE scale-up plan, and
- identification and ongoing integration of related ECE priorities, such as revision of the curriculum, and solutions to overcome workforce shortages, in the revised national education plan.

All of these important milestones were achieved over a six-month period from January to June 2019.

Lessons learnt and next steps

While the revision of the national plan is still underway, early lessons learnt from this experience to leverage national planning to expand access to quality ECE at scale highlight the importance of:

- Ministerial leadership in the ECE working group is critical to elevate ECE as a priority; while still ensuring the involvement of technical officials to promote continuity in case of elections or Cabinet shuffles;
- the diagnostic workshop, held early on, which helped to foster national ownership and partnership through this interactive, consultative, and participatory process; and
- a comprehensive approach to the ECE sub-sector to ensure coordinated and coherent planning and budgeting.
Cost effectiveness

A catalytic investment of US $125,000 has contributed to a commitment to increase access to one year of quality ECE and a correlated increase in national spending for this foundation level of education.

Catalytic investments to integrate ECE into national education plans helps to ensure that “Every Child Learns” right from the start of their learning journey.

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