MARCH 2026

# EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION: A STRONG FOUNDATION FOR LEARNING



Students play with blocks and other materials in Aranaputa Nursery School, Guyana. GPE/Kelley Lynch

**Early childhood education (ECE) is one of the most critical and cost-effective investments a country can make in its people and overall development. Working alongside governments, the Global Partnership for Education (GPE) aligns financing, policy dialogue and technical support behind country-led reforms that strengthen pre-primary systems at scale so that all children are ready to learn. GPE supports partner countries to design and implement high-quality ECE that is grounded in evidence and integrated with a broader approach to improve foundational learning.**

## THE CHALLENGE

- It's estimated **more than 300 million children**—37% of the world's children—will **lack basic reading skills** by 2030.
- Quality ECE is one of the most important predictors for academic success at age 17, but globally, **175 million children do not have access** to pre-primary education.
- 40% of countries with data allocate **less than 2% of education budgets** to early childhood education, and only **1.7% of aid** to education is invested in pre-primary education.

## QUALITY ECE IMPROVES LEARNING AND MAKES EDUCATION SYSTEMS MORE EFFICIENT AND COST-EFFECTIVE

High quality early learning services are essential to **closing learning gaps**, improving learning outcomes and ensuring education meets the needs of all

## GPE RESULTS

### US$324 MILLION INVESTED

in ECE through GPE grants active in fiscal year 2025.

### 46% OF CHILDREN

in GPE partner countries are enrolled in pre-primary education—nearly double compared to 19% in 2002.

### NEARLY HALF

of partner countries have chosen early learning as their priority education reform in their partnership compact.

### 31 PARTNER COUNTRIES

have scaled up national ECE policies using GPE Multiplier funds that have mobilized additional cofinancing and strengthened partner alignment around early learning reforms.

GPE Transforming Education

MULTIPLY POSSIBILITY FUND EDUCATION

**For all sources visit:** www.globalpartnership.org/data.

learners through **early identification of disabilities**. ECE underpins children's positive development so that they can gain foundational learning and 21st-century skills, including problem solving and socio-emotional skills, as the building blocks to future learning and later employment. Children who get quality ECE before age 5 perform better throughout their schooling than those who don't: they're more likely to enter school on time, less likely to drop out or repeat grades and more likely to complete primary and secondary school. ECE is estimated to provide an average **return of $9.25 for every dollar invested**, rising to $17 per dollar invested for children impacted by disadvantage. In countries where more children attend pre-primary education, more children reach minimum competencies in reading and math by the end of primary school. Quality ECE has also been found to lessen the negative impact of conflict, crisis and displacement on brain development for children living as refugees.

## GPE APPROACH

GPE is committed to supporting partner countries to improve access, quality and learning outcomes in the early years, including **ensuring all children have access to at least 1 year of quality pre-primary education** in line with Sustainable Development Goal 4 and the Education 2030 Framework for Action. GPE also advocates for **increased financing** and investment for early learning. Through GPE grants, partner countries develop laws, policies and advocacy campaigns to expand the number of children enrolled in pre-primary education.

To strengthen ECE within national education systems, GPE fosters good practices through **cross-country exchange** that develop partner country capacity to plan and implement quality programs. The GPE Knowledge and Innovation Exchange (KIX) and inter-organizational collaboration also promote sharing research at global and regional levels on how to scale alternate models for ECE relevant to partner country context.

Through the Better Early Learning and Development at Scale (BELDS) initiative and in partnership with UNICEF, GPE has promoted capacity building for ECE both within and across countries in Ghana, the Kyrgyz Republic, Lesotho, São Tomé and Príncipe, South Sudan and Tajikistan as well as launched the ECE Accelerator Analysis and Planning Toolkit.

## EL SALVADOR

A partner country since 2022, El Salvador prioritizes increasing the access and quality of early childhood learning for its education reform, especially for girls. Building on its national ECE policy *Crecer Juntos* (Growing Together), El Salvador is revising curricula, defining quality standards for educational services and developing teacher training with a gender perspective. Using a $12 million GPE Multiplier grant, the government leveraged $171.5 million in financing from the Inter-American Development Bank (IDB)—a leverage ratio of just over 1:14—to improve learning for more than 850,000 students. The investment expands early education access, trains nearly 30,000 teachers and school leaders, and strengthens inclusive education for children with disabilities. It also supports the reintegration of 2,000 returning migrant students through targeted programs and teacher training, helping young people reenter school, reconnect with their communities and build brighter futures. El Salvador is also the first partner country to access funding through the GPE Girls' Education Accelerator ($5 million) that was combined with a $10 million GPE Multiplier grant to create gender-sensitive learning materials in collaboration with local authors and publishers as well as to develop a framework for assessments so that they do not reinforce stereotypes or mislead about girls' abilities. These efforts are addressing social norms that are harmful for girls and keep them from learning from early childhood to the end of secondary school.



Early learners and their caregivers participate in a session to help develop motor skills, collaboration and curiosity at an ECE center in San Salvador, El Salvador.

GPE/Julio Roberto

GPE Transforming Education

MULTIPLY POSSIBILITY FUND EDUCATION

information@globalpartnership.org

GPforEducation

GPforEducation

GlobalPartnership

globalpartnership.org