



North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program Evaluation

Key Findings (2002–2016)

Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg, Ph.D.

NC Pre-K
Program
Evaluation
Project

© May 2017
by Ellen S. Peisner-Feinberg,
FPG Child Development Institute,
The University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill.

This research was funded by the North Carolina Division of Child Development and Early Education, Department of Health and Human Services. The opinions expressed in this summary do not necessarily reflect those of the funding agency.

Further information about the NC Pre-K Evaluation Project is available at <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/projects/evaluation-nc-pre-kindergarten-program>

Purpose of the NC Pre-K Evaluation

Since the NC Pre-K (More at Four) Program began in 2001–2002, a variety of statewide evaluation studies have been conducted by the FPG Child Development Institute. These annual evaluations have included several studies of program services, classroom quality, and children’s outcomes during pre-k as well as longer-term into kindergarten and third grade.

Key questions addressed by these evaluation studies have been: What are the outcomes for children attending NC Pre-K? and What factors are associated with better outcomes? A summary of key findings related to children’s outcomes, as well as key findings related to the quality and characteristics of the program are presented below.

Key Findings

Children’s Outcomes

The NC Pre-K (More at Four) Program has positive effects across key domains of learning - children’s language development and communication skills, cognitive development, and social and emotional development.

- Poor children who attended the state pre-k program scored higher on third-grade reading EOGs and math EOGs than poor children who had not attended the program, based on a study of all third-graders in NC across two years using a treatment and comparison design. (90% of pre-k program participants are poor—i.e., qualify for free or reduced-price lunch.)

- Children had better language, literacy, and math skills following participation in the state pre-k program compared to children who had not participated in the program, based on a study of treatment and comparison groups using a regression discontinuity design (RDD).
- Children who attended NC Pre-K had significantly better math and executive function skills at the end of kindergarten than children who did not attend the program, based on a study with a treatment group and a comparison group using propensity score matching.
- Children who participated in NC Pre-K (More at Four) made greater than expected gains in language, literacy, math, general knowledge, and social skills during pre-k and continuing into kindergarten, based on several longitudinal studies using comparisons to norm-referenced measures.

Dual-language learners and children with lower levels of language proficiency demonstrated similar or greater benefits on learning outcomes from participation in NC Pre-K.

- These studies also indicated that the pre-k program had positive effects for dual language learners (DLLs), who showed gains in skills in English and most skills in Spanish. Children with lower English proficiency levels made gains at an even faster rate than other children, although they typically had lower skills at pre-k entry and often had not caught up to their peers even by the end of kindergarten. These findings suggest consideration of practices such as differentiated instructional approaches or the use of home language, in order to ensure that the NC Pre-K Program is meeting all children's learning needs.

Program Quality and Characteristics

Many of the characteristics of the NC Pre-K Program have been stable over time and consistent with good quality standards for early care and education practices.

- Classroom quality for the NC Pre-K Program has been in the medium to high range across a number of different areas that have been measured—global quality, teacher-child instructional interactions, language and literacy environment, and teacher sensitivity. Classroom quality has remained fairly similar over the years in almost all areas; although scores are still not as high as they could be, very few classrooms have scored in the low quality range.
- There have been consistent improvements in teacher qualifications—increases in the proportion of teachers with BA degrees and B-K licenses and decreases in the proportion of teachers with no credential. In the most recent sample, more than 99% of lead teachers had a BA degree or above, and nearly all those in public school settings and over three-quarters in private settings had a B-K license.
- The NC Pre-K Program has continued to ensure that it primarily serves an at-risk, diverse population of children from different racial and ethnic backgrounds, including a substantial number of dual-language learners. The majority of children in NC Pre-K had not previously been enrolled in a preschool program.
- NC Pre-K classrooms have continued to be offered in a variety of setting types, most recently including about half in public schools, about one-quarter in for-profit child care, less than 10% in non-profit child care, and about 15% in Head Start.

Overview of the NC Pre-K Program

The NC Pre-K Program is a state-funded educational program for eligible 4-year-olds, designed to enhance their school readiness skills. Initiated in 2001–2002 (as the More at Four Program), the statewide pre-k program has served over 350,000 children. Children are eligible for NC Pre-K primarily based on age and family income (up to 75% of state median income), although children from higher-income families with other risk factors (limited English proficiency, identified disability, chronic health condition, or educational need) or a parent actively serving in the military may be enrolled. NC Pre-K provides funding for serving eligible children in classroom-based settings on a school schedule (6½ hours/day, 180 days/year). Program standards for local sites address curriculum and assessment; training and education levels for teachers; class size and adult:child ratios; and NC child care licensing levels. ■