# First 5 Santa Cruz County



# Annual Evaluation Report

**July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026**

October 2026

# Acknowledgements

First 5 Santa Cruz County would like to thank Nicole Young, of Optimal Solutions Consulting, who managed Santa Cruz County's Triple P - Positive Parenting Program for over 15 years, as well as her invaluable collaboration in the evaluation of this program.

In addition, First 5 Santa Cruz County would like to thank the staff and participants of the funded partner agencies, whose commitment to data collection has facilitated the gathering of the robust data included in this report.

**First 5 Santa Cruz County Staff**

David G. Brody
Bryanna Amezcua
Vicki Boriack
Alicia Clark
Michelle Dodge
Alicia Fernandez
Irene Freiberg
Yesenia Gomez-Carillo
Holly Maclure
Maribel Pedroza
Rosio Sanchez
Christine Sieburg
Laura Sotelo
Alicia Zenteno

**First 5 Santa Cruz County Commissioners**

Sheree Storm
Dr. Faris Sabbah
Heidy Kellison
Julio Andrade
Sandy Brown
Jennifer Herrera
Gloria Carroll
Monica Martinez
Kimberly Petersen
Connie Moreno-Peraza
Maia Yates

**Optimal Solutions Consulting**

Nicole M. Young

# Quality Counts Santa Cruz County

## Program Description

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California (QCC), a "statewide effort to strengthen California's early learning and care system to support young children and their families. QCC uses an equity approach to close the education gap:

- Prioritizing communities where we can make the greatest impact
- Providing access to tools and resources for quality partners, including Quality Improvement System (QIS) administrators, coaches, trainers, and higher education faculty
- Linking early educators to resources and support to advance their commitment to quality early learning and care
- Informing parents and families about the importance of quality early learning and helping them identify quality early learning and care environments
- Offering information and research to help policymakers communicate the value and importance of quality early learning and care." [42]

In 2012, First 5 Santa Cruz County launched a local Quality Rating and Improvement System (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)—co-led with the Santa Cruz County Office of Education—worked to develop and pilot a local 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**

[42] Quality Counts California, https://qualitycountsca.net, 2025.

Beginning in FY 2023-24, QCC shifted some funding away from formal rating to maximize resources and meet the diverse needs of early learning and care providers through research, evaluation, and a focus on equity. QCC continues to maintain some funding for State-subsidized preschool 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."[43]

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 (FFN), family child care, center-based child care, and alternative settings. This will be achieved by unifying funds as follows:

- **F5CA IMPACT Legacy (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive) 2025-2027**

  First 5 California has invested $46 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, in particular for priority populations not currently receiving support. 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 2025-26 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**

[43] Quality Counts California, https://qualitycountsca.net/about, 2024.

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

  The California Department of Education (CDE) appropriates $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. Beginning in FY 2023-24, only CSPP sites will continue to be rated on the Quality Continuum Framework (formerly called the Rating Matrix). In FY 2024-25, all 21 CSPP sites were rated using the California Quality Continuum Framework. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, which—along with First 5—co-leads the Quality Counts Santa Cruz County QRIS efforts.

- **CDE Workforce Pathways Grant**

  For FY 2025-26, 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 professional development workshops related to teacher and program quality improvement, training of professional growth advisors, and providing grants for access to higher education in ECE. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

## Quality Counts California – A 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.

*One Provider's Experience*

"I keep a full house here, and I'm proud of that, and I really think that it's because of the support, and all of the knowledge and education, and all of the classes – I know that definitely made a difference."

**- A Pittsburg Family Child Care Provider – quoted in the Quality Counts California website**

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 license-exempt FFN providers), so that children receive quality care in all settings

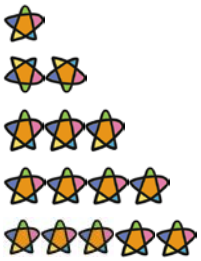
## Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) - Local Quality Rating and Improvement System

The QCSCC Consortium adopted the Quality Counts California Quality Continuum Framework (QCF)—formerly called the Rating Matrix—as the foundation of their local QRIS (see Appendix A). The QCF provides a framework, or structure, for quality improvement and is part of the QCC Implementation Guide (QCC Guide) which provides guidance to support implementation at the local level. As the early education system has evolved, the QCC Guide has been updated to support implementation of the Quality Continuum Framework-Measurable Quality Elements. This Framework includes continuous quality improvement elements for all early learning and care setting types across California, including rating requirements for California State Preschool Program (CSPP) QRIS Block Grantees. (Beginning in FY 2023-24, only CSPP programs are required to be rated.)

The QCF uses the terms “Core” and “Elements,” which refer to the three overarching categories (Core) and the indicators or components within these categories (Elements). The Elements are numbered one through six, with Elements five and six for centers only, and Element 4b (Classroom Assessment Scoring System Independent Assessment) only required as part of the CSPP rating protocol.

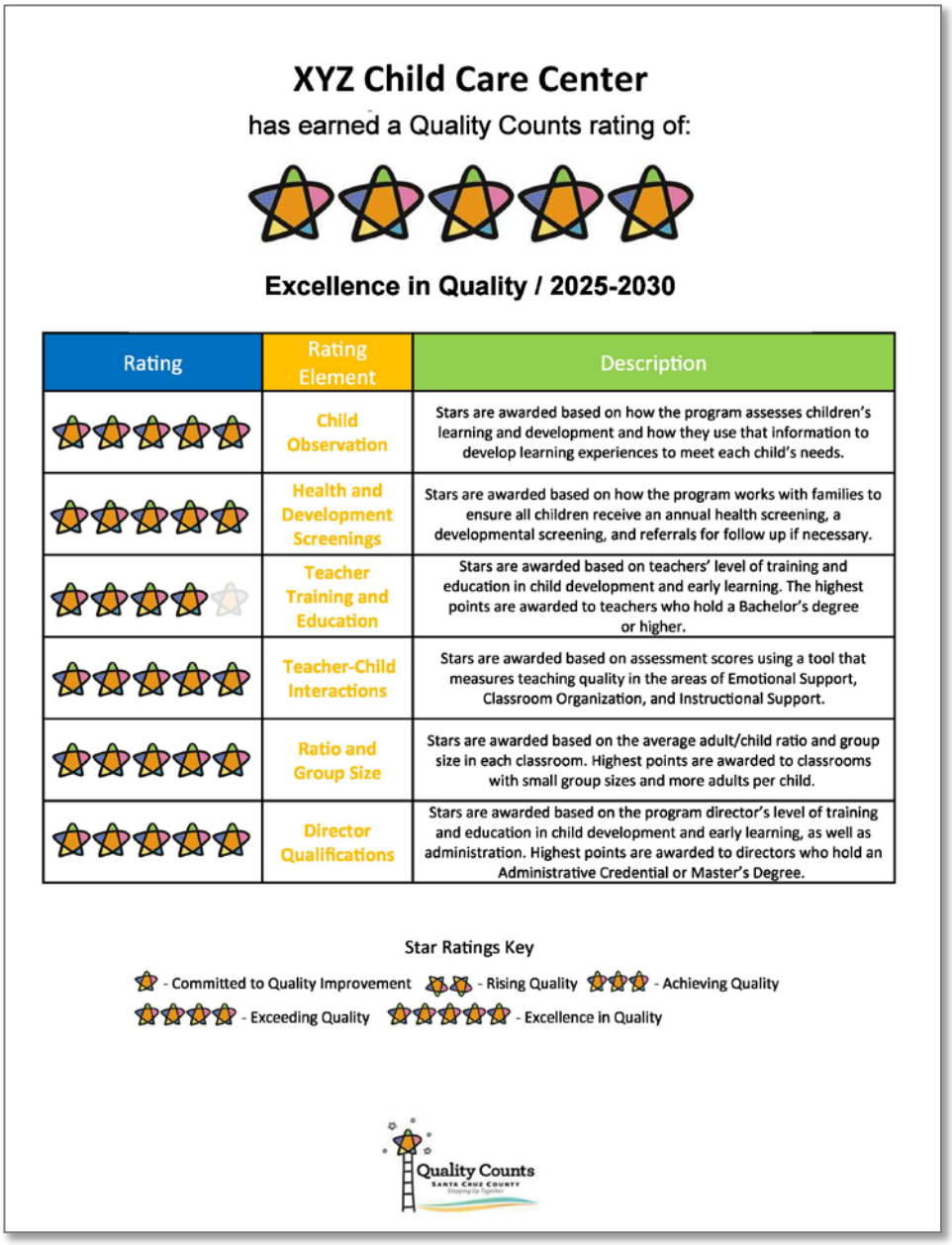
In December 2024, all 21 CSPP sites participating in QCSCC were rated using the QCF, and received a rating based on their cumulative scores in all six elements across five tiers of quality, with points assigned to each element (for more information, see Appendix A).

The Star Ratings Key is as follows:



1 star: **Committed to Quality Improvement**
2 stars: **Rising Quality**
3 stars: **Achieving Quality**
4 stars: **Exceeding Quality**
5 stars: **Excellence in Quality**

Figure 49: **Example of a Quality Counts Rating document**



**XYZ Child Care Center**

has earned a Quality Counts rating of:

**Excellence in Quality / 2025-2030**

| Rating | Rating Element | Description |
|---|---|---|
| ★★★★★ | Child Observation | Stars are awarded based on how the program assesses children's learning and development and how they use that information to develop learning experiences to meet each child's needs. |
| ★★★★★ | Health and Development Screenings | Stars are awarded based on how the program works with families to ensure all children receive an annual health screening, a developmental screening, and referrals for follow up if necessary. |
| ★★★★☆ | Teacher Training and Education | Stars are awarded based on teachers' level of training and education in child development and early learning. The highest points are awarded to teachers who hold a Bachelor's degree or higher. |
| ★★★★★ | Teacher-Child Interactions | Stars are awarded based on assessment scores using a tool that measures teaching quality in the areas of Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. |
| ★★★★★ | Ratio and Group Size | Stars are awarded based on the average adult/child ratio and group size in each classroom. Highest points are awarded to classrooms with small group sizes and more adults per child. |
| ★★★★★ | Director Qualifications | Stars are awarded based on the program director's level of training and education in child development and early learning, as well as administration. Highest points are awarded to directors who hold an Administrative Credential or Master's Degree. |

Star Ratings Key

★ - Committed to Quality Improvement ★★ - Rising Quality ★★★ - Achieving Quality

★★★★ - Exceeding Quality ★★★★★ - Excellence in Quality

Quality Counts Santa Cruz County

The ratings 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).[44] All CSPP sites achieved a rating of either Tier 4 (Exceeding Quality) or Tier 5 (Excellence in Quality), as shown below:

- 0 sites received a Tier 1 rating (0-6 points)
- 0 sites received a Tier 2 rating (7-16 points)
- 0 sites received a Tier 3 rating (17-22 points)
- **11 sites received a Tier 4 rating** (23-26 points)
- **10 sites received a Tier 5 rating** (27-30 points)

[44] See Appendix A for an explanation of the Tiers and the point calculations.

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 quality child care programs.

There are currently 19 CSPP rated sites which may also have infant and toddler classrooms, as well as an additional 10 private non-profit Center sites and 60 Family Child Care provider sites participating in QCSCC at the Quality Improvement level. The program for license-exempt child care providers, called Family, Friend, and Neighbor care, had 40 participants in FY 2025-26.

Figure 50: **QCSCC overall participation, by Site type (2025-26)**

| SITE TYPE | NUMBER OF SITES | NUMBER OF PROVIDERS / ECE PROFESSIONALS [1] | NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED (AGES 0-5) [2] |
|---|---|---|---|
| Participating Child Care Centers [3] | 29 | 267 [4] | 1,076 |
| Participating Family Child Care (FCC) Sites | 60 | 103 [5] | 553 |
| Participating Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Sites | 40 | 40 [6] | 68 |
| **Total** | **129** | **410** | **1,697** |

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2026.
[1] The number of providers includes those for whom complete CCDs were available, as well as those with no CCDs who were informally counted.
[2] The number of children was informally counted, as no CCDs were available for them.
[3] The number of participating Child Care Centers is lower than previous year's, due to unexpected federal requirements in November 2025 that resulted in the closure of Head Start/Early Head Start programs run by Encompass Community Services.
[4] Child Care Center ECE professionals include teacher directors, teachers, and assistant teachers.
[5] FCC ECE professionals include the FCC owner and assistants. Of the 103 providers reported here, 60 had enough data available to create full CCDs.
[6] FFN providers include license-exempt child care providers who provide care for children from one family other than their own. Of the 40 providers reported here, all 40 had enough data available to create full CCDs.

Figure 51: **Distribution of QCSCC sites in the County (2025-26)**




Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2026.

## Quality Counts Santa Cruz County Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Workshops

Beginning in FY 2024-25, QCSCC added a Family, Friend, and Neighbor program. It is estimated that up to 40% of families rely on FFN care at some point during the week or month. These are typically relatives, neighbors, or friends who take care of young children in hours that aren't provided at licensed centers. To help ensure the quality and safety of these spaces, First 5 began conducting workshops based on the Quality Continuum Framework, in partnership with three elementary schools in South County.

To ensure access for FFN providers, First 5 partners with an elementary school to provide a space for the workshops. Over the course of two months, a series of six 1-hour workshops are offered relating to the elements of the Quality Continuum Framework, such as: Health and Safety; Nutrition; the Developing Child; Meaningful Conversations; Early Literacy; and Positive Interactions. Prior to each workshop, parents who are also FFN providers drop off their school-age children and then they head to the library for refreshments before the start of the workshop. After each workshop, the participants receive incentive gifts that relate to the topic (outlet covers, books, etc.). Information from the local Resource and Referral agency is also available for anyone wanting to learn more about becoming a licensed family child care provider.

The FFN program served 40 participants at Ann Soldo and Radcliff elementary schools in Fall 2025, and Radcliff and Freedom elementary schools in Spring 2026.

## Quality Improvement Activities

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

In addition, First 5 contracted with Go Kids, Inc. to continue leading the QCSCC Consortium's quality improvement activities for family child care (FCC) programs. The Go Kids Quality Improvement Coordinator supported all 60 FCC providers in updating their annual Quality Improvement Plans, and applying for Quality Improvement grants to enhance their home learning environment. In addition, the Coordinator managed a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for 20 of the participating providers.

Educators come together in these PLC's to work together to build on their own and others' ideas and experience to improve practice and enhance quality. The following table presents the number

of individuals and sites that participated in professional development through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in FY 2025-26.

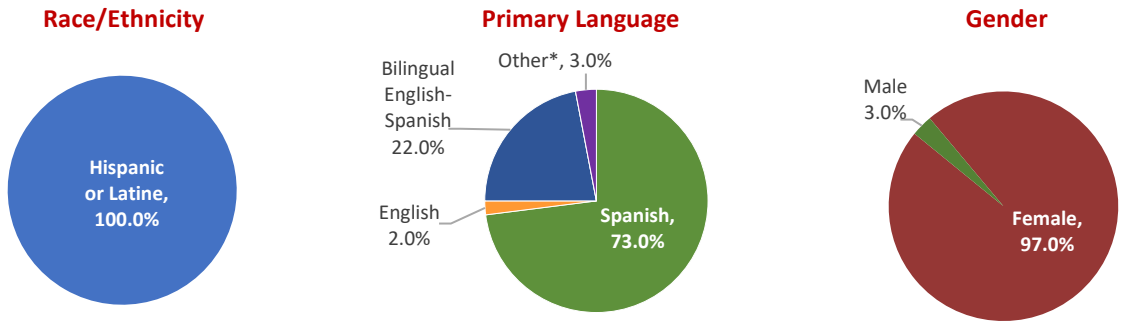
Figure 52: **Individuals and sites that participated in a QCSCC Professional Learning Community (2025-26)**

| INDIVIDUALS AND SITES | NUMBER |
|---|---|
| Number of Family Child Care providers in QCSCC who participated in a Professional Learning Community | • 20 family child care providers |

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2026.

In addition, The Santa Cruz County Office of Education oversees the Workforce Professional Development pathway grant of QCSCC and provides professional development and training to teachers and FCC providers from participating QCSCC sites. In FY 2025-26, it is estimated that an additional 80 teachers and providers attended trainings through this pathway.

Figure 53: **Key demographics of Family Child Care Providers who participated in QCSCC trainings and technical assistance meetings (2025-2026)**




Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026.
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.

* "Other" languages include "Bilingual Other" and other languages.
N=100.

## 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 early learning practices, and minimize duplication.

Regional 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: [45]

- 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

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