



FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT



July 1, 2024 - June 30, 2025

October 2025

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EARLY CARE AND EDUCATION

Supporting and improving the quality of early learning programs in Santa Cruz County.



Early Care and Education

First 5 Santa Cruz County is working to improve children's early literacy skills by encouraging families to read together, providing language and literacy skill development for early childhood educators, and offering supports to enhance language-rich practices in the classroom.

First 5 Santa Cruz County believes that all children deserve quality early childhood experiences in the crucial first five years of life in order to be ready for kindergarten and beyond. It's known that 90% of a child's brain develops before their fifth birthday and therefore First 5 supports programs that apply evidence-based approaches about early brain development to increase quality and access to early education experiences.

- Increased access to affordable, high quality early care and education
- Increased early learning and school readiness skills (developmental, social-emotional, cognitive)
- Increased stability and sustainability of the early care and education system

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."*²⁸

Unfortunately, data show that Santa Cruz County children are struggling with their reading and writing skills.²⁹

²⁸ 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.

²⁹ 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.

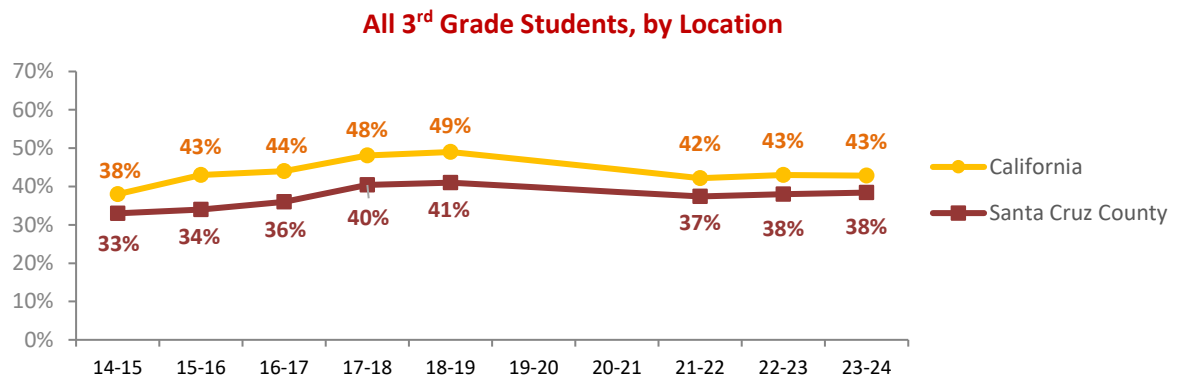
When assessed using the *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP)*, *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for English Language Arts (ELA) and Mathematics* that are completed by all students, results for 2023-24 (the most current set of data available at the time of this report) show that:

- In 2023-24, only 38% of **Santa Cruz County 3rd grade students** met or exceeded standards in English language arts/literacy, which is lower than the state average of 43%.
- 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

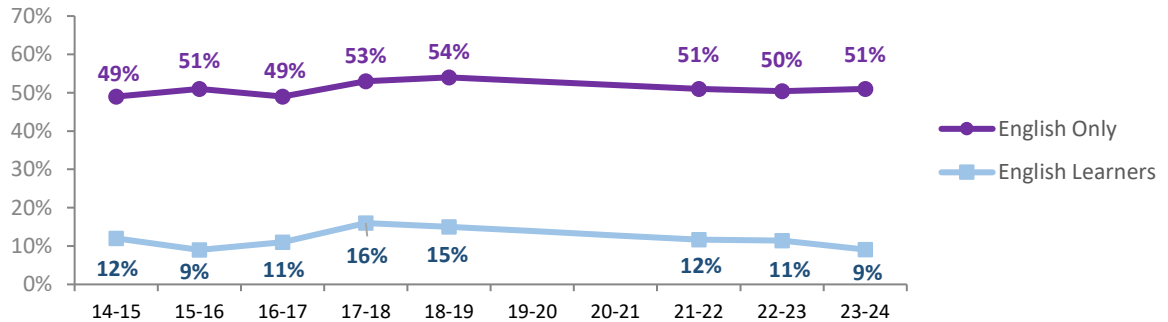
Figure 46: **Percentage of 3rd Grade Students Who Met or Exceeded Standards In English Language Arts/Literacy**



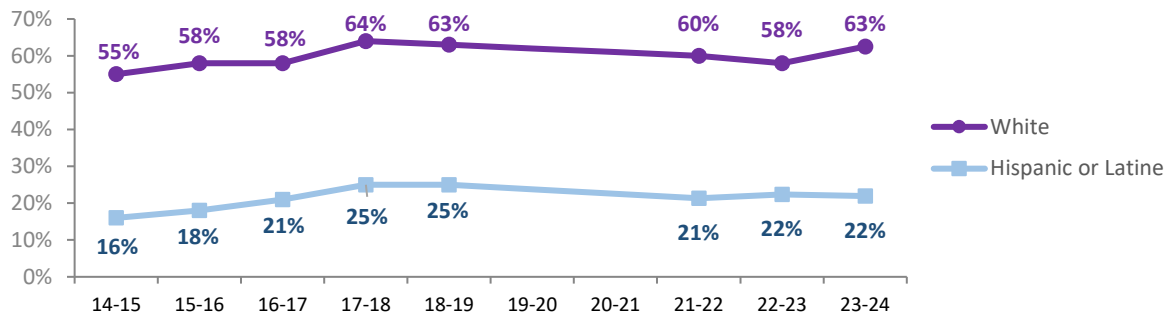
Source: California Department of Education, *California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP)*, *Smarter Balanced Summative Assessments for ELA and Mathematics*. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a complete set of assessments was not collected in Santa Cruz County during 2019-20 and 2020-21. 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.)

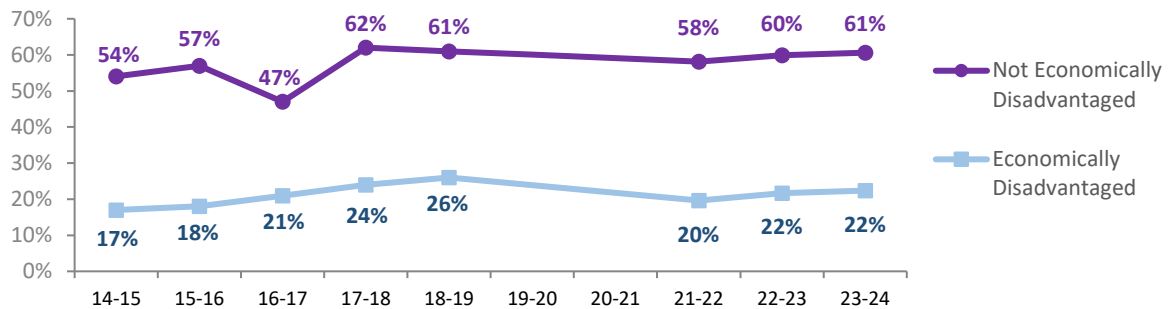
County 3rd Graders, by English-Language Fluency*



County 3rd Graders, by Ethnicity



County 3rd Graders, by Economic Status**



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.

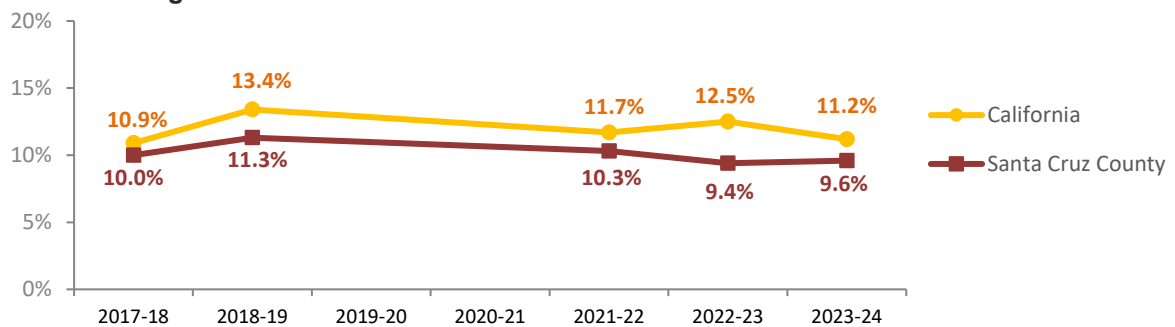
* The California Department of Education defines English learner students as those students for whom there is a report of a primary language other than English on the state-approved Home Language Survey and who, on the basis of the state approved oral language (grades kindergarten through grade twelve) 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.

However, 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 2023-24, almost 10% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having “well-developed” English skills (compared to 11% across the state).³⁰
- Note that another 30% of Santa Cruz County 3rd grade English Learner students were assessed as having “moderately-developed” English skills.³¹

Figure 47: 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.

³⁰ 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.

³¹ 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 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.”³²

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

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

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

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

- First 5 California

³² Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountscalifornia.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 public programs to conduct ratings, inform prioritization of quality improvement activities, and increase public accountability.

As QCC explains, “QCC uses an equity approach as an essential component of quality to close the opportunity gap by prioritizing communities where we can make the highest impact. QCC supports quality early learning and care programs to promote environments, relationships, interactions, and activities supporting all children’s growth and development to prepare them for success in school and life.”³³

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 administering 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) 2023-2025**

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

- **Quality Counts California QRIS block grant**

Nearly 13 million dollars have been appropriated statewide for FY 2024-25 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

³³ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountscalifornia.net/about>, 2024.

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

The California Department of Education (CDE) appropriated \$50 million annually statewide for the purpose of allowing local consortia to give QRIS block grants to local California State Preschool Program (CSPP) sites participating and rated in the QRIS. Consortia use the QRIS block grant to support local early learning programs and increase the number of low-income children in high-quality state-funded preschool programs. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education, who are the co-leads in the Quality Counts Santa Cruz County QRIS efforts. Beginning in FY 2023-24, only CSPP sites will continue to be rated on the Quality Continuum Framework (formerly called the Rating Matrix). In FY 2024-25, all 21 CSPP sites were rated using the California Quality Continuum Framework.

- **CDE Workforce Pathways Grant**

For FY 2024-25, CDE appropriated over \$12 million statewide for the QCC Workforce Pathways Grant, designed to align with the QCC professional development system and to focus on local workforce needs across all child care setting types. This includes training of professional growth advisors, ensuring all early learning and care (ELC) providers are participating in the California ECE Workforce Registry, and providing grants for access to higher education in ECE. This grant is administered locally by the Santa Cruz County Office of Education.

Quality 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.

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

One Provider's Experience

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

- Provider quote from the Quality Counts California website

- 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 informal 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 (see Appendix A) as the foundation of their local QRIS. The QCF provides a framework, or structure, for quality improvement and is part of the QCC Implementation Guide (Guide) which provides information 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 which 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. (As of FY 23-24, 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 48: Example of a Quality Counts Rating document



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).³⁴ All CSPP sites were rated at either Tier 4 or 5, 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)**

³⁴ 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.

In addition to the 21 CSPP rated sites which may also have infant and toddler classrooms, there are an additional 20 Center sites and 60 Family Child Care provider sites participating in QCSCC at the Quality Improvement level, as well as a program for informal care providers called Family, Friend, and Neighbor care.

Figure 49: QCSCC overall participation, by Site type (2024-25)

SITE TYPE	NUMBER OF SITES	NUMBER OF PROVIDERS / ECE PROFESSIONALS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN SERVED (AGES 0-5)
Participating Child Care Centers	41	312 ¹	1,405
Participating Family Child Care (FCC) Sites	60	110 ²	586
Participating Family, Friend, and Neighbor (FFN) Sites	7	7 ³	7
Total sites	108	429	1,998

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2025.

Note: The number of providers and children were informally counted, and no CCDs were available for them unless otherwise noted.

¹ Child Care Center ECE professionals include teacher directors, teachers, and assistant teachers.

² FCC ECE professionals include the FCC owner and assistants. Of the 110 providers reported here, 60 had enough data available to create full CCDs.

³ FFN providers include unlicensed child care providers who provide care for children from one family other than their own.

Figure 50: Distribution of QCSCC sites in the County (2024-25)



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2025.

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.

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 Quality Counts CA Matrix, 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 seven participants at Ann Soldo elementary school in Spring 2025, and will grow to more schools in FY 2025-26.

Quality Improvement Activities

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

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

The following table presents the number of individuals and sites that participated in professional development through a Professional Learning Community (PLC) in FY 2024-25. 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.

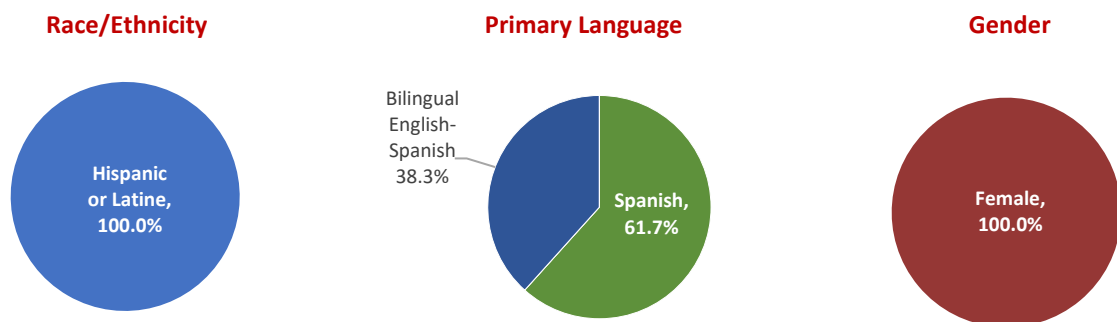
Figure 51: Individuals and sites that participated in a QCSCC Professional Learning Community (2024-25)

INDIVIDUALS AND SITES	NUMBER
Number of Family Child Care providers in QCSCC who participated in a Professional Learning Community	20 family child care providers
Number of directors from center-based QCSCC sites participating in monthly professional learning meetings with the QCSCC Program Manager	8 directors

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2025.

In addition, The Santa Cruz County Office of Education oversees the Workforce Professional Development pathway of QCSCC and provides professional development and training to teachers and FCC providers from participating QCSCC sites. In FY 2024-25, it is estimated that an additional 139 teachers and providers attended trainings through this pathway.

Figure 52: Key demographics of Family Child Care Providers who participated in QCSCC trainings and technical assistance meetings (2024-2025)



Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

Notes:

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

N=60.

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

Santa Cruz County has joined with Santa Clara, San Francisco, Alameda, Contra Costa, San Mateo, San Benito, and Monterey counties to form the Quality Counts California Region 4 Hub. While QCC takes place primarily at the County level, Regional Hubs are funded by First 5 California and were

developed so that neighboring counties could strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, align practices, and minimize duplication.

Hubs are intended to be a support mechanism (not monitors) for consortia in the region. More specifically, hubs are funded for the activities listed as follows:³⁵

- 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

³⁵ 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 2024 data indicate that 62% are below grade level in reading. This number jumps to 78% among low-income 3rd graders in the County, and 78% among Hispanic and Latine 3rd graders.³⁶ 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:³⁷

“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

³⁶ 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.

³⁷ 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™

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.”³⁸

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.

³⁸ 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 diagrams³⁹ 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.

³⁹ "Hand" diagrams: Kate Colwell Horst, SEEDS of Learning™, FY 17-18 SEEDS of Learning Manual.

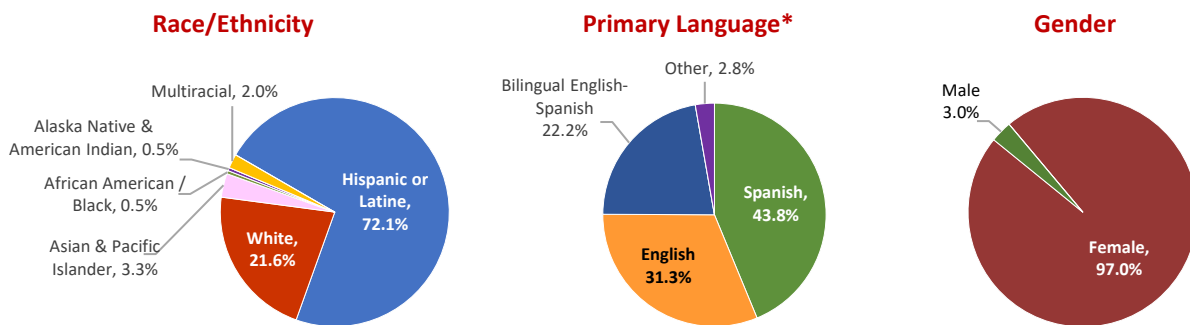
Population Served

	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
TOTAL (unduplicated)	68	745

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.

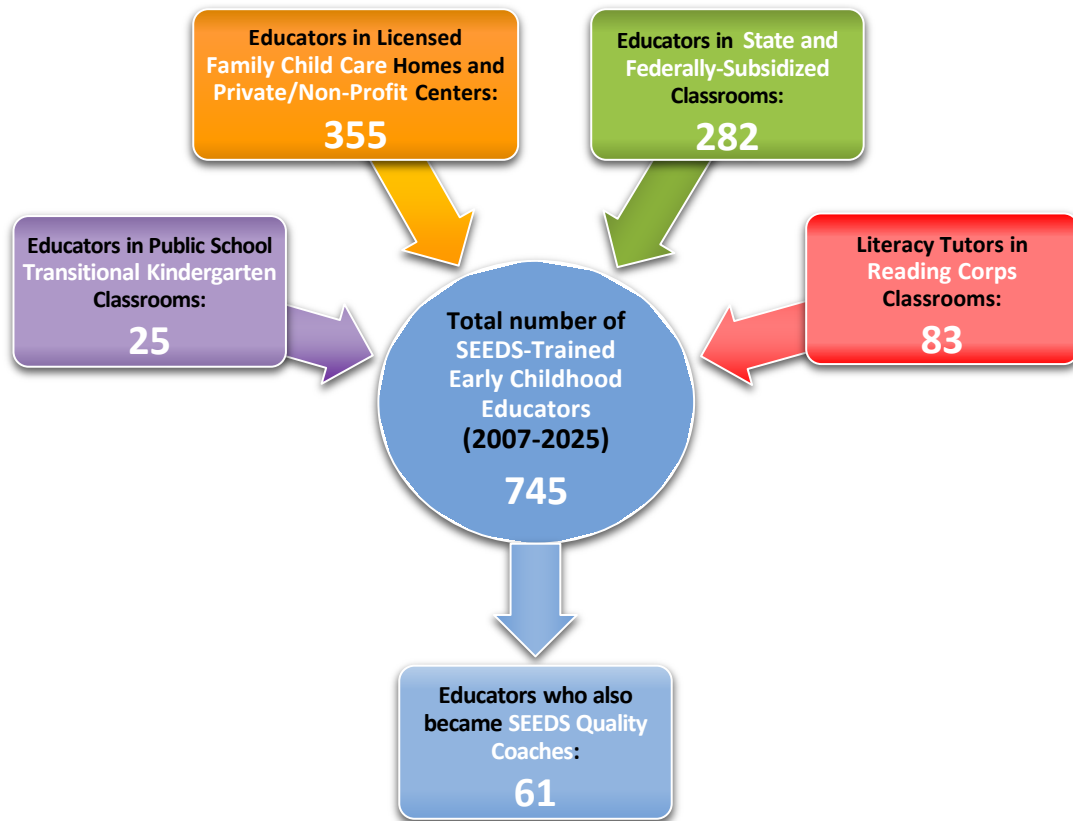
Notes:

- 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

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 1st and 2nd classes), and a final (“Post”) ELLCO (between the 6th and 7th 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.

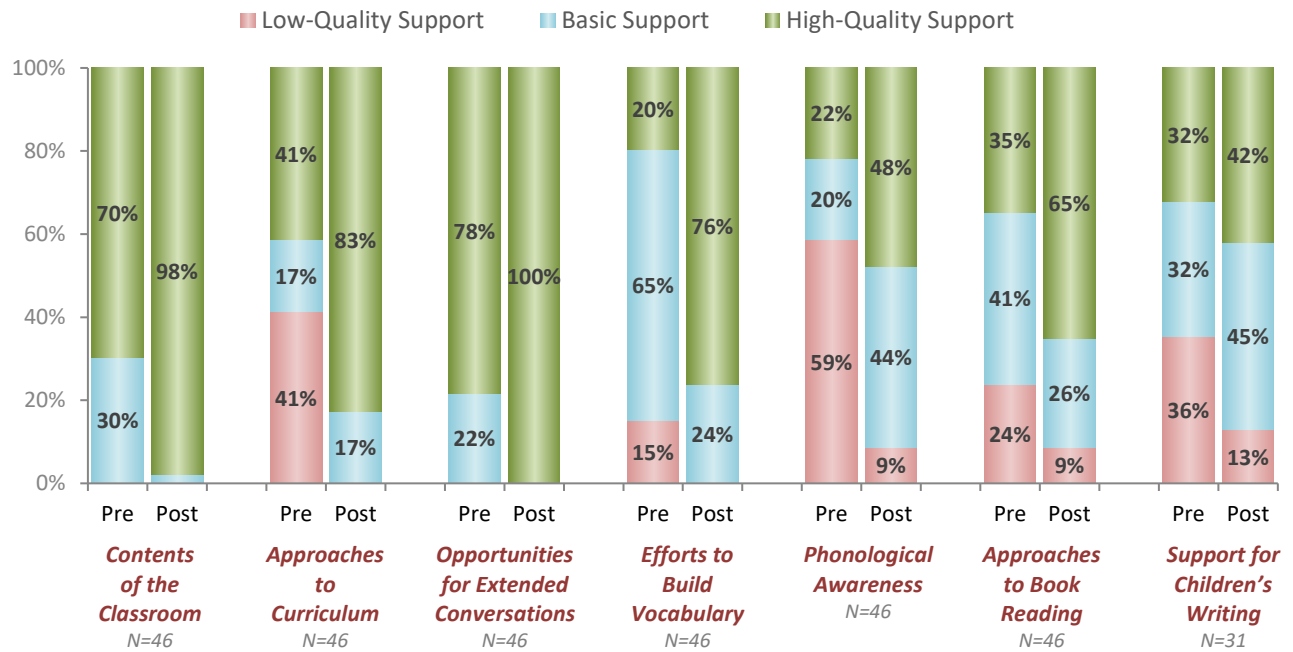
Due to the changes in coaching techniques and classroom evaluation that began in FY 2022-23, only the three years of these new measurements of language and literacy components in the classroom have been aggregated and are presented in the following analyses.

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”*

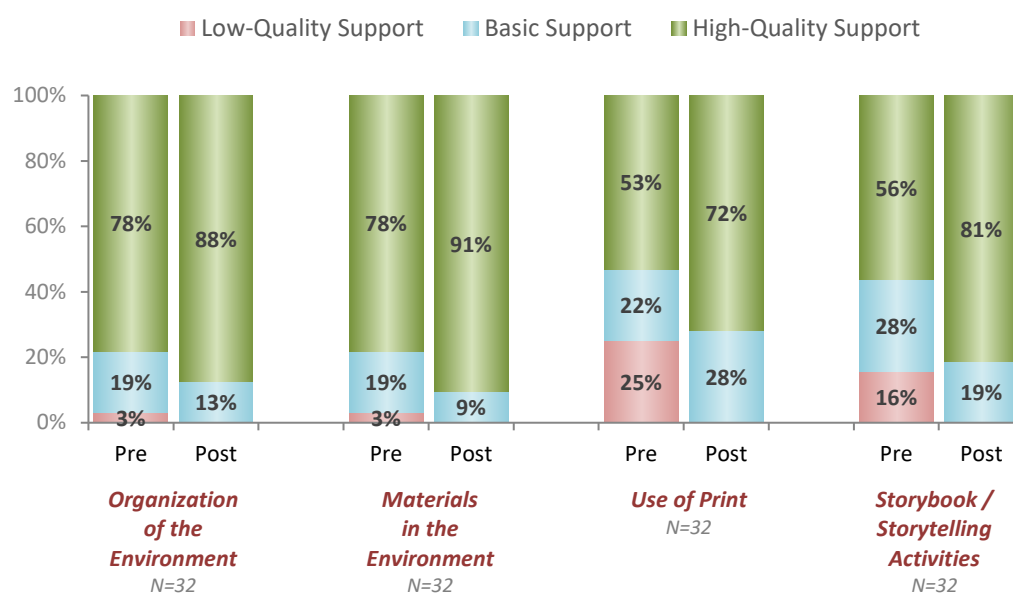
Due to the changes in the evaluation method FY 2023-24, only the two years of these new measurements of the early literacy environment in home-based child care settings are presented in the following analyses.

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.

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 **33,833** 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.

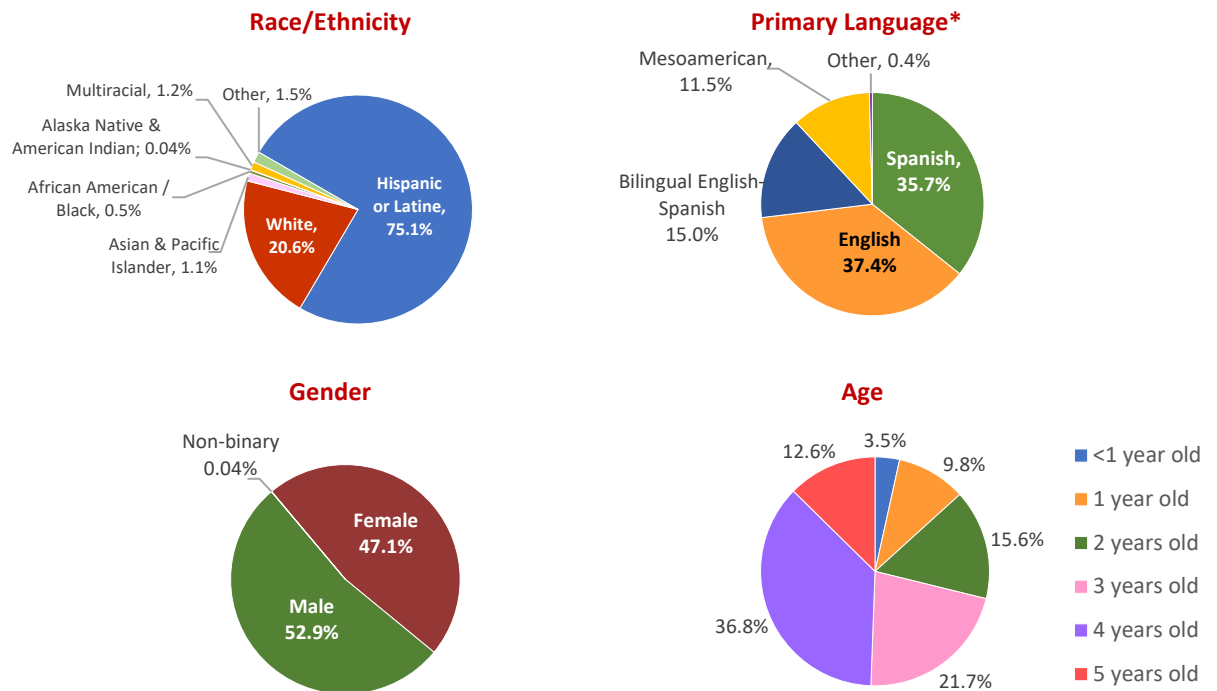
RAR also connects families with their local public library, and at the end of the program children are given a book bag of their own as a way to encourage families to continue the practice of borrowing and reading books together.

Population Served

	This Funding Cycle 2024-2025			Cumulative Total 2006-2025
	New	Existing	Total 2024-2025	
Children	1,535	1,298	2,833	33,833

Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

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 57: Demographics of Children (ages 0-5) participating in Raising A Reader (2024-25)

Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2024 – June 30, 2025.

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, Oaxacan, and Zapoteco. "Other" languages include Bilingual-Other and other languages.
N: (Race/Ethnicity)=2,786; (Primary Language)=2,808; (Gender)= 2,820; (Age)=2,833.

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		2024-25 Total
	Family Child Care Home	Preschool/Child Care Center	
Between July 1, 2024 and June 30, 2025, sustain, monitor and support approximately 200 RAR sites with RAR since 2006.	164	117	281

Source: Raising A Reader Annual Progress Report, 2024-25.

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 38 new sites in 2024-25.

Number of New Sites Implemented since July 1, 2024		2024-25 Total
Family Child Care Home	Preschool/Child Care Center	
30	8	38

Source: Raising A Reader Annual Progress Report, 2024-25.

Parents' Stories

- "The book bag serves as a reminder to read to our children every day. It also gives us access to many different books. My son gets very excited every time he receives a bag."
- "I really like that the books have diversity. We learn about different cultures, traditions, family values, and much more. Since the books are short my children will actually sit down and listen to a story. We ask questions as we read and I like to make it fun when reading a story."
- "Bueno, pues a mi me ayudo a leerle los libros a mi hijo porque antes no lo hacia." [Well, it helped me read books to my son, because I didn't do it before.]

- Raising A Reader, Biannual Progress Report

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

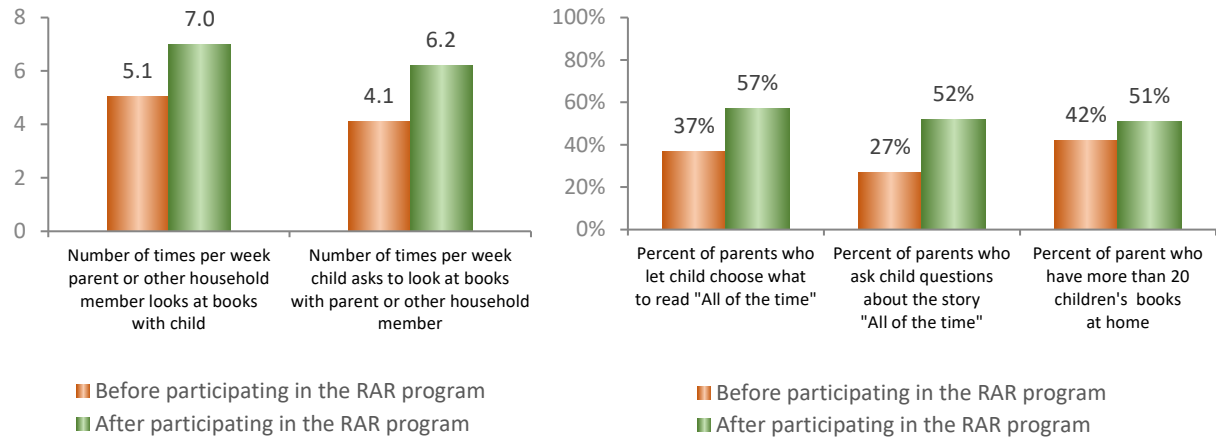
There were two different retrospective parent surveys used this year to measure the effectiveness of Raising A Reader in Santa Cruz County and the Pajaro Valley area of Monterey County: *Raising A Reader (Migrant) Parent Retrospective Survey*, and *Raising A Reader Refresher Provider/Teacher Survey*.

Raising A Reader (Migrant) Parent Retrospective Survey

The first survey was the standard *Raising A Reader Parent Retrospective Survey* provided by Raising A Reader National through Survey Monkey. It was administered in the fall of 2024 to migrant parents at the PVUSD Migrant Seasonal Head Start centers in Watsonville, and again in the spring of 2025 to 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.

Figure 58: Key pre-literacy activities practiced by RAR parents with their child (2024-25)



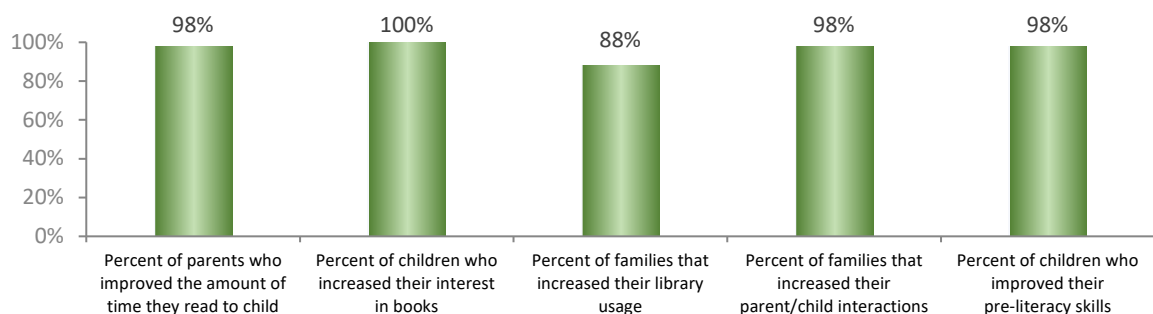
Source: Raising A Reader, Annual Progress Report, *RAR Parent Retrospective Survey* results, 2024-25.
N: (Looks at books)=195; (Child asks)=193; (Child chooses)=188; (Asks child questions)=190; (21+ books)~193.

Raising A Reader Refresher Provider/Teacher Survey

The second retrospective survey was the *Refresher Provider/Teacher Survey* created by consultant Shareen Bell, and was distributed to teachers and providers throughout Santa Cruz County in the spring of 2025. Teachers were asked to report about the RAR program itself (their enthusiasm, the program's effectiveness, etc.), and also to retrospectively report the amount of improvement they saw in parents' and children's pre-literacy behaviors and skills.

In the *Refresher Provider/Teacher Survey*, teachers reported that after participating in RAR, the vast majority of parents spent more time reading with their children, increased their library usage, and had more interactions with their children. Teachers related that nearly all children had an increased interest in books, and improved their pre-literacy skills.

Figure 59: Teachers' report of the impact of RAR on parents' and children's pre-literacy behaviors and skills (2024-25)



Source: Raising A Reader, Annual Progress Report, *Raising A Reader Refresher Provider/Teacher Survey*, 2024-25.
N=42.

