

# Preschool Quality, Child Development, and First 5 California Investment in IMPACT

IMPACT 2020 Brief (February 2023)

## Introduction

This brief provides context for the report *Preschool Quality and Child Development: How Are Learning Gains Related to Program Ratings?*<sup>1</sup> The report summarizes a study investigating the relationships between preschool quality, based on the Quality Counts California (QCC)<sup>2</sup> system, and children’s learning and development. This study explored the following research questions:

- Do children in higher-quality-rated programs exhibit greater learning and development than children in lower-quality-rated programs?
- If so, does this pattern hold for children who are multilingual learners, children with disabilities, and children from different racial/ethnic groups?

## How Do California Preschool Quality Ratings Relate to Children’s Learning and Development?

The study provides new information about the association between program quality ratings and child-level data from publicly supported preschools in California. QCC program quality data were analyzed with child-level data about children’s learning and development from the Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP).<sup>3</sup> The DRDP is a developmental assessment administered by children’s classroom teachers.

The sample for the study were children ranging in age from 4.5 to 5.5 years in spring 2017 or spring 2018 who were likely to enter kindergarten the following fall. Children were primarily from families who were income-eligible for publicly supported preschool programs. The DRDP child-level data were linked with QCC data, when available, from the preschool setting where children were enrolled.

Using the DRDP dataset as the primary data file, the research team used common identifiers to map DRDP results with QCC facilities ratings where possible. Not all children with a completed DRDP were enrolled in QCC-rated programs. Linking DRDP and QCC records was a laborious process because common identifiers between the two systems were limited, especially for children in family child care programs. Thus,



the final sample was more inclusive of preschool children in center-based programs than family child care homes.

Overall, results of this study suggest that attending a higher-quality-rated program is associated with greater learning and development than attending a lower-quality-rated program. Key findings include the following:

- Children in higher-tier programs showed more learning and development than those in lower-tier programs.
- Multilingual learners, children with disabilities, and children from all racial or ethnic groups exhibited more learning and development in higher-tier programs.
- Preschool children who are Black, Latine<sup>a</sup> or multiracial were underrepresented in higher-quality programs.

## First 5 California IMPACT Funding for Quality Counts California

Over the past decade, California has developed the QCC quality rating and improvement system to support and evaluate program quality across a diverse system and inform families seeking care. QCC is a collaboration between three state agencies—First 5 California (F5CA), the California Department of Education, and the California Department of Social Services—and uses a multifaceted approach to assess and improve the level of quality in early learning and care programs. Early learning and care sites are rated on seven elements and assigned a final quality rating in a tiering system that ranges from Tier 1 (the lowest overall rating) to Tier 5 (the highest overall rating). Participation in QCC is voluntary, with 28 percent of California’s licensed early learning centers participating in QCC during the 2020–21 funding year.<sup>5</sup>

Since its inception, the goal of QCC was to improve the quality of early learning and care programs and close the achievement gap for children from high-impact communities and experiences. IMPACT, funded through F5CA, contributed to the successful implementation of QCC through flexible funding, through funding for Regional Hubs and data systems, and by promoting family engagement. IMPACT 2020, the newest iteration, was specifically designed to provide flexible funding for expansion of quality improvement and to support providers serving high-impact communities and populations not already receiving quality support. Today QCC operates with state, regional, and county coordination and support to serve a variety of early learning and care settings serving California’s children.

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<sup>a</sup> “Latine” is emerging as a preferred gender-inclusive alternative to historically used terms such as “Hispanic” or “Latino/a” and as a culturally inclusive alternative, originating from Latin America, to “Latinx.” “Latine” is used here instead of “Hispanic/Latino/a” which is used in *Preschool Quality and Child Development: How Are Learning Gains Related to Program Ratings?*

## Implications for California's Quality Improvement System

The results of this study provide new information about the relationship between preschool quality ratings and children's learning and development and can be used to inform future quality improvement initiatives. Children enrolled in Tier 4 and Tier 5 QCC programs showed greater learning and development compared to children enrolled in Tier 3 programs.

- The results suggest that attending higher-quality programs could be associated with more equitable outcomes for children who are multilingual learners and children with disabilities, and that differences between groups may narrow when all children are in higher-quality programs.
  - More study is needed to understand how learning and development is supported for children across racial and ethnic groups who are enrolled in family child care home settings.
- Although higher-quality-rated programs appeared to benefit children across racial and ethnic groups, preschool children who are Black were underrepresented in Tier 5 center-based preschool programs compared to children from all other racial and ethnic groups.
  - Nearly one in seven preschool children who are Black were represented in Tier 5 programs compared to one in five who are multiracial and one in four who are Latine, Asian/Pacific Islander, and White.

Through this study, children's learning and developmental progress was quantified as months of growth. As compared to children enrolled in Tier 3 programs, children enrolled in Tier 5 QCC programs showed significantly more growth from the beginning to the end of preschool, as follows:

- 2.5 more months of growth in social and emotional development
- 2.3 more months of growth in mathematics
- 2.2 more months of growth in language and literacy development

The relationship between tier quality and learning and development for children who are Black was less pronounced and not statistically significant as compared to children from all other racial or ethnic groups.

More research is needed to know the extent to which differences that are detectable at the end of preschool persist as learning gaps throughout early elementary and beyond. Minimally, these results show a trend toward positive relationships between preschool quality and readiness for kindergarten. These results also suggested that higher-quality programs may do more to close the learning gap for many children who have been traditionally underserved (diverse populations, multilingual learners, and children with disabilities).



Further study is needed to understand why children who are Black are less represented in Tier 5 preschool programs and why they appear to benefit less from being enrolled in a Tier 5 program compared to their peers.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Sussman, J., Melnick, H., Newton, E., Kriener-Althen, K., Draney, K., Mangione, P., & Gochyyev, P. (2022). [\*Preschool quality and child development: How are learning gains related to program ratings?\*](#) Learning Policy Institute.

<sup>2</sup>Quality Counts California. (2022). <https://www.qualitycountsca.net/>. QCC is a locally administered state quality rating and improvement system that seeks to ensure that children throughout the state have access to high-quality programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond. QCC works to improve the quality of early learning with a focus on eight elements of program quality: (1) school readiness, (2) social and emotional development, (3) health, nutrition, and physical activity, (4) effective teacher-child interactions, (5) professional development, (6) environment, (7) program administration, and (8) family engagement. See [Quality Counts California Continuous Quality Improvement Pathways](#) for more information.

<sup>3</sup>[Desired Results Developmental Profile](#).

<sup>4</sup>The seven QCC elements that make up the [QCC Rating Matrix](#) are (1) child observation, (2) developmental and health screenings, (3) lead teacher qualifications, (4) teacher-child interactions, (5) teacher-child ratios and group size, (6) program environment rating scales, and (7) director qualifications. Ratings are assigned by trained assessors based on program documentation and classroom observations. The tier ratings are based on a site's score on each of the seven QCC elements. These elements were determined through collaboration between local QCC consortia, the California Department of Education, the California Department of Social Services, F5CA, and other interested parties. Individual elements each have a research base that indicates their importance in quality early childhood education, with evidence ranging from suggestive to strong.

<sup>5</sup>Personal communication with David Dodds, Deputy Director of Evaluation at F5CA (2021, December 1).