First 5 Santa Cruz County

Annual Evaluation Report

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

October 2026

Early Literacy Foundations (ELF) Initiative

Santa Cruz County 3rd graders are struggling to become proficient readers. The latest 2025 data indicate that 63% are below grade level in reading. This number jumps to 79% among low-income 3rd graders in the County, and 79% among Hispanic and Latine 3rd graders.[46] Because language development in the early years is crucial to later reading proficiency, parents and early childhood educators have a unique role in influencing language and literacy development and later educational success. As stated by First Things First: [47]

"Talk. Read. Succeed.

A child's brain is growing at an incredible pace from birth. In fact, babies listen in utero, and once they're born, they communicate through eye contact, facial expressions, crying, smiles and touch. Every time you talk, read or sing to them, you're helping build the connections they'll need to become a confident reader and lifelong learner.

Studies show that kids who regularly hear words and conversations from caring adults:

- *Build larger vocabularies*
- *Become stronger readers*
- *Perform better in school"*

The Early Learning Foundations initiative was founded in FY 2006-07 and has trained **761** early childhood educators, transitional kindergarten teachers, and family child care providers throughout Santa Cruz County in the SEEDS of Learning™ framework. These early childhood educators are working to ensure that their children are on target for kindergarten readiness by using evidence-based early literacy strategies, receiving coaching, and integrating pre-literacy materials into their learning environments. The Raising A Reader program provides a way for children and their parents to participate in a weekly rotating book bag program through early care and education settings, fostering healthy brain development, supporting parent-child bonding, and motivating families to read aloud with their children, all of which helps develop the early literacy skills that are critical for school success.

The ELF Initiative features:

1. Professional development for early childhood educators working in **center-based Toddler and Pre-K sites serving children 2 – 3 ½ years old,** through **SEEDS of Learning**™ training and coaching. Educators earn an educational award and attend literacy labs. In FY 2025-26, two workshop series were held: one in Fall 2025 and the other in Spring 2026. Each workshop had seven sessions. This program is described in more detail on the following pages.
2. Professional development for **family child care providers** working with Spanish-speaking children through **SEEDS of Learning**™ training and coaching. Training includes opportunities to create literacy-based materials to use in the family child care home environment through "Make and Take" workshops. This program is described in more detail on the following pages.

[46] California Department of Education, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics*. These are the most current data at the time of this report.
[47] First Things First, *Why Early Childhood Matters: Early Literacy*, retrieved 8/31/26 from https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/early-literacy.

3. Family Engagement through continuation of the **"Raising A Reader"** weekly rotating book bag program. Most Raising A Reader classrooms and family child care homes have SEEDS trained staff, resulting in mutually complimentary interventions to boost shared reading practices with children and their families, and to impact children's early literacy skills. Information on this program can be found in the Raising A Reader partner profile later in this report.

Funding Transition

Having trained more than 750 early learning professionals to date, First 5 will be shifting its focus in FY 2026-27. Rather than offering county-wide professional development workshops for early childhood education (ECE) teachers, it will deepen the SEEDS model by placing a Master Literacy Coach directly into early learning and state preschool sites that serve children who qualify for subsidized child care.

Now embedded in the Quality Counts Santa Cruz County workplan, the Master Literacy Coach will work with whole teaching teams to integrate research-based language and literacy strategies, targeting the Big 5 Early Literacy Skills, into everyday classroom practice. In response to a demographic shift toward toddlers ages 2 to 3½, coaching will also emphasize social-emotional development and literacy-rich environments for younger children, complemented by program-wide "Make and Take" labs. In addition, the SEEDS of Learning™ online portal will be available to all teachers in programs participating in Quality Counts Santa Cruz County.

SEEDS of Learning™

Program Description

This professional development initiative follows the SEEDS of Learning™ framework that has been researched by the University of Minnesota. Research on the SEEDS model shows that teachers trained and coached on the SEEDS of Learning™ framework score significantly higher on the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation* (ELLCO) tool and show greater change over time in teaching strategies than teachers without such training or coaching. Results from a 2020 study indicated that "a single year of SEEDS educator training results in up to 8 additional months of learning for children." [48]

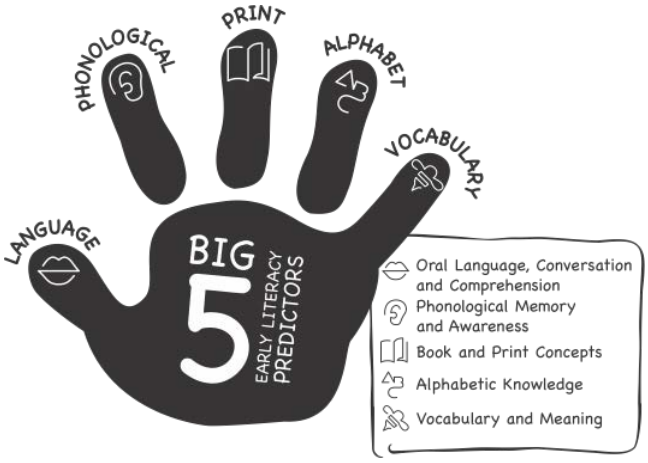
The SEEDS Professional Development model trains early childhood educators on how to effectively integrate research-based language, literacy, and early math strategies and materials into their programs. Early childhood educators are taught to use the strategies of both embedded instruction (planned strategies that occur within the typical routines of the class day) and explicit instruction (teacher-directed activities that emphasize the teaching of a specific skill), and to create a classroom/home environment that is designed to target early literacy and math predictors.

[48] NORC at the University of Chicago, *SEEDS of Learning Program Evaluation*, *Research Brief: Study Overview and Main Findings*, October 2, 2020. Retrieved 9/27/24 from Collaborative Classroom website, https://www.fluentseeds.org/research.

These predictors of later reading success include:

- **Oral Language, Conversation and Comprehension:** The ability to produce or comprehend spoken language.
- **Phonological Memory and Awareness:** The ability to detect, manipulate, or analyze the auditory aspects of spoken language, including the ability to distinguish or segment words, syllables, rhymes, and beginning sounds.
- **Book and Print Concepts:** Refers to what children understand about how books and print work, such as left-right, front-back, letters, words and that print has meaning.
- **Alphabetic Knowledge:** The ability to visually discriminate the differences between letters and say the names and sounds associated with printed letters.
- **Vocabulary and Meaning:** A collection of words that relate to experiences and knowledge that children have of the world around them.

These diagrams[49] display the five essential SEEDS Quality Interactions and the five predictors of early literacy and early math ideas.



The predictors of later math literacy success include:

- **Comparison and Classification**
- **Geometry and Spatial Sense**
- **Measurement**
- **Numbers and Operations**
- **Patterns**

[49] "Hand" diagrams: Kate Colwell Horst, SEEDS of Learning™, *FY 17-18 SEEDS of Learning Manual*.

The Santa Cruz County's SEEDS of Learning™ program has proven to be very effective at strengthening classroom environments and practices, as well as influencing changes in children's skills on research-based predictors of early reading and math.

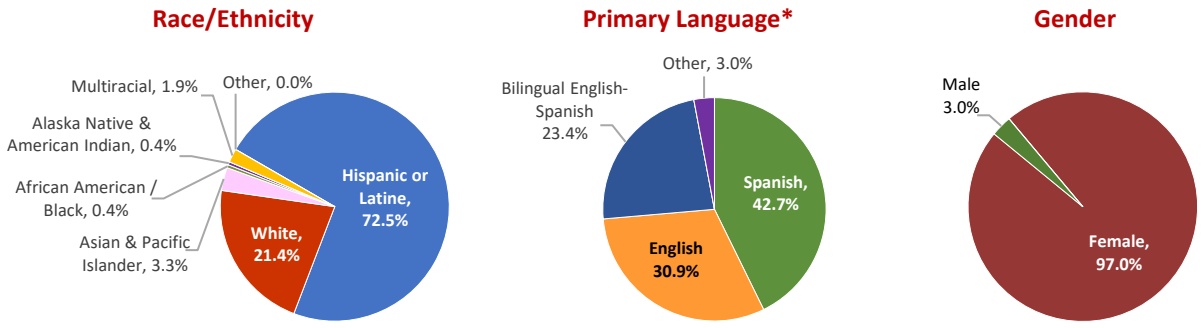
Population Served

	This Funding Cycle 2025-2026	Cumulative Totals 2007-2026
Educators in licensed family child care homes and private/non-profit centers	26	365
Educators in State- and Federally-subsidized classrooms	24	288
Educators in public school Transitional Kindergarten classrooms	0	25
Literacy Tutors in Reading Corps Classrooms*	-	83
TOTAL *(unduplicated)*	**50**	**761**

Source: (Educator current Funding Cycle) First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2026, (Educator Cumulative Totals) First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records*, 2007-2026. (Literacy Tutor Cumulative Total) First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program Reading Corps records*, 2012-2020

* The Santa Cruz Reading Corps program was discontinued in 2020-2021 as California State Preschool programs were not open to in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The cumulative total for Literacy Tutors reflects the years that this program was provided: 2012-2020.

Figure 54: **Demographics of SEEDS-trained Early Childhood Educators (2007-2026)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records*, 2007-2026.

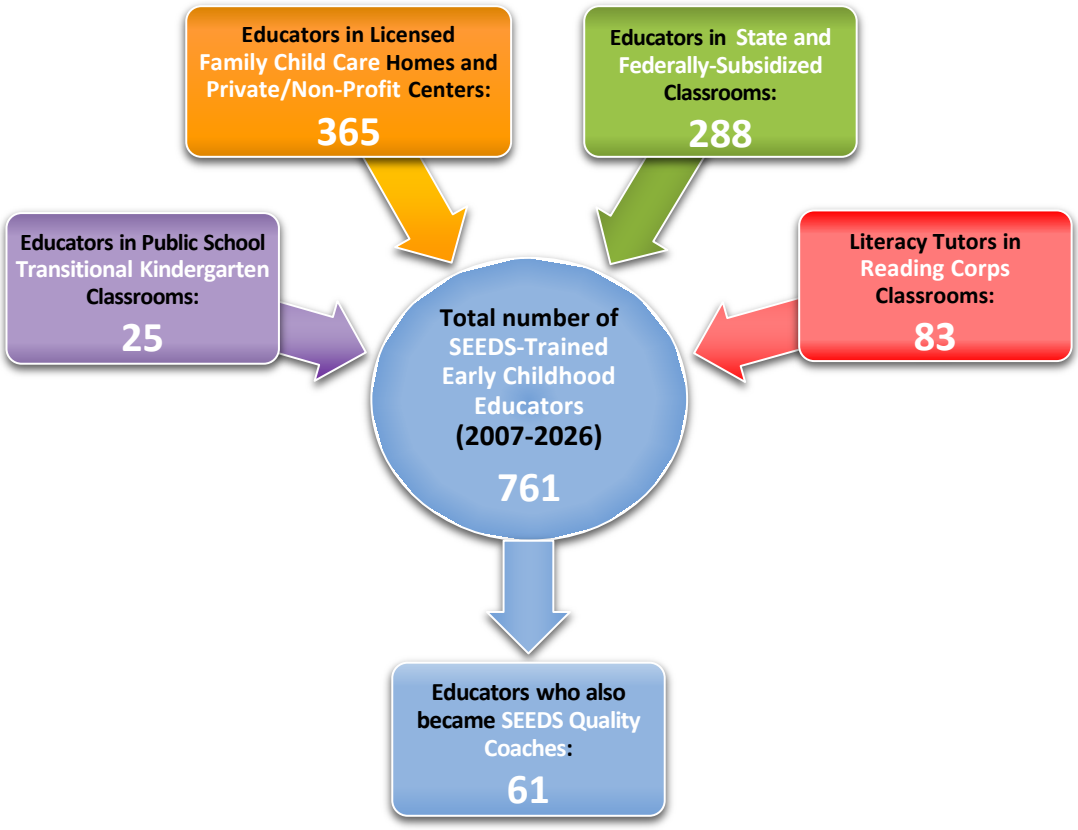
Notes:

- SEEDS-Trained Early Childhood Educators (ECEs) include SEEDS coaches and participants in all SEEDS classes offered since 2007. Santa Cruz Reading Corps Literacy Tutors began to be included in these analyses in 2017-18. Early childhood educators and coaches may have participated in more than one SEEDS class, but are only counted once in these analyses. For ECEs who have participated more than once, their language data are as of their earliest class, in order to assess the status of these educators at the beginning of their participation in the SEEDS program. Educators might also speak other languages that they do not consider their primary language.
- Clients with missing or unknown data for a demographic are excluded from that demographic's analysis.

* "Other" language includes Multilingual and other languages.

N: (Ethnicity)=676, (Language)=709, (Gender)=710.

Figure 55: **Number of SEEDS-trained Early Childhood Educators, by Type of classroom (2007-2026)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records*, 2007-2026.
Notes:

- This figure includes the Santa Cruz Reading Corps Literacy Tutors, who were also trained in the SEEDS of Learning™ framework. The Reading Corps program was discontinued in 2020-2021 as California State Preschool programs were not open to in-person instruction due to the COVID-19 pandemic, so this cumulative total of Literacy Tutors reflects the years that this program was provided: 2012-2020.
- "Light touch" and "refresher" trainings in the SEEDS of Learning™ framework were also provided in the past: 1) Between 2007-2020, up to 150 Family, Friend, or Neighbor (FFN) license-exempt child care providers attended "light touch" SEEDS of Learning™ workshops that modeled basic early literacy concepts. 2) Between 2011-2013, some educators participated in the SEEDS Plus program, which was designed for "graduates" of the basic SEEDS of Learning™ classes. This course was designed to promote and embed the ongoing use of SEEDS strategies, identify children who would receive tailored literacy-based interventions (using Response to Interventions (RtI) strategies), and increase the number of children on target with early reading predictors. Currently, SEEDS skills are incorporated into all SEEDS of Learning™ trainings for SEEDS coaches and early childhood educators, without the use of RtI.

Outcome Objective: Increase the number of early education settings that provide high quality support for language and literacy and math

SEEDS of Learning™ Trainings

In FY 2025-26, First 5 Santa Cruz County offered SEEDS of Learning™ programs to early childhood educators.

SEEDS of Learning™ program with focus on environments for family child care providers working with Spanish-speaking children

The Basic SEEDS of Learning™ program was held in the summer of 2025 (June – September), designed for Spanish-speaking family child care providers who work with Spanish-speaking children ages 2-3 ½ in migrant families. Utilizing the SEEDS for Parents curriculum framework, this series of five workshops included a focus on early learning environments such as early science, dramatic play, early math, and the outdoor environment. These workshops were designed to teach evidence-based literacy and math skills that, with the support of a coach, the provider would then embed into practice.

Each participant received:

- 5 "Make and Take" workshops comprised of:
  - 2 hours of instruction
  - 2 hours to create literacy-based materials to use in their programs
- 5 children's books and curriculum materials to use in their program
- Stipend of $250 at the end of the series

Basic SEEDS of Learning™ workshops for center-based Toddler and Pre-K teachers

Two Basic SEEDS courses were held—one in Fall of 2025 and again in Spring 2026—providing professional development for early childhood educators working in Toddler and Pre-K center-based classrooms. With the Transitional Kindergarten (TK) option available for families with children as young as age 3, our local preschools find that their enrolled students are now as young as age 2. In fact, The California State Preschool Program has recently expanded enrollment to 2-year-old children for income-qualified families. Many teachers have been teaching for years in preschool programs where the children are ages 3-5, but with more 3 and 4 year olds attending TK, they are now needing professional development in early literacy strategies that support young toddlers in order to meet the needs of the children at these younger developmental levels. Therefore, the SEEDS program for FY 2025-26 shifted from a focus on children ages 3-5 to children ages 2-3 ½.

Each series of workshops was conducted in person and included lab time to complete "Make and Take" props.

Participants in the Basic SEEDS workshop series for children ages 2-3 ½ years old received:

- 7 three-hour instructional in-person workshop sessions
- One-on-one coaching via the online Coaching Companion platform
- Light-touch group coaching during each session
- 2 "Make and Take" labs
- SEEDS Quality Classroom tour, visiting 2 sites to see SEEDS strategies in action
- 5 books and curriculum materials to use in their centers with their families
- Stipend of $450 at the end of the series

The Fall 2025 series focused on basic early literacy strategies for toddlers and young preschoolers.

The Spring 2026 series focused on SEEDS and Science and Math, to encourage the development of STEM skills in young children. This series provided early educators with strategies for children to build experiences in investigation and problem solving and the foundation for understanding basic science and math concepts.

Center-Based Toddler and Pre-K Classrooms

Research on teacher effectiveness shows that by focusing professional development on language and literacy and social/emotional development, children are much better prepared for school and have higher academic achievement. SEEDS training is designed to help educators create a literacy-rich environment that supports children's early language, social-emotional development, motor skill development, and emerging literacy and math skills through meaningful, developmentally appropriate experiences.

In past years, the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool (ELLCO Pre-K)* was used to evaluate SEEDS-trained educators and the effectiveness of their classroom teaching on children's language and literacy development. However, in FY 2025-26, the focus of the SEEDS training began including young toddlers up to age 3, and First 5's Early Literacy Foundation program determined that the *ELLCO Pre-K* did not evaluate classrooms with that age group well.

To address this younger age group, two instructors of First 5's Early Literacy Foundation program created their own observational checklist called the *Checklist for a Literacy Rich Toddler Program (Checklist)*. This is not an assessment tool, and is purely a checklist created by the two instructors to guide them as they observed classrooms. The *Checklist* was adapted from the SEEDS of Learning™ framework (developed by Kate Horst), and was further modified by the instructors to meet the specific needs of infant/toddler programs.

The *Checklist* lists various "literacy-rich strategies" for observers to look for, including classroom settings and activities that emphasize intentional teacher-child interactions, engaging books, opportunities for conversation, songs and rhymes, environmental print, early writing experiences, and early literacy-related materials that can be used throughout the classroom and daily routine.

The results of these observations are used as a coaching tool, supporting teachers in setting early literacy goals.

The *Checklist* contains 24 key "literacy-rich strategies," divided into four main sections:

- Caregiver Interactions
- Classroom Environment
- Education for Development of Big 5 Skills
- Development of Skills Through Doing

The observers assess each of the 24 "literacy-rich strategies" regarding whether it is observed in the classroom. Each of the 24 items are assessed using a score from 1 (Not observed) to 3 (Often observed), and the total score for each of the four sections is calculated as the average of all the items in that section.

In addition to using the *Checklist*, one item from the *ELLCO Pre-K*—called "Phonological Awareness"—was retained and included on the list of "literacy-rich strategies" to observe. This item is rated along a 5-point scale, where "1" is deficient and "5" is exemplary.

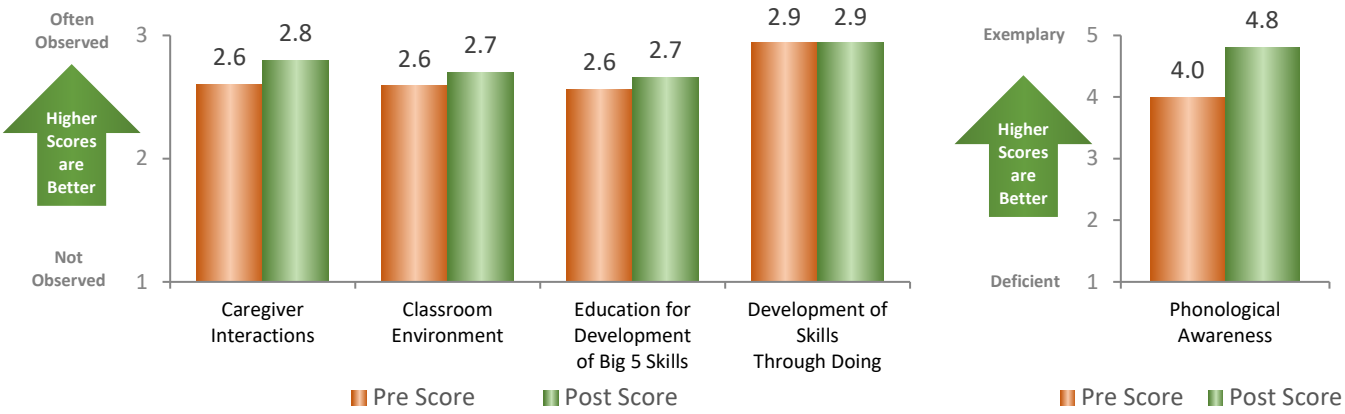
These two resources (the *Checklist* and one item from the *ELLCO Pre-K*) were used to observe the classrooms. Due to these changes in the classroom evaluation in FY 2025-26, the observations for just this one year are presented in the following charts.

Center-Based Toddler and Pre-K Classrooms Outcomes

The observers assessed whether or not "literacy-rich strategies" were observed in SEEDS classrooms, using the *Checklist for a Literacy Rich Toddler Program* and one question from the *ELLCO Pre-K*. Observations were completed at the beginning (Pre) and end (Post) of the SEEDS trainings.

- On average, literacy-rich strategies were frequently used in classrooms, even before the SEEDS trainings began.
- By the end of the SEEDS trainings, early childhood educators tended to use even more of these literacy-rich strategies in their classrooms.

Figure 56: **Center-Based Classrooms: Observed utilization of key "literacy-rich strategies" (2025-26)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County Early Literacy Foundations program records, *Checklist for a Literacy Rich Toddler Program* and *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool (ELLCO Pre-K)*, 2025-26.
N = (Checklist) = 34; (ELLCO Pre-K) = 19.

Family Child Care Settings

Early childhood educators from licensed family child care settings also participated in SEEDS training and received SEEDS coaching. Their sites were observed at the beginning of their SEEDS training in July and again at the end of their training in September. Beginning in FY 2022-23, coaching was no longer done in-home, but rather was conducted as a group in workshops.

The *Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation* (CHELLO) is a tool designed to assess the early literacy environment in home-based child care settings of children ages birth to 5 years. Individual questions from the Group/Family Observation section were used to assess home-based classrooms.

- For the Group/Family Observation section, items were scored along a 5-point scale, where 1 is deficient and 5 is exemplary. Early childhood family child care providers' scores were categorized into three levels, indicating their classroom environment provided **low-quality support**, **basic support**, or **high-quality support for language and literacy**.

Due to the changes in coaching methodology, Coaches are no longer using the entire CHELLO in their evaluation of home-based child care settings. Beginning in FY 2025-26, individual questions from the CHELLO have been selected to assess the settings at the beginning and end of the training:

- Question 5: *"Adult/Child Language Interaction"*
- Question 10: *"Storybook / Storytelling Activities"*
- Question 11: *"Writing Activities"*
- Questions 1-22: *"Literacy Environment Checklist"*

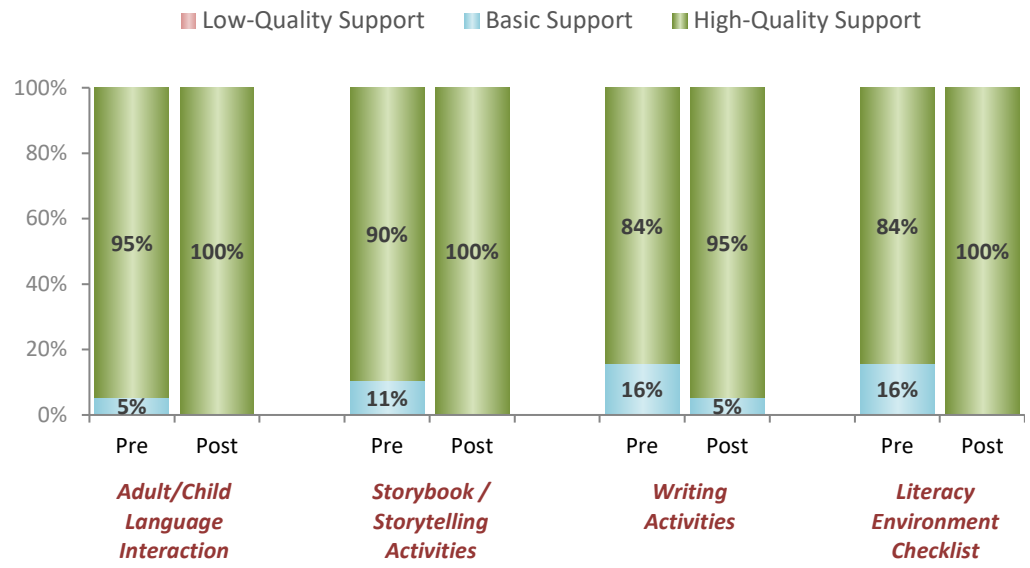
Due to the changes in the evaluation method in FY 2025-26, the results for just this one year are presented in the following analyses.

Family Child Care Outcomes

The following figure presents the Pre and Post scores gathered from early childhood educators in family child care settings for infants/toddlers, in the assessment of the early literacy environment.

- On average, all components that were selected to assess the settings of home-based classrooms showed improvements from the beginning of the training to the end.
- The component that demonstrated the most improvement was the "Literacy Environment Checklist."

Figure 57: **Family Child Care settings: Support for language and literacy (2025-26)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County Early Literacy Foundations program records, *Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation* (CHELLO); *Group/Family Observation*, 2025-26.
Notes: Low-quality support = scores less than or equal to 2.5; Basic support = scores between 2.51 and 3.5; High-quality support = scores between 3.51 and 5. Percentages less than 3% are not labeled. Percentage totals in this chart may not sum to 100% due to rounding.
N = 19.