

# North Carolina Pre-Kindergarten Program Evaluation

Summary of Research (2002-2013)



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This summary 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 Program began, a variety of statewide evaluation studies have been conducted. These annual evaluations have included multiple studies of program services, classroom quality, and children's outcomes during their pre-k year as well as longer-term into kindergarten and third grade. The primary research questions addressed by these evaluations have included:

- What were the key characteristics of the local NC Pre-K Programs?
- What was the quality of NC Pre-K classrooms and what factors were associated with better quality?
- What were the outcomes of children attending NC Pre-K and what factors were associated with better outcomes?
- To what extent have there been any changes over time in these results?

## Key Findings

### Program Characteristics

- 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.
- The NC Pre-K Program has continued to ensure that it primarily serves an at-risk, high service priority (children who have not been in a preschool program), and diverse population of children.
- NC Pre-K classrooms have continued to be offered in a variety of setting types, including public school, for-profit and non-profit child care, and Head Start.

## Program Quality

- Classroom quality for the NC Pre-K Program is in the medium to good 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.
- Similar to most other pre-k samples, quality tends to be higher for areas related to the general classroom environment and the sensitivity and supportiveness of teacher-child interactions than for aspects related to instructional support.
- There have not been consistent predictors of classroom quality, including factors such as teacher qualifications, class size, and the composition of the classroom. Likely, this is because there are program requirements that are known to relate to higher quality (e.g., lower class size, higher adult:child ratios, teacher qualifications, use of curriculum). These have resulted in a restricted range of quality (toward the higher end) which has prevented these associations from being found.

## Child Outcomes

- The NC Pre-K Program likely has beneficial effects for children, based on several longitudinal studies of children from pre-k through kindergarten. Comparisons to norm-referenced measures show that children who participate in the NC Pre-K Program make greater than expected gains in all domains of learning (language, literacy, math, general knowledge, social skills) during pre-k and continuing into kindergarten.
- These studies also indicate that the program is especially beneficial for dual language learners (DLLs). Children who have lower levels of English proficiency make gains at an even faster rate than other children, although they typically start pre-k with lower levels of skills and often have not caught up to their peers even by the end of kindergarten.
- Based on a study with a treatment and a comparison group, participation in the pre-k program improves children's skills at entry into kindergarten. Positive effects were found for language, literacy, and math skills, with similar findings for different groups of children (by poverty status, risk factor status, or English proficiency level).
- Participation in the pre-k program has long-term benefits that can help to reduce the achievement gap for poor children. These findings were based on a study of third-grade end-of-grade (EOG) scores for all children in NC across two years. In third grade, poor children who had attended the pre-k program scored higher on math and reading EOGs than poor children who had not attended the pre-k program (90% of program participants were poor in pre-k).

## Conclusions

The NC Pre-K Program has had positive outcomes for children, the level of quality has remained fairly constant over time, and there have been substantial improvements in teacher qualifications (one of the primary areas of focus for the program). These results indicate that the program clearly has several areas of strength; as it has grown over the years into a full-scale statewide program, the effects for children and the quality of classroom practices have been maintained. However, as with any program, there are some areas for improvement; two broad recommendations from these findings would be to support efforts to help increase the overall level of classroom quality and to support efforts for improving instruction for DLLs.

### 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. Since its inception in the 2001-2002 school year (as the More at Four Program), the statewide pre-k program has served over 255,000 children. Children are eligible for NC Pre-K primarily based on age and family income (up to 75% of state median income), although children with higher family incomes who have other risk factors (limited English proficiency, identified disability, chronic health condition, or developmental/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 educational programs on a school day (6-1/2 hours/day) and school calendar basis (180 days/year). Local sites are expected to meet a variety of program standards including curriculum and assessment; training and education levels for teachers; class size and adult:child ratios; and North Carolina child care licensing levels.