

Executive Summary

Children's Kindergarten Outcomes and Program Quality in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program

2013-2014
Statewide Evaluation



Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, Ph.D.
Jennifer M. Schaaf, Ph.D.
Lisa M. Hildebrandt, M.A.
Yi Pan, Ph.D.
Bethany L. Warnaar, M.A.

Purpose of the NC Pre-K Evaluation Study

The purpose of the 2013–2014 North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten (NC Pre-K) Evaluation study was to conduct a follow-up study of children who attended the pre-k program to examine their outcomes through kindergarten. In addition, the characteristics and quality of the NC Pre-K Program during 2013–2014 were examined, along with comparisons to previous years. The primary research questions addressed by this evaluation were: What are the longitudinal outcomes through kindergarten of children who attended NC Pre-K and What factors were associated with better outcomes? Secondly, the evaluation also addressed: What were the key site, classroom, teacher, and child characteristics of the local programs? and What was the quality of a sample of NC Pre-K classrooms?

To address these questions, information was gathered from multiple sources. A sample of 561 children was included in the study, with data gathered at the beginning and end of NC Pre-K (2012–2013) and kindergarten (2013–2014). Researchers conducted individual assessments of children's language, literacy, math, and general knowledge skills and gathered teacher ratings of behavior skills. For 119 Spanish-speaking dual language learners (DLLs) in the sample, skills were measured in both English and Spanish using parallel measures. Information about characteristics of the local NC Pre-K settings and the children served was obtained from statewide monthly service report data. Observations conducted in a sample of 374 NC Pre-K classrooms as part of the rated license assessments provided information about the quality of classroom practices in the 2013–2014 program year.

Results

CHILD OUTCOMES

- Children enrolled in the NC Pre-K Program made significant gains from pre-k through kindergarten across all domains of learning. Children showed gains in language and literacy skills (receptive vocabulary, expressive vocabulary, letter-word identification, phonological awareness), math skills (math problem-solving, counting), general knowledge (basic self-knowledge), and behavior skills (social skills).
- Growth rates for children who had enrolled in NC Pre-K were even greater during pre-k than during kindergarten for many skills. Although children made significant gains throughout this entire time period, the rate of gain was even greater during pre-k on several measures (letter-word identification, phonological awareness, basic self-knowledge, social skills). In contrast, children's rate of growth was relatively greater in kindergarten compared to pre-k for two measures (receptive vocabulary, counting).



UNC

FPG CHILD DEVELOPMENT INSTITUTE

Results

CHILD OUTCOMES (CONTINUED)

- Dual-language learners made significant gains for all skills measured in English and for most skills measured in Spanish. Similarly to the full sample, DLLs made significant gains for all language and literacy, math, and general knowledge skills in English. Even though the language of instruction in these classrooms was most likely English, these children made significant gains for many of the same skills measured in Spanish, with the exception of most language and literacy skills.
- Children with lower levels of English proficiency, including DLLs, made greater gains than their peers from pre-k through kindergarten in most areas of language and literacy skills, math skills, and general knowledge. Conversely, children with higher levels of English proficiency made greater gains than their peers in phonological awareness, which is a more complex language skill that may require a higher level of proficiency to learn.

PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS AND QUALITY

- Many of the characteristics of the NC Pre-K Program were consistent with good quality standards, as well as program guidelines. In 2013–2014, the average class size was 16 children (with 13 of those funded by NC Pre-K); the majority of programs were at the highest, five-star licensing level; and all classrooms reported using an approved curriculum and conducting ongoing assessments and developmental screenings. The average attendance, however, was only 135 days (79% of the operation days and 75% of the intended instructional days).
- Many program characteristics have been fairly stable over time. In 2013–2014, the NC Pre-K Program served almost 30,000 children in nearly 2,000 classrooms located in more than 1,100 sites. Similarly to previous years, the program was offered in a variety of setting types (public schools, private settings, and Head Start), and the children served included the vast majority from low-income families, a majority of whom had never been served or were currently unserved in a preschool program, and those with different risk factors.
- One continuing trend in the NC Pre-K Program has been a steady improvement in the levels of teacher education and credentials, with a higher proportion with bachelor's degrees or higher and B-K licenses in 2013–2014 compared to past years.
- The quality of classroom practices for a sample of NC Pre-K classrooms gathered as part of the rated license assessments was in the high quality range overall, with almost all classrooms scoring at or above the required score of 5.0 based on the program guidelines. In addition, teachers who had a B-K license had classrooms with higher ECERS-R scores compared to teachers without a B-K license.

Overview of the NC Pre-K Program

NC Pre-K is a state-funded educational program for eligible 4-year-olds, designed to enhance their school readiness skills. Initiated in 2001–2002, the statewide pre-k program has served over 292,000 children, with an average annual cost per child of approximately \$5,000. Children are eligible for NC Pre-K primarily based on age (4 years old) and family income (no more than 75% of state median income), although children with higher family incomes may be enrolled with at least one of the following risk factors: limited English proficiency, identified disability, chronic health condition, or educational need as indicated by results from developmental screening; or a parent actively serving in the military. NC Pre-K provides funding for serving eligible children in classroom-based educational programs in a variety of setting types, including public schools, Head Start, and private child care centers (both for-profit and nonprofit). NC Pre-K operates on a school day and school calendar basis for 6-1/2 hours/day and 180 days/year. Local sites are expected to meet a variety of program standards around curriculum, screening and assessment, training and education levels for teachers and administrators, class size, adult:child ratios, North Carolina child care licensing levels, and provision of other program services.

© February 2015 by Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, FPG Child Development Institute, The University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

Suggested citation: Peisner-Feinberg, E. S., Schaaf, J. M., Hildebrandt, L. M., Pan, Y. & Warnaar, B. L. (2015). *Children's kindergarten outcomes and program quality in the North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program: 2013–2014 Statewide evaluation*. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute.

This study was funded by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed in this report do not necessarily reflect those of the funding agency.

This report is available at <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/projects/evaluation-nc-pre-kindergarten-program>.