



KINDERGARTEN READINESS 2019

ALAMEDA COUNTY
Executive Summary

In partnership with:



Prepared by:



Overview of Findings and Recommendations

Every two years, First 5 Alameda County (First 5) measures kindergarten readiness in the county. In 2019, it partnered with Applied Survey Research (ASR) to examine the factors associated with children’s kindergarten readiness skills, the readiness of families and communities to support children’s development, and the readiness of elementary schools to meet the needs of children entering their classrooms. **We find differences in kindergarten readiness are largely attributable to inequities in access to resources.** First 5 is committed to implementing targeted, evidence-based policies and practices to address these inequities, and the study’s recommendations are closely aligned with First 5 policy priorities and investments.

Key Findings	Recommendations
Readiness of Children and Families	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 44% of children were <i>Fully Ready</i>, demonstrating proficiency across multiple domains of readiness • Readiness was most strongly associated with child and family demographics and socioeconomics, as well as other factors that can be modified with interventions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> » Child health and well-being » Early childhood education (ECE) attendance » More reading at home » Less screen time » Child resilience » Father’s use of community resources • Help Me Grow and Quality Counts ECE sites supported the readiness of children by conducting developmental screenings and linking families to interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies that support families’ basic needs and expand access to high-quality early childhood education experiences • Early identification and intervention systems for children at risk for special needs and those experiencing trauma • Programs and policies that encourage father involvement and support families so they have the time and resources to engage in enriching activities with their children such as reading
Readiness of Communities	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Children living in neighborhoods with a greater number of assets (e.g., parks, libraries, and mutual support) had higher readiness than children living in neighborhoods with fewer assets, even after controlling for family income; parents wanted to see increased access to these resources, as well as affordable ECE and support for basic needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Policies that build livable communities with neighborhood assets like parks and libraries, affordable housing, and safe, reliable transportation • Investment in evidence-based kindergarten readiness supports, coordination of navigation programs, and alignment of family support programs like family resource centers
Readiness of Schools	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relatively few teachers were bilingual or had received training related to trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and family engagement • Classrooms with a high proportion of <i>Fully Ready</i> children tended to be in schools that offer more transition supports compared to classrooms where children had lower readiness levels • Parents wanted schools to ease the transition for children and offer resources like libraries and health and family support services at school 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Efforts to recruit a diverse teacher workforce and investment in teacher professional development, including training in equity and implicit bias • Family engagement policies at schools and school-based programs that address basic needs • Expansion of kindergarten transition supports like parent-teacher meetings and school events



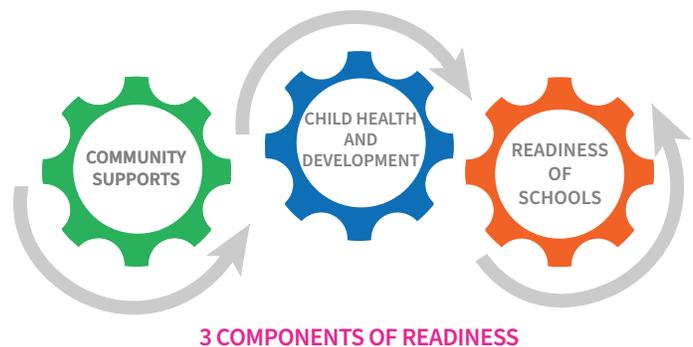
Introduction

Every two years, First 5 Alameda County (First 5) measures kindergarten readiness in the county. In 2019, it partnered with Applied Survey Research (ASR) to examine the factors associated with children’s kindergarten readiness skills, the readiness of families and communities to support children’s development, and the readiness of elementary schools to meet the needs of children entering their classrooms.

Ready Children and Families

Entering kindergarten with strong social-emotional and academic skills is connected to numerous longterm outcomes for children, including improved academic proficiency later in elementary schoolⁱ and even socioeconomic outcomes in adulthood.ⁱⁱ

For example, in Alameda County, a longitudinal study conducted in 2018 found kindergarten readiness scores strongly predicted children’s proficiency in math and reading in third grade.ⁱⁱⁱ



The model of kindergarten readiness used to frame the 2019 Alameda County Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) recognizes that children’s kindergarten readiness skills do not develop in isolation. As stated in a widely cited study of readiness:

Children are not innately “ready” or “not ready” for school. Their skills and development are strongly influenced by their families and through their interactions with other people and environments before coming to school.^{iv}

Ready Communities

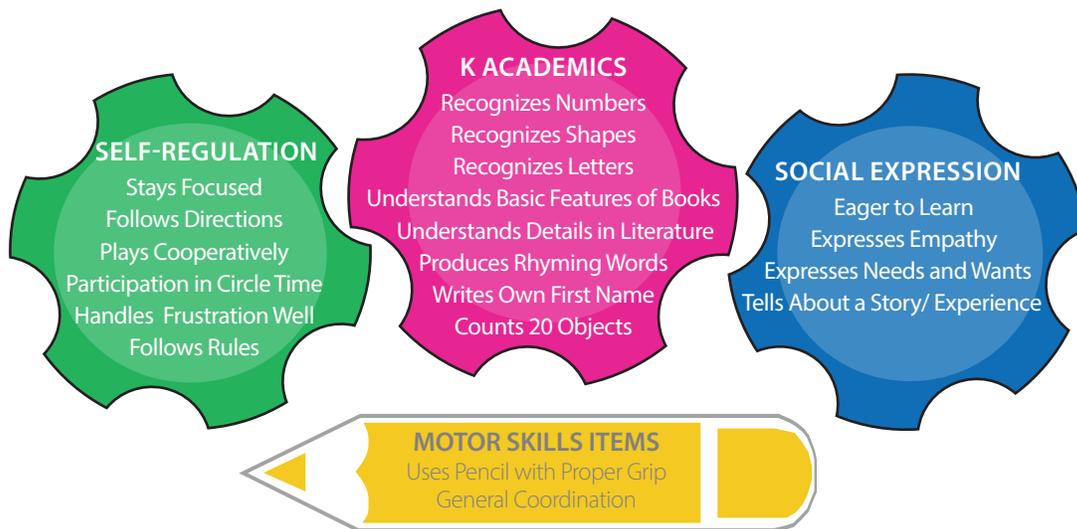
Since the 2015 KRA, **formal early childhood education (ECE) has been a leading factor in predicting kindergarten readiness.** This 2019 study points to the particular importance of ECE for African-American and Latinx children – all other things held equal, participation in ECE significantly narrowed readiness gaps. However, while 83% of children in this study participated in ECE, still only 44% were found to be ready for kindergarten, a stubborn trend. The KRA finds that other factors also play an important role in kindergarten readiness. Each year of this study, and in our longitudinal research, the **greatest moveable factor continues to be child health and well-being, which is tied to socioeconomics, housing stability, and stress among parents/caregivers.** “Ready” communities are rich with supports to help families meet their basic needs and promote children’s development.

Ready Schools

Finally, readiness also entails the capacity of elementary schools to receive young children entering kindergarten. “Ready” schools smooth the transition between home and school, by demonstrating sensitivity to cultural differences and engaging parents in the education of their children.^v **Ready schools are committed to the success of each child.** They acknowledge the effects of poverty and institutional racism and engage in inclusive practices that meet diverse learning needs. Unfortunately, schools may inadvertently reproduce societal inequities and exacerbate readiness gaps, as children living in poverty and children of color are more likely to attend less resourced and lower performing schools.^{vi} Conversely, our longitudinal research shows that **schools that are more socioeconomically advantaged and higher performing overall are more likely to help children** who are not yet ready in kindergarten catch up to their peers by third grade.^{vii}

What Parents Say

Parents participating in the study’s focus groups said the academic expectations for kindergartners are much higher than they used to be, but to them, “kindergarten readiness” is about much more than children being prepared academically. It also includes the child’s ability to social-emotionally adapt to the new school environment, as well as the availability of school and community supports to smooth the transition and meet the basic needs of children and families.



About This Study

To measure kindergarten readiness in Alameda County, teachers assessed children’s skills using the *Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF)*, which sorts readiness skills into three primary domains, termed the *Basic Building Blocks of Readiness (Building Blocks): Self-Regulation, Social Expression, and Kindergarten Academics*. Additionally, motor skills are included on the *KOF* as foundational elements of readiness. Teachers also completed a teacher survey, parents completed a parent survey, and two focus groups were conducted with parents. The results presented here are from a representative countywide sample and illustrate the readiness of children, families, communities, and schools in Alameda County. Given that research conducted to date demonstrates that kindergarten readiness has wide-ranging implications for a child’s long-term outcomes, it is critical to use the study’s findings to inform policies and practices that promote equity in kindergarten readiness.



Readiness of Children and Families

How ready for kindergarten were children assessed?

Students in Alameda County 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*. Children were considered *Not Ready* if they were still progressing in all three areas. Using these criteria, **44%** of the sample was *Fully Ready* for kindergarten, 38% was *Partially Ready*, and 18% was *Not Ready*.

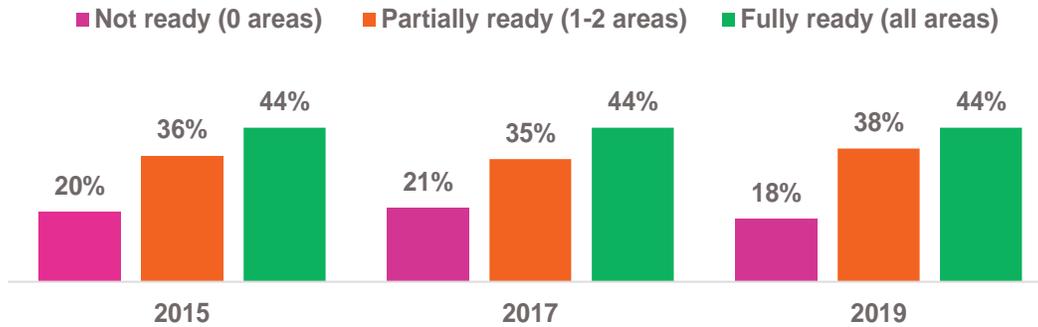
Percent Ready Across Building Blocks



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2019)
Note: N=1,487.

This year's readiness levels were very similar to those of kindergartners participating in the last two assessments, which took place in 2015 and 2017. However, there was a slight, marginally significant increase in the proportion of children who were *Partially Ready* and decline in the proportion of children who were *Not Ready* between 2017 and 2019.

Percent Ready over Time, 2015-2019



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2015, 2017, 2019)

Note: N=1,460 (2015); 1,303 (2017); 1,487 (2019). Difference in percent *Not Ready* and *Partially Ready* between 2017 and 2019 marginally significant ($p < .10$).

What family factors, child characteristics, and neighborhood contexts are associated with higher levels of kindergarten readiness?

The factors that were strongly and independently associated with readiness are illustrated in the graphic at right. Although many of these characteristics and experiences are related to one another, each factor in the diagram is linked to readiness even after taking into account the contributions of other factors.

For example, a child who had formal early childhood education (ECE) experience had higher readiness than a child who did not, when all other characteristics and experiences we measured were otherwise the same. The factors are arranged in the diagram according to the strength of their association with readiness, beginning with age (the strongest factor) and continuing clockwise.

The differences in readiness that we found based on demographic and socioeconomic factors are largely due to inequities in access to resources – this finding is consistent with other research on kindergarten readiness gaps that have used a variety of assessment methods, including the ratings of outside assessors rather than teachers.^{viii} We also measured parent/caregiver perceptions of child readiness and found that parents/caregivers and teachers rated children similarly. Numerous steps were taken to minimize the effects of implicit bias on the results, including giving teachers a thorough training and detailed rubric for each skill, removing anomalous ratings, controlling for classroom-level variability in scores, and confirming that there were no systematic differences in ratings based on teacher demographics, yet it is possible assessments of children’s skills were nevertheless influenced by gender, race, and class stereotypes.



What types of experiences and family backgrounds were characteristic of the incoming's kindergarten students?

5.5

years old: children's average age when they entered school; children develop rapidly at this age and therefore children who were older were more developed in their physical, social-emotional, and cognitive skills.

84%

of children came to school well-rested and well-fed; with their basic needs cared for, these children were more likely to enter kindergarten ready to learn. Some of the child and family characteristics associated with better health and well-being outcomes included higher family income and housing stability, as well as lower levels of stress among parents/caregivers.

83%

of children attended licensed preschool or family child care or transitional kindergarten (TK) in the prior year; these enriching experiences were associated with higher readiness, especially among African-American and Latinx children, for whom ECE was more strongly linked to readiness than it was for other children. In addition, children who attended an ECE site participating in the Alameda County Quality Counts (QRIS) program and received a high rating in their use of developmental screenings (i.e., conducted health and developmental screenings with all children and used the results to make referrals and implement interventions) had higher *Social Expression* scores than children who attended a site with lower ratings in this area of quality. Families of children in QRIS-rated ECE settings were also more engaged in those sites compared to families of children in other ECE settings.

69%

of students were native English speakers or were fully bilingual in English and another language; these children had higher readiness than children who were monolingual non-English speakers, a group whose parents/caregivers were more socioeconomically disadvantaged and reported less social support, higher stress, engagement in fewer readiness activities with their children, and access to fewer neighborhood resources. Dual language learners who are supported to become bilingual have better academic performance and social outcomes and benefit the communities in which they eventually live and work.^{ix}

91%

of students were typically developing and had higher readiness than their peers with diagnosed special needs, who had delays in one or more skill domains. Among children with special needs, those who had received services from Alameda County's Help Me Grow (HMG) program were significantly more likely to be receiving professional help than those who had not.

68%

of children came from families earning at least \$50,000 per year; higher income families have more disposable resources to contribute towards their children's early education and development, report experiencing less stress, and have access to a greater number of resources in their communities, and thus their children tended to have higher readiness.

34%

of children had no more than 1 hour of screen time throughout the week, as recommended by the American Academy of Pediatrics;^x less screen time exposure was associated with higher readiness, as it is correlated with better sleep and frees up more time for children and families to engage in active play, reading aloud, and other high-quality social interactions.

81%

of children had high resilience, as reported by their parents/caregivers, meaning they were able to adjust well to changes in routine and calm themselves when upset; these children had better readiness outcomes, especially in their social-emotional skills. Conversely, trauma affects children's ability to manage their emotions and adapt to stressful situations;^{xi} children who had experienced trauma likely had lower resilience ratings and lower social-emotional readiness.

33%

of children were Latinx, 29% were Asian/Pacific Islander, 20% were white, 9% were multiracial, and 8% were African-American. Latinx children had lower readiness than white and multiracial children, a disparity that may be partly explained by the fact that, in addition to having less disposable income, parents/caregivers of Latinx children reported higher degrees of stress, lower levels of social support, and access to fewer neighborhood assets compared to the parents/caregivers of white and multiracial children.

48%

of children were girls; developmental researchers have noted that girls are more developed than boys at this age, particularly in their social and behavioral skills,^{xii} and therefore tend to have higher readiness. The gender gap in readiness was particularly large for African-American, Asian/PI, and multiracial children.

69%

of parents/caregivers reported reading with their children at least five times per week; more frequent reading with children, which research shows promotes children's language and social-emotional development,^{xiii} was linked to higher readiness.

59%

of fathers used at least three types of community resources (e.g., libraries, museums, and parks) with their children; children had higher readiness when their fathers utilized a greater number of these community resources. Other research shows that fathers play an important and unique role in children's early cognitive and regulatory development.^{xiv}



Readiness of Communities

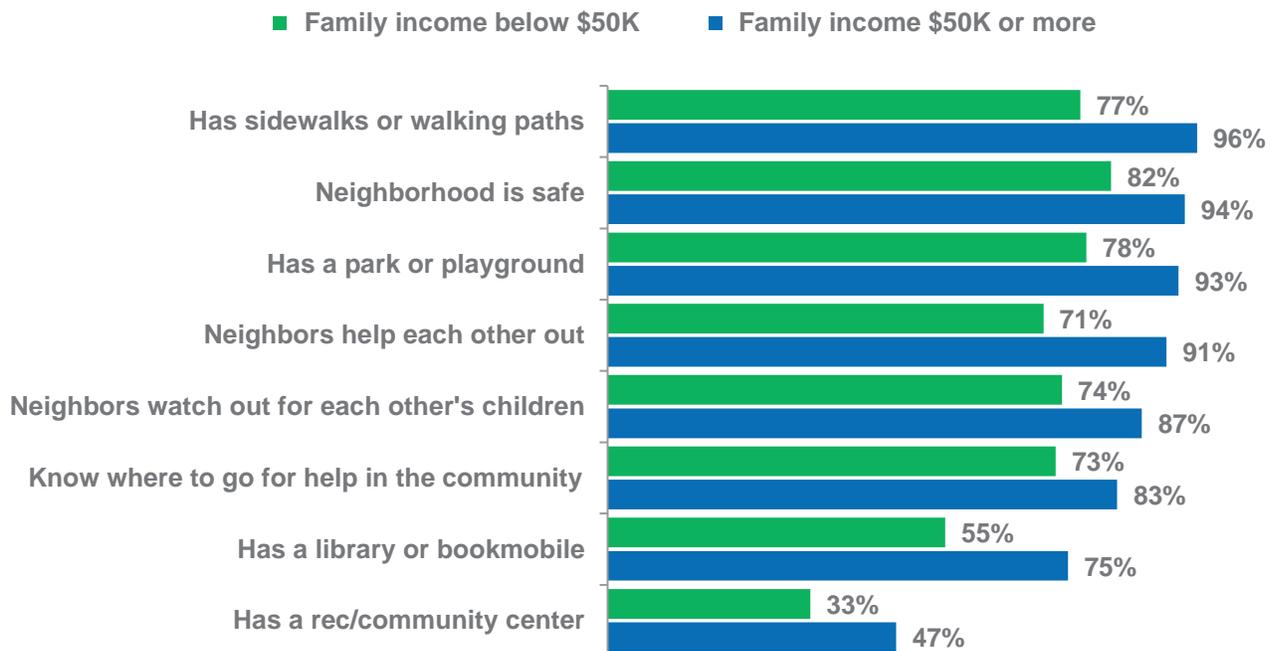
To help assess the readiness of communities to support children’s kindergarten readiness, parents/caregivers in the study reported on the safety, sense of community, and resources available in their neighborhood.

The vast majority reported that their neighborhood is safe, well-connected, and has basic resources like sidewalks and parks or playgrounds, although fewer parents/caregivers reported that their neighborhood has a library or a recreation or community center. Families earning at least \$50,000 per year were significantly more likely than lower income families to report the availability of each asset in their neighborhood.

“Playgroups, preschools, parks, and libraries – these resources help children to play together [and] face problems and cope with them, automatically making them resilient.”

– Parent focus group participant

Prevalence of Neighborhood Assets



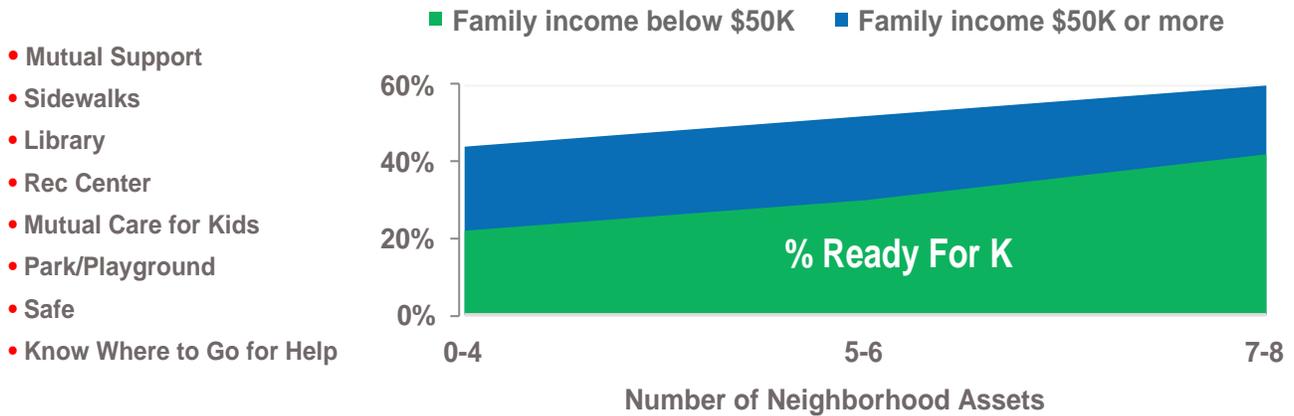
Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2019), Parent Information Form (2019)
 Note: N=1,017-1,078. Differences statistically significant (p<.01).

The kindergarten readiness levels of children in the study differed based on the presence of these neighborhood assets, even after accounting for family income. Children in both low-income families and higher income families had significantly higher readiness if they also lived in asset-rich neighborhoods. To the left of the graph that follows, the assets are listed in the order of the strength of their association with readiness; assets that had the strongest relationship with readiness included the presence of mutual support among community members, sidewalks and walking paths, and libraries. **Neighborhood assets significantly boost children’s readiness.** Policies that address income inequality are also needed to fully close the gap in readiness between children in low-income families and higher income families.

“If the parks were safe and inviting, I wonder if kids would have less screen time and be outside more.”

– Parent focus group participant

Percent Fully Ready, by Number of Neighborhood Assets



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form (2019), Parent Information Form (2019)
 Note: N=1,036. Relationship between assets and readiness statistically significant (p<.05).

What Parents Say

Focus group parent participants wanted to see more of the following assets in their communities to help build kindergarten readiness:

- Support for basic needs, help with accessing these supports, and more funding for resource programs
- Affordable child care, preschool, and after school programs, as well as changes to income eligibility requirements for subsidized care so more families qualify
- Parent groups and playgroups, as well as programs specifically for fathers
- Libraries, engaging reading programs for kids, and parent education on how to read with kids
- Safe and inviting parks and organized sports and outdoor activities
- Free community events and activities for children and families, including programs that operate during school breaks



Readiness of Schools

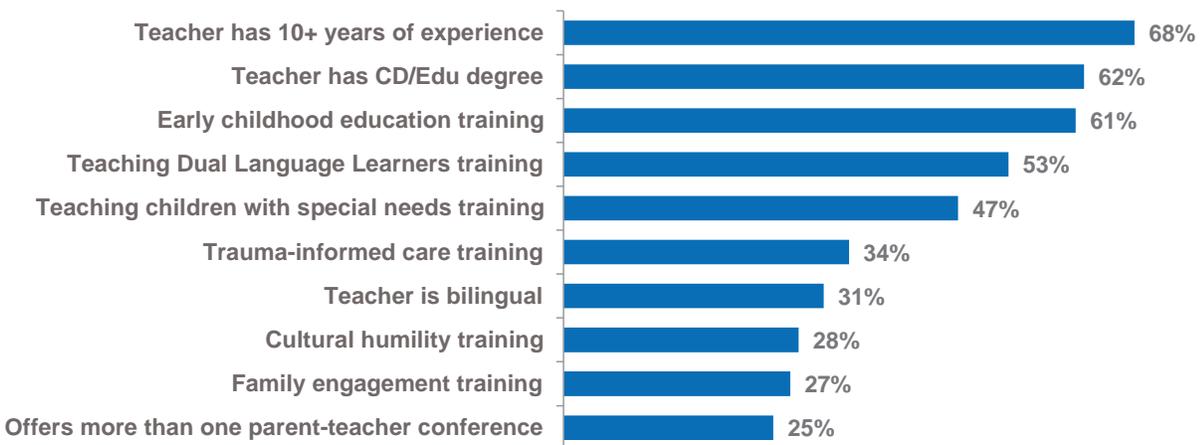
Finally, to examine the readiness of schools to support entering kindergartners, the study looked at various characteristics of children's classrooms and schools, measuring teacher qualifications and training, as well as the availability of kindergarten transition supports.

“[It is] good [for schools] to meet children where they are. Some kids never even go to preschool.”

– Parent focus group participant

The majority of teachers had a bachelor's or graduate degree in child development or education and at least 10 years of teaching experience. Most teachers also reported that they had received early childhood education and dual language learner trainings, but fewer than half were bilingual and had received training related to children with special needs, trauma-informed care, cultural humility, and family engagement. Most teachers hold only one official parent-teacher conference each year, but said they offer more if needed. Only teachers' years of experience was correlated with the readiness of children entering their classrooms; children with lower than average kindergarten readiness levels tended to enter classrooms that were taught by teachers with *more* years of experience.

Teacher Credentials, Training, and Family Engagement

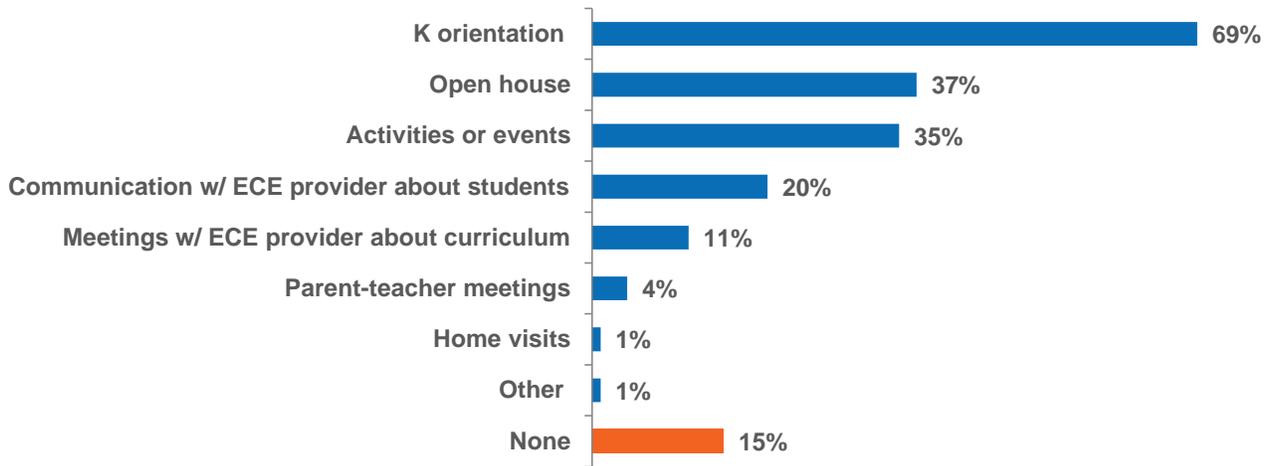


Source: Teacher Survey (2019).
Note: N=73-74.

“My child was in foster care. When she came to this school, she needed to adapt to a new environment and had a hard time. Now, after more time, she’s more comfortable.” – Parent focus group participant

The most common kindergarten transition support offered by schools was an orientation session, reported by 69% of teachers. Fewer than half of teachers indicated that their school provided other types of transition activities, and 15% of teachers said their school did not have any formal transition supports.

Kindergarten Transition Supports Offered by School



Source: Teacher Survey (2019).
Note: N=71.

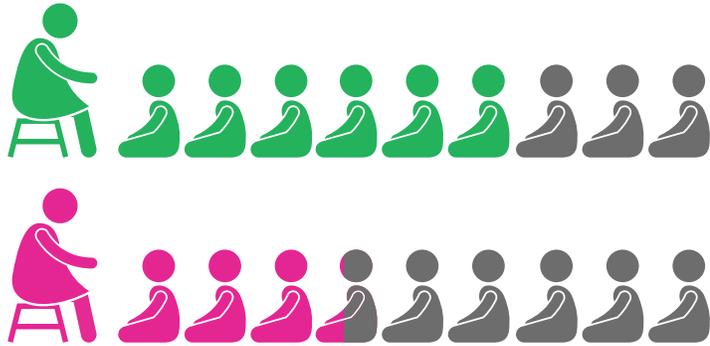
The study found that classrooms where children had lower readiness levels tended to be in schools with fewer transition supports compared to classrooms where children had higher readiness. Over two-thirds of classes with mostly *Fully Ready* students were in schools with at least three kindergarten transition supports, compared to 45% of classrooms where most children were not *Fully Ready*. We also found that schools where children were already likely to be *Fully Ready* tended to be higher performing, as measured by third grade test scores. These findings add to other research suggesting that schools may reinforce structural inequities in that children at risk for lower kindergarten readiness often attend poorer resourced and therefore less “ready” schools.^{xv} In contrast, longitudinal research in Alameda County has found that schools where children “beat the odds” – by demonstrating proficiency in third grade when they were not yet ready in kindergarten – are more socioeconomically advantaged, as measured by the proportion of students enrolled in the Free or Reduced-Price Lunch Program, and higher performing overall.^{xvi}

Percent of Classes in Schools Offering Multiple Kindergarten Transition Supports, by Average Student Readiness in the Class

68% of “**high readiness**” classes had 3+ K transition supports

compared to

45% of “**low readiness**” classes



Source: Teacher Survey (2019)

Note: N=71. At least half of children in “high readiness” classes were *Fully Ready*. Difference between class types statistically significant ($p < .05$).

What Parents Say

Parents in the focus groups mentioned several ways in which schools can better meet the needs of children and the community, including:

- Offer resources and services at schools, like libraries, healthy food, and health and family support services, like food pantries and clinics
- Have plans and practices in place to ease the transition for children and offer more parent-teacher meetings
- Educate teachers on intervention programs to promote child resilience, and identify and intervene early when children have learning difficulties
- Increase the diversity of the teacher workforce



Recommendations

What programs, policies, and systems changes will help “turn the curve” on kindergarten readiness in Alameda County?

The findings can inform approaches partners in the community can take to achieve more equitable outcomes for children entering kindergarten and complement efforts currently underway. For example, Alameda County has identified eliminating poverty and hunger as a Vision 2026 goal, and Oakland Unified School District has adopted the Early Development Instrument (EDI) to understand place-based disparities in investment and outcomes. Likewise, First 5 Alameda County uses policy advocacy and community investment to address the recommendations from this study. Specific interventions suggested by the findings are aligned with First 5 Alameda County’s policy priorities and include:

First 5 Alameda Policy Priorities for Improving Kindergarten Readiness

-  **Address inequity and child poverty**
-  **Support family engagement, leadership, and community well-being**
-  **Sustainability for proven results**

Readiness of Children and Families

- **Policies that promote child health and well-being** and reduce food insecurity, such as expanded food subsidies, free meal programs, and quality medical care.
- **Support for basic needs**, such as income and housing support, so that families experience less stress and have sufficient resources to invest in their children’s early education and development. This recommendation is consistent with recent research on the kindergarten transition for African-American children, which has found that those with an optimal transition came from families with higher incomes and had parents who had better physical and mental health.^{xvii}
- **Early childhood education (ECE) experiences for all children**, including bilingual instruction for dual language learners, which has been found to promote children’s language and literacy development.^{xviii}

“If you don’t have proper housing, shelter, it’s hard. [It] makes things unstable for the kids.”

– Parent focus group participant

- **Investment in ECE quality improvement efforts**, like First 5 Alameda’s Quality Counts initiative, including coaching and training for ECE providers in trauma-informed care to strengthen their capacity to support the resilience of young children. Additionally, policies should address pay equity and provide a living wage for ECE professionals; research shows that higher provider pay is linked to higher quality care.^{xix} Policies should also promote the professional and workforce development of a diverse ECE field. Children of color are more likely to have a better transition to kindergarten if there is a close connection between the ECE provider and the child and parent.^{xx}
- **Early identification and intervention systems**, like the First 5 Alameda-supported Help Me Grow (HMG) program and universal developmental screenings in ECE sites, so children at risk for special needs and those experiencing trauma develop to their potential. HMG and ECE sites in the Quality Counts program both supported the readiness of children by conducting developmental screenings, discussing the results with families, and linking families to interventions.
- **Family education and support policies and programs** that:

- » Welcome and encourage father involvement and
- » Understand and address barriers to the replacement of screen time with enriching activities like reading (e.g., stress, time, adult education and literacy, and access to books, including multilingual books). Research shows that reading to non-English speaking children in their native language improves their English reading proficiency later in elementary school.^{xxi}

What Parents Say

Parent focus group participants suggested kindergarten readiness could be boosted by increasing access to:

- Supports for basic needs, like food and shelter, and help with accessing these supports
- Affordable child care and preschool
- Early intervention for children with learning difficulties
- Community resources like libraries, parks, community activities and events, playgroups, and parent groups
- Kindergarten transition supports and more parent-teacher meetings at schools
- A diverse and trained teacher workforce
- Services and supports at schools, including healthy meals, libraries, and health and family support services

“Because of the multi-culturalism of the Bay Area, we want to be able to read to children in our primary language. For families where English is not their first language, they need more opportunities to read to their children in their primary language.”

– Parent focus group participant

Readiness of Communities

- **Policies that go beyond supporting individual children and families and build neighborhood assets**, such as parks, libraries, affordable housing, and safe, accessible transportation, ensuring communities have resources and supports families can utilize to help promote their children’s development. Research on the effects of neighborhood disadvantage on kindergarten readiness suggest interventions are more effective when made available to all families in neighborhoods with fewer resources.^{xxii}
- **A cohesive and aligned system of kindergarten readiness supports** that maintain an equity focus, are data-driven and evidence-based, and are directly linked to the needs of young children and their families, neighborhoods, and schools. Investment in young children (prenatal to age 5) comes with a high rate of return, significantly improving an array of health, education, and economic outcomes throughout childhood and well into adulthood.^{xxiii}

Readiness of Schools

- **Efforts to recruit and retain a diverse teacher workforce** (e.g., more male teachers and bilingual teachers) – including policies that provide stipends to incentivize teacher education and teaching in high-need schools – and investment in the professional development of that workforce, so that all teachers, even those with many years of experience, have the tools and training to equitably address the diverse needs of children entering their classrooms.
- **Policies that require educators to have trainings** on equity and implicit bias, child development, supporting dual language learners and children with special needs, family engagement, cultural sensitivity, social-emotional learning, and trauma-informed care, can better prepare them to meet the learning needs of all children.
- **Formal plans and activities in elementary schools that involve reaching out to and engaging families**, including parents of color and non-English speaking parents, with cultural sensitivity, recognizing their strengths.
- **School-based programs and policies that help children and families meet their basic needs** (e.g., policies that expand access to and facilitate utilization of free and reduced-price meals at school and on-site family support services), so children are able to learn optimally.
- **Expansion of the number and type of kindergarten transition supports offered at schools**, particularly where children enter with lower readiness skills, to help smooth the transition to school for children and their families.

Through the coordinated efforts of diverse partners, the county can build kindergarten readiness: *ready* families and communities that support *ready* children to enter *ready* schools.



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