First 5 Santa Cruz County



Annual Evaluation Report

July 1, 2025 - June 30, 2026

October 2026

Acknowledgements

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EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Strategic Goal:

Support and strengthen early care and education systems so that young children are ready for school and fluent readers by 3rd grade.

Desired Results:



- Increased access to affordable, high-quality, inclusive early care and education (ECE) for children ages 0-5
- Increased alignment and cohesion within and between the ECE system and TK-12 education system
- Increased stability and sustainability of the ECE system, including the workforce
- Increased early learning and school readiness skills (developmental, social-emotional, language, literacy, numeracy)

Reading proficiency in Santa Cruz County

One of the most powerful indicators of later success is a child's reading proficiency at the end of 3rd grade. A report released by the Annie E. Casey Foundation found that students who aren't reading proficiently by 3rd grade are four times less likely to graduate from high school, compared to proficient readers.

> *"Up until the end of third grade, most children are* **learning to read***. Beginning in fourth grade, however, they are* **reading to learn***, using their skills to gain more information in subjects such as math and science, to solve problems, to think critically about what they are learning, and to act upon and share the knowledge in the world around them. Up to half of the printed fourth-grade curriculum is incomprehensible to students who read below that grade level."*[38]

Unfortunately, data show that Santa Cruz County children are struggling with their reading and writing skills. [39]

[38] The Annie E. Casey Foundation, *Early Warning! Why Reading By The End Of Third Grade Matters. A KIDS COUNT Special Report On The Importance Of Reading By 3rd Grade*, retrieved from http:// www.aecf.org/, 2021.

[39] Two assessments conducted by the California Department of Education (the *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress* (CAASPP), and *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California* (ELPAC)) provide measurements of 3rd grade students' English language arts/literacy skills. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a complete set of assessments was not collected in Santa Cruz County during 2019-20 and 2020-21. Therefore, only academic years with a thorough and complete collection of assessment data are presented here in order to provide the most accurate representation of these results.

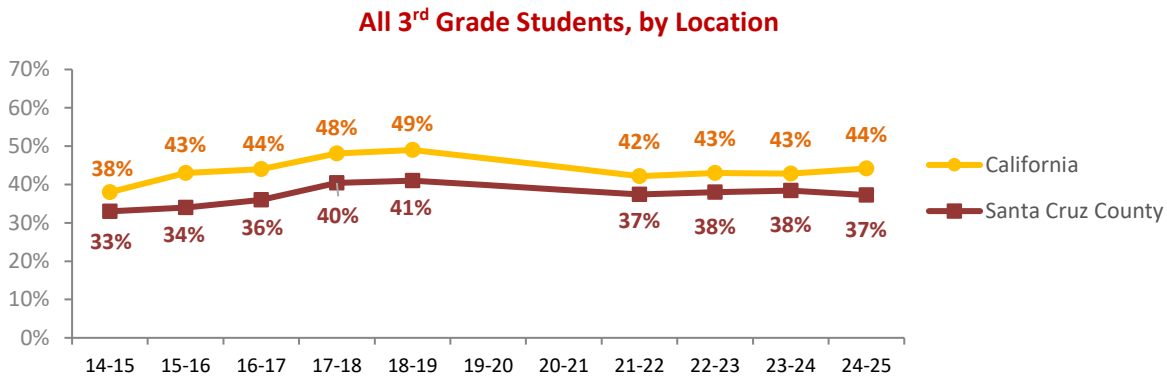
When assessed using the *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics* that are completed by all students, results for 2024-25 (the most current set of data available at the time of this report) show that:

- In 2024-25, only 37% of **Santa Cruz County 3rd grade students** met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy, which is lower than the state average of 44%.
- Within the County, there were still significant **disparities** when looking at students' English-language fluency, race/ethnicity, and economic status.

"Reading proficiently by the end of third grade … can be a make-or-break benchmark in a child's educational development."

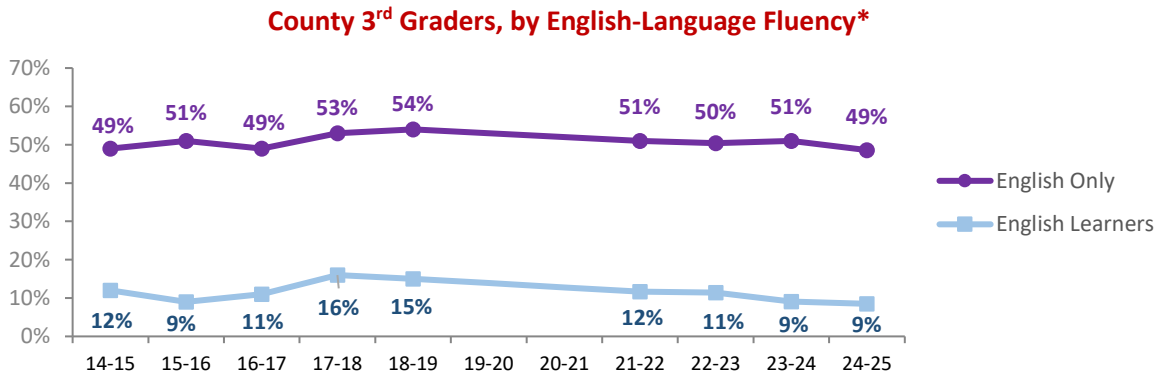
- Annie E. Casey Foundation

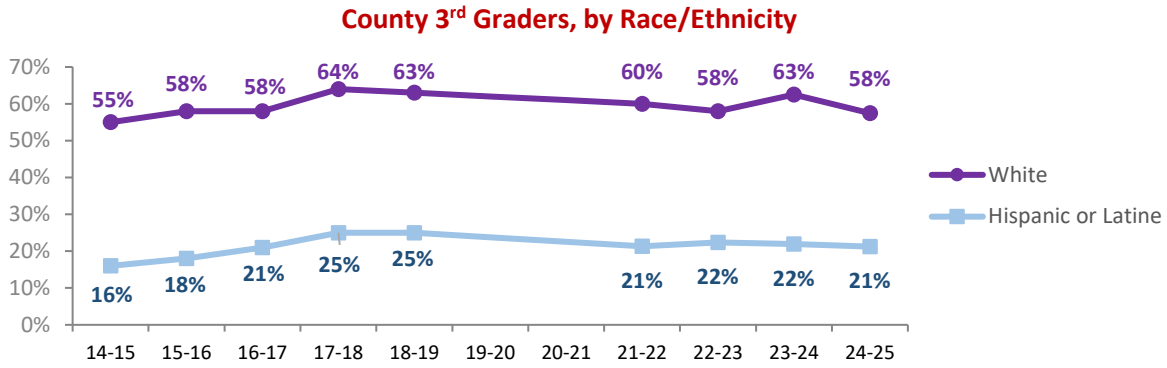
Figure 47: **Percentage of 3rd Grade Students Who Met or Exceeded Standards In English Language Arts/Literacy**

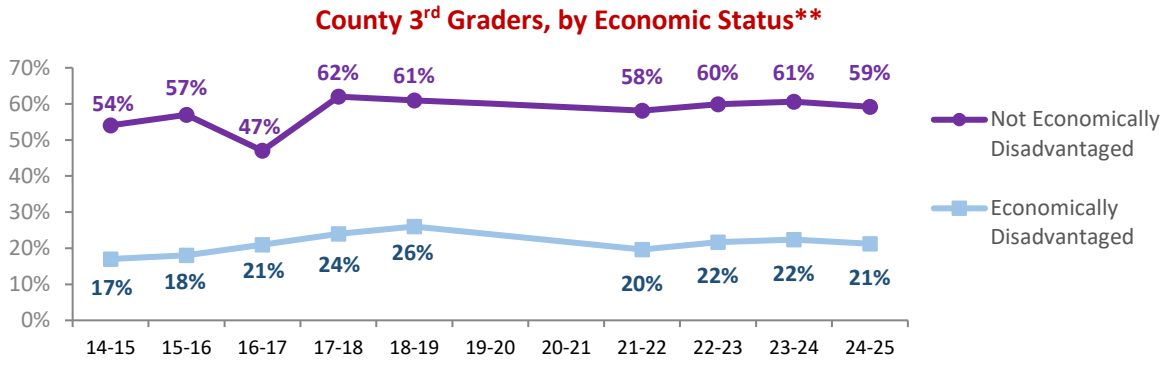


Source: California Department of Education, *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress* (CAASPP), *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a complete set of assessments was not collected in Santa Cruz County during 2019-20 and 2020-21. Therefore, only academic years with a thorough and complete collection of assessment data are presented here in order to provide the most accurate representation of these results. Assessment results reflect the most current data available at the time of this report.

Percentage of 3rd Grade Students Who Met or Exceeded Standards In English Language Arts/Literacy *(cont.)*







Source: California Department of Education, *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress* (CAASPP), *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a complete set of assessments was not collected in Santa Cruz County during 2019-20 and 2020-21. Therefore, only academic years with a thorough and complete collection of assessment data are presented here in order to provide the most accurate representation of these results. Assessment results reflect the most current data available at the time of this report.

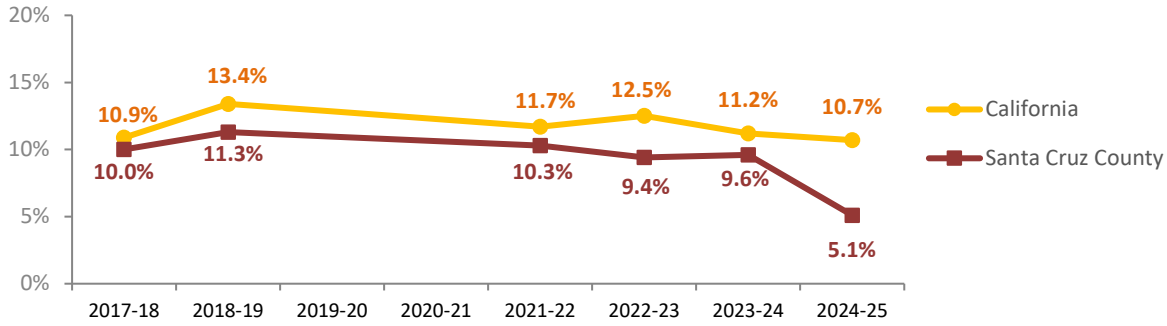
* The California Department of Education defines English learner students as those students for whom there is a report of a primary language other than English on the state-approved Home Language Survey and who, on the basis of the state approved oral language (grades kindergarten through grade twelve) assessment procedures and literacy (grades three through twelve only), have been determined to lack the clearly defined English language skills of listening comprehension, speaking, reading, and writing necessary to succeed in the school's regular instructional programs.

** Economically Disadvantaged Students include students eligible for the free and reduced priced meal program (FRPM), foster youth, homeless students, migrant students, and students for whom neither parent is a high school graduate.

The *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) assessment* was designed specifically for English language learners, to measure how well they are progressing toward English language proficiency.

- Results from the *ELPAC* show that in 2024-25, only 5% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having "well-developed" English skills (compared to 11% across the state). "Well-developed" is the highest level of skill for this assessment.[40]
- Note that if the top ***two*** levels of skill are combined, a total of 35% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having either "moderately-developed" or "well-developed" English skills (see the definitions of both of these levels of skill in the footnote below).[41]

Figure 48: **Percentage of 3rd Grade English Learner Students with "Well-Developed" English Skills**



Source: California Department of Education, *English Language Proficiency Assessments for California* (ELPAC), *Summative ELPAC*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a complete set of assessments was not collected in Santa Cruz County during 2019-20 and 2020-21. Therefore, only academic years with a thorough and complete collection of assessment data are presented here in order to provide the most accurate representation of these results. Assessment results reflect the most current data available at the time of this report. Previous years' results have been modified to reflect updated data.

Notes:

- The *Summative ELPAC* is administered only to students who were previously identified as English learners based upon the results of the *Initial ELPAC*. The *Summative ELPAC* measures how well English learners are progressing toward English language proficiency.
- English Learner students who are evaluated by the *Summative ELPAC* as having "well developed" English skills can usually use English to learn new things in school and to interact in social situations. They may occasionally need help using English.

First 5 Santa Cruz County is working with partners to improve these reading and writing skills by encouraging families to read together, providing language and literacy skill development for early childhood educators, and encouraging child assessments and individualized instruction.

[40] English Learner students who are evaluated by the Summative ELPAC as having "well developed" English skills can usually use English to learn new things in school and to interact in social situations. They may occasionally need help using English.

[41] English Learner students who are evaluated by the Summative ELPAC as having "moderately developed" English skills can sometimes use English to learn new things in school and to interact in social situations. They may need help to communicate on less-familiar school topics and social situations.

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

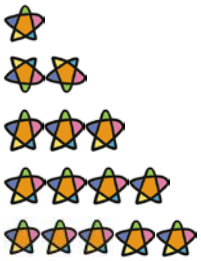
Quality Counts Santa Cruz County (QCSCC) - Local Quality Rating and Improvement System

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.

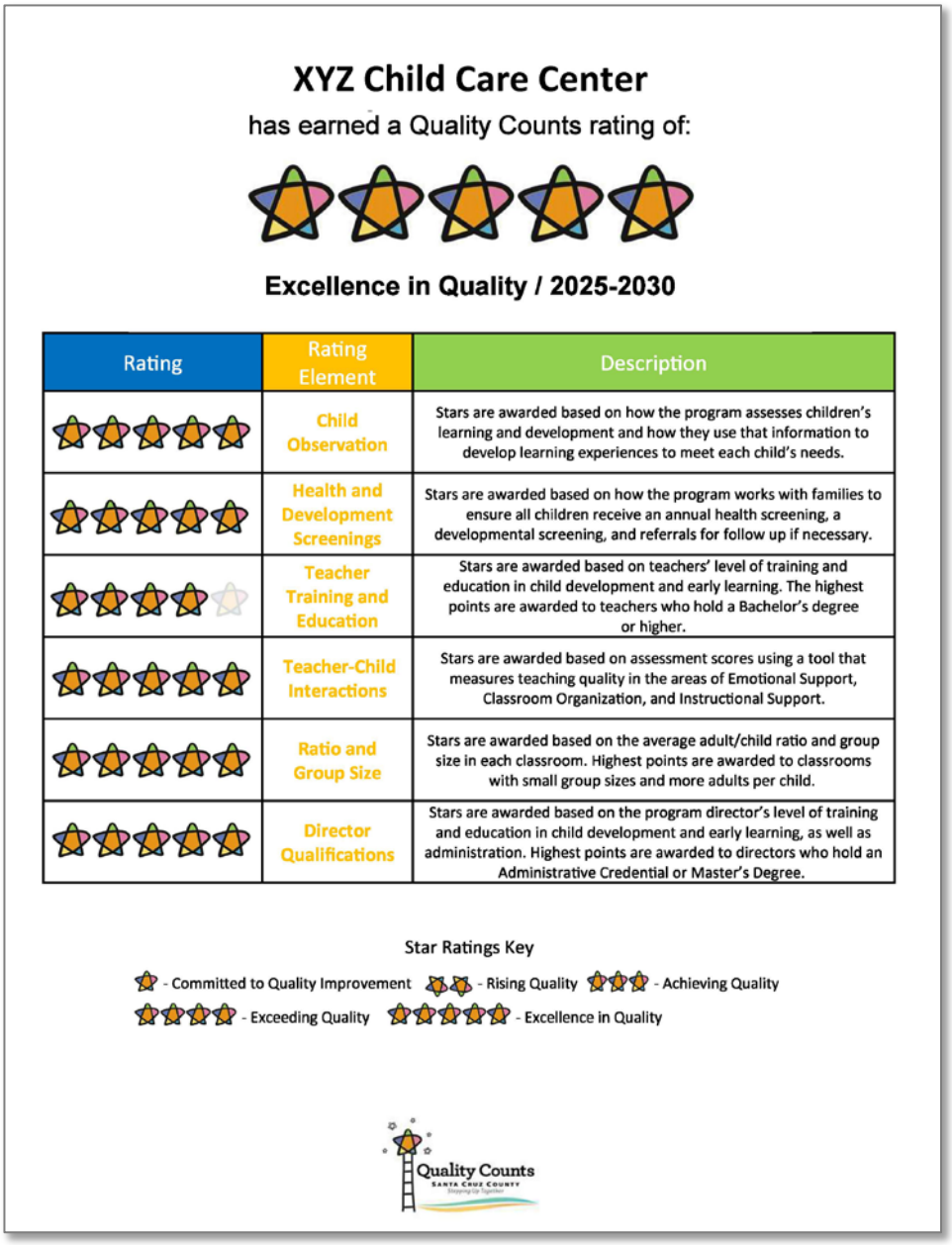
In December 2024, all 21 CSPP sites participating in QCSCC were rated using the QCF, and received a rating based on their cumulative scores in all six elements across five tiers of quality, with points assigned to each element (for more information, see Appendix A).

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.

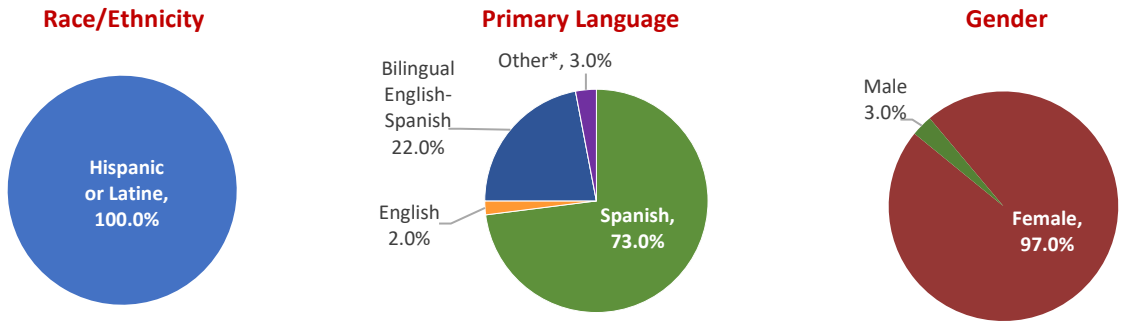
Figure 52: **Individuals and sites that participated in a QCSCC Professional Learning Community (2025-26)**

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.

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.

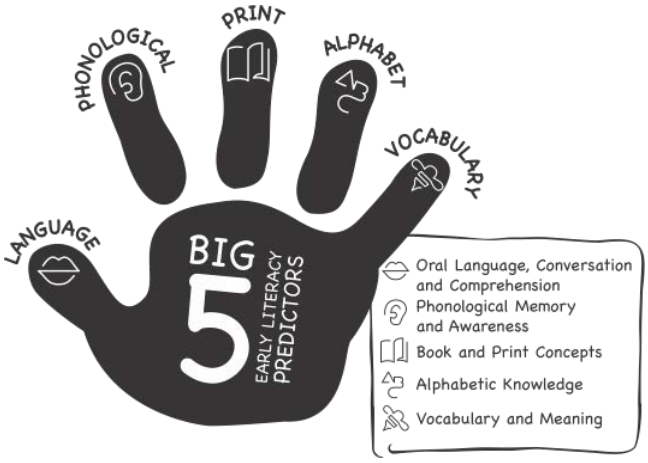
[48] NORC at the University of Chicago, *SEEDS of Learning Program Evaluation*, *Research Brief: Study Overview and Main Findings*, October 2, 2020. Retrieved 9/27/24 from Collaborative Classroom website, https://www.fluentseeds.org/research.

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.

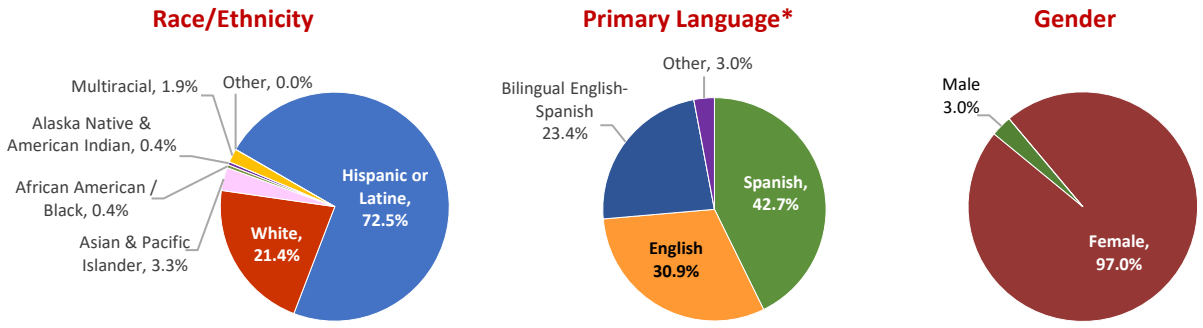
Population Served

	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.

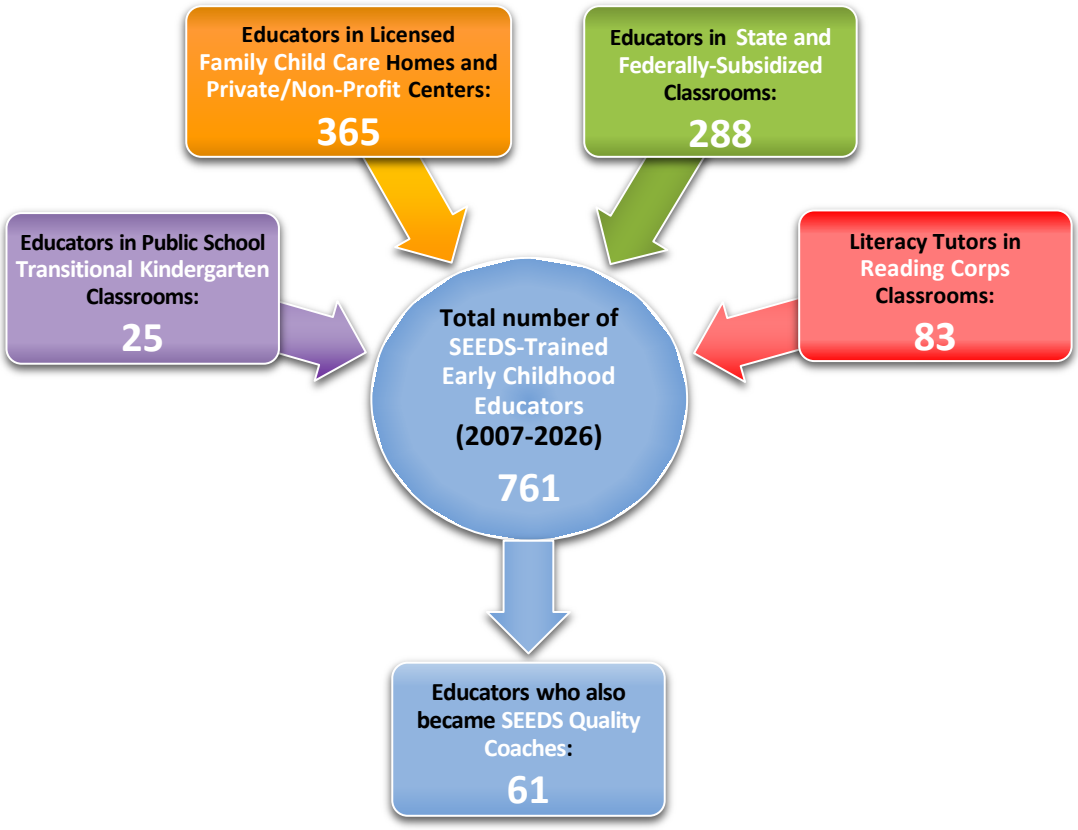
Notes:

- 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.

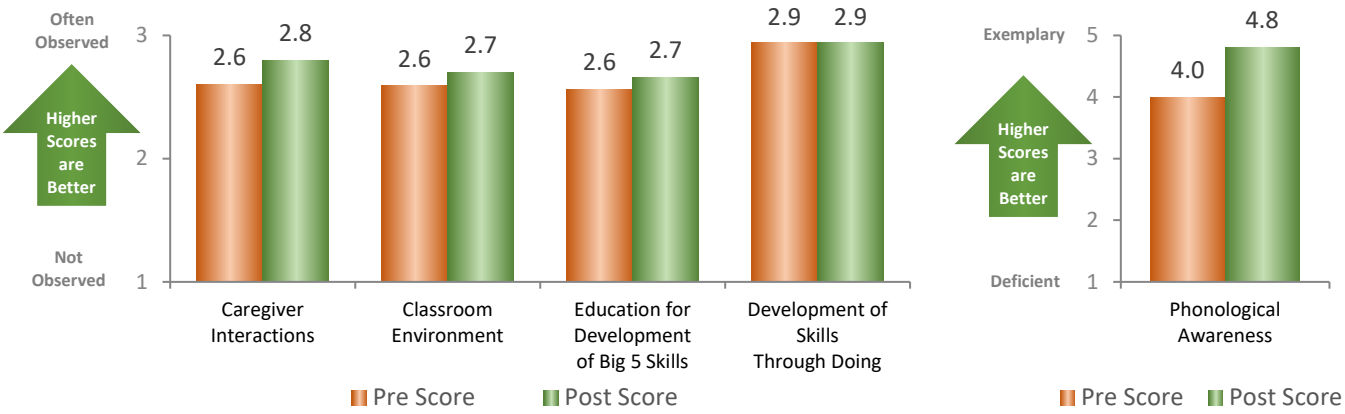
These two resources (the *Checklist* and one item from the *ELLCO Pre-K*) were used to observe the classrooms. Due to these changes in the classroom evaluation in FY 2025-26, the observations for just this one year are presented in the following charts.

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"*

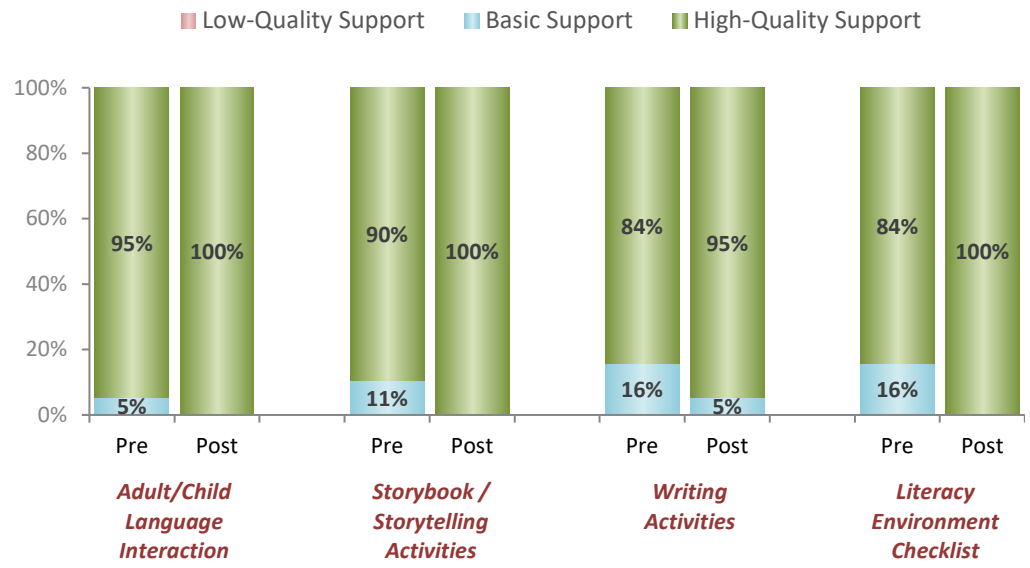
Due to the changes in the evaluation method in FY 2025-26, the results for just this one year are presented in the following analyses.

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.

Raising A Reader

Program Description

Raising A Reader (RAR) fosters healthy brain development, supports parent-child bonding, and motivates families to read aloud with their children which helps develop the early literacy skills that are critical for school success. Raising A Reader (RAR) began operation in Watsonville during the last quarter of the 2005-06 fiscal year and has served nearly **35,600** children since then. The program provides a way for children and their parents or caregivers to participate in a weekly rotating book bag program through early care and education settings.

On a weekly basis, participating RAR classrooms and family child care homes provide children with bags that are filled with various award-winning books, which they borrow and bring home to their parents. RAR provides training and information to parents and caregivers on how to effectively share these books with their children at home, to help develop their children's early literacy skills, and instill a love of reading.

RAR also connects families with their local public library, and at the end of the program children are given a book bag of their own as a way to encourage families to continue the practice of borrowing and reading books together.

Funding Transition

In FY 2025-26, First 5 notified RAR that due to budget constraints, First 5 would need to suspend financial support beginning July 1, 2026. In fall of 2025, Pajaro Valley Unified School District (PVUSD) and First 5 met to discuss a sustainability and transition plan for FY 2026-27 that would help districts, agencies, and sites become independent affiliates of Raising A Reader National. Up until to now, Santa Cruz County RAR has been organized as one independent affiliate of Raising A Reader National, coordinated by PVUSD. The goal for FY 2026-27 is to transition these sites and school districts to be completely independent affiliates with Raising A Reader National. The fee for becoming an affiliate is usually $2,000 per center or school, or $500 per family child care, but Raising A Reader National is supportive of this new sustainability plan in Santa Cruz County and has waived these one-time affiliate fees to help with this transition.

In FY 2026-27, PVUSD intends to maintain the RAR program for its district-operated, state-funded preschool programs, TK classrooms, and contracted family child care providers. First 5

Looking Ahead: Reflections from the RAR Coordinator

"Over the past 20 years, this affiliate has proudly supplied early literacy strategies and books to thousands of children across Santa Cruz County and the Pajaro Valley, ensuring that the most reached-for books are available in their homes. This book bag program has been the foundation of language, family connection, and a love of books in this community.

We extend our deepest gratitude to First 5 Santa Cruz for making this possible and for their steadfast support of young children aged 0–5. Additionally, we appreciate the opportunity to provide materials and training as local sites transition into becoming their own independent affiliates, ensuring that Raising A Reader continues sustainably."

- Raising A Reader, Annual Progress Report

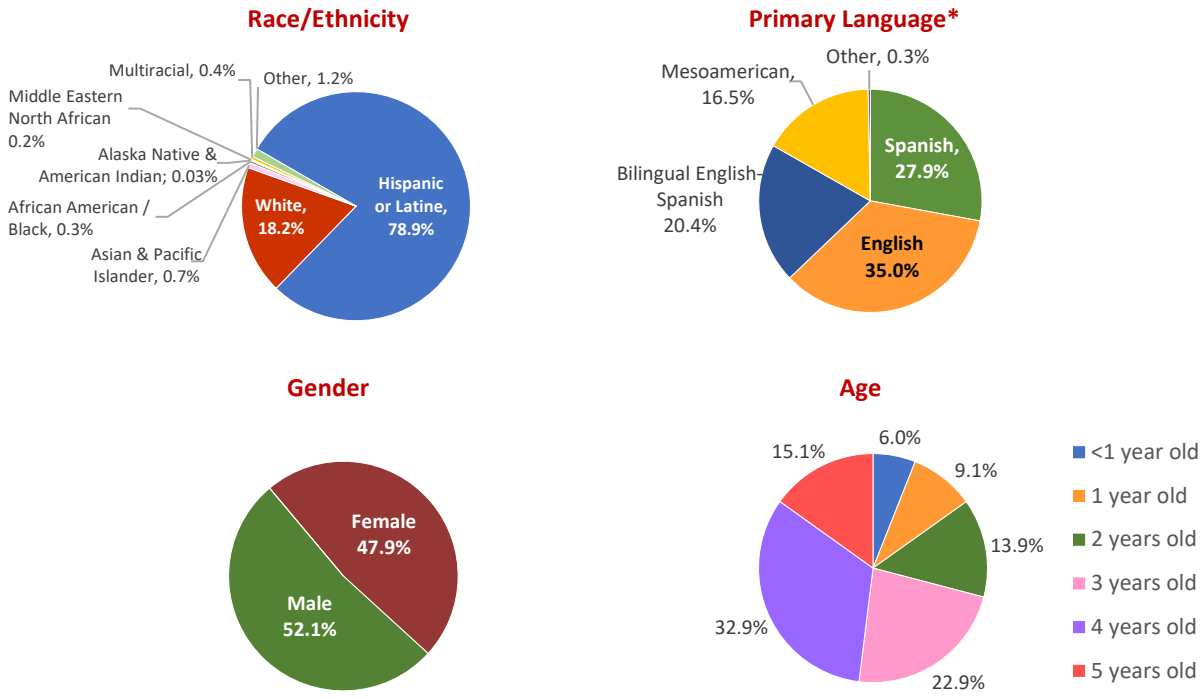
plans to provide one year of transition funding to PVUSD to support training and initial book purchases for agencies that want to continue as independent RAR affiliates. At the end of that 1st year, First 5 will provide results regarding the number of sites that became an affiliate of RAR, and were able to independently continue providing Raising A Reader to the community.

Population Served

	This Funding Cycle 2025-2026			Cumulative Total 2006-2026
	New	Existing	Total 2025-2026	
Children	1,756	1,425	**3,181**	**35,589**

Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026.
Note: "New" children are those who began participating in Raising A Reader for the first time during this fiscal year. "Existing" children are those who began participating in Raising A Reader before this fiscal year and continued their participation into this fiscal year. The population numbers include children reported by Raising A Reader, and also children who were enrolled in this program through Families Together.

Figure 58: **Demographics of Children (ages 0-5) participating in Raising A Reader (2025-26)**



Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2025 – June 30, 2026.
Notes:
- These demographics are for the children enrolled in classrooms providing Raising A Reader.
- Clients with missing or unknown data for a demographic are excluded from that demographic's analysis.

* "Mesoamerican" languages include Mixtec, Zapotec, and Triqui. "Other" languages include Bilingual-Other and other languages.
N: (Race/Ethnicity)=3,097; (Primary Language)=3,178; (Gender)= 3,180; (Age)=3,181.

Program Objective: Support existing sites offering Raising A Reader

RAR staff visit participating child care sites to monitor how well the RAR program is operating, and to provide refresher books or trainings as needed. Indeed, as more and more sites in the county have implemented RAR over the years, the objectives of RAR have shifted from adding new sites to maintaining and supporting the existing ones.

The following results show the number of sites that have been supported during the past year. Some sites may be listed more than once if they required additional assistance throughout the year.

Existing Sites	Number of Visits at Existing Sites[1]		2025-26 Total
	Family Child Care Home	Preschool/Child Care Center	
Between July 1, 2025, and June 30, 2026, sustain, monitor, and support approximately 200 sites with RAR since 2006. Distribute refresher materials, train/re-train teachers/providers on early literacy and family engagement strategies.	160	116	**276**

Source: Raising A Reader *Annual Progress Report*, 2025-26.
[1] Some sites may be visited more than once. Additionally, the actual number of classrooms participating in Raising A Reader is likely to be higher than the total number of sites, as one site may include more than one classroom.

In addition to supporting existing sites, RAR also enrolled 34 new sites in 2025-26.

Number of New Sites Implemented since July 1, 2025		2025-26 Total
Family Child Care Home	Preschool/Child Care Center	
23	11	**34**

Source: Raising A Reader *Annual Progress Report*, 2025-26.

Outcome Objective: Parents will spend more time reading or sharing books with their child

Two surveys were conducted to help to measure the impact of Raising A Reader in Santa Cruz County and the Pajaro Valley area of Monterey County, both utilizing the Raising A Reader *Parent Retrospective Survey* provided by Raising A Reader National through SurveyMonkey (an online tool for creating and analyzing surveys).

Raising A Reader Parent Retrospective Survey

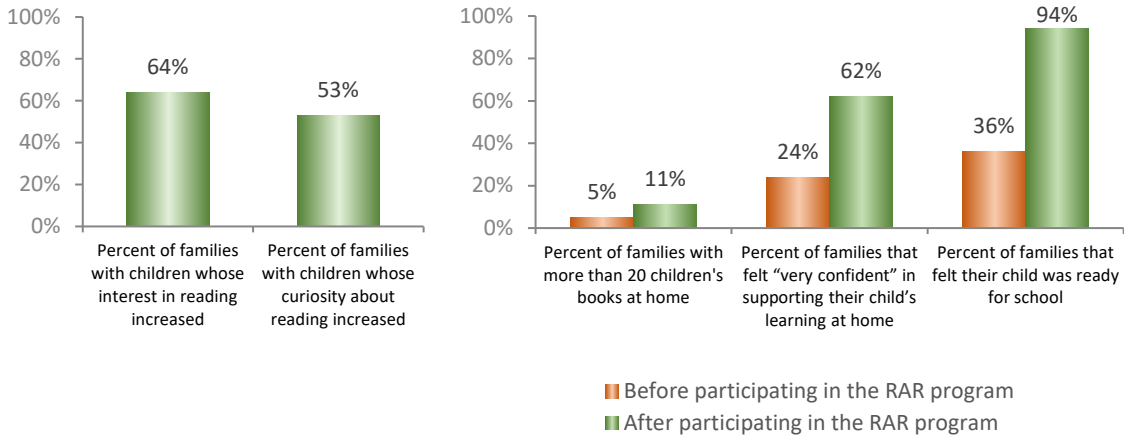
The *Raising A Reader Parent Retrospective Survey* was first administered in the fall of 2025 to 39 migrant parents at the PVUSD Migrant Seasonal Head Start centers in Watsonville, and then again in the spring of 2026 to 213 families throughout the county. RAR staff interviewed migrant parents one at a time and recorded their answers directly into the survey link. For the families throughout the county, the link for this survey was emailed to all the centers and schools so they could forward it to families participating in RAR.

Findings from the *RAR Parent Retrospective Survey* highlight the positive impact of RAR on family reading behaviors and child growth in early literacy.

Impact of RAR on families' pre-literacy activities (2025-26)

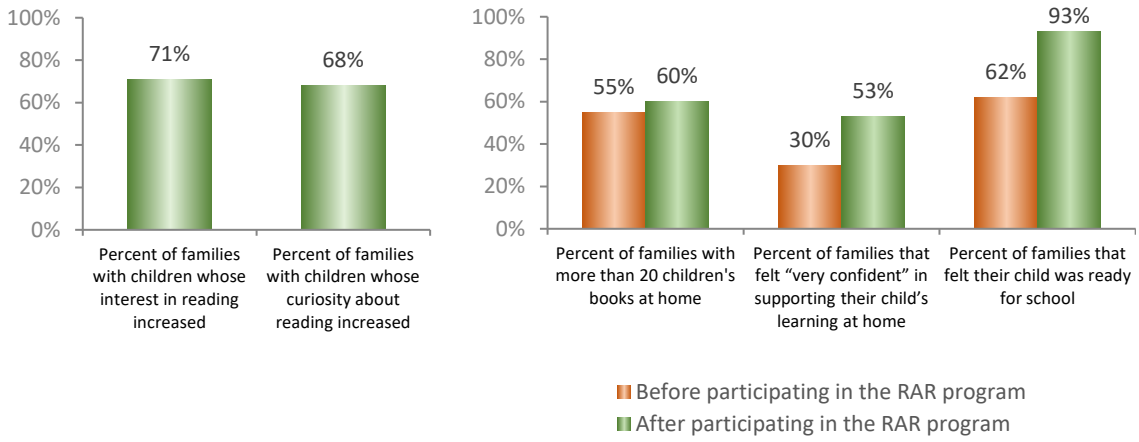
Migrant Families (Fall 2025)

N = 39.



County Families (Spring 2026)

N = 213.



Source: Raising A Reader, Annual Progress Report, *RAR Parent Retrospective Survey* results, 2025-26.

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library

Program Description

Dolly Parton's Imagination Library (DPIL) helps children develop a love for reading by providing free books to children from birth to their fifth birthday, regardless of their family's income. Books are selected by a panel of early childhood literacy experts for content that is informative, age appropriate, and inspiring.



In the fall of 2025, First 5 Santa Cruz County—along with founding local sponsors United Way of Santa Cruz County and Thrive by 5—brought Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to Santa Cruz County. The Imagination Library of Santa Cruz County mails a new, high-quality, and age-appropriate book to every enrolled child each month, from birth until their fifth birthday, at no cost to the family, and with no eligibility requirements. Books are addressed to the child and are delivered directly to the child's preferred mailing address. In Santa Cruz County, children have the option of receiving books in English, or bilingual books (English and Spanish). Also, age-eligible siblings in the same house who are enrolled in the Imagination Library will receive separate age-appropriate books.

First 5 Santa Cruz County serves as the program's Local Program Partner (LPP), which includes administering enrollment through an online dashboard, conducting community outreach, and ensuring funding that covers book and shipping costs for children across the county. First 5's Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program has been a primary source of enrollment at the three local birthing hospitals by offering families the opportunity to register their newborns and other age-eligible children during their visits with the Newborn Enrollment Coordinator (NEC).

Welcoming a New Reader

Just three hours after a delivery, a Newborn Enrollment Coordinator (NEC) warmly welcomed a first-time mom by sharing the First 5 *Kit for New Parents* and a wealth of community resources, including information about Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

When the program was mentioned, the mother beamed and said, "Grandma already signed up the baby." Amazed that the baby was just three hours old, the NEC joyfully confirmed it was the same program.

This heartwarming moment highlights how eager and proactive families are in supporting their child's future. The Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program is dedicated to providing friendly, encouraging service, and helping families enroll in insurance and connecting them to valuable programs and services, such as Dolly Parton's Imagination Library.

- First 5 Baby Gateway Newborn Enrollment Program

First 5 is proud to bring Dolly Parton's Imagination Library to our County's young children. By nurturing a passion for reading, this program is helping prepare the young children in our community for a bright future.

Population Served

	2025-2026
Children	2,598

Source: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Book Ordering System, 2026.
Note: Total includes all children who were registered as of June 30, 2026 (whether or not they've received any books yet), PLUS all children who "graduated" (turned age 5) during FY 2025-26.

Outcomes

FY 2025-26 Enrollment

During FY 2025-26,

- **2,598 children** were registered in Dolly Parton's Imagination Library of Santa Cruz County.
- **12,405 books** were mailed to these children during this time period.

Current Enrollment

Participation rates fluctuate throughout the year due to new enrollments, ongoing "graduations" (when a child reaches age 5 and is no longer eligible for the program), and children who transfer to another county's program. The following results represent the program's current, active enrollment roster as of June 30, 2026.

Measure	As of June 30, 2026
Total children currently enrolled as of 6/30/26	**2,512**
ZIP codes served	**21** (Santa Cruz County)
Average child age	**Just under 2 years old** (23.8 months)
Percent receiving Bilingual English/Spanish books	**38.6%** (970 children)
Average time remaining until "graduation" (reaches age 5)	**35.2 months** (2.9 years)
Graduating (turning 5) within the next 12 months	**376 children** (15.0%)

Source: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Book Ordering System, 2026.

Geographic Reach

As of June 30, 2026, children who are currently enrolled live across all ZIP codes and cities/communities in Santa Cruz County, though enrollment is heavily concentrated in South County. Watsonville (95076) alone accounts for more than a third of the program—900 children, or 35.8% of total enrollment—followed by two central Santa Cruz ZIP codes (95060 and 95062, together 26.0%) and Aptos (7.7%). The ten most-enrolled ZIP codes account for over 92% of the total program enrollment.

ZIP CODE	PRIMARY CITY	# OF CHILDREN ENROLLED	% OF TOTAL COUNTY ENROLLMENT	% OF BOOKS THAT ARE BILINGUAL
95076	Watsonville	900	35.8%	65.3%
95060	Santa Cruz (City)	332	13.2%	27.4%
95062	Santa Cruz (Live Oak)	320	12.7%	25.6%
95003	Aptos	194	7.7%	16.0%
95066	Scotts Valley	148	5.9%	8.1%
95073	Soquel	107	4.3%	19.6%
95019	Freedom	104	4.1%	74.0%
95010	Capitola	74	2.9%	24.3%
95006	Boulder Creek	73	2.9%	11.0%
95018	Felton	68	2.7%	11.8%

Source: Dolly Parton's Imagination Library Book Ordering System, 2026.

Age Profile

Of the children who are currently enrolled as of June 30, 2026, the average age is just under 2 years old (23.8 months). Ages span from newborn to just under five years, which is consistent with the program's birth-to-age-five eligibility window. The age group with the largest percentage of children—children roughly 5–17 months old—accounts for 27.8% of the total enrollment.

Language Access

As of June 30, 2026, 38.6% of children currently enrolled (970 of 2,512) receive Dolly Parton's Imagination Library books in the Bilingual English/Spanish edition rather than English only. This usage varies across the County: bilingual enrollment reaches 74.0% in Freedom and in Watsonville, compared with under 10% in Scotts Valley and the San Lorenzo Valley communities.

"Graduation" Rates

Across the current roster, children have an average of 35.2 months (2.9 years) remaining before they graduate out of the program at age five, and children have been enrolled for an average of 5.6 months so far. Notably, 376 children (15.0% of the roster) will turn five—and graduate—within the next 12 months, which is useful for anticipating both the size of the program's annual "graduating class" and the pace of new enrollment.