EDUCATING THE FUTURE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After School Program

Pilot Evaluation

PILOT SITES

EPE **Alfredo de Jesus Lemos** Ermera
EPE **Tomas Ximenes** Ermera
EPE **Lauhata** Liquiçá
EPE **Saboria** Aileu

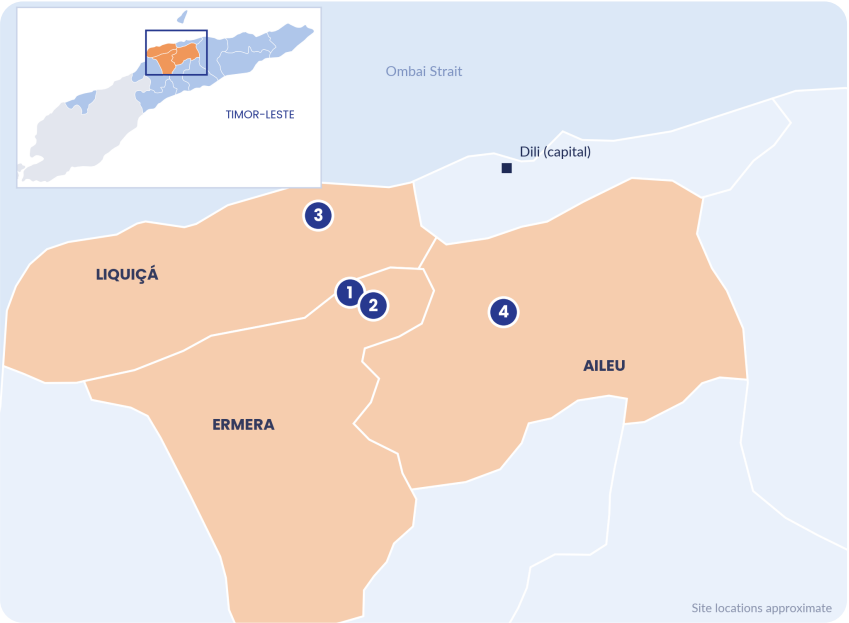


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THE PILOT AT A GLANCE

The After School Program was piloted in four unique communities in rural areas

The After School Program is one of the first of its kind in Timor-Leste, complementing any existing early childhood education in a safe space with play-based learning.



1. **EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos**
   Railaco, Ermera · Round 1
   Feb – Jul 2026 · 41 children enrolled

2. **EPE Tomas Ximenes**
   Railaco, Ermera · Round 1
   Feb – Jul 2026 · 57 children enrolled

3. **EPE Lauhata**
   Liquiçá · Round 2
   Jul – Sep 2026 · 64 children assessed

4. **EPE Saboria**
   Aileu · Round 2
   Jul – Sep 2026 · 43 children assessed

Reach

205
children took part
111 girls (54%) · 94 boys

64
play-based sessions
16 per site over 8 weeks

113
parents & caregivers surveyed at baseline and endline

8
facilitator assessments
local Timorese facilitators

Key outcomes

35% → 82%
learning-skill checks done independently

26% → 86%
health & hygiene practices seen often or always

23% → 73%
socio-emotional behaviours seen often or always

RESULTS

By the end, children did more on their own

35% → 82%

of skill checks done **independently**. A skill check is one child attempting one of ten skills, such as counting from 1 to 10.

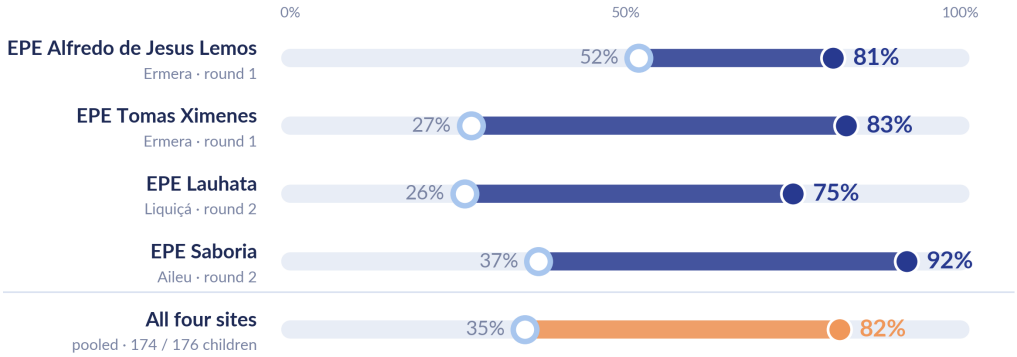
33% → 1%

of skill checks rated **"not yet able"**: for example, a child who could not count from 1 to 10 or retell a short story, even with help.

100 of 107

children at the second-round sites, assessed twice, did more skills on their own at endline.

SKILLS PERFORMED INDEPENDENTLY, BY SITE ○ baseline ● endline



ALL FOUR SITES

Early literacy Retells a simple story	20% → **82%**	Letter recognition 27% → 67%; letter sounds 21% → 73%.
Numeracy Counts 1–10 without help	22% → **68%**	"More" and "less" 40% → 91%; shapes 21% → 70%. Counting is the weakest skill.
Problem-solving Builds structures with blocks	48% → **97%**	Puzzles 42% → 91%; trying several ways to solve a problem 43% → 89%.
Health & hygiene Practices seen often or always	26% → **86%**	Handwashing, healthy-food recognition and movement skills.

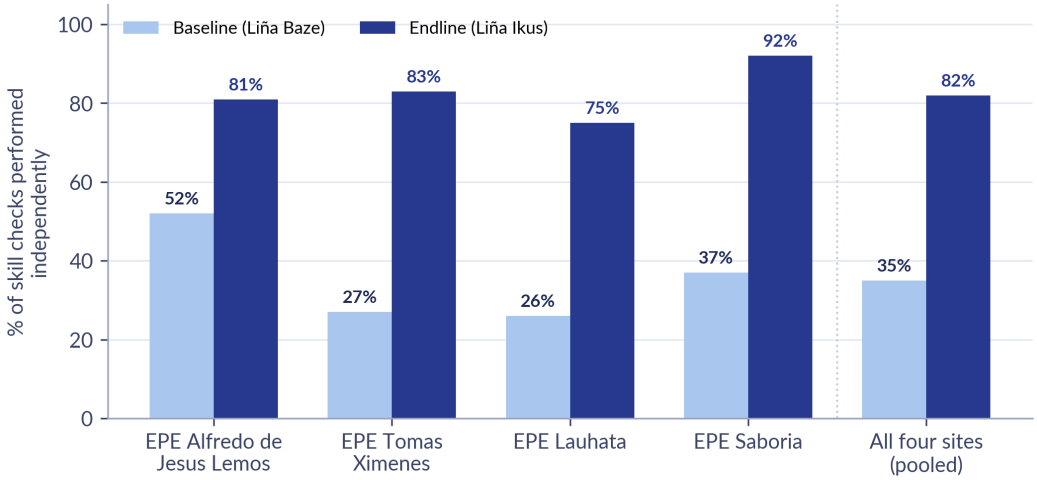
FIRST-ROUND SITES EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos and EPE Tomas Ximenes

Social & emotional Behaviours seen often or always	AdJL 35% → **90%** TX 31% → **48%**	The smaller gain at EPE Tomas Ximenes coincides with many children joining after baseline.
Parental confidence Mean score out of 5, EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos	3.3 → **5.0**	Not measurable at EPE Tomas Ximenes: the endline survey repeated the baseline records.
Facilitator capacity Knowledge test score out of 6	2–3 → **6**	Three facilitators with complete records reached full marks. Confidence applying it in class is still developing.

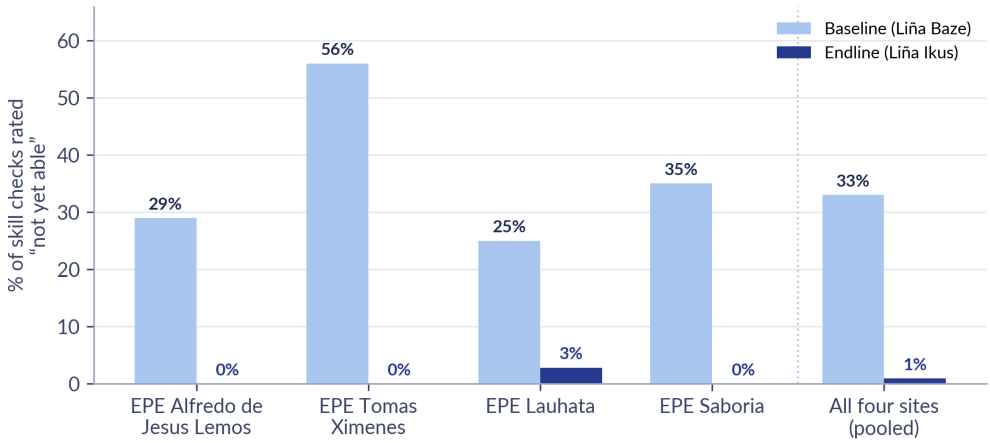
Source: child assessments, observation records, parent surveys and facilitator tests. Before-and-after comparison without a comparison group; see Methods.

RESULTS

Skill checks at baseline and endline



Share of all learning-skill checks performed independently, baseline versus endline, by site and pooled across all four sites.



First-round site baseline values for Lae are derived from published site percentages (±1 point).

Share of learning-skill checks rated "not yet able" (Lae): eliminated at endline at three of the four sites.

> "Bring children to the After School Program because they have an opportunity to learn something new."
>
> Mother of a participating child, EPE Tomas Ximenes

What families saw

At the two first-round sites, the qualitative round confirmed the direction of these findings from the household side. All three parents interviewed individually judged the program beneficial, despite most children having attended for under three months at the time of interview. Parents independently described children studying without prompting, becoming more creative, teaching newly acquired skills to siblings and to parents themselves, and shifting away from passive screen time toward hands-on making, drawing and planting. Both parents and facilitators reported that children feel safe in the program, and no child protection concern was raised by any respondent. Parents valued their children's exposure to science, the friendships built through games and the discipline of a regular activity, and credited attentive facilitators for their children returning home safe and content.

ABOUT THE PILOT

Structured play after school, in children's own communities

The pilot

The Early Childhood Education (ECE) After School Program (Programa Depois Eskola) was designed and piloted by Educating The Future Australia (ETF) between February and July 2026 at four public pre-schools (EPE) in Ermera Municipality, Railaco Administrative Post, Suku Lihu: EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos and EPE Tomas Ximenes, and Aileu Municipality, Saboria, and Liquiçá Municipality in Lauhata. The program supported children aged approximately 3-9 years (with a core target of 3-7 years, and extended to children 9 years of age given the limited structured opportunities after school) through structured, play-based activities in literacy, numeracy, problem-solving, socio-emotional learning, and health and hygiene, delivered by trained local facilitators over eight weeks, with two sessions per week at each site, resulting in 16 sessions per EPE and 32 sessions across the two sites. The pilot was designed to provide children with additional opportunities to strengthen foundational learning and developmental skills through engaging, child-centred activities beyond regular preschool hours. The implementation of this pilot was supported by the Swiss Embassy to Timor-Leste under their small-grants program.

Free to attend. No fee was charged and sessions used existing school facilities, removing cost as a barrier to participation.

Who delivered it. Implemented by ETF Timor-Leste, with ETF Australia as development partner and funding from the Swiss Embassy Small Grants Program.

Context

14–24%

of children at the first-round sites had any previous preschool experience. Nationally, gross preschool enrolment is 31.5% against a 60% target for 2028.

The country-led evaluation of the preschool sub-sector commissioned by the Ministry of Education supported by MFAT through HANDS Program found a gross preschool enrolment rate of 31,5% as of 2025, against national targets of 60% by 2028 and 80% by 2030, and identified underfunding, a shortage of qualified teachers and fragmented policy as the principal constraints (HANDS Report, 2025). The pilot communities sit at the difficult end of that distribution. Only 10 of 41 enrolled children (24%) at EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos and 8 of 57 (14%) at EPE Tomas Ximenes had any previous preschool experience according to enrolment records. Baseline assessment confirmed the consequence: at EPE Tomas Ximenes, 56% of all learning-skill checks were rated "not yet able", including more than two-thirds of children unable to recognise ten letters, count to ten unaided, or identify basic shapes without support. Baseline assessment at the two second-round sites was similarly low: 25% of learning-skill checks at EPE Lauhata and 35% at EPE Saboria were rated "not yet able". Prior preschool experience was not recorded for these sites.

Language: local language / mother tongue. Local language should be prioritized in sites where Tetum is not the dominant/preferred language, and this is emphasized in the program design and facilitator guidelines.

PROGRAM DESIGN

LONG-TERM GOAL

To improve foundational learning and holistic development of children aged 3-7 years through structured, play-based after-school activities delivered in their own communities.

Early literacy
Extend preschool themes into the afternoon with Timorese stories, letters and sounds.

Numeracy
Build counting, shapes and comparison skills that underpin early maths.

Problem-solving
Construction and discovery play that builds reasoning and creativity.

Social & emotional
Cooperation, self-control and confidence through regular peer play.

Parental engagement
Raise parents' confidence to support learning at home.

Facilitator capacity
Build local capacity to deliver early learning with local materials.

The program complements rather than duplicates preschool: it uses preschool facilities in the afternoon, follows the national curriculum themes, and aligns with the National Preschool Policy (2014) and the Preschool Network Plan (Diploma Ministerial N.º 64/2024).

PARTICIPANTS

205
children at four sites

~5 yrs
average age (4.7–5.3 by site); most aged 3–7

54%
girls (111 of 205)

100%
rural aldeias at round-1 sites; most walk

76–93%
with birth certificates (round-1 sites)

205 children took part: 98 enrolled at the two first-round sites (41 at EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos, 57 at EPE Tomas Ximenes) and 107 assessed at the two second-round sites (64 at EPE Lauhata, 43 at EPE Saboria). 174 children completed baseline and 176 endline assessments, 113 parents and caregivers joined the confidence surveys, and 25 parents and facilitators at the first-round sites took part in interviews and focus groups. Four facilitators were trained at the first-round sites, with four further facilitator assessments recorded at the second-round sites.

Inclusion. There was anecdotal evidence of children with disabilities taking part, but this was not systematically recorded. A disability screening tool is recommended for the next cycle.

IMPLEMENTATION

How the pilot ran

Duration. Round 1 at EPE Alfredo de Jesus Lemos (sessions 10 March – 18 May 2026) and EPE Tomas Ximenes (15 April – 16 June). Round 2 at EPE Lauhata and EPE Saboria, July – September 2026. Each site ran 16 two-hour sessions, twice a week: 64 sessions in total.

Structure. Two locally recruited facilitators per site, trained by ETF in February 2026 and supported by ETF Timor-Leste staff, who led monitoring visits, classroom observation and baseline and endline data collection. Sessions used existing pre-school classrooms.

Scheduling. Sessions were designed for after school. A mid-cycle shift to mornings, announced late, excluded some children; afternoons left others tired. The lesson is to agree a timetable with each school and its parents before enrolment, and hold it.

WHAT CHILDREN DID



WHAT THE PILOT SHOWS

What worked, and what the evidence can carry

Play-based learning drove engagement and the largest gains. The most game-like skills (sorting, block building and flexible problem-solving) reached 96–100% independent at the first-round sites and 77–98% at the second-round sites, and facilitators rated the most hands-on sessions as the most effective. This matches global evidence: guided play produces learning gains equal to or greater than direct instruction on several early outcomes while sustaining engagement better (Weisberg, Hirsh-Pasek & Golinkoff, 2013; Zosh et al., 2017), and after-school programs work best when activities are sequenced, active, focused and explicit (Durlak, Weissberg & Pachan, 2010).

Community trust built over time. Attendance at EPE Tomas Ximenes grew 62% between the first and second halves of the cycle as families saw the program in action.

Local recruitment is a durable asset. Facilitators live in the communities they serve, are known to families and remain available between cycles; parents cited their attentiveness as the reason children were safe.

Learning travels home. Children taught skills to siblings and parents, swapped phones for making and drawing, and planted seedlings at home.

US$75 approximate cost per enrolled child at the first-round sites (budget basis): 16 sessions, local facilitators, existing classrooms.

What the pilot can demonstrate

- **The model is deliverable.** All 16 planned sessions ran at each first-round site, with locally recruited facilitators, in Tetun, using low-cost materials in existing school facilities, at roughly **US$75 per enrolled child** (first-round sites, budget basis).
- **Children's measured performance rose** on every learning indicator at all four sites, and on health, hygiene and socio-emotional behaviours.
- **The program is acceptable** to families and workable for facilitators: every respondent group affirmed its value; criticisms were operational.

What it cannot demonstrate

- **Causal impact.** Without a comparison group, the share of the change caused by the program, rather than schooling or children simply growing older, is unknown.
- **The size of the effect.** The in-house tool is unvalidated and rates skills in three broad categories, so gains cannot be compared with other programs.
- **Independent confirmation.** Children were assessed by the team that delivered the program, and only some first-round children could be matched between rounds.
- **Lasting gains.** There was no follow-up after the cycle, so whether gains persist is unknown.

CHALLENGES AND LIMITATIONS

What held the pilot back

Variable attendance.
Sessions averaged 22–28.5 children against 41–64 enrolled or assessed per site. Rain, difficult terrain and river crossings, tiredness, illness and, above all, an unstable timetable kept children away.

Communication with families.
With little internet access, messages relayed through children led to missed invitations and late notice of schedule changes.

Data quality.
Some records were missing or duplicated; second-round records contain patterns that need verifying, and no qualitative data were collected there.

Facilitators need coaching, not just training.
Knowledge scores rose, but facilitators had little experience managing rooms of up to 39 children across a five-year age span, and the four learning corners were rarely used.

Evaluation limits.
No comparison group, in-house instruments, assessments by the implementing team, and only partly matched cohorts at the first-round sites.

Incomplete financial actuals.
Expenditure was documented only for materials, so unit costs are stated on a budget basis.







Play, learning and community at the four pilot sites. All images follow our child protection and consent process.

EDUCATING THE FUTURE

November 2026

The evidence supports a further, better-measured cycle.

Partner with us to fund a site, strengthen evidence, share materials and reach children in rural Timor-Leste.

About Educating The Future

Educating The Future is an Australian founded not-for-profit providing pre-school education in Timor-Leste to over 3000 children since 2015 and is a full member of the Australian Council for International Development (ACFID) since 2020. The organization has built and supports eight public pre-schools and runs Timor's first evidence-based After School Program improving educational, social-emotional and developmental outcomes for youth and communities. The organization also founded the Timor-Leste Australia Youth Dialogue providing a regional forum for youth-led policy action. Educating The Future is run completely by volunteers in Australia with paid staff in Timor-Leste. The Timorese organization is part of the Technical Working Group for Pre-School Education and is a recognized Ministry of Education partner with an active Memorandum of Understanding since 2019.

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The implementation of this pilot was supported by the Swiss Embassy to Timor-Leste under their small-grants program.