



FIRST 5 SANTA CRUZ COUNTY



ANNUAL EVALUATION REPORT



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Quality Counts Santa Cruz County

Program Description

Santa Cruz County is one of 58 counties participating in Quality Counts California, a “statewide, locally implemented quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) that funds and provides guidance to local and regional agencies, and other quality partners, in their support of early learning and care providers.”²⁷



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

In 2020, The California Department of Education (CDE), California Department of Social Services (CDSS) and First 5 California (F5CA) created the Quality Counts California (QCC) Local Consortia and Partnership Grants program unifying funds from several sources:

- **F5CA IMPACT (Improve and Maximize Programs so All Children Thrive) 2020**

First 5 California has invested \$69.3 million over three fiscal years to support a network of local QRIS’s statewide. Striving toward high-quality, evidence-based standards, First 5 IMPACT 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 ensure more early learning settings can support children to

²⁷ Quality Counts California, <https://qualitycountscalifornia.net>, 2019.

gain the skills and knowledge necessary to be successful in school and life. This grant is administered locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County.

- **Quality Counts California QRIS block grant (now including the California Migrant Program (CMIG) Block Grant)**

Nearly 13 million dollars have been appropriated statewide for FY 2022-23 to support local QRIS consortia to provide training, technical assistance and resources to help child care providers meet a higher tier of quality on the Quality Counts California matrix. The funds are for Early Learning and Care settings serving children with high needs, with first priority for infants and toddler programs as well as for children receiving services through a California Migrant Program (locally through PVUSD). 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

- **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.

- **Federal Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five (B-5) Renewal (PDG-R)**

The funding for this grant comes from the renewal of the federal Preschool Development Grant and is administered by the California Department of Health and Human Services. California will receive \$40.2 million through December 30, 2022: to enable local consortia to provide professional development, and training and technical assistance supports that build early learning and care (ELC) programs and home visiting capacity; to expand access to infants and toddlers, and children experiencing trauma (such as homelessness, foster care, natural disasters etc.); and to create partnerships for family engagement. This grant is administered locally by First 5 Santa Cruz County.

- **CDE Workforce Pathways Grant**

For FY 2022-23, 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 ELC’s 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.

The QCC Local Consortia and Partnership Grant program is designed 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, family child care, center-based, and alternative settings.

This three-year grant (FY 2020-2023) asks counties to build stronger and more diverse partnerships, set more specific engagement and quality improvement goals, and move toward a more holistic vision of quality improvement including:

- Trauma-informed practice;
- Serving the highest impact populations (e.g., children living in poverty, who are experiencing disasters and/or homelessness, etc.);
- Integrating the CDE/CDSS Child Care and Development Grant quality projects and the “Talk. Read. Sing.®” campaign;
- Educating families about the importance of quality early learning and helping them identify quality early learning and care environments (i.e., family child care home or child care center);
- Creating connections to other services, such as home visiting;
- Providing access to tools and resources for quality partners like QRIS administrators, coaches, trainers, and higher education faculty.²⁸

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

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

²⁸ Quality Counts California (QCC) Local Consortia and Partnership Grants FY 20-21 through FT 2022-23 *Request for Applications*, Jan. 2020.

- 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 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 Framework which includes the Quality Counts California Rating Matrix (see Appendix A) and the Quality Counts California Continuous Quality Improvement Pathways (CQI Pathway; see Appendix B) as the foundation of their local QRIS. This framework encompasses 15 elements of quality, including seven rated elements and eight elements in the CQI Pathways. The elements that are rated include teacher-child ratios, teacher qualifications, and teacher-child interactions.

In December 2019, all sites participating in QCSCC that were ready to be rated received a rating based on their cumulative scores in all seven elements (or five, for Family Child Care programs) across five tiers of quality, with points assigned to each element (for more information, see Appendix A). These ratings became publicly available to families seeking child care and early learning programs through Quality Counts California and the local Resource and Referral Agency. This system provides a set of standards that describe the requirements that center- and home-based early learning programs must meet in order to qualify for a QRIS rating; the higher the quality, the higher the rating.

At the time of this last rating in December 2019, there were 41 state- and federally funded center sites with 67 classrooms (from 11 child development programs); 3 private/non-profit center sites with 7 classrooms; and 35 Family Child Care homes participating and rated in Quality Counts Santa Cruz County. Twenty-five additional family child care providers and 6 additional private/non-profit center sites were participating in QCSCC at the Quality Improvement (QI) level, receiving professional development, training, and coaching.

It is important to note that QRIS ratings can help parents choose the best early learning and care program for their child. At the same time, 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 ratings and ultimately to higher quality child care programs.

- Full ratings of all participating Quality Counts sites in Santa Cruz County were conducted in December 2019 and are valid for 3-5 years (5 years for sites rated at Tiers 4 or 5, and 3 years for sites rates at Tier 3 or below). Sites were rated on a 5-tier scale (1=lowest tier; 5=highest tier), and as of the most recent rating in 2019:
 - 0 sites received a Tier 2 rating
 - 11 sites received a Tier 3 rating
 - 62 sites received a Tier 4 rating
 - 6 sites received a Tier 5 rating

It is important to note that several sites are just 1 point away from moving to the next higher Tier rating:

- Nine Tier 3 family child care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.
- Six Tier 4 centers and five Tier 4 family child care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

Figure 44: **QCSCC sites and ratings**

QUALITY TIER	NUMBER OF SITES WITH THIS RATING				
	DEC. 2013 PROVISIONAL RATINGS	DEC. 2014 PROVISIONAL RATINGS	DEC. 2015 FULL RATINGS	DEC. 2017 FULL RATINGS	DEC. 2019 FULL RATINGS
Tier 1	0	0	0	0	0
Tier 2	0	23	0	1	0
Tier 3	24	17	16	8	11*
Tier 4	16	28	36	56	62**
Tier 5	0	1	8	9	6
Total sites	40	69	60	74	79***

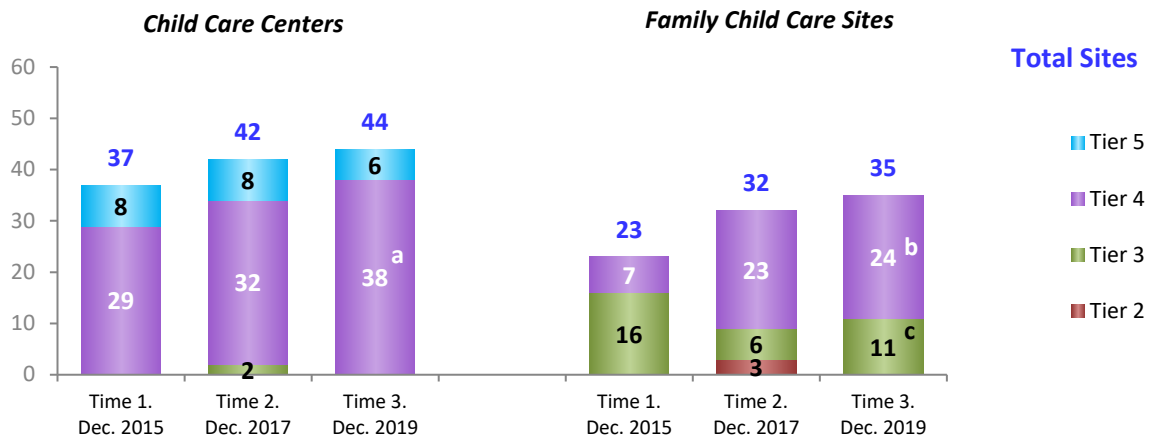
Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2023.

* Nine Tier 3 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.

** Six Tier 4 centers and five Tier 4 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

*** Three additional sites participated but closed down prior to the December 2019 full rating. In all, 82 sites have been rated between 2012-2019.

Figure 45: Number of QCSCC sites at each Tier rating, by Rating time and Type of site



Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2023.

^a Six Tier 4 centers are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

^b Five Tier 4 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 5.

^c Nine Tier 3 Family Child Care sites are 1 point from moving to Tier 4.

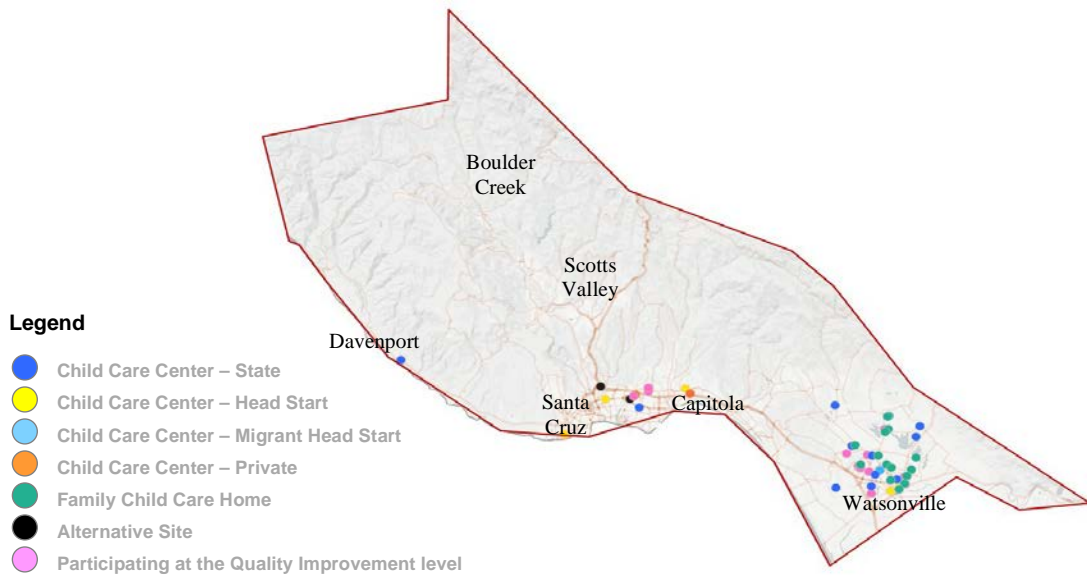
- Throughout the pandemic, many centers participating in QCSCC closed and met with children and families virtually. Most reopened in FY 2021-22, and while a few remain closed, there are new centers that have joined: four in FY 2021-22 and two in FY 2022-23. The total number of sites currently participating and active in QCSCC as of FY 2022-23 are as follows:
 - **48** Child Care Centers are participating in QCSCC, with 40 rated sites, and 8 participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level.
 - **60** Family Child Care Sites are participating in QCSCC, with 35 sites that have been rated, and 25 participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level.

As of FY 2022-23, this brings the total number of actively participating providers/sites to **108**.

Figure 46: QCSCC overall participation, by Site type (2022-23)

SITE TYPE	NUMBER OF PARTICIPATING PROVIDERS / SITES
Child Care Centers Participating and Rated	40 (sites)
Child Care Centers Participating at QI Level Only	8 (sites)
Family Child Care Sites Participating and Rated	35 (providers/sites)
Family Child Care Sites Participating at QI Level Only	25 (providers/sites)
Total sites	108 (providers/sites)

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2023.

Figure 47: Distribution of QCSCC sites in the County (2022-23)

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2023.

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 an online 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 grants to enhance their home learning environment. New for FY 2022-23 was the creation of a Professional Learning Community (PLC) for participating FCC’s, which was facilitated by the Go Kids Quality Improvement Coordinator. Twenty FCC’s were selected via an application process and met eight times over six months for in-person trainings and discussion on topics that supported their on-going professional development. In a post-survey, the FCC participants reported that they benefited from taking a “deeper dive” into topics that supported quality in their FCC businesses. As independent business owners often working alone as Early Childhood Educator (ECE) professionals, they built new professional relationships with other FCC’s, and learned from each other as they discussed topics such as teacher-child interactions, anti-bias and equitable practices in the FCC home, early literacy strategies, and talking to families about developmental milestones.

The following table presents the number of individuals and sites that participated in professional development provided through Quality Counts Santa Cruz County in 2022-23.

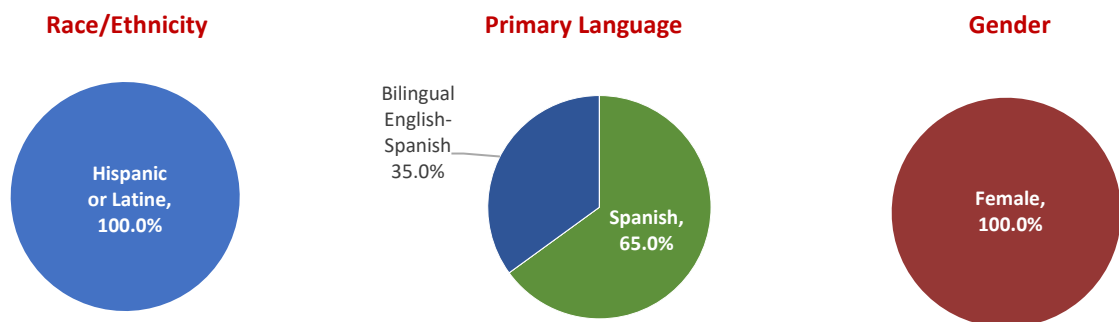
Figure 48: Individuals and sites that participated in QCSCC professional development (2022-23)

INDIVIDUALS AND SITES	NUMBER
Number of Family Child Care providers in QCSCC who participated in an 8-session Professional Learning Community	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 20 family child care providers
Number of directors from center-based QCSCC sites participating in monthly virtual technical assistance meetings with the QCSCC Program Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 10 directors
Number of QCSCC Family Child Care sites that are rated and participating in virtual technical assistance meetings with the Family Child Care Education Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 35 family child care sites
Number of QCSCC Family Child Care sites participating at the Quality Improvement (QI) level that are creating a Quality Improvement plan, receiving technical assistance and meeting with the Family Child Care Education Manager	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 25 family child care sites

Source: First 5 Santa Cruz County, 2023.

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 2022-23, it is estimated that an additional 171 teachers and providers attended trainings through this pathway.

Figure 49: Key demographics of Providers who participated in QCSCC trainings and technical assistance meetings (2022- 2023)



Source: First 5 CCD database for July 1, 2022 – June 30, 2023.

Note: Demographics were only collected for teachers/providers receiving services where enough personal information was collected to create a Unique ID.
 N=60.

Quality Counts California Region 4 Hub

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. Regional Hubs are funded by First 5 California and were developed so that neighboring counties could strategize together, share resources, leverage funds, and align practices.

As described by First 5 California,²⁹ these Hubs have provided funding for our regional partnership to:

- Help identify local and regional strengths and assets, and determine local and regional gaps and needs
- Coordinate regional activities to implement the Quality Counts California elements and systems functions
- Reduce regional duplication of efforts
- Build local and regional expertise, and incorporate state and federal evidence-based practices/models
- Maintain a strong connection to Quality Counts California

²⁹ First 5 California, *Regional Coordination and Training and Technical Assistance Hubs (Hubs)*: Request for Application, March 2016.