



FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT



July 1, 2023 - June 30, 2024

October 2024

Acknowledgements

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Program Description

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California, a “statewide, locally implemented quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that funds and provides guidance to local and regional agencies, and other quality partners, in their support of early learning and care providers.”³⁰



In 2012, First 5 Santa Cruz County launched a local QRIS, partnering with family child care and child care center providers to improve the quality of early learning for children ages birth through 5 in Santa Cruz County. First 5 established this initiative as a result of receiving funding through California’s Race to the Top - Early Learning Challenge federal grant, and First 5 California’s Child Signature Program.

Drawing on resources from both grants, the Quality Early Learning Initiative Consortium was created, bringing together public and private center-based program leaders, family child care providers, higher education faculty, home visiting program partners, and other early learning stakeholders. Together, this Consortium—now called Quality Counts Santa Cruz County—worked to develop and pilot a local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), aligning with the California Quality Continuum Framework, as a way to foster on-going quality improvement that is proven to help children thrive.

Since 2015, a statewide QRIS has been established in all 58 counties. Renamed Quality Counts California (QCC) in FY 2017-18, QCC helps to ensure that children ages 0 to 5—particularly those who are low-income, English learners, or children with disabilities or developmental delays—have access to high quality early learning programs so that they thrive in their early learning settings and succeed in kindergarten and beyond.

“A growing body of research confirms the importance of quality early learning experiences to effectively prepare young children not only for school, but for life.”

- First 5 California

Beginning in FY 2023-24, QCC has shifted some funding away from formal rating to maximize resources and meet the diverse needs of our early learning and care providers through research, evaluation, and a focus on equity. QCC continues to maintain some funding for public programs to conduct ratings, inform prioritization of quality improvement activities, and increase public accountability.

As QCC explains, “QCC uses an equity approach as an essential component of quality to close the opportunity gap by prioritizing communities where we can make the highest impact. QCC supports quality early learning and care programs to promote environments, relationships, interactions, and activities supporting all children’s growth and development to prepare them for success in school and life.”³¹

³⁰ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountsca.net>, 2019.

³¹ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountsca.net/about>, 2024.

First 5 California continues to partner with the California Department of Education (CDE), and the California Department of Social Services (CDSS) in a statewide effort to enhance the quality of early learning and care environments. These three administrating state agencies have committed to working together to achieve a common purpose: funding a system of continuous quality improvement support and an infrastructure for assessing, coordinating delivery of professional development, and promoting quality across the spectrum of early learning and care providers and programs in California, including family, friend, or neighbor care, family child care, center-based, and alternative settings. This will be achieved by unifying funds as follows:

- **F5CA IMPACT LEGACY (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive) 2023-2025**

First 5 California has invested \$40 million over two fiscal years to support a network of local QRIS's statewide. Striving toward high-quality, evidence-based standards, First 5 IMPACT Legacy will improve the quality of early learning settings across the entire continuum, from alternative settings and family, friend, or neighbor care, to family child care homes, child care centers, and preschools. It will focus on addressing the needs of the whole child, including health, child development, and family strengthening. This grant is administered locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County.

- **Quality Counts California QRIS block grant**

Nearly 13 million dollars have been appropriated statewide for FY 2023-24 to support local QRIS consortia to provide training, technical assistance and other quality improvement resources to support and expand the quality of child care. The funds are for Early Learning and Care settings serving children with increased needs, including those in rural areas, migrant populations, children who have experienced trauma, and children experiencing homelessness. Funds will also be available for infant and toddler programs, as well as for children receiving services through a California Migrant Program. This grant is administered locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County.

“At-risk children who receive high-quality early care and education benefit greatly, often exceeding national averages on measures of school readiness...[and] these gains persist”

- First 5 California

- **California State Preschool Program QRIS Block Grant**

The California Department of Education (CDE) appropriated \$50 million annually statewide for the purpose of allowing local consortia to give QRIS block grants to local California State Preschool Program (CSPP) sites participating and rated in the QRIS. Consortia use the QRIS block grant to support local early learning programs and increase the number of low-income children in high-quality state-funded preschool programs. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, who are the co-leads in the Quality Counts Santa Cruz County QRIS efforts. Beginning in FY 2023-24, only CSPP sites will continue to be rated on the Quality Continuum Framework (formerly called the Quality Matrix).

- **CDE Workforce Pathways Grant**

For FY 2023-24, CDE appropriated over \$12 million statewide for the QCC Workforce Pathways Grant, designed to align with the QCC professional development system and to focus on local workforce needs across all child care setting types. This includes training of professional growth advisors, ensuring all ELC's are participating in the California ECE Workforce Registry, and providing grants for access to higher education in ECE. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

Quality Rating Improvement System (QRIS)

A QRIS helps to improve early care and education programs by measuring current quality levels against research-based standards. In California, these standards focus on what research shows are the key components of quality early care and education, including learning environments, teacher-child ratios, adult-child interactions, staff qualifications, as well as other related criteria. A QRIS can assist early learning educators with increased training to expand their skills in working with young children; provide coaching to help programs create learning environments that nurture the emotional, social, language, and cognitive development of every child; and provide families with information to help them understand and choose quality programs.

The process of building a QRIS ultimately results in:

- A shared definition of child care quality based on reliable and validated research
- A comprehensive and consistent approach to assess quality
- Access to a system that supports quality improvement, especially for programs serving children with high needs (low income children, infants, dual language learners, children with special needs)
- A design to evaluate the rating system and its impact
- A consistent way for providers to communicate to parents and caregivers about quality
- Increased consumer awareness about—and demand for—high quality child care
- Training and incentives for providers of wrap-around and enrichment care (such as FFN providers), so that children receive quality care in all settings

One Provider's Experience

"Before, always, people thought we were babysitters ... so now I can say I have a certificate, and a permit. I'm an accredited program."

- Provider quote from the Quality Counts California website

Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) - Local Quality Rating and Improvement System

The QCSCC Consortium adopted the Quality Counts California Framework (which includes the Quality Counts California Rating Matrix; see Appendix A) as the foundation of their local QRIS. This

framework encompasses 15 elements of quality, including 7 rated elements. The elements that are rated include teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child interactions.

In December 2019, all sites participating in QCSCC that were ready to be rated received a rating based on their cumulative scores in all seven elements (or five, for Family Child Care programs) across five tiers of quality, with points assigned to each element (for more information, see Appendix A). These ratings became publicly available to families seeking child care and early learning programs through Quality Counts California and the local Resource and Referral Agency. This system provides a set of standards that describe the requirements that center- and home-based early learning programs must meet in order to qualify for a QRIS rating; the higher the quality, the higher the rating.

At the time of this last rating in December 2019, there were 41 state- and federally funded center sites with 67 classrooms (from 11 child development programs); 3 private/non-profit center sites with 7 classrooms; and 35 Family Child Care homes participating and rated in Quality Counts Santa Cruz County. Twenty-five additional family child care providers and 6 additional private/non-profit center sites were participating in QCSCC at the Quality Improvement (QI) level, receiving professional development, training, and coaching.

It is important to note that a QRIS rating helps programs identify areas for potential quality improvement and QCSCC provides support, training, and financial incentives to make improvements that lead to higher ratings and ultimately to higher quality child care programs.

- Full ratings of all participating Quality Counts sites in Santa Cruz County were conducted in December 2019 and are valid for 3-5 years (5 years for sites rated at Tiers 4 or 5, and 3 years for sites rated at Tier 3 or below). Sites were rated on a 5-tier scale (1=lowest tier; 5=highest tier), and as of the most recent rating in 2019:
 - 0 sites received a Tier 2 rating
 - 11 sites received a Tier 3 rating
 - 62 sites received a Tier 4 rating
 - 6 sites received a Tier 5 rating

It is important to note that several sites are just 1 point away from moving to the next higher Tier rating:

- Nine Tier 3 family child care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.
- Six Tier 4 centers and five Tier 4 family child care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

Figure 45: QCSCC sites and ratings

| QUALITY TIER | NUMBER OF SITES WITH THIS RATING | | | | |
|--------------------|----------------------------------|-------------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
| | DEC. 2013 PROVISIONAL RATINGS | DEC. 2014 PROVISIONAL RATINGS | DEC. 2015 FULL RATINGS | DEC. 2017 FULL RATINGS | DEC. 2019 FULL RATINGS |
| Tier 1 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Tier 2 | 0 | 23 | 0 | 1 | 0 |
| Tier 3 | 24 | 17 | 16 | 8 | 11* |
| Tier 4 | 16 | 28 | 36 | 56 | 62** |
| Tier 5 | 0 | 1 | 8 | 9 | 6 |
| Total sites | 40 | 69 | 60 | 74 | 79*** |

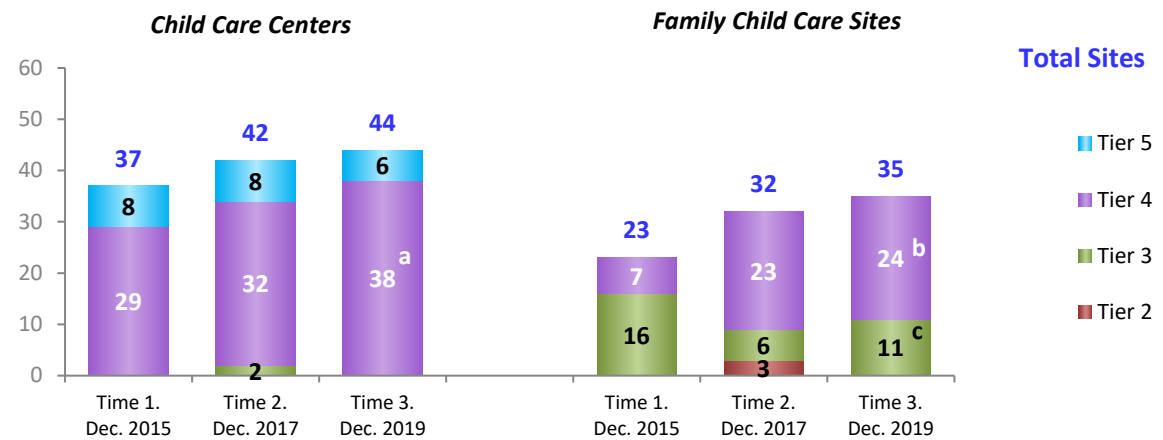
Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2024.

* Nine Tier 3 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.

** Six Tier 4 centers and five Tier 4 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

*** Three additional sites participated but closed down prior to the December 2019 full rating. In all, 82 sites have been rated between 2012-2019.

Figure 46: Number of QCSCC sites at each Tier rating, by Rating time and Type of site



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2024.

^a Six Tier 4 centers are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

^b Five Tier 4 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

^c Nine Tier 3 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.

➤ Throughout the pandemic, many centers participating in QCSCC closed and met with children and families virtually. Most reopened in FY 2021-22, and while a few remain closed, there are new centers that have joined: four in FY 2021-22 and two in FY 2022-23. In FY 2023-24, five family child care providers joined QCSCC. The total number of sites currently participating and active in QCSCC as of FY 2023-24 are as follows:

- **43** Child Care Centers are participating in QCSCC, with 37 rated sites, and 6 not yet rated.
- **65** Family Child Care Sites are participating in QCSCC, with 35 sites that have been rated, and 30 not yet rated.

As of FY 2023-24, this brings the total number of actively participating providers/sites to **108**.

Figure 47: **QCSCC overall participation, by Site type (2023-24)**

| SITE TYPE | NUMBER OF SITES |
|---|-------------------------------|
| Child Care Centers Participating and Rated | 37 (Center sites) |
| Child Care Centers Participating and Not Yet Rated | 6 (Center sites) |
| Family Child Care Sites Participating and Rated | 35 (FCC provider-owned sites) |
| Family Child Care Sites Participating and Not Yet Rated | 30 (FCC provider-owned sites) |
| Total sites | 108 sites |

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2024.

Figure 48: **Distribution of QCSCC sites in the County (2023-24)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2024.

Quality Improvement Activities

During this past year, Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) has provided online technical assistance to program directors, teachers and providers; maintained the QCSCC database; facilitated a Directors’ Professional Learning Community; and collaborated with partners to provide system-wide trainings.

In addition, First 5 contracted with Go Kids, Inc. to continue to lead the QCSCC Consortium’s quality improvement activities for family child care (FCC) programs. The Go Kids Quality Improvement

Coordinator supported all 65 FCC providers in updating their annual Quality Improvement Plans, and applying for small Quality grants to enhance their home learning environment.

The following table presents the number of individuals and sites that participated in professional development provided through Quality Counts Santa Cruz County in FY 2023-24.

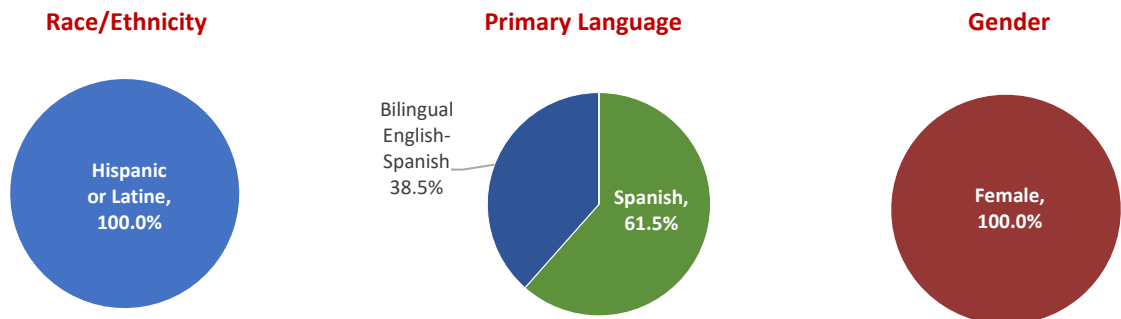
Figure 49: Individuals and sites that participated in QCSCC professional development (2023-24)

| INDIVIDUALS AND SITES | NUMBER |
|---|----------------------------------|
| Number of Family Child Care providers in QCSCC who participated in a Professional Learning Community | • 20 family child care providers |
| Number of directors from center-based QCSCC sites participating in monthly professional learning meetings with the QCSCC Program Manager | • 8 directors |
| Number of QCSCC Family Child Care sites that are rated and participating in technical assistance meetings with the Family Child Care Education Manager | • 35 family child care sites |
| Number of QCSCC Family Child Care sites participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level that are creating a Quality Improvement plan, receiving technical assistance and meeting with the Family Child Care Education Manager | • 30 family child care sites |

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2024.

In addition, The Santa Cruz County Office of Education oversees the Workforce Professional Development pathway of QCSCC and provides professional development and training to teachers and FCC providers from participating QCSCC sites. In FY 2023-24, it is estimated that an additional 395 teachers and providers attended trainings through this pathway.

Figure 50: Key demographics of family child care Providers who participated in QCSCC trainings and technical assistance meetings (2023-2024)



Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2023 – June 30, 2024.

Notes:

- Demographics were only collected for teachers/providers receiving services where enough personal information was collected to create a Unique ID.
- Clients with missing or unknown data for a demographic are excluded from that demographic’s analysis.

N=65.

Quality Counts California Regional Training, Technical Assistance and Coordination Hub – Region 4

Santa Cruz County has joined with Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, San Benito, and Monterey counties to form the Quality Counts California Region 4 Hub. While QCC takes place primarily at the County level, Regional Hubs are funded by First 5 California and were developed so that neighboring counties could strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, align practices, and minimize duplication.

Hubs are intended to be a support mechanism (not monitors) for consortia in the region. More specifically, hubs are funded for the activities listed as follows:³²

- Build local expertise and capacity
- Finance strategically
- Enhance and align standards
- Recruit and engage QCC participants
- Create and support continuous quality improvement
- Ensure accountability
- Public outreach and communication

³² First 5 California, *What are QCC Regional Hubs?* Retrieved from https://caecresources.org/QCC/F5CA_What-are-QCC-Regional-Hubs.pdf. 2023.