

Evaluation of the North Carolina More at Four Pre-Kindergarten Program



Children's Longitudinal Outcomes and Program Quality Over Time (2003–2007)

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 69,000 children during the first six program years (2002–2007).

Key findings from the sixth year of the statewide evaluation of More at Four examining program quality and children's outcomes are listed below, based on data from two cohorts of children who were followed over their pre-k and kindergarten years (2003–2005; 2005–2007). The data analyzed included monthly service reports about the More at Four Program, observations of the quality of classroom practices in randomly-selected pre-kindergarten and kindergarten classrooms, and individual child assessments of children's growth in language and literacy skills, math skills, general knowledge, and social skills.

The primary research questions addressed by this evaluation included:

- What were the characteristics of the local More at Four Programs and to what extent have they changed over time?
- What was the quality of the More at Four pre-k and kindergarten programs attended by children?
- What were the longitudinal outcomes from pre-k through kindergarten for children who attended the More at Four Program?
- What factors were associated with better outcomes for children?

KEY FINDINGS

Program Characteristics

- The size of the program has almost doubled during the four most recent years of program operation, from 10,891 in 2003–2004 (year 3) to 20,468 in 2006–2007 (year 6). However, 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 the children in public school sites and half in community sites.
- The program has continued to serve an at-risk and high service priority population of children, with the majority in targeted groups such as very low-income families, limited English speakers, and children who were unserved in another early education program at enrollment.
- One area that has shown positive change is teacher qualifications, with an increasing number of teachers meeting the program guideline requiring a B-K license (or the equivalent), although the increase has primarily been in public school settings. Across all types of settings, the percentage of teachers with no credential has decreased.



Classroom Quality

- In both cohorts, the quality of classroom practices was significantly higher in the pre-k than the kindergarten classrooms. Smaller class sizes were associated with higher quality classroom practices in both pre-k and kindergarten. There were, however, some decreases in quality from the first to the second cohort for both the pre-k and kindergarten classrooms, which may be evidence of a difference in the samples for the two cohorts. However, it will be important to monitor that quality is not reduced in conjunction with continued scaling up of the More at Four Program.
- Information on the quality of the literacy environment indicates that pre-k classrooms tended to have higher quality literacy environments than kindergarten classrooms, although there were no differences in the frequency of literacy activities. In both pre-k and kindergarten, teachers with B-K licenses (or the equivalent) had classrooms with higher quality literacy environments.
- The quality of teacher-child interactions tended to be more sensitive in pre-k than in kindergarten classrooms. Neither class size nor teacher qualifications were related to the sensitivity of teacher-child interactions in either pre-k or kindergarten.

Children's Outcomes

- Consistent with previous years, children made substantial gains during both pre-k and kindergarten across all domains: language and literacy (receptive language, rhyming, story and print concepts, letter naming); math (applied problems, counting); general knowledge (social awareness, color knowledge); and behavioral skills (social skills). While children made significant progress each year, for many of these skills they exhibited greater gains in pre-k than kindergarten.
- For Spanish-speaking children, growth occurred on all skills assessed in English and most in Spanish, with similar amounts of gain during pre-k and kindergarten. Higher initial skill levels and/or greater growth in Spanish were associated with greater growth in many skills in English. These findings speak to the potential benefits of promoting native language skills in conjunction with growth in English skills.
- In general, the More at Four Program had even greater benefits from pre-k through kindergarten for children with greater needs (higher cumulative risk levels or lower English proficiency levels). While these children entered More at Four with lower scores and continued to score lower than their peers, they made even greater gains from pre-k through kindergarten in many key school readiness and early academic skills.

These results suggest that the More at Four Program helped prepare these at-risk children for school and enabled them to continue to progress, often at a greater than expected rate, in kindergarten. Participation in such programs may offer an important and ameliorative experience for children who otherwise may not have these opportunities during the pre-k year. ●

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