

**EVALUATION OF
THE NORTH
CAROLINA
MORE AT FOUR
PRE-KINDERGARTEN
PROGRAM:**

**CHILDREN'S
OUTCOMES AND
PROGRAM
QUALITY
IN THE
FIFTH YEAR
(2005-2006)**



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OVERVIEW

The North Carolina More at Four Pre-kindergarten Program, a state-funded initiative for at-risk 4-year-olds, is designed to help children be more successful when they enter school. More at Four provides funding for classroom-based educational programs during the year prior to kindergarten, and has served over 49,000 children during the first five program years (2002-2006).

Key findings from the fifth year of a statewide evaluation of the More at Four Program examining program quality and children's outcomes are listed below, based on data from two program years (2003-2004 and 2005-2006), including monthly service reports about program characteristics and the children served from all sites; observations of the quality of classroom practices in randomly-selected classrooms (n=99 and 57, respectively); and individual child assessments of children's growth in language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and social skills over the pre-k year (n=514 and 478, respectively).

The primary research questions addressed by this evaluation included:

- What were the characteristics of the local programs?
- What was the quality of the services provided?
- What were the outcomes of children attending the More at Four Program?
- What factors were associated with better outcomes for children?

KEY FINDINGS

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS

- While the size of the program has grown substantially over time, from 1,244 children served in the first year to 10,891 in 2003-2004 (year 3) and 17,251 in 2005-2006 (year 5), most characteristics of the local More at Four sites have remained fairly similar.
- A range of different types of sites and classrooms have continued to participate in More at Four, with nearly half in public school sites and half in community sites.
- The program has continued to serve a diverse population of at-risk children, with the majority in targeted groups such as very low-income families (e.g., children qualify for free lunch) and children who were unserved in another early education program at enrollment.
- One positive change has been improvements in teacher qualifications, with public school sites showing increases in the proportion of teachers with B-K licenses and community sites showing increases in the proportion of teachers with early childhood education credentials (CDA or NCECC) and decreases in the proportion with no credential.

KEY FINDINGS, CONTINUED

CLASSROOM QUALITY

- The quality of classroom practices was somewhat lower in 2005-2006 (ECERS-R mean=4.4) than in 2003-2004 (ECERS-R mean=5.3). Although it is difficult to determine whether this single decrease in quality is a general trend, this is an issue to monitor as the program continues to scale up.
- More at Four classrooms were doing a somewhat better job of setting up a literacy-rich environment than carrying out literacy-related activities, and doing better for reading activities than writing. These areas might be important to consider for professional development efforts.
- Observations of the quality of teacher-child interactions indicated that teachers were fairly sensitive in their interactions with children, with high positive interactions and low negative interactions.
- There were no consistent factors predicting classroom quality across measures or cohorts, although higher quality classroom practices were associated with having a lower proportion of More at Four children in the classroom in 2005-2006 only.

CHILDREN'S OUTCOMES

- Consistent with previous years, children made significant gains in all skill areas over the More at Four program year: Language and literacy (receptive language, rhyming, story and print concepts, naming letters); Math (applied problems, counting task); General knowledge (color knowledge, social awareness); and Social skills. Problem behavior scores remained constant over the year, with slightly fewer problem behaviors than the general population.
- There were no consistent associations of classroom quality with children's outcomes. For 2005-2006 only, better quality was associated with greater gains on rhyming and social skills, but lower gains on letter knowledge, although these findings were not maintained when the two cohorts were combined.
- Children at greatest risk entered the program with lower skill levels and still had not caught up to their peers in many areas by the end of the program year. Even though they made greater gains during pre-k in some areas, especially children at the lowest English proficiency level, these differences still persisted.
- For Spanish-speaking children (approximately one-fifth of those served), growth occurred for skills assessed in both English and Spanish, with greater gains in English for children with higher initial skill levels and/or greater growth in Spanish. These findings speak to the potential benefits of promoting native language skills in conjunction with English skills.

The More at Four Program is designed for children at risk, especially those who otherwise would not have been likely to participate in a pre-k program, thus providing them with opportunities for an early education experience. The evidence from the present year's evaluation, as well as those in the past, suggests that such experiences are beneficial and likely to help these children on the path to school success.



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