

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program Year 4 (July 1, 2004–June 30, 2005) Program Characteristics and Services



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Overview of the More at Four Program

The North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program, a state-funded initiative begun in 2001-2002, is designed to help at-risk 4-year-olds be more successful when they enter kindergarten. More at Four provides funding for classroom-based educational programs in all 100 counties at a variety of different types of sites, including public schools, Head Start, and community child care centers (both for-profit and nonprofit). Local sites must meet a variety of program guidelines and standards around curriculum, training and education levels for teachers and administrators, class size, teacher-child ratios, North Carolina child care licensing levels, and provision of other program services.

The program first targets “unserved” children (those not already being served in a preschool program) and secondly, “underserved” children (those eligible for but not receiving child care financial assistance and/or those in lower quality settings). Eligibility for More at Four in the 2004-2005 school year was primarily based on family income, either up to 75% of State Median Income (SMI) or above 75% SMI and below 300% of federal poverty if the child demonstrates a designated risk factor (limited English proficiency, disability, chronic health condition, and/or developmental/educational need). In 2004-2005, it was estimated that there were approximately 53,000 at-risk 4-year-olds in North Carolina based on poverty status (at or below 185% of poverty), with more than 7,000 of these children remaining unserved by a preschool program and more than 10,000 underserved in low quality care.

Evaluation Results

The current report contains results from the fourth year of a statewide evaluation of the More at Four Program, focusing on findings related to program characteristics and services. Information was analyzed from monthly service report data provided by each county or region (multi-county group) for all children, classrooms, and sites participating in More at Four. These monthly reports included information about program size and operation days, teacher and administrator qualifications, and children’s demographic characteristics and attendance information.

The primary research questions addressed by this component of the evaluation included:

What were the characteristics of the local programs during the fourth year of operations? Did individual sites and classrooms meet the program guidelines?

- What was the size of the More at Four Program?
- In what types of settings were children served?
- What were the qualifications of the staff?

Who was served by the More at Four Program?

- What were the demographic characteristics of the children served?
- Did the children served meet the program guidelines in terms of eligibility and service priority?

Program Size

North Carolina's More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program has continued to expand substantially each year, although at a less rapid pace by the fourth year. The total number of children served in the fourth year was 13,515, an increase of 24% from the previous year's total of 10,891 children and more than double the second year's total of 6,125. The number of classrooms and sites has continued to increase somewhat as well, with 1,027 classrooms in 689 sites (schools and child care centers) across North Carolina in year 4.

Participation at the local county/region level was phased in over the first three years of the program, with the fourth year marking the first time all counties in the state had established programs to build upon at the start of the school year. Accordingly, most children participating in the program had the opportunity to attend for the complete school year in 2004-2005, with the vast majority of children (84%) and classrooms (94%) beginning by September. Nearly all sites operated for a full or nearly full program year, with 90% operating for the complete 10 months (mean days of operation=170 out of 180 maximum), although children actually attended the program for slightly fewer days (mean=155 days for those who attended the full year). Sites operated for an average of 6.4 hours per day, consistent with the length of a regular school day, in accord with the guidelines requiring 6- to 6-1/2 hours per day. The mean class size was 16 and the median class size was 18; while most children were in classrooms blending funding sources, the majority of children (mean=12 children per class) were funded through the More at Four Program.

Types of Settings

The More at Four Program has continued to serve children in a variety of settings, with most children in public school settings (50%) or for-profit child care centers (31%); 11% are in non-profit child care centers and 10% in Head Start (2% of these in public schools and 8% in community settings). Some significant differences in program characteristics were noted for public and community settings, some of which are to be expected given other requirements of these settings. Most notably, community settings as well as Head Start sites were more likely than public school settings to be licensed, with more than three-quarters of the classrooms in community and Head Start sites licensed at the two highest levels (5-star and 4-star).

Staff Qualifications

More at Four teachers and site administrators reported fairly high levels of education and licensure/credentials, with slight increases compared to prior years of the program and many staff working on higher level educational degrees and/or licensure/credentials. Lead teachers and administrators in public settings were more highly qualified than those in community settings in terms of education and credentials, with fewer differences in assistant teacher qualifications by setting type. Moreover, lead teachers and administrators, especially those in public settings, were more likely to meet the program standards than assistant teachers in any setting. (Individual classrooms are given four years to meet the goals from the time they begin serving More at Four children.)

Almost all (99%) lead teachers in public schools and about two-thirds (65%) in community settings held bachelor's degrees or higher. In contrast, fewer than half of the assistant teachers had associate's degrees or higher (43% overall; 50% public schools and 35% community settings). Three-quarters (75%) of lead teachers in public schools held B-K or preschool add-on licenses compared to 15% of those in community settings. Few assistant teachers held a CDA credential or higher (11% overall; 15% community settings and 9% public schools). However, almost half of all assistant teachers met the program goal of either a CDA credential or higher or an associate's degree or higher (49% overall; 49% public schools and 46% community settings). Nearly all (99.7%) administrators in public settings held a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 62% in community settings. Nearly all (96%) public school administrators held principal's licenses (some program directors may not have been school principals). For directors in community settings, 45% held a Level III North Carolina Early Childhood Administrator Credential or a principal's license and another 37% held a Level II credential.

Child Characteristics

The More at Four Program served a variety of at-risk children, in accord with its mission. The children represented diverse racial/ethnic backgrounds and 7% had identified disabilities. A total of 3% of all children received a referral for a disability evaluation while attending More at Four, an indication that that the program is helping with early identification. The children enrolled in More at Four were largely from poor families, with 90% qualifying for free or reduced-price lunch. More than three-quarters (78%) were unserved at the time of enrollment, indicating that the local programs are doing a good job recruiting this highest service priority group and serving the intended population.

Summary

As in previous years, the program reflected allowable variations in local implementation, with individual counties/regions differing on a number of program characteristics, including program size, types of settings, and children's risk status (with all children served meeting the eligibility guidelines). Nearly all individual sites met the guidelines for program operation in 2004-2005, including class size, daily hours of operation, length of program year, and recommended curriculum use. While there are still some areas for improvement, most notably in terms of staff qualifications, the More at Four Program in its fourth year has become well-established at the local level, meeting most of the goals in terms of the characteristics of the services provided and the children served. ❖

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For more information about the More at Four Evaluation Project, including a full version of this report, visit the website at www.fpg.unc.edu/~mafeval.

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