



## FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



# ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT



**July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025**

October 2025

## Early Literacy Foundations (ELF) Initiative

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Santa Cruz County 3<sup>rd</sup> graders are struggling to become proficient readers. The latest 2024 data indicate that 62% are below grade level in reading. This number jumps to 78% among low-income 3<sup>rd</sup> graders in the County, and 78% among Hispanic and Latine 3<sup>rd</sup> graders.<sup>36</sup> 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:<sup>37</sup>

*“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 745 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** through **SEEDS of Learning™** training and coaching. Educators earn an educational award and attend literacy labs. In FY 2024-25, two workshop series were held in Fall 2024 and Spring 2025, with seven sessions each. 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

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<sup>36</sup> California Department of Education, California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP), *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics*. These are the current data at the time of this report.

<sup>37</sup> First Things First, *Why Early Childhood Matters: Early Literacy*, retrieved 9/12/25 from <https://www.firstthingsfirst.org/early-childhood-matters/early-literacy>.

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.

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.

## SEEDS of Learning™

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### 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.”<sup>38</sup>

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.

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.

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<sup>38</sup> 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>.

- **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<sup>39</sup> 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**



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.

<sup>39</sup> “Hand” diagrams: Kate Colwell Horst, SEEDS of Learning™, FY 17-18 SEEDS of Learning Manual.

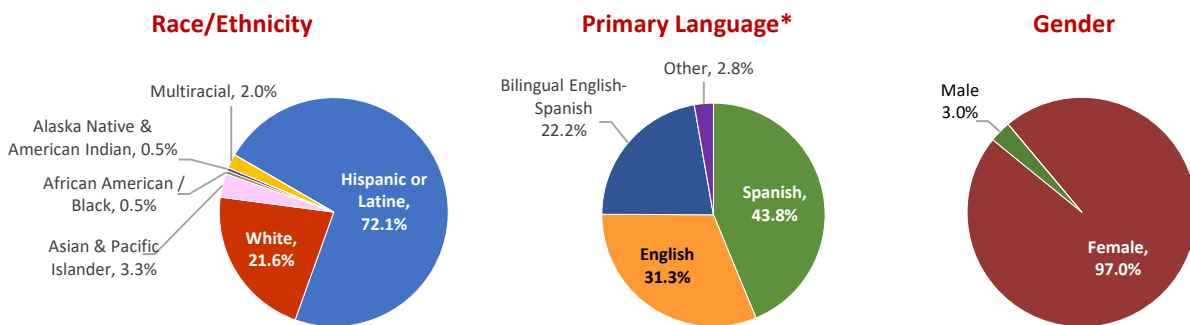
## Population Served

	THIS FUNDING CYCLE 2024-2025	CUMULATIVE TOTALS 2007-2025
Educators in licensed family child care homes and private/non-profit centers	40	355
Educators in State- and Federally-subsidized classrooms	27	282
Educators in public school Transitional Kindergarten classrooms	1	25
Literacy Tutors in Reading Corps Classrooms*	-	83
<b>TOTAL (unduplicated)</b>	<b>68</b>	<b>745</b>

Source: (Educator current Funding Cycle) First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025, (Educator Cumulative Totals) First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records, 2007-2024*. (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 53: Demographics of SEEDS-trained Early Childhood Educators (2007-2025)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records, 2007-2025*.

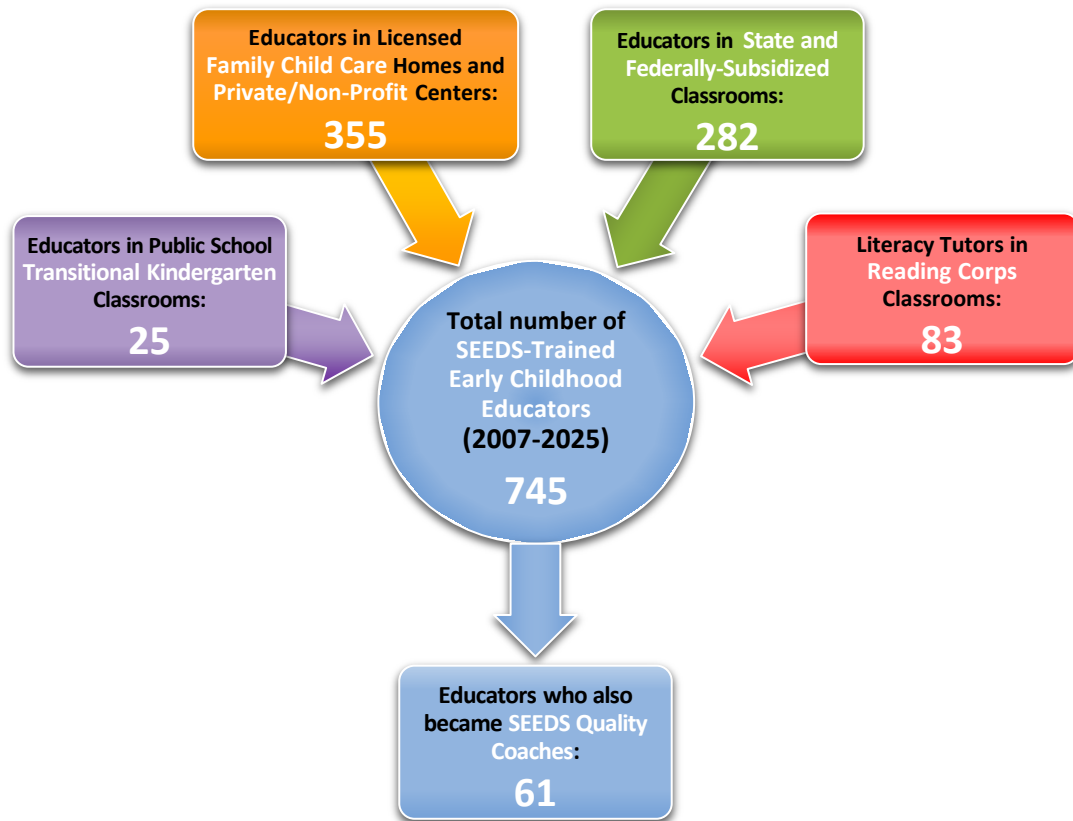
Notes:

- 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)=657, (Language)=690, (Gender)=692.

Figure 54: **Number of SEEDS-trained Early Childhood Educators, by Type of classroom (2007-2025)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, *Early Literacy Foundations program records, 2007-2025.*

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) informal 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 on-going 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**

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### **SEEDS of Learning™ Trainings**

In FY 2024-25, 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 2024 (July – September), designed for Spanish-speaking family child care providers who work with Spanish-speaking children ages 0-5 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 basic 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 in Fall of 2024 and again in Spring 2025, 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 the young toddlers in order to meet the needs of the children at these younger developmental levels. Therefore, the SEEDS program for FY 2024-25 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 2024 series was a continuation of the Spring 2024 cohort and focused on basic early literacy strategies for toddlers and young preschoolers.

The Spring 2025 series focused on SEEDS and Science, providing early science literacy strategies to encourage the development of STEM skills in young children. This series is new and provided early educators with strategies for children to build experiences in investigation and problem solving and the foundation for understanding basic science concepts.

## Toddler and Preschool 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. The first indicators of change are the literacy environment, teacher-child interactions, and language opportunities that teachers provide to children.

First 5 SEEDS Quality Coaches are trained to assess SEEDS classrooms that are teaching children ages 2 ½ - 5, using the *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K Tool* (ELLCO Pre-K). The ELLCO Pre-K is used to assess the following five classroom components: “*Classroom Structure*,” “*Curriculum*,” “*Language Environment*,” “*Books and Book Reading*,” and “*Print and Early Writing*.” Each of these five classroom components are comprised of 3-5 individual questions, with a total of 18 questions in the ELLCO Pre-K.

Items are scored along a 5-point scale, where 1 is deficient and 5 is exemplary. From this scale, early childhood educators’ classroom scores can be categorized into three levels, indicating that their classroom environment provides **low-quality support**, **basic support**, or **high-quality support for language and literacy**.

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, it was not possible to complete any ELLCO Pre-K assessments for three fiscal years (2019-22). Beginning in FY 2022-23, one early literacy staff member observed and evaluated the classrooms of each SEEDS participant, conducting a first (“Pre”) ELLCO (between the 1<sup>st</sup> and 2<sup>nd</sup> classes), and a final (“Post”) ELLCO (between the 6<sup>th</sup> and 7<sup>th</sup> classes). Coaches were able to “observe” and evaluate classrooms and teacher interactions via the online Coaching Companion platform, and this evaluation method has continued to be used since then. Coaching Companion is a video-sharing and coaching feedback application that allows a teacher to share their classroom



practice with their coach and to view the videos to make comments and reflect on their practice. Due to this more limited access and changes in coaching techniques, Coaches are no longer using the entire ELLCO Pre-K in their classroom evaluation. Instead, individual questions from the ELLCO Pre-K have been selected to assess the classrooms at the beginning and end of the semester:

- Question 2: *“Contents of the Classroom”*
- Question 5: *“Approaches to Curriculum”*
- Question 9: *“Opportunities for Extended Conversations”*
- Question 10: *“Efforts to Build Vocabulary”*
- Question 11: *“Phonological Awareness”*
- Question 15: *“Approaches to Book Reading”*
- Question 18: *“Support for Children’s Writing”*

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

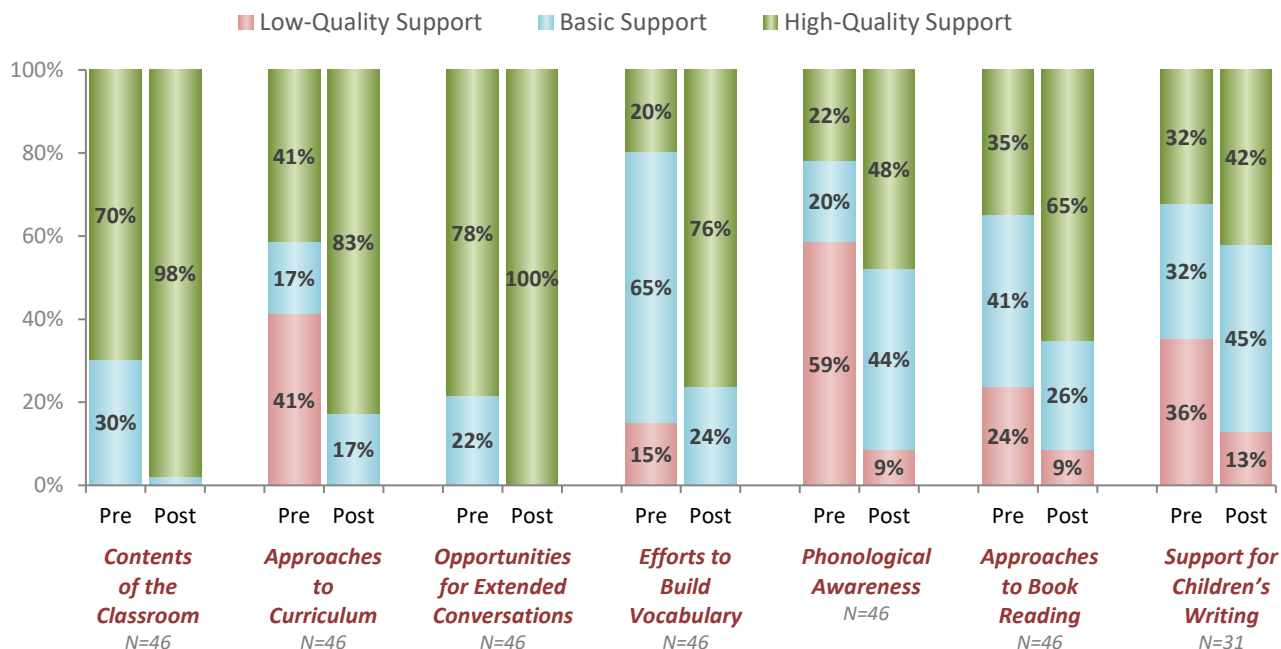
Due to the changes in coaching techniques and classroom evaluation that began in FY 2022-23, only the three years of these new measurements of language and literacy components in the classroom have been aggregated and are presented in the following analyses.

### ***Toddler/Preschool Outcomes***

Selected questions from the ELLCO Pre-K assessment were used to evaluate the quality of support for language and literacy in SEEDS classrooms, which were completed at the beginning (Pre) and end (Post) of the workshop series.

- On average, classrooms showed substantial improvements from the beginning of the series to the end, across each element of language and literacy.
- The classroom elements where the most change occurred were *“Approaches to Curriculum,”* *“Efforts to Build Vocabulary,”* and *“Phonological Awareness.”*

Figure 55: **Preschool and Transitional Kindergarten classrooms: Support for language and literacy (2022-25)**



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County Early Literacy Foundations program records, *Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) Pre-K*, 2022-25.  
 Note: 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.

## 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 2023-24, individual questions

from the CHELLO have been selected to assess the settings at the beginning and end of the semester:

- Question 1: “Organization of the Environment”
- Question 2: “Materials in the Environment”
- Question 9: “Use of Print”
- Question 10: “Storybook / Storytelling Activities”

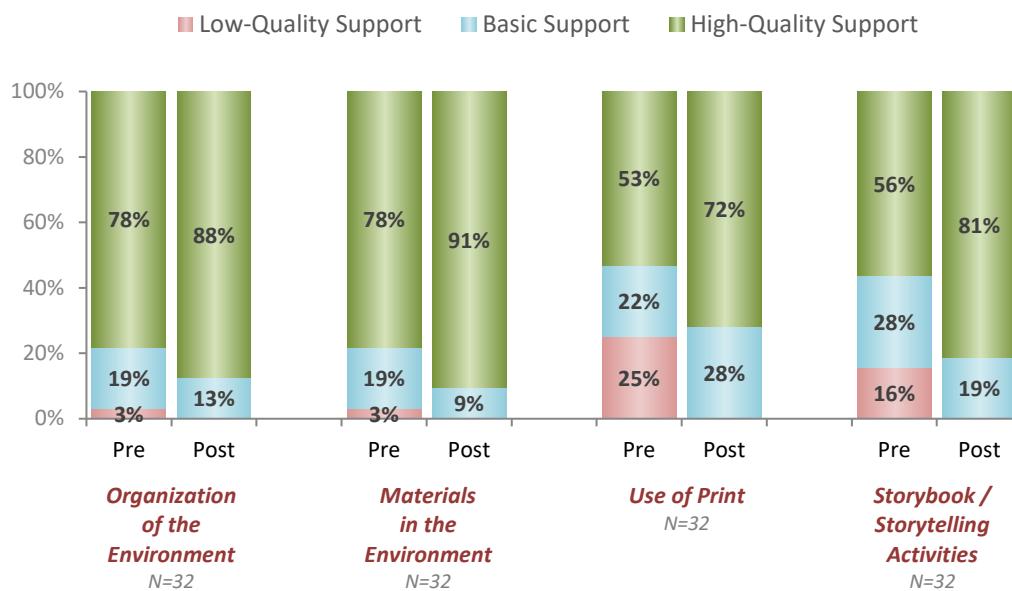
Due to the changes in the evaluation method FY 2023-24, only the two years of these new measurements of the early literacy environment in home-based child care settings are presented in the following analyses.

**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 semester to the end.
- Among the individual Group/Family Observation components, the components that demonstrated the most improvement were “Storybook / Storytelling Activities” and “Use of Print.”

Figure 56: Family Child Care settings: Support for language and literacy (2023-25)



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County Early Literacy Foundations program records, Child/Home Early Language and Literacy Observation (CHELLO); Group/Family Observation, 2023-25.

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.