

**A Strategy Review of the First 5 Contra Costa
School Readiness Initiative: 2003-2007**

**Submitted to
First 5 Contra Costa**

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A Strategy Review of the First 5 Contra Costa School Readiness Initiative: 2003-2007

Deanna S. Gomby

Introduction

How can parents, schools, and community agencies work together to prepare children for school? Can strong early childhood services pave the way for later school success? These are some of the questions underlying school readiness efforts across the nation, and, in 2002, First 5 Contra Costa applied for and won funding from First 5 California to implement a school readiness initiative to explore those questions in Contra Costa County.

The State Commission conceptualized school readiness as including three main components: (1) children’s readiness for school; (2) schools’ readiness for children; and (3) family and community supports and services that contribute to children’s readiness for school success.¹ All funded programs were required to possess five elements:

- Parenting/family support
- Early care and education
- Health and social services
- Schools’ readiness for children
- Infrastructure, administration and evaluation.²

The State commission required that funded services focus on the catchment areas of low-performing schools, defined as schools that scored in the lowest three deciles on the California Department of Education’s Academic Performance Index (API) in 1999.

The First 5 Contra Costa school readiness program focused on children and families living in geographic areas associated with four school districts (West Contra Costa Unified School District, Mount Diablo Unified School District, Pittsburg Unified School District, and Antioch Unified School District). These cover the communities of Antioch, Bay Point, Concord, Richmond, and San Pablo. Although the Antioch Unified School District opted not to participate formally in the initiative, limited services are provided within its boundaries.

¹ California Children and Families Commission. (2001). Guidelines and Tools for Completing a School Readiness Application.

² In the most recent round of funding, these elements have been grouped into four categories to map onto the four First 5 California annual report result areas: parenting/family support becomes “improved family functioning;” early care and education becomes “improved child development;” health and social services becomes “improved health;” schools’ readiness for children and infrastructure, administration and evaluation become “improved systems of care.”

More specifically, First 5 Contra Costa decided to focus on those children who were not enrolled in formal center-based preschool programs, reasoning that it was those children who would be at the greatest disadvantage when enrolling in kindergarten. The First 5 Contra Costa school readiness program therefore focused a great deal of energy on activities aimed at improving parents' abilities to be their children's "first teachers." In other words, most services were designed to help parents learn how they could promote their children's development at home and how they could increase their own involvement in their children's education at school.

Funded activities included the following (See Attachment 1 for detailed descriptions):³

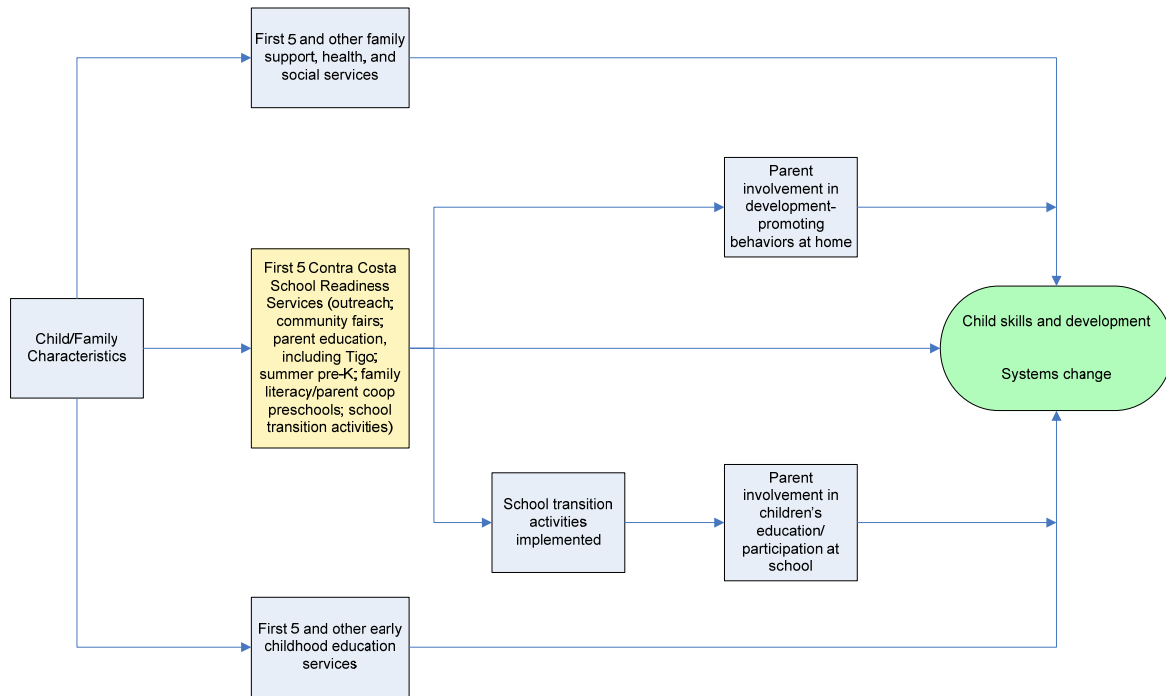
- **Outreach** activities to connect families to services
- School readiness **community fairs** designed to connect families to services and to provide activities or materials for parents to use with their children to promote their children's development
- **Parent education**
 - Tigo workshops or home visits
 - Distribution of books and materials to help parents promote their children's development (e.g., Raising a Reader book lending program – initially not funded through First 5; kindergarten backpacks)
 - Other parent education workshops on a wide range of topics
- **Summer pre-kindergarten programs** for children entering kindergarten in the fall who have never been to preschool and/or have been referred for extra services by their existing preschool teachers (PUSD and WCCUSD only)⁴
- **Family literacy and parent cooperative preschools** for children without preschool experience (MDUSD only)
- Planning for and implementing **transition activities** designed to ease children's entry into kindergarten.

Figure 1 illustrates the conceptual model underlying Contra Costa school readiness services. Children's development is influenced by their characteristics and the characteristics of their families, by the early childhood education, health, and social services they receive (whether funded by First 5 or not), by their parents' behavior, and by their schools' characteristics. Participation in First 5 activities such as family literacy or co-op preschools should lead directly to better child outcomes because they include direct services, focused on the child. Participation in First 5 school readiness activities that focus on schools and parents should produce changes in school transition activities, in parents' involvement in school activities, and in parenting behavior at home, which, in turn, should be associated with better child development and school readiness. By working closely with school districts, the overall system of services for children should change.

³ Pittsburg Unified School District also provided free school uniforms to children attending its summer preschool program.

⁴ MDUSD family literacy and parent coop preschools provide ongoing services during the summer.

Figure 1. Conceptual Model of First 5 Contra Costa School Readiness Initiative



Funding from First 5 California has totaled approximately \$1 million per year. About 10% of funds are held by First 5 Contra Costa for administration, evaluation, and the development of countywide materials (e.g., Tigo). The remaining 90% is allocated to be used in districts on a formula of about \$25,000 per year per participating school.

The Strategy Review: Purpose, Methods, Sample, and Analyses

Purpose

In late 2007, First 5 Contra Costa invited consultant Deanna Gomby to review the School Readiness initiative. The primary purposes of the review were to (1) describe results obtained through the School Readiness initiative; and (2) make recommendations for change or improvement, if needed.

Methods

The review consisted of interviews and focus groups, new analyses of existing data, and comparisons of findings in Contra Costa County with results from other school readiness programs in California.

- **Interviews and focus groups.** Telephone and in-person interviews and focus groups were held with a total of 60 individuals (24 parents, 17 kindergarten teachers, 5 principals/school personnel, 7 outreach workers/transition coordinators, 4 program administrators, and 3 school district administrators) in all participating communities. Respondents were asked their impressions of First 5-funded services; what was and was not working well; results of the services for parents, children, schools, teachers, or districts; and recommendations for the future.
- **New analyses of existing data.** Existing data that have been collected annually by First 5 Contra Costa were reviewed and reanalyzed by Harder+Company. The data were derived from (1) service logs; (2) annual ratings of the school readiness of entering kindergarteners (conducted by their kindergarten teachers using a measure called the Modified Desired Results Developmental Profile (MDRDP)); (3) annual surveys of parents concerning characteristics of their families and aspects of parent behavior, and (4) annual surveys of kindergarten teachers, principals, and administrators concerning the kindergarten transition practices in place in their schools. Each year, the parent surveys and ratings of children's school readiness were administered to many more children than participated in First 5 services, which permits some exploration of the role of receipt of First 5 services in producing outcomes such as better school readiness.
- **Comparison of results from other school readiness programs.** Findings were compared with results of school readiness programs in several other counties (e.g., Monterey, San Joaquin, Ventura, Los Angeles, Stanislaus, Orange, and Alameda).

Sample

Since 2004-05, the surveys reported above have been collected annually for students and parents in participating schools, with varying response levels. In each year, analyses have focused on those families in which parents returned their surveys and kindergarten teachers rated the children's school readiness, so that the child and parent data could be matched. In 2007-08, data continued to be collected from 28 schools, but a concerted effort was made to collect matched parent-child data from the 12 schools that First 5 program staff judged to be the most likely to participate in data collection.⁵ Tables 1-2 list key child and family characteristics children and their parents in the target and non-target schools, and those samples with a California sample that participated in a 2006 statewide assessment of the First 5 school readiness initiative. Families from the targeted schools differ from those in the non-targeted schools on some characteristics (race/ethnicity, parental education, income, child's IEP status, health insurance status, and some aspects of parental behavior). Only matched pair (parent-child) data from targeted schools are used for analyses of changes over time that are reported in this paper.

⁵ 32 schools were involved in preparing kindergarten transition plans, but 28 schools were involved in submitting data in 2007-08. Of the 28 schools, 7 were in MDUSD, 7 in PUSD, and 14 in WCCUSD.

TABLE 1. CHARACTERISTICS OF SURVEY PARTICIPANTS CONTRA COSTA 2006-07 VERSUS 2006 STATEWIDE

Demographic Characteristics	Target Schools Total	Non-Target Schools Total	All Schools Total	2006 State KEP
Child's age	% (N=1,015)	% (N=817)	% (N=1,832)	% (N=6,915)
≤ 5.5 years	59	57	58	67
> 5.5 years	41	43	42	33
Child's gender	% (N=1018)	% (N=824)	% (N=1,842)	% (N=7,147)
Male	48	50	49	51
Female	52	50	51	49
Child's Race/Ethnicity	% (N=995) ^a	% (N=799) ^b	% (N=1,794)	% (N=7,167)
White	3	7	5	6
Black/African American	8	10	9	9
Hispanic/Latino	76	68	73	78
Asian/Pacific Islander	6	6	6	6
Other	7	9	8	1
Languages child speaks fluently	% (N=926)	% (N=744)	% (N=1,670)	% (N=7,159) [^]
English	34	36	35	40
Another Language	40	39	39	--
English & Another Language	26	25	25	--
Language spoken at home	% (N=898)	% (N=720)	% (N=1,618)	
English	23	27	25	--
Another Language	44	43	44	--
English & Another Language	33	30	32	--
Child has an IEP for Special Education	% (N=1012) ^a	% (N=818) ^b	% (N=1,764)	% (N=7,199)
Yes	6	4	5	3
No	89	94	91	69
Unknown	5	2	4	28
Parent's education level	% (N=872) ^a	% (N=687) ^b	% (N=1,559)	% (N =4,398)
Less than high school	47	38	43	44
High school graduate or GED	34	34	34	35
Some college	15	20	17	15
College degree or higher	5	8	5	5
Annual Household Income	% (N=714) ^a	% (N=557) ^b	% (N=1,271)	% (N=3,725)
Less than \$15,000	42	35	39	--
\$15,000-<\$30,000	37	34	35	--
\$30,000-<\$60,000	15	23	19	--
\$60,000-<75,000	2	3	3	--
≥ \$75,000	4	5	4	6

*Data are for matched pairs

^{ab} Items with footnotes that do not match are statistically different at the .05 or higher significance level. Comparisons were only made between target and non-target schools

Table 2. Health Practices, Early Care, and Family-Based School Readiness Activities

	Target Schools Total¹	Non-Target Schools Total²	All Schools Total³	2006 State KEP⁴
Health Insurance	%	%	%	%
Child has health insurance	92 ^a	95 ^b	93	90
Early Care and Education	%	%	%	%
Preschool or child care center	75	76	76	62
≤20 hours	60	58	59	--
21 hours or more	40	42	41	--
Licensed child care home	14	12	13	--
≤20 hours	45	39	43	--
21 hours or more	55	61	57	--
Care of a family or friend	38	36	37	--
≤20 hours	56	51	54	--
21 hours or more	44	49	46	--
Family Activities	%	%	%	%
Talk to child about the first day of school daily	59	55	57	--
Talk to child about meeting his/her new teacher daily	56 ^a	49 ^b	53	--
Talk to the child about how to behave in school daily	85 ^a	81 ^b	83	--
Practice daily routines of getting ready for school daily	73 ^a	67 ^b	70	--
Practice self-help skills daily	80 ^a	76 ^b	78	--
Practice Kindergarten skills daily	69	66	68	--
Read stories with child daily	12	13	13	--

*Data are for matched pairs

^{ab} Items with footnotes that do not match are statistically different at the .05 or higher significance level. Comparisons were only made between target and non-target schools.

¹ Target Schools 2007 responses for each item range from N=89 to N=893.

² Non-Target Schools 2007 responses for each item range from N=71 to N=745.

³ All Schools 2007 responses for each item range from N=160 to N=1638.

⁴ The most recent statewide data available are from 2006. Responses for each item range from N=2,770 to N=3,957.

Analyses

Qualitative data derived from interviews and focus groups were used to complement the results of analyses of quantitative data. Harder+Company, the firm with which First 5 Contra Costa has contracted for evaluation services, conducted the quantitative analyses for this report. Univariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to explore (1) the intensity of services delivered; (2) the effects of First 5-funded services on children's school readiness; (3) factors other than First 5-funded services that were associated with outcomes for children, parents, schools, and school districts; and (4) changes over time in outcomes for children, parents, and schools.

Results

Results suggest that the First 5-funded services have reached thousands of families in Contra Costa County and that families appreciate those services. Changes in parents' involvement in their children's education can be seen. Children who have attended preschool and who attend elementary schools that have put many kindergarten transition practices in place fare better on a measure of school readiness. Benefits from other First-5-funded services are hard to detect with the measures and methods used. Bolstering quality and implementation of services and altering the service mix would likely produce better outcomes. The following summarizes the results, beginning with descriptions of services and their implementation, then results of interviews and focus groups, and then results of analyses of quantitative data conducted by Harder+Company.

Descriptions of Services

Services vary across communities. Table 3 illustrates the variation in services across communities. Most notably, MDUSD is the only school district providing family literacy or coop preschool services, and PUSD and WCCUSD are the only districts providing First 5-funded summer preschool. Raising a Reader was not initially funded by First 5, but has been seen as an integral part of First 5 services. It was provided in all communities initially, although Raising a Reader services have reportedly ceased in PUSD. Services in Antioch are limited and, because the school district is not participating, school-based services or services related to kindergarten transition, if they exist, are not funded by First 5. Because the Antioch school district is not participating, no data were provided by teachers, children, or parents in the district, and no expectations exist for systems change associated with First 5 activities in that school district.

Table 3. Services Provided Across Communities, and Primary Provider of Services

Who?	Activity	MDUSD	PUSD	WCCUSD	Antioch
Outreach Worker	Outreach	X	X	X	X
	Community fair	X	X	X	X
	Parent education:				
	Tigo	X	X	X	X
	Raising A Reader	X		X	X
	K backpacks	X	X	X	X
	Workshops	X	X	X	X
Teacher	Summer preschool		X	X	
Teacher	Family literacy/coop preschool	X			
Outreach Worker/Teacher	School transition activities	X	X	X	

Note: MDUSD offers summer preschool as part of its ongoing family literacy and coop preschools.

Outreach workers play a central role in service delivery. Table 3 also illustrates the important role of outreach workers in the First 5 Contra Costa school readiness initiative. They provide many services, including initial outreach and enrollment, parent education, and liaison to schools. It is important to note that many of their activities are conducted out of the view of school teachers and principals, and, as will be reported below, many of those individuals were unaware of the wide range of services provided by the outreach workers or that were part of the First 5 School Readiness Initiative.

All services focus on parents. As would be assumed based on the conceptual model for First 5 school readiness services (Figure 1), most of the services provided through the initiative included a primary or secondary focus on parents (see Table 4). Only summer preschool and family literacy and coop preschool services provided at least some services directly focused on children.

Thousands of families reached. Since 2003, First 5 outreach workers have contacted and delivered Tigo or other parent education services to more than 2800 families (see Table 4). Many more have participated in the school readiness community fairs that also serve to introduce families to First 5 and other community services.⁶ More than 800 children have participated in the family literacy and cooperative preschools offered in the Mt. Diablo

⁶ Numbers attending community fairs were not routinely or consistently collected, and so are not reported here.

Unified School District (MDUSD), and close to 650 children have participated in the summer preschool programs offered in the Pittsburg and West Contra Costa Unified School Districts (PUSD and WCCUSD).

Table 4. Service Intensity, Numbers Served, and Focus of Services

Activity	Intensity	# Served (2004-06)	Focus
Outreach	Low	2800+ families	Parent
Community fair	Low	?	Parent
Parent education:	4-5 contacts, 4-7 hrs (2006-07)	2800+ families	Parent
Tigo	Low		
Raising A Reader	Low		
K backpacks	Low		
Workshops	Low		
Summer preschool	Medium	649 children	Child/parent
Family literacy/coop preschool	High	814 children, 800+ parents	Child/parent
School transition activities	?	?	School/parent

Note: Low=<10 hrs; Med = 10-40 hrs; High = 40+ hrs of direct intervention per year

Most participating families have received relatively low-intensity services. Table 4 also illustrates, however, that most of the families who have received First 5 School Readiness services have participated in fairly low-intensity services. In 2006-07, for example, families received an average of 4-5 contacts from outreach workers for a total of only 4-7 hours of contact (numbers vary somewhat by district). While these levels are higher than in previous years (see Table 5), they are still relatively low.

Table 5. Intensity of Contacts of Outreach Workers with Families, by School District and Year

District	Contact Intensity	2004-05	2005-06	2006-07
MDUSD	Average time (hrs)	.78	1.06	4.84
	Average # of contacts	1	4	5
PUSD	Average time (hrs)	.3	1.4	6.71
	Average # of contacts	1	2	4
WCCUSD	Average time (hrs)	1.45	2.8	3.62
	Average # of contacts	1	3	4

Comments from Parents, Providers, and School Personnel About Program Services

The following summarizes the results of interviews and focus groups concerning the services and their effects on children and families.

Parents praised the First 5-funded school readiness services. Parents like and value the First 5-funded services. Parents praised every service offered through the First 5 school readiness initiative, often mentioning how they and their children had benefited. For example, about **parenting workshops and Tigo**:

My child gets along better with other children. He's better behaved.

-- Parent who participated in parenting workshop

We see toys in a different way – You think like a critical thinker, “How will this toy help him?”

-- Parent, Tigo recipient and participant in workshops

Shortly before the interviews were conducted with parents for this project, First 5 Contra Costa had recalled Tigo because tests revealed low levels of lead in the dye used in the material that made up the soft-sided canvas bus. The educational toys and books that were included with Tigo were safe; it was only the bus itself that had to be recalled. Given the timing of the interviews, the recall was very salient for parents, and they talked about how sorry they and their children were to see the bus go. One father said that his son was so attached to Tigo that the parents had to take it away while the boy slept.

Some parents received training on Tigo via **home visits** rather than parent education workshops, and those parents mentioned that they preferred the individualization of services and extra privacy that was possible in a home visit, compared to parent workshops.

Some parents had first learned of the availability of the First 5 services through the First 5 center, where they were able to enroll their children in a variety of classes and other **enrichment opportunities**. Parents appreciated the availability of those services, which often gave children opportunities that they could not otherwise afford (e.g., field trips to a local farm, music, outdoor activities):

My kids learn a lot. We don't have enough money to attend a lot of classes. Here it's free – so much benefit for us and them. Music and dance – and everything! We can see where the child's talents are, and then in the future, we can put our money there. They're helping us draw their maps for life.

– Parent discussing enrichment activities child had attended

Parents saw changes in their children and in themselves associated with the **parent coop and family literacy preschool services** offered in MDUSD:

It helps them get along with other children. That's important when there are so many different types of students.

-- Parent

It teaches me to help my child with homework.

-- Parent

Parents said that they participated in the cooperative preschools both because it helped them to be better parents and because they simply enjoyed the experience:

I do it so when I go to the doctor [with my child], I can understand. I do it for my child.

-- Parent

I enjoy being in the classroom once a week.

-- Parent

Parents also appreciated the sense of **connectedness to a larger community** and other service providers that they gained through their connection to First 5 and all its services. One parent who participated in Tigo and parent workshops said:

It feels more safe in the neighborhood – there are professional people who can help if your child is sick. We're not alone. They're helping us.

-- Parent, Tigo recipient and participant in workshops

They enjoyed the **community fairs**, and they appreciated the **kindergarten backpacks** that they received at the fairs.

Kindergarten teachers and principals were less familiar with First 5, but liked the services they knew about. Kindergarten teachers and principals knew about, and liked, the First 5-funded services that were school-based or school-linked, but they were less familiar with the school readiness services that were offered to younger children or away from school campuses. For example, most teachers did not know about parent education workshops or Tigo, but they praised the kindergarten backpacks and mentioned that they often saw children carrying them.

They also liked the **summer preschool** program. Teachers thought the summer program helped strengthen children's social-emotional skills, acquainted children with the routines of

kindergarten, and, in particular, helped eliminate the one or two weeks of crying that many children who have never attended preschool experience when they first come to kindergarten. (Parents mentioned this benefit of summer preschool too.)

Teachers and principals also appreciated **on-site preschool** programs offered in MDUSD. One principal noted the on-site preschool not only helped develop children's skills, but also helped involve parents in their children's education:

Parents are more invested in getting kids ready – they're on campus more, practicing more. That's critical if we're going to move forward as a Title I school.

-- Principal of school with on-campus preschool

Parents and teachers recommend more services. Both parents and teachers recommended that **preschool** opportunities be expanded. Kindergarten teachers usually prefaced their recommendations by saying that they could definitely tell which children had participated in preschool and which had not because the children who had attended preschool were better prepared for kindergarten. Some of the parents in MDUSD recommended additional preschool opportunities, without the requirements for parent participation that currently are in place in MDUSD.⁷ As one mother explained, she felt guilty if she could not attend the adult family literacy program, because it meant that her child was unable to benefit from the preschool experience.

It is important to note that all three districts do have other subsidized preschool services available. This project was not designed to determine if parents were unaware of those other services, if they were not eligible for them, or if those services did not meet their needs.

In addition, both parents and teachers recommended **more information for parents** on what they could do to prepare their children for kindergarten. Teachers further recommended that the information be provided early, beginning in children's preschool year, continuing over the summer before kindergarten, and then throughout the children's kindergarten year. The teachers strongly suggested that the information be aligned with kindergarten requirements and that the teachers help select the materials and activities to be shared with parents.⁸

Parents recommend ongoing opportunities for feedback. Parents were interviewed in groups, and some recommended that there be future opportunities for such parent groups to meet and provide ongoing evaluative feedback to program managers.

⁷ In MDUSD, services are provided through Adult Education, which requires parents to participate regularly as a condition for their children to receive preschool services. Occasional absences by parents are tolerated, but, if parents are not able to commit to regular participation, then parents are referred to other preschool or child care services that may better meet their needs.

⁸ Outreach workers and transition coordinators currently seek to work with kindergarten teachers and principals to help select materials that go into kindergarten backpacks, but the outreach workers report that it is sometimes difficult to gain teacher participation.

Kindergarten teachers recommend elimination of the MDRDP. As described above, Kindergarten teachers are requested to complete the Modified Desired Results Developmental Profile for kindergartners entering their classrooms each fall. Most teachers objected to the experience for one or more of the following reasons:

- The MDRDP was redundant with other kindergarten readiness measures their districts required them to administer at about the same time each school year. That meant that extra time and effort spent, without a lot of perceived benefit for the teachers. Teachers did note with approval that the MDRDP contains items related to children's social-emotional development. Most of the scales teachers must fill out for their districts do not assess children's social-emotional development, so the kindergarten teachers thought that was the one part of the MDRDP that was useful.
- Some teachers felt that certain items on the MDRDP were hard to score.
- Some teachers new to their districts had never been trained on the use of the MDRDP, and, while they may have used it, they were uncertain that they had completed it correctly.
- Teachers felt they did not receive feedback from First 5 Contra Costa soon enough to be able to make use of the results of the assessments. To make good use of the results and tailor their instructional approaches for students, for example, most said that they would need feedback by January or sooner.

In contrast with this general feeling of dislike by kindergarten teachers for the MDRDP, it appears to be well-incorporated into instruction in the preschool programs in MDUSD. In that district, preschool teachers use the MDRDP as a pretest/posttest measure of children's progress during their enrollment in the family literacy and parent coop preschool programs, and they tailor instruction to address children's needs identified through the pretest assessment. (Results of these assessments will be reported below.) Program administrators for the preschool programs in MDUSD value the MDRDP and would like to continue its use.

Outcomes for Schools, Parents, Children, and the System

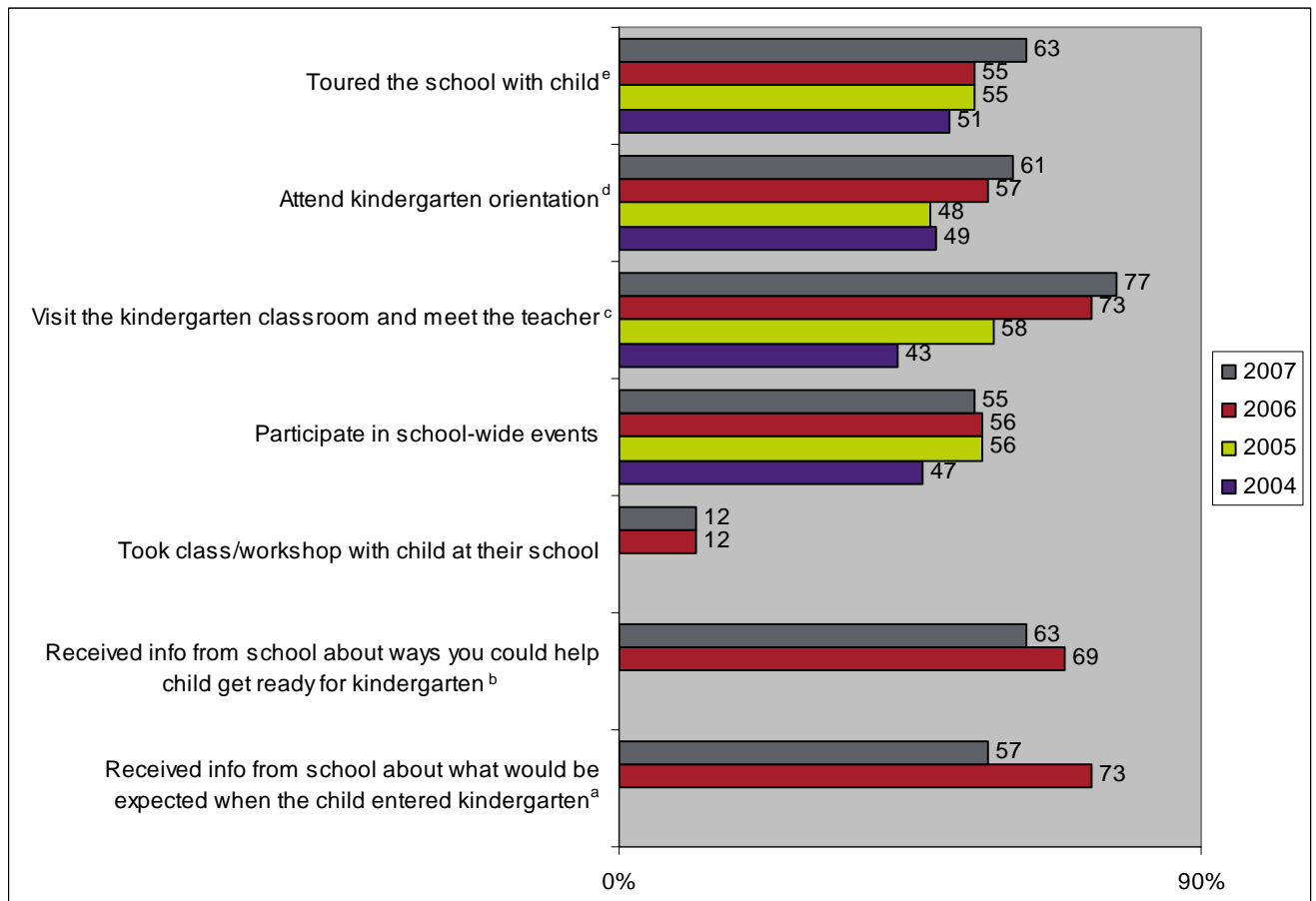
This section of the report focuses on changes in school practices, parent behaviors, child outcomes, or the overall system. Reported results are based largely on analyses conducted by Harder+Company of data collected from 2004-2007.

Outcomes for Schools and Parents

Data from the annual surveys administered to parents and to kindergarten teachers, principals, and school district personnel suggest that schools are putting plans into place to ease children's transition into kindergarten, and more parents are participating in those activities. Parent behavior with their children at home (e.g., reading daily) does not appear to be associated with First 5-funded services.

Changing kindergarten transition practices: Evidence of a changing school system and greater parent involvement. First 5 outreach workers and coordinators work with elementary schools to establish and implement plans to ease children’s transition into kindergarten. Since funding began, 32 schools (all except the schools in Antioch) have developed kindergarten transition plans. Further, increasing percentages of parents report that they have participated in some key activities that are often part of such transition plans (see Figure 2). For example, Figure 2 illustrates that the percentage of parents who have toured the school with their child, attended kindergarten orientation, or visited the kindergarten classroom and met the teacher have all increased since 2004.

Figure 2. Parent Participation in School-Based Transition Activities at Target Schools



*N’s for 2004 items range from 305-309; N’s for 2005 items range from 616-638; N’s for 2006 items range from 854-858; N’s for 2007 range from 867-983

^a There is a significant difference between 2006 and 2007 (chi-square, p-value <0.05)

^b There is a significant difference between 2006 and 2007 (chi-square, p-value <0.05)

^c There is a significant linear trend between 2004 and 2007 (chi-square linear by linear association, p-value <0.05)

^d There is a significant linear trend between 2004 and 2007 (chi-square linear by linear association, p-value <0.05)

^e There is a significant linear trend between 2004 and 2007 (chi-square linear by linear association, p-value <0.05)

Table 6 lists 21 practices that national research⁹ has indicated are elements of a good kindergarten transition plan. In 2007, school administrators and kindergarten teachers reported the percentage of families reached by those kindergarten practices on their campuses, and the results in Table 6 demonstrate that not all elements are equally implemented across schools. This suggests that schools can continue to make progress by implementing more of these important practices.

⁹ See, for example, Pianta, R.C. & Kraft-Sayre, M. (2003). *Successful kindergarten transition: Your guide to connecting children, families, & schools*. Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes.

Table 6. Availability of Transition Activity, as Reported by Teachers and Administrators, 2007-08 (N=118)	
Transition Activity	Percentage reporting activity exists and reaches most, nearly all, or all families
Kindergarten teachers and early care providers in neighborhood preschool programs get to know each other and work together to plan for school transitions.	12%
The school is welcoming to families with children age 0 to 4 years old. There are accessible resources and a place for families with children age 0 to 4 to gather	13%
Children who lack kindergarten readiness skills are offered pre-kindergarten intervention at the school prior to kindergarten entry (e.g., early back, summer preK, etc.)	20%
Kindergarten teachers send a personal note to every child prior to the first day of school, welcoming children to kindergarten.	24%
The school attempts to collect children's preschool records and portfolios from their former early care settings.	25%
The school offers parents of children ages 0 to 5 years information about child development and parenting using a variety of methods (via workshops, brochures, and other reading materials)	29%
The school invites parents and children age 0 to 4 years old to schoolwide events (held for K-5 families).	38%
The school's kindergarten registration day provides parents with meaningful opportunities to feel more comfortable with the school and kindergarten expectations.	41%
The school offers families several opportunities to meet the kindergarten teacher and see the classroom <i>prior</i> to the first day of school.	42%
Kindergarten teachers are encouraged to take workshops, classes, and attend conferences to learn more about early childhood development and developmentally appropriate practices.	43%
Kindergarten teachers gather information about children's skills, interests, and backgrounds <i>from parents</i> .	44%
The kindergarten program <i>values play</i> as the work of young children and provides hands on, active learning experiences.	47%
The school maintains connections with community agencies to support the health and basic needs of incoming and existing kindergartners and their families.	49%
There are <i>well defined</i> school readiness expectations for entering kindergartners.	54%
The school hosts an orientation to kindergarten before children start school.	57%
The kindergarten classroom has multicultural materials that reflect the home culture of the children in the class.	61%
The kindergarten program is designed to stimulate learning in all areas – social, emotional, physical, and cognitive	65%
Kindergarten teachers use an agreed upon tool to assess the readiness skills of every entering kindergarten child.	67%
The school provides information to parents about ways to support school readiness at home.	69%
Kindergarten teachers begin the kindergarten year with familiar preschool/prekindergarten songs, books, routines, and activities.	71%
Information for parents is translated into the languages spoken by the parents at home (e.g., kindergarten expectations, parent notices, flyers, etc.).	76%

Few parents read with their children every day, and their reading levels are not related to participation in First 5 services. Many First 5-funded school readiness services aim to persuade parents to undertake more activities with their children at home so as to promote their children’s development and readiness for school. One of the most important of those behaviors is reading to their children every day. Unfortunately, results suggest that the overall percentage of parents who read to their children daily is low (only about 13%). Univariate and multivariate analyses were undertaken to determine the factors associated with parents’ reading to their children.

Table 7. Variables Associated with Reading to the Child Daily, Univariate and Multivariate Analyses

Variables	Daily Reading Level
<i>Child Characteristics</i>	
Gender	ns
Age	ns
Race/Ethnicity	Hispanic/Latino < other groups
Child has IEP	ns
<i>Family Characteristics</i>	
Language spoken at home	ns
Maternal education	HS>no HS
Income	+
<i>Child’s ECE Experience</i>	
Preschool	ns
Type of preschool	ns
Tigo	ns
<i>Parent/Adult Behavior</i>	
Parent attends events at school	+
Parent participates in workshops	ns
<i>Characteristics of Reading Experience</i>	
Difficulty in sharing books on regular basis	Less reported difficulty > more difficulty
Child listens quietly while parent reads	+
Child asks questions while parent reads	+
Child tells parent the story	+

NOTE: “ns” = not statistically significant at the $p<.05$ level. Univariate results $p<.05$ are noted in the table; shaded cells denote effects that remain significant ($p<.05$) in multivariate analyses.

Table 7 lists the variables tested for univariate and multivariate associations with parents’ daily reading with their children, and reports the results of both sets of analyses:

- Univariate tests demonstrated that the following variables were associated with higher rates of daily reading: non-Hispanic/non-Latino parents, higher maternal education, higher income, parents who attends more events at school, parents who do not report difficulty in sharing books regularly, and whose children listen quietly, or ask questions when the parent is reading, and who tell the parent the story (all $p<.05$).
- Of these variables, only a few exert an independent influence on daily reading, as demonstrated by the multivariate analyses. Those variables are highlighted in the

blue cells in Table 7. The parents who were more likely to read daily to their children were non-Hispanic/non-Latino; they tended to attend more events at school, and they reported little difficulty in reading to their children.

- Neither univariate nor multivariate analyses demonstrated any effect of First-5-funded activities (e.g., preschool, Tigo, parent workshops) on daily reading levels.

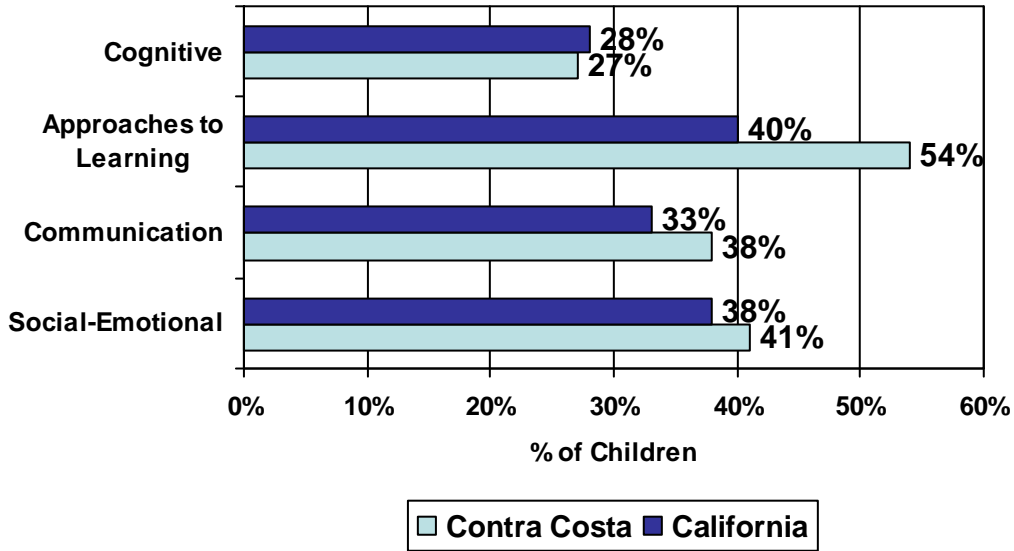
Outcomes for Children

The primary measure that First 5 Contra Costa has used to assess children's skills and development (their school readiness) has been the MDRDP. As described above, kindergarten teachers have used the MDRDP to assess the skills of children entering kindergarten each fall since Fall 2004. Four types of MDRDP results are reported below:

- Comparisons of the scores of children enrolled in Contra Costa's participating schools with those of their counterparts enrolled in low API schools across California.
- Changes in MDRDP scores over time. Scores should increase as school readiness services improve in quality over time and/or as children receive more years of school readiness services (i.e., children assessed in 2004 might have received only one year of school readiness services since services themselves began in earnest in 2003, but kindergartners assessed in 2005 could have received two years of services, and so on).
- Changes in MDRDP scores as a pre-test/post-test measure of children's skills after they participated in First 5-funded services.
- Results of multivariate analyses that explore factors associated with higher MDRDP scores.

Children in Contra Costa's school-readiness initiative schools score above their California counterparts in low-API schools on many aspects of school readiness. The MDRDP was developed by SRI International as part of the statewide assessment of school readiness activities funded by First 5. Figure 3 illustrates that, in 2007, children in the schools participating in Contra Costa's school readiness initiative outscored children in low-API schools in California on three of the four scales of the MDRDP (Approaches to Learning, Communication, and Social-Emotional). Many of the children assessed may not have participated in First 5 services, so this is a measure of the average school readiness of children in those schools, rather than of the effectiveness of the First 5-funded services.

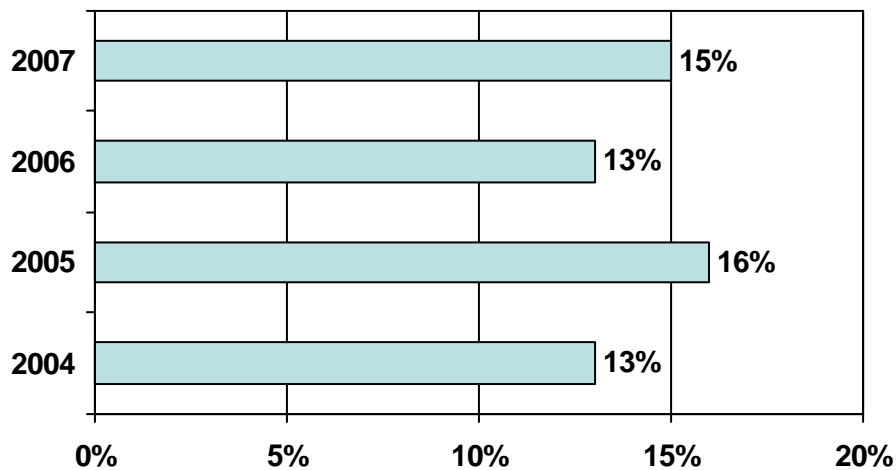
Figure 3. Percentage of Children Who Almost or Fully Mastered All MDRDP Items: Contra Costa School Readiness Districts (2007) Compared to California (2006) Low-API Districts



NOTE: For Contra Costa: n=1,806 for Cognitive; n=1,825 for Approaches to Learning; n=1,816 for Communication; n=1,807 for Social-Emotional. For California: N=7,199 for all scales.

No change in MDRDP scores over time. Figure 4 illustrates the percentage of children in target schools who almost or fully mastered all the items on the MDRDP. This combines children’s scores on all four subscales of the MDRDP into a single composite score. Results show that composite scores did not change significantly between 2004 and 2007.

Figure 4. Percentage of Children in Target Schools Who Almost or Fully Mastered All Items (MDRDP Composite Scores), by Year



NOTE: 2004, N=282; 2005, N=600; 2006, N=836; 2007, N=961

Children who attend First 5-supported family literacy and cooperative preschools show benefits in development, and children who were enrolled longer show greater benefits. In MDUSD, family literacy and cooperative preschools provide part-day part-year services to children and their parents. At the beginning and end of each school year, preschool teachers rate children’s developmental skills using the MDRDP. Those pre- and post-test assessments demonstrate that children who participated in the preschool services ended the year having mastered or nearly mastered more developmental skills than at the beginning of the year for all four of the MDRDP scales (cognitive and general knowledge, approaches to learning, communication, and social-emotional).¹⁰ Figure 5 illustrates the differences for all four scales combined into a single composite score. Results are presented separately for children enrolled in each type of preschool.

In addition, some children were enrolled in the preschools for only about 6 months (perhaps arriving mid-year in the preschool year). Another group of children completed about one year of preschool, and a third group actually attended preschool for two years. Results are presented separately for each of these groups.

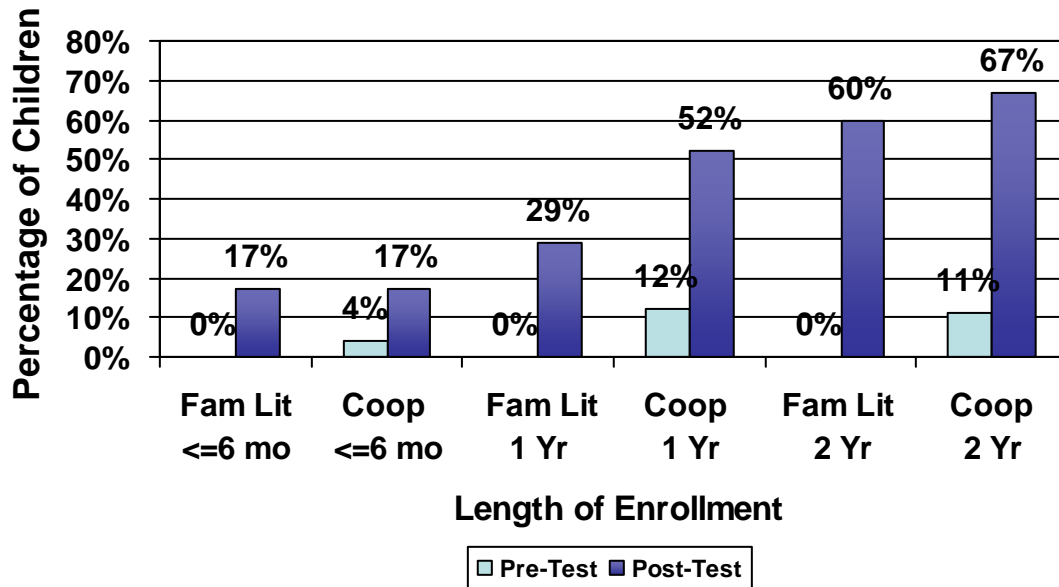
Figure 5 illustrates some important findings:

- No matter the type of preschool attended or the length of enrollment, more children had almost or fully mastered all items on the MDRDP by the end of their participation in preschool than they had when they first enrolled.
- The children who attended preschool the longest demonstrated the greatest improvement. At enrollment, from 0-12% of children had almost or fully mastered all MDRDP items. For children who attended about 6 months of preschool, that percentage had risen to 17%. For children who attended about 1 year, the percentage who almost or fully mastered all the MDRDP items was 29-52%; and, for children who attended about 2 years, 60-67%.¹¹

¹⁰ The MDRDP is not a normed instrument, so there are no available comparisons to determine if the children in MDUSD gained more than might be expected due to maturation.

¹¹ These percentages are not adjusted for initial differences in family characteristics or child age, which might influence the results.

Figure 5. School Readiness Gains of Children Enrolled in MDUSD Family Literacy and Coop Preschools: % Almost or Fully Mastered All Items Pre- Post MDRDP Composite Scores, by Preschool Type and Length of Enrollment



NOTE: Family Literacy, <=6 mo, n=12; Coop <=6 mo, n=24; Family Literacy, 1 yr, n=45; Coop 1 yr, n=42; Family Literacy, 2 yr, n=30; Coop, 2 yr, n=18.

Children who attend preschool and schools that have put many kindergarten transition practices in place score higher on the MDRDP. Most of the other services funded through the First 5 school readiness initiative did not consistently collect pretest/post-test data. Harder+Company therefore conducted analyses to determine which of several factors were independently associated with higher school readiness (MDRDP) scores. Separate analyses were conducted for each MDRDP subscale. Table 8 lists the variables that were tested first via univariate analyses and then via multivariate analyses. Cells shaded in blue include the variables that were demonstrated via the multivariate analyses to continue to exert an independent influence on MDRDP scores.

The multivariate results depicted in Table 8 suggest that children score higher on one or more scales of the MDRDP when:

- They have attended preschool;
- They attend schools that have many kindergarten transition practices in place;
- They or their parents possess particular demographic characteristics (e.g., girls perform better than boys; older children outscore younger ones; children without special needs outscore those who have special needs; children who speak two languages outscore those who speak only English);
- Their parents attend school events; and

- Their kindergarten teacher speaks their language.

Higher levels of family income and maternal education were also associated, although not significantly so, to children's MDRDP scores, but analyses revealed no independent association between children's school readiness scores and participation in other First 5-funded services (e.g., Tigo, parent workshops, summer preschool).

Table 8. Univariate and Multivariate Analyses of Fall 2007 MDRDP Scores, at Kindergarten Entry, All Districts, Matched Pairs Only

Variables	MDRDP Scores				
	Social-Emotional	Communication	Positive Approaches to Learning	Cognition and General Knowledge	Composite Score
<i>Child Characteristics</i>					
Gender	girls > boys	girls > boys	girls > boys	girls > boys	girls > boys
Age	older > younger	older > younger	older > younger	older > younger	older > younger
Race/Ethnicity	Hisp< Asian/PI	Hisp<Asian/PI, bl, other	Hisp<Asian/PI; Hisp<wh	Hisp<Asian/PI, other	Hisp<Asian/PI
Languages child speaks fluently	Ns	ns	ns	Eng+another language>English only	ns
Child has IEP	IEP< no IEP	IEP< no IEP	IEP< no IEP	IEP< no IEP	IEP< no IEP
<i>Family Characteristics</i>					
Language spoken at home	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Maternal education	HS>no HS	HS>no HS	HS>no HS	HS>no HS	HS>no HS
Income	+	+	+	+	ns
<i>Parent/Adult Behavior</i>					
Reading to child daily	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Parent attends events at school	+	+	+	ns	ns
Parent participates in workshops	ns	+	+	ns	ns
Parent involvement: home activities to promote child's development	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Parent involvement: home activities to promote child's transition to school	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
<i>Child's ECE Experience</i>					
Preschool	ns	+	+	+	+
Preschool intensity	ns	+	ns	+	+
Preschool type (family literacy, coop, Tigo+preschool, other	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns

preschool)					
Summer preK (bridge program)	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Tigo	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
Tigo, Tigo + preschool, no preschool	ns	ns	ns	ns	ns
School/District Factors					
District	WCCUSD<PUSD=MDUSD	ns	WCCUSD<PUSD=MDUSD	MDUSD<PUSD	PUSD>MDUSD,WCCUSD
Teacher's speaks child's language	ns	+	+	+	ns
School K transition activities	+	+	+	+	+

NOTE: “ns” = not statistically significant at the $p<.05$ level. Univariate results $p<.05$ are noted in the table; shaded cells denote effects that remain significant ($p<.05$) in multivariate analyses.

Systems Change: Changes in the School Districts

As depicted in Contra Costa's conceptual model for the initiative (Figure 1), a key goal of the initiative was to foster change in the systems associated with young children, and, in particular, with school districts. As described above, schools do seem to be putting kindergarten transition plans in place, but what is their overall commitment to school readiness? Results reported below are based on interviews and focus groups.

School districts appear to be committed to school readiness, but not all are committed to the particular constellation of school readiness services funded by First 5. Most district and school administrators report that they support the notion of school readiness as a helpful precursor to later school success, and several reported that the First 5 efforts had helped elevate the importance of school readiness and the early childhood years. For example, one district administrator praised First 5 and said, "This [the First 5 initiative] has altered the culture. We're now a preschool-to-adult school district."

But, support for the importance of school readiness does not always mean support for the particular constellation of services funded by First 5. One district administrator described a conversation with the district superintendent, "'My superintendent asked, 'How does First 5 funding help our children?' I said, 'Very little. We get backpacks in the first week of school, MDRDP in the first month, the early learning fair, and then the rest of the money goes to salaries and benefits.' I couldn't see where the money went."

Where district commitment is weaker, the district may be more passive in facilitating implementation of services. One program administrator described the situation as follows: "Philosophically, the district is supportive. Still, it's not as folded in as it could be – preK with K-6... The district is supportive, but not actively pushing it."

That district-level support makes a big difference to First 5 program success and the satisfaction of First 5-funded staff. Where First 5 services seem to have been incorporated the best, the district has overseen the effort to bring First 5 personnel and principals together, to align curricula in First 5-funded programs with district curricula for K-6, to give First 5 services a visible presence on school campuses, and to consider how best to pool funding so that First 5 services can complement or extend existing services.

Where such conditions do not exist, school personnel offer more limited commitment to the specific services offered by First 5, outreach workers feel disconnected from schools and teachers, and principals feel disconnected from First 5. For example, one outreach worker reported, "I don't feel the district cares if we're here or not." Another said, "We met with the kindergarten teachers who are interested in what we do, but they're so busy. No one above tells them to work with me." And, in that same district, a principal acknowledged apologetically that he was not always accessible to the First 5 outreach workers, saying

“They’re [the outreach workers] hard-working, forceful advocates for their program. I’m not opposed to it. It’s just not a top priority – there are other burning issues.”

Anecdotally, interviewees suggested that principals who have a background in early childhood education may value the First 5-funded services more and facilitate the implementation of services more thoroughly. Whether that is true or not, some principals do strongly support the First 5 services and the focus on school readiness:

I want children coming in prepared. Kindergarten is the foundation. Kindergarten can be a better experience – not always trying to catch up – if children come in prepared. If they’re able to write their names, recognize letters.

-- Principal

[The First 5-funded services on the school campus]... serve as great PR for the school! They shape parents’ views of school before their children get here.

-- Principal

Quality and Implementation of Services

Even if the best service strategies are selected, an initiative may have limited success if services are poorly implemented or of poor quality. Results of interviews suggest that services and implementation vary across schools and districts, and that some aspects of service quality and implementation could be bolstered.

Variation across schools and districts. Parent education services, activities of outreach workers, and school transition activities all differ across schools within districts and across districts. During focus groups, parents and teachers expressed some surprise and a great deal of interest in learning about the variation, and they sometimes wanted their own schools or districts to adopt the practices that they learned were being delivered in other districts.

In addition, there are differences in the backgrounds and status of the outreach worker, ranging from unpaid volunteers to paid staff, from part-time to full-time employees, and from individuals with early childhood background to those without such training.

Turnover at all levels limits program effectiveness. Across schools and districts, fairly high levels of turnover were reported among outreach workers and coordinators, kindergarten teachers, principals, and school district personnel. While some turnover may be positive because it may bring a more committed or better qualified individual into a position, all turnover results in at least a short-term lag in the delivery of program services. When turnover occurs among outreach workers, it can interrupt the relationship families have with the program. When it occurs among school and school district personnel, it can

mean that previously-made agreements have to be renegotiated, and program services may suffer in the meantime.

Enrolling and engaging families is challenging. Across districts, program staff talked about the challenges of enrolling families in services. Most felt that the problem of enrolling families had eased in recent years, as most families now learned about services through word-of-mouth or First 5 centers. Still, staff mentioned that while they might be able to enroll families, they were not always able to keep them enrolled throughout the course of program services or over multiple years, perhaps because of high rates of mobility. Which families were the most difficult to engage? Program staff and administrators reported that it was easier to engage Spanish-speaking Latino families than African American families, but they did not agree on why that was so – or even if it was something that needed to be addressed. Some program and district administrators suggested that the low-percentage of enrolled families who were African American was an accurate reflection of the community, and so not a cause for concern. Some outreach workers suggested that the difficulty reflected the program’s focus on children who had not enrolled in preschool, which meant that two-parent families with mothers who were not employed were more likely to participate – and those were more likely to be Hispanic/Latino families. Still others felt that the enrollment reflected the comfort that Spanish-speaking families felt with the primarily Hispanic/Latino outreach workers. In any case, the result of low engagement over time is that families and children may be receiving fewer, shorter duration services than intended.¹²

Family enrollment and engagement is a serious issue for many school readiness initiatives across California, but it may be especially important in Contra Costa County, where so many of the services funded through the initiative require parent involvement and engagement to be effective.

No consistent measures of program quality. Programs do not appear to have in place consistent practices for quality assessments. In preschool programs, such practices might include regular assessments of the classroom environment or teacher-child interactions; in home visiting or parent education programs, that might include periodic shadowing of outreach workers by supervisors, or additional measures of progress for children and parents. This does not mean that the services currently delivered as part of the initiative are of poor quality. This review did not involve direct observation of services delivered, and so no opinion about service quality is expressed here. But, without consistent measures, it means that service quality levels are unknown.

Some services are low intensity. As described above, most families who have received First 5-funded services have been exposed to a relatively low-intensity intervention. The outreach workers have made a concerted effort to increase the intensity of their services by offering more workshops in recent years, and one long-time worker saw the difference, “I

¹²Administrative data does not provide a ready picture of attrition or engagement.

like the workshops. We're working more in-depth with parents now. In the past, we just met with these families and had no ability to really change things.”

Interpreting the Results and Some Caveats

The primary results of this review suggest that, first, entering kindergarteners in Contra Costa County's low API schools are outperforming their peers in California on many measures. System change is occurring most notably with respect to kindergarten transition activities, and an awakened sense of the importance of school readiness generally in participating districts. Families like the services they receive; schools and teachers know and like the kindergarten backpacks, summer preschools, and on-site preschool services – the services they are most likely to encounter. Results of analyses of children's kindergarten readiness scores suggest that children who attend preschool or who attend schools with many kindergarten transition practices in place are likely to enter kindergarten having mastered more developmental skills than their peers. But, other First 5-funded activities, such as parent education workshops, Tigo, and summer preschool, do not appear to have an effect on children's school readiness scores or on whether parents read to their children every day.

It is important to remember that many results of this review are based on a single measure of children's development (the MDRDP). During interviews, kindergarten teachers had mixed opinions of the value of the MDRDP, and some reported that they had rated their children without having been trained on the use of the MDRDP.

Comparisons with Other Counties

Still, findings in Contra Costa County are consistent with those found elsewhere in California in at least two ways:

The services offered in Contra Costa County's school readiness program are similar to those offered in other counties. Many other counties offer some or all of the services that are part of Contra Costa's initiative (see Table 9). In addition, however, counties may offer a broader range of services, including more preschool services, consistent screenings to identify children who may need additional health or developmental services, and ongoing opportunities for parents to learn and play together with their infants and toddlers.

Table 9. Examples of Services Offered in School Readiness Programs in Other Counties

Health	Parents/Family Support	Early Childhood Education	Kindergarten Transition
Screenings: health vision, dental, behavioral, developmental	Adult education: ESL, computer, vocational	Home visits (PAT, HIPPIY, PCHP)	Articulation activities between preschool and kindergarten teachers
Treatment (including referrals to treatment for children identified through screening)	Assessment/case management	Playgroups, Mommy and Me groups for infants/toddlers	Early kindergarten registration day(s)
Health and nutrition education	Family counseling	Family literacy/early literacy programs	Workshops/day(s) for parents on kindergarten readiness
Counseling	Male/father involvement	Summer preschool programs	Kindergarten orientation day(s)
Safety programs	Parenting education	Preschool, including Saturday school, twilight preschool	Kindergarten backpacks
Mental health consultation in ECE settings	Family resource centers	Distribution of home “play kits”	Transfer health records from preschool to kindergarten
	Parent Advisory Committees (ongoing feedback mechanism for parents)	Book distribution	Alignment of kindergarten and preschool curricula
		Library vans	
		Art workshops	
		Early intervention for children identified with special needs	
		Training for ECE providers	
		Curriculum specialist for ECE/preschool	

Results concerning the benefits of particular services are similar when assessed and analyzed in a similar way. Harder+Company has also analyzed the effects of school readiness services in San Joaquin and Monterey Counties on children’s MDRDP scores, with results similar to those found in Contra Costa County (see Table 10). In all three counties, preschool and factors associated with the transition to kindergarten are associated with benefits for children on one or more MDRDP scales. (Contra Costa’s specific approach to assessing these activities by using its survey of school and district personnel appears to be relatively unique in the state.) Further, in all three counties, a variety of child and maternal demographic characteristics are also associated with school readiness scores, but no other interventions are.

Table 10. Factors Associated with MDRDP Scores in Three Counties (Results of Multivariate Analyses)

MDRDP Scales	Contra Costa	Monterey	San Joaquin
Social-Emotional	Child age, gender, IEP, mother attends school events, school K transition practices	Child age, gender, maternal education, child practices K skills	Ease of transition to K
Communication	Child age, gender, IEP, mother attends school events, preschool, teacher speaks child's language, school K transition practices	Child age, maternal education, ease of transition to K	Maternal education, teacher speaks child's language, ease of transition to K
Approach to Learning	Child age, IEP, school K transition practices	Child age, maternal education, ease of transition to K	Maternal education, preschool, ease of transition to K
Cognitive	Child age, gender, language, IEP, preschool, school K transition practices	Child age, maternal education, preschool	Child age, home language, maternal education, teacher speaks child's language

Other studies do suggest benefits for some of the service strategies supported by **First 5 Contra Costa**, although most of these studies do not control for the effects of family or child characteristics. For example, a study of *summer preschool* in Alameda County found benefits immediately after children participated in their social-emotional skills, which is the area that kindergarten teachers in Contra Costa County thought was particularly affected by the services. No benefits were found for summer preschool services on children's cognitive development in a study in San Joaquin County. A few counties have followed children who participated in summer preschool programs and seen benefits in grade 2 (Ventura) or 3 (Stanislaus), but these studies do not appear to have controlled for the effects of demographic characteristics.

First 5 Los Angeles reports improvements in child development skills, language, and literacy for children who participate in *preschool*, along with earlier identification of children with special needs.

Stanislaus reports improved kindergarten readiness and social skills and increased daily reading among children who participate in programs to receive *free books*.

Results in Los Angeles suggest that increased levels of participation in *parent education* services are associated with increased benefits, and that parent education services offered through centers (in groups) afford larger improvements in social support than do services offered via home visits. Stanislaus results indicate that parent-child programs yield greater benefits than parent-focused parent education services.

Interpreting the Results

The results in Contra Costa County and elsewhere suggest that the services provided can lead to benefits for children and parents. But, in Contra Costa, with the exception of preschool and kindergarten transition activities, the effects of most interventions have been swamped by effects associated with child and family demographic characteristics, perhaps because the Contra Costa interventions have not been strong enough interventions. Benefits might be enhanced if:

- Services were more intensive and longer duration (i.e., more frequent and ongoing contacts with parents for parent education; full-year preschool rather than summer preschool);
- Services included more direct intervention with children, rather than focusing on parents alone. To work through parents requires that parents enroll and stay enrolled in services, and that they change their behavior. Intervening directly with children would lead to change directly, whether or not parents change too.
- Services were richer and their messages were reinforced. This could be accomplished if services were aligned with school district priorities and if they were tied more closely to other First 5 services in the community.

Remember the Context

Developing and delivering effective programs is not easy, and no program exists in a vacuum. Parents and service providers were acutely aware of the difficulties in their communities, and they often mentioned those issues as ones that they wished could also be addressed. For example, school personnel mentioned shootings that had occurred in their community, and parents asked if safety could be addressed. In one group, a mother mentioned that a fifth grader had been found with drugs, and she worried that her young kindergartner was going to have to face this soon.

Outreach workers and others mentioned the chilling effects that immigration raids had on parent participation levels during the previous year. Families were afraid to leave their homes, and so engagement in parent education workshops fell.

Limitations of physical space made it hard to house some services on school campuses, and pending state education budget cuts made it difficult for school districts to contemplate ongoing sustainability of programs.

Recommendations

Recommendations focus on strengthening program services, improving program implementation and quality, focusing on sustainability and system change, and revising processes currently used for monitoring and evaluation.

Program Strategies

1. Expand preschool services, and/or couple parent education with preschool services.

Parents and school personnel all endorsed the notion of expanded access to preschool services, and results in Contra Costa and other counties indicate strongly that preschool is associated with benefits for children. Preschool services do exist in the county, but parents may not be aware of or able to afford them, or the services may somehow not meet their needs. In any case, preschool is an effective service for children, endorsed by parents and teachers, and so efforts to expand access to it should be supported. In addition, consider coupling parent education and support services that are currently offered via First 5 with preschool services. National research suggests that combined interventions that focus on both parents and children directly can lead to a broader range of long-term benefits, and so such combined services could make sense. Obviously, expanding preschool or enriching preschool services by coupling them with parent education is more expensive than lower-intensity interventions that focus on parents, but the evidence in Contra Costa County and elsewhere is that children flourish when they are the direct recipients of early childhood services.

2. Continue to distribute kindergarten backpacks, Tigo, and books, but mostly to encourage parent/child involvement in other, more intensive ongoing services.

The results suggest that these services, by themselves, are not sufficiently intensive to generate a great deal of change in parents or in children on the measures used in this study. Possible changes could include altering the kindergarten backpack content to more closely dovetail with kindergarten requirements; and/or linking Tigo with subsequent, more intensive, parent education services such as ongoing home visiting programs or a center-based parent education program such as The Incredible Years.

3. Enhance focus on transition to kindergarten services.

Results of this review indicate that children do better when they are enrolled in schools that have many kindergarten practices in place. In addition, interviewees suggested that principals with backgrounds in early childhood were more likely to be receptive to First 5's kindergarten transition and other services. Further, teachers suggested that they would be interested in learning about the range of services they and their schools could consider as part of kindergarten transition activities, and they supported the notion of providing information to parents about what they could do to help their children prepare for and succeed in kindergarten. For these reasons, training for school principals and kindergarten teachers regarding the importance of early childhood education and appropriate kindergarten transition activities are recommended. Enhanced kindergarten transition activities for parents, beginning in the child's preschool year and continuing through kindergarten might also be beneficial, especially if kindergarten teachers and principals are involved in shaping the content of those activities and associated materials.

4. *Align services with kindergarten requirements.*

Services are more effective if they are reinforced. To the extent possible, work closely with school districts, principals, and kindergarten teachers to make sure that services for parents and children are aligned with current kindergarten requirements.

5. *Connect school readiness services with other First 5-funded activities.*

First 5 Contra Costa supports many other services in the communities where school readiness services are offered. Making sure that school readiness families are linked with other First-5-funded services in their communities may deepen and strengthen the impact of the individual services. In addition, if multiple community agencies deliver consistent messages to families, the impact of each agency's services will be reinforced. Joint training opportunities for staff in First 5-funded agencies could facilitate such consistency.

6. *Consider incorporating routine health and development screenings and referrals into school readiness services.*

Many counties use contacts with families during First 5-funded school readiness efforts as opportunities to screen children for vision, hearing, and dental health problems and for developmental delays. First 5 Contra Costa might consider implementing such screenings to help assure that children receive services early in their lives, which can forestall later problems, and to help connect families with other services in the community. If other First 5-funded agencies are already providing such services, then linking families served through the school readiness initiative with those agencies will deepen and enrich the services families receive.

Program Implementation and Quality

7. *Increase consistency of implementation.*

Currently, services (e.g., in kindergarten transition activities, activities of outreach workers, and in the content and approach to parent education) vary across schools both within and across school districts. There are also differences in the background and qualifications of outreach workers and coordinators, and in the content of curricula employed in summer preschool programs. Some of this variation is undoubtedly intended and may be useful, but a focused examination of the variation and its results is needed to know which approaches are most successful. In addition, the interest expressed by kindergarten teachers and parents when, during interviews and focus groups, they learned of services available in other communities suggests that both groups might welcome efforts to consider available services and work toward greater consistency.

8. *Focus on families who are not enrolling or not staying enrolled.*

Families can only benefit from school readiness services if they enroll and stay engaged in them. During interviews, outreach workers and program administrators were not sure how to increase engagement, but it might be possible to test some ideas in the future, using a

rapid improvement cycle approach. In such an approach, a new strategy (e.g., providing incentives) is tried out for a few months. If the strategy is successful, it is retained; if not, a new approach is tried.

9. *Review requirements for staff, and make sure staff members have backgrounds appropriate for their responsibilities.*

Currently, personnel who conduct outreach and parent education activities in the First 5 program vary in background training and experience, and range from unpaid volunteers to paid staff and from part-time to full-time employees. But, if school readiness services increase in intensity and complexity over time (which is the thrust of the recommendations of this report), then staff should have the appropriate expertise in early childhood to meet their responsibilities. To help address issues of turnover, staff compensation should reflect any new job responsibilities.

Sustainability and Systems Change

10. *Concentrate on supportive school districts, and move services under school district management, if possible.*

Outreach workers and program administrators are well aware if their school district is supportive of the school readiness efforts. They feel stymied in their efforts to gain access to teachers, principals, and families when their district is not supportive, and they are legally prohibited from gaining access to school system records about the children or their families that could speed their success with family outreach and enrollment. In the long-run, the only way that the school readiness initiative can fulfill its promise is if services are embraced by and embedded in school districts. Now that the initiative is about 5 years old, it may be time to concentrate efforts in those districts where such support is manifest. Of course, it is possible that a district may be committed to school readiness but not to the current constellation of services provided by First 5. If flexibility in the use of school readiness funding is possible, given the requirements of First 5 California, it might be useful to enter into some concerted discussions with school district personnel about service alternatives.

11. *If districts are not supportive, consider embedding some services in the First 5 Centers.*

Where districts are not supportive even after discussions about changes in service mix, but First 5 remains convinced of the value of services provided, First 5 might consider embedding services in the First 5 centers that are increasingly becoming part of the community. It is important to note that while this approach may be a good alternative for parent education services, it probably would not be suitable for summer preschool or kindergarten transition activities, which require connections to the school district and to elementary schools to maximize success.

12. *Develop strategies for ongoing communication with school and school district personnel regarding First 5 activities, both those related to school readiness and other activities.*

During interviews and focus groups, many principals, teachers, and district personnel were curious about services funded by First 5, but really knew only about the kindergarten backpacks or the MDRDP assessments of children's school readiness. If a goal of the school readiness initiative is to forge stronger ties between early childhood services and agencies and local schools, then ongoing communication with schools and school districts about First 5, the services it offers, and the relevance of those services for the children and families in local communities can help create those connections. Such communication may also help build long-term support for early childhood activities within school districts.

13. *Support a fund developer to help school districts/contractors seek ongoing funding for services.*

All participating school districts are facing multi-million dollar cuts in their budgets. Even when they thought their districts were very supportive, program administrators worried that existing services would be cut back or would not keep pace with rising costs and enrollment. It is possible that some school readiness activities could be supported at least partially through private funds or through some larger federal grants. These are not ongoing sources of support, but they could be used to leverage funds and for one-time expenses. Program staff have little time to explore funding possibilities or to write grants, and some expressed doubt that their school district would actively seek support for school readiness activities when budgets for core activities are threatened. First 5 support for a fund developer could help programs and districts continue important services even when funding is scarce.

Monitoring and Evaluation

First 5 Contra Costa currently collects data for at least three purposes: (1) monitoring of program activities (contract compliance); (2) to assess the effectiveness of program services; and (3) to assess the school readiness of entering kindergartners in low-API schools, whether or not they have been recipients of First 5 funded services. Currently, the MDRDP is the sole measure used for the latter two purposes. The following recommendations focus on clarifying the multiple purposes of data collection and then selecting the right measures and procedures for each purpose.

14. *Simplify reporting requirements for monitoring, incorporate parent input, and develop mechanisms to provide ongoing feedback concerning data or reports submitted.*

Currently, First 5 Contra Costa requires monthly reports from contractors. Most program coordinators and staff felt that the reporting requirements were onerous. Further, they would like more regular and timely feedback on their reports. It was beyond the scope of this project to review the reporting forms and procedures or to consider what is needed

to satisfy First 5 Contra Costa and First 5 California legal requirements for reporting. Generally, however, if reporting requirements can be simplified, that will make it easier for contract agencies to report and for First 5 staff to review and reply to the reports they have received. In addition, while conducting parent focus groups, some parents noted that they thought an opportunity to meet regularly to speak to program administrators about the services they and their children were receiving was a good idea. As part of ongoing program monitoring, it might be helpful to incorporate a mechanism for routine feedback from parents.

15. Consider new strategies and measures for evaluating the effectiveness of First 5 program services.

To date, the primary measure that has been used to assess the effectiveness of First 5 program services has been the MDRDP. The MDRDP was developed as part of the statewide evaluation of First 5 California's school readiness initiative, and was conceptualized as a tool that would be used at least every other year to assess the developmental skills of children entering kindergarten classrooms in low API schools throughout the state. First 5 California has changed its approach toward evaluation. If the MDRDP is no longer used by First 5 California, there will no longer be comparable statewide data available. Further, while MDUSD *preschool* teachers and administrators like the MDRDP because they used results to guide their instructional practices, most of the *kindergarten* teachers interviewed in all districts did not like it. They felt that the instrument was not useful to them (in part because they did not receive results quickly enough), that it was somewhat redundant with existing measures that they were required by their districts to use to assess children, and that some of the items were too difficult to score. They did, however, value the MDRDP scale that assesses children's social-emotional development (because their school district measures did not always cover those skills).

For all those reasons, it may be time to select different measures and different methods to assess the effectiveness of First 5 school readiness services. A more targeted evaluation design, using standardized measures, conducted by external observers would be one way to assess the effectiveness of program services. A variety of designs are possible, including immediate pre-and post-tests of progress, conducting a longitudinal study to track the progress of students who have received First 5 services through their school years, and/or forgoing the large-scale annual assessments/surveys of thousands of children and families for more in-depth explorations with smaller samples. Additional measures should also be selected to assess some of the intermediate outcomes sought by the school readiness services (e.g., changes in parents' knowledge or attitudes about parenting; changes in parents' behavior at home and at school; changes in school practices), so that more fine-grained analyses of program effects will be possible in the future.

16. Consider new approaches to assessing countywide school readiness.

As currently administered, the MDRDP is also used as an annual measure of school readiness for a cohort of children in low-API schools entering kindergarten. A countywide assessment of school readiness might be a useful means of gauging how all the children in the county are doing, as well as a means of publicizing the importance of the early childhood years. If First 5 Contra Costa is interested in assessing school readiness countywide, it should consider sampling, using a measure other than the MDRDP (perhaps one selected in conjunction with the school districts), and it should make sure that the kindergarten teachers (or whomever is selected to administer it) are well trained in its use.

Conclusions

The First 5 school readiness initiative is an ambitious effort. It seeks to change the views and behaviors of parents, to affect the priorities of schools and school districts, and, through parents and schools, to alter the trajectory of children's lives. In its initial years, it has done much to reach families, to test approaches, and to form connections with schools. It has employed service strategies that are in the mainstream of accepted practice, and has even extended the field through its demonstration of the relationship of school transition practices to children's school readiness. Through all these efforts, a strong foundation for services has been established in many communities.

But, much more can be done. Child development research consistently demonstrates that many programs *can* make a difference for children and families, but whether they actually do depends on their quality and the way in which they are implemented. This is where the First 5 Contra Costa school readiness programs have the greatest opportunities for change. The challenge is to build upon the solid foundation established and to deepen the content and improve the quality of its school readiness services. By strengthening services, First 5 Contra Costa will have an opportunity to achieve its goal of changing the lives of children and families in the county.

Attachment 1.

First 5 Contra Costa School Readiness Services

Outreach: Outreach workers seek to identify families with children entering kindergarten, link parents and caregivers with schools, and provide educational resources and information about school readiness and kindergarten transition activities available locally.

Annual school readiness community fairs: Provide activities for parents and children to help families prepare their children for kindergarten and to connect families with local services (including First 5 school readiness services).

Parent education: Outreach workers and others provide home visits or workshops to help parents learn better parenting skills, activities they can do to promote their children's development, and the importance of being involved in their children's education. Services can take a variety of forms, and often include the distribution of free materials such as children's books, toys, or educational materials that parents can use to work on with their children. Examples of parent education services include:

Tigo: an early learning kit in the form of a soft-sided, bus-shaped carry-all. Developed by First 5 Contra Costa, Tigo contains a variety of materials for parents to use with their children. Parents learn how to make the best use of Tigo via three workshops or home visits.

Raising a Reader: A book-lending program that teaches and encourages parents and caregivers to lap-read with young children daily. First 5 Contra Costa does not fund this program, but many of the First 5 school readiness programs do make use of it.

Kindergarten backpacks: Child-sized backpacks, filled with materials and school supplies that parents can use with their children to prepare them for school. Distributed at community fairs, summer preschool programs, and kindergarten registration events.

Family literacy and parent cooperative preschools: Offered in MDUSD only, these part-day programs provide preschool experiences to children without previous preschool attendance. The programs are provided through Adult Education, and parents are required to either help out in the classroom weekly (cooperative preschool) or attend adult education/English as a Second Language classes (family literacy preschool).

Summer pre-kindergarten programs: Offered primarily in the West Contra Costa and Pittsburg Unified School Districts, these 4-6-week programs are for children entering kindergarten in the fall who have never been to preschool and/or for children who have

attended preschool but whose teachers suggest that they might benefit from continued services over the summer.

School transition activities: Outreach workers work with elementary school principals and kindergarten teachers to develop a plan to ease children's entry into kindergarten. Activities can include opportunities for parents and children to meet kindergarten teachers, take tours of the school, attend parent groups, and participate in kindergarten registration activities.