Snapshot of the 2015 School Readiness Assessment
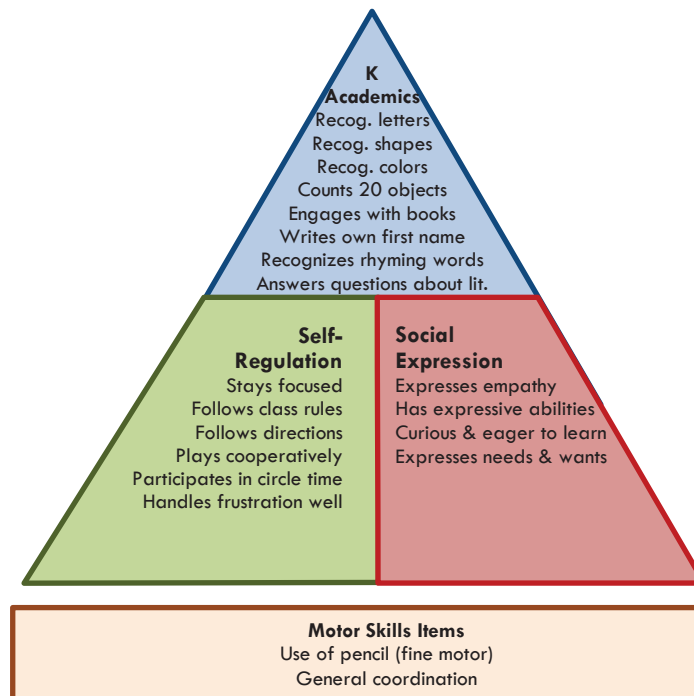
Background

This report describes the state of school readiness and related findings for kindergarten students across Alameda County who started school in Fall 2015. This is the second such assessment, following a 2013 study of similar size and scope. The study was funded by First 5 Alameda County (F5AC), with support from the Interagency Children's Policy Council.

The report is based on data collected about children and families at 47 schools, spanning nine school districts. Teachers at these schools rated their students' proficiency levels on 20 kindergarten readiness skills on a scale from 1 (*Not Yet* demonstrating the skill) to 4 (*Fully Proficient* on the skill). These readiness skills sorted into three *Building Blocks* – *Self-Regulation, Social Expression,* and *Kindergarten Academics*. A fourth area includes two items related to fine and gross motor skills, which serve as a foundation for these *Building Blocks*. The pyramid below illustrates the theoretical progression of readiness skills, with foundational motor skills preceding the more advanced self-regulation and socio-emotional skills. The top of the pyramid contains early academic skills, like counting and color, shape, and letter recognition.

Figure 1. *Basic Building Blocks* **of Readiness and** *Motor Skills* **Items**

K Academics
Recog. letters
Recog. shapes
Recog. colors
Counts 20 objects
Engages with books
Writes own first name
Recognizes rhyming words
Answers questions about lit.

Self-Regulation
Stays focused
Follows class rules
Follows directions
Plays cooperatively
Participates in circle time
Handles frustration well

Social Expression
Expresses empathy
Has expressive abilities
Curious & eager to learn
Expresses needs & wants

Motor Skills Items
Use of pencil (fine motor)
General coordination

In addition to the teacher ratings, the study involved a survey of parents about their child's demographics, family background, and child care experiences. Please note that the information presented in this report describes only those students and families assessed; statistical techniques were used to make the sample representative of the county in terms of the percentage of English Learners

and relative sizes of school districts, but because of sample limitations, the findings are not generalizable to all children in the county.

Key Findings

How ready for school were children assessed in Alameda County?

Students were considered *Fully Ready* for kindergarten in all areas if they scored at or above 3.25 out of 4 on the three *Building* Blocks – that is, if they were *Proficient* or nearing proficiency in *Self-Regulation, Social Expression,* and *Kindergarten Academics*. Students were considered *Partially Ready* if they were *Proficient* or nearly proficient in one or two *Building Blocks*, and considered *Not Ready* if they were still progressing in all three areas. Using these criteria, **44%** of the sample were *Fully Ready* for kindergarten.

Figure 2.   **Percent Ready for Kindergarten**
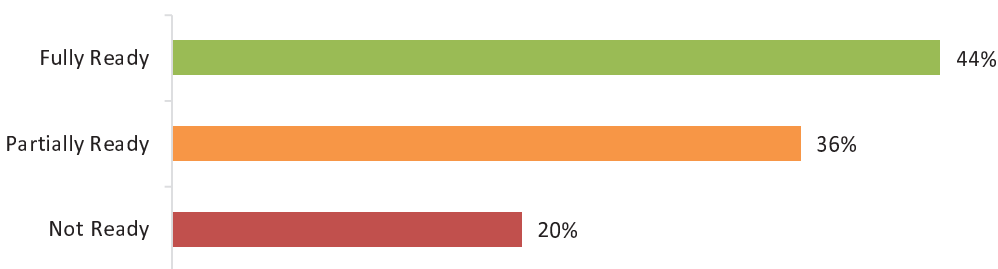
Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2015)
Note: N=1,460.

What family factors and child characteristics are associated with higher levels of school readiness?

The factors that were strongly and independently associated with readiness are illustrated in the diagram below. Although many of these predictors are related to one another, each factor in the diagram contributes to readiness even after taking into account the contributions of other factors. For example, the impact of child well-being on readiness is significant for children in both high and low socioeconomic status (SES) families. Likewise, the effect of preschool on readiness is significant, regardless of the child's age, race/ethnicity, or gender. The size of the circle corresponds to the strength of the relationship between the factor and readiness, after holding constant all other child and family characteristics. The strongest predictors of higher readiness were coming to school healthy, well-rested, and well-fed, followed by preschool, Transitional Kindergarten, or licensed family care attendance. Children who were older, did not have special needs, were not English Learners, and were female also had higher readiness levels. In contrast, children who were African-American/black, from low SES families, exposed to more screen time during the week (i.e., TV and video games), and from single parent families, had lower readiness levels, controlling for other characteristics.
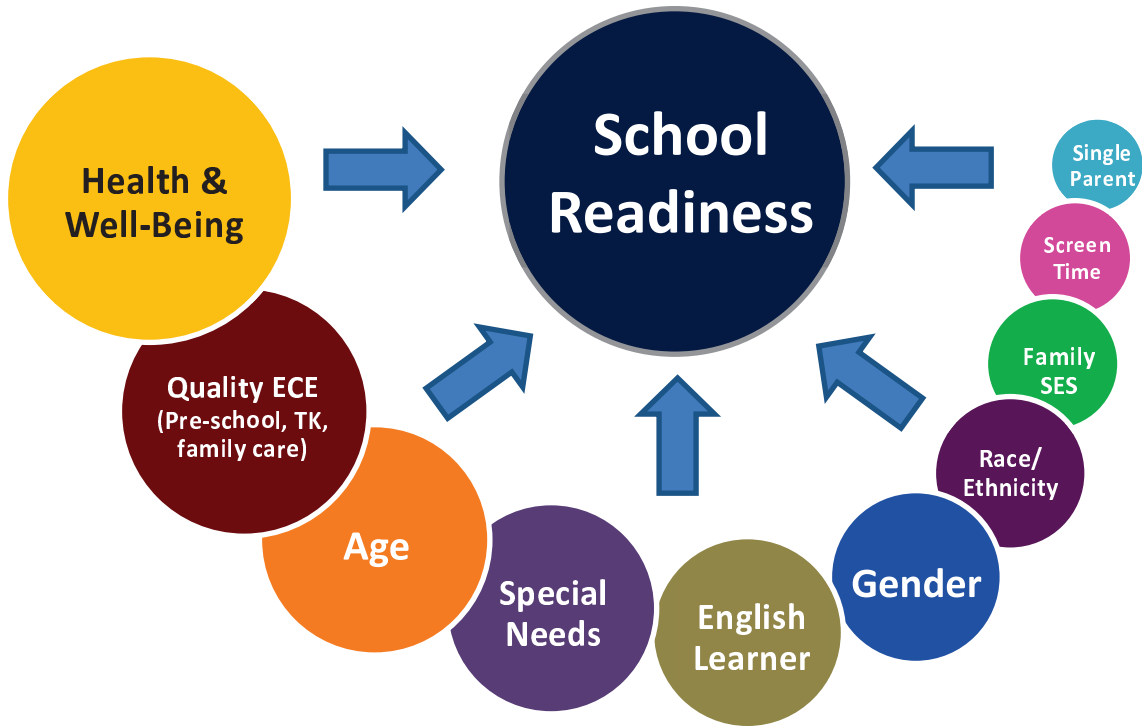
What types of experiences and family backgrounds were characteristic of the incoming kindergarten students?

14% of children came to school hungry, tired, or sick on at least some days, and these children experienced lower levels of readiness than their healthy peers.

83% of children attended preschool, licensed family child care, or TK in the prior year; these experiences predicted higher readiness.

5.5 years old: children's average age when they entered school. Older children also had higher readiness levels.

8% of students had a diagnosed special need. Having a special need was associated with lower readiness.

40% of students were English Learners. English Learners also had lower readiness than those who were proficient in English.

50% of children were male, and boys had lower readiness than girls.

45% of students were Hispanic/Latino (of any race), 23% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 12% were white, 8% were African-American/black, 4% were Filipino, and 18% were mixed race/ethnicity. African-American/black children had lower readiness than children of other races/ethnicities.

38% of children came from families with incomes under $35,000 per year and 31% of mothers had no more than a high school education. Lower family socioeconomic status was related to lower readiness.

41% of children spent more than the recommended two hours per day on screen time activities (watching TV or playing video/computer games). Higher exposure to screen time predicted lower readiness levels.

20% of families were headed by a single parent, and the children in these families had lower readiness than children in multi-parent families.

What will it take to "turn the curve" on school readiness in Alameda County?

The findings can inform approaches the community can take to help address gaps in readiness in the county, including – but not limited to – the following:

- Interventions that promote child health and well-being, such as expanded food subsidies, free meal programs, free and subsidized health insurance, and quality medical care;

- Quality early childhood education experiences for all children, including dual language preschools for children whose first language is not English;

- Early identification and intervention for children at risk for special needs, such as universal developmental screening and referral systems, like Help Me Grow; and

- Family education and support programs, including home visiting and parent education on school readiness, to help parents with limited resources or whose children do not have access to licensed preschool engage in enriching school readiness activities with their children, such as reading or working on school skills.

These approaches align well with current F5AC investment strategies, but improving the readiness of children countywide will require the contribution of partners throughout the community.