Uncovering the Impact of Quality

First 5 LA’s 2015-2020 Strategic Plan aims to improve outcomes for the greatest number of children prenatal to 5 in Los Angeles County by working with partners to strengthen families, build community capacity, increase access to high quality early care and education, and help ensure health services meet the needs of young children and their families. In order to maximize potential impact of its investments, First 5 LA is committed to being a learning organization and sharing lessons learned through research and reflection, so that best practices can be replicated and course corrections made if need be to improve the quality of services and support systems for young children and their families throughout L.A. County.

This research brief summarizes key findings from research on the outcomes of First 5 LA’s investment in Los Angeles Universal Preschool’s programs. Our hope is that lessons learned from these efforts will have a multiplier effect and help policymakers and practitioners improve the quality of early child care and education throughout the county, so that all children can enter kindergarten ready to achieve in school and life.
First 5 LA was created in 1998, as a result of California’s Proposition 10 tobacco tax. Since then, First 5 LA has invested more than $1.2 billion in efforts aimed at providing children from prenatal to age 5 a best start on life.

From the outset, a key priority of First 5 LA has been to improve access to affordable, high-quality early care and education in L.A. County, and to identify ways to improve the outcomes of all early childhood education programs.

In 2004, First 5 LA founded Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) as an independent nonprofit organization with a mission to improve access to, and the quality of, early education for children in Los Angeles County. Since then LAUP has leveraged First 5 LA’s initial allocation of $580 million to help more than 130,000 children in over 800 preschools prepare for success in kindergarten and beyond.

To support, evaluate and learn from this investment, First 5 LA commissioned the Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study (UPCOS). UPCOS is a multiyear study of LAUP programs and child progress conducted by Mathematica Policy Research in collaboration with First 5 LA and LAUP. The findings and lessons learned from this study have been used to continually improve programs and document outcomes. To see highlights of the Universal Preschool Outcomes Study key findings and project highlights click here:

In 2016, First 5 LA and LAUP began shifting the focus of their partnership. Going forward, the agencies will work together to promote adoption of a uniform quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) in L.A. County; improve early childhood education (ECE) workforce development; and advocate for policies that increase access to quality, affordable and sustainable early care and education for all children in L.A. County.

In a Quality Research Brief released last year, First 5 LA and Mathematica Policy Research examined the relationship between indicators of preschool quality and children’s success in the classroom using data from UPCOS Phase II and Phase III (2007-2010) as well as available administrative data collected by LAUP. This is a summary of those findings. For the full quality research brief click here [insert link].

The primary purpose of the research was to inform efforts underway to improve quality of early child education in L.A. County including those aimed at implementing a uniform QRIS countywide. A uniform quality rating system in L.A. County would help parents determine which preschools are right for their children and help providers continually improve the quality of their services, so the children of L.A. County enter kindergarten ready to succeed in school and life.

Using data collected from several quality measurement tools1, researchers looked at a number of quality indicators including: teacher interactions with children through emotional support, classroom organization and instructional support; the learning environment; and language development activities in the classroom. While both UPCOS and LAUP track student progress on multiple levels, for this project, researchers focused on two outcomes: expressive vocabulary and executive function.

This summary brief highlights four findings from this research for practitioners and policymakers to consider as they work to measure and improve the quality of early education programs throughout L.A. County.

1 Observed classroom quality measures used from UPCOS and LAUP include: Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS); Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale-Revised (ECERS-R); Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale-Revised (FCCERS); and Language Interaction Snapshot (LISn).
Quality depends on every adult in the classroom

When lead teachers have more years of education and higher levels of teaching permits, quality in the classroom tends to be stronger. The permit levels and education of the assistant teachers and aides contribute to quality as well. This means classroom quality depends on every adult in the classroom. These findings highlight the importance of ECE workforce development at all levels and taking the qualifications and contributions of all teachers, not just the lead teacher, into account in a QRIS.

The level of quality in the classroom matters to outcomes

Analysis of Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study data from 2009-2010, found that classrooms must pass a certain threshold of quality before children benefit from their preschool experience. At the low end of the quality spectrum, there are no discernable benefits to children. Classrooms must reach at least a low/moderate quality rating to show results. Once that threshold is passed children’s outcomes improve as classroom quality increases.

The analysis of LAUP data, however, found fewer associations between quality ratings and children’s outcomes, although in some cases, those associations were observed in the higher ranges of program quality ratings. The variance appears likely due to limitations in available LAUP data, which, could only be considered at the program level, due to data comparability issues. The Universal Preschool Child Outcomes Study on the other hand included individual classroom level data.

This finding underlines the need for quality rating systems to measure more than the average quality of classrooms in a program order to be sure to capture the effect of individual teachers and other aspects of quality that may vary from classroom to classroom in any one given program.

Figure 2. Average CLASS scores in LAUP center-based classroom and FCCs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>UPCOS-2 Classrooms</th>
<th>UPCOS-3 Classrooms</th>
<th>UPCOS-3 FCCs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Emotional Support</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>5.6</td>
<td>5.5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Classroom Organization</td>
<td>5.4</td>
<td>4.8</td>
<td>4.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instructional Support</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>2.8</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: UPCOS-2 spring classroom observation; UPCOS-3 winter classroom and FCC observation.

Note: Analyses are weighted to represent LAUP classrooms in spring 2008 and winter 2010, respectively.
Children do not experience or benefit from quality in the same way

Differences were found between how teachers talked with children who have English as their primary language and those whom have Spanish as the primary language in the home (dual language learners or DLLs). On average children with English as their first language were spoken to more frequently and on a wider range of topics than children with Spanish as the primary language spoken at home.

This research also found that Spanish speaking dual language learners benefited greatly from emotional support in the classroom perhaps more than other children. Classrooms that scored well in emotional support had teachers who were responsive to children, acknowledged their feelings and emotions, helped them resolve problems and supported positive peer relationships. In these classrooms where emotional support ratings were high, the expressive vocabulary of dual language learners increased significantly more rapidly than children overall once a basic threshold of quality was met.

These findings indicate that professional development and supporting quality rating systems should be aligned with the needs of the population that a program or individual classroom serves and supports.

Quality ratings appear to be appropriate for programs with different characteristics

The study found few associations between quality ratings and the type of program or source of funding. Both center-based and home-based family child care (FCC) programs showed similar patterns and quality ratings results. Although not conclusive this finding suggests that it is possible no one type of program, location or method of delivery provides better quality than another.

It should be noted, LAUP provides coaching support and other resources to support quality improvements in all programs in its networks. In L.A. County as a whole, these types of supports may be more readily available to center-based programs than to home-based family child care programs, which are more prevalent.

Figure 1. Children’s expressive vocabulary skills in classrooms that exceed or are below a threshold for quality

Children’s expressive vocabulary began to increase once quality (CLASS Emotional Support) reach a minimum threshold

![Graph showing the relationship between CLASS Emotional Support and expressive vocabulary](image_url)

Source: UPCOS-3 direct child assessments and classroom quality observations.
Note: Expressive vocabulary was measured with the Expressive One Word Picture Vocabulary Test (EOWPVT). Classroom quality was measured with the CLASS.
IMPLICATIONS

The multiyear UPCOS study of over a decade of investment in LAUP preschool programs has implications in the areas of workforce development, dual language learners, and QRIS.

Workforce

The findings underscore the need for multiple education and training opportunities for ECE teachers and caregivers at all levels. In L.A. County children under 5 years old are predominantly Latino, and many are dual language learners suggesting not only the need to recruit bilingual teachers but to help English-only speaking teachers understand how best to support the early child education and development of this population.

Dual Language Learners

Los Angeles County is home to more than 346,000 dual language learners of all ages. This represents nearly one-quarter of all dual language learners in the State of California. Dual language learners mostly speak Spanish as a second language (86%), but there are more than 65 languages listed by the State as “second languages spoken at home”.

First 5 CA is currently developing a $16 million dual language learner pilot to identify effective culturally and linguistically responsive strategies to better support children who are DLLs. The UPCOS findings suggest one such strategy would be to emphasize with teachers the importance of providing emotional support when working with dual language learners.

Because of the high proportion of dual language learners in L.A. County, especially children with Spanish spoken at home, L.A. County is well-poised to support statewide efforts and potentially lead the field in developing scalable strategies to help dual language learners develop and thrive.

Quality Rating Improvement System

LAUP utilized a 5-star quality rating improvement system to evaluate and improve programs while informing parents about programs, so they could choose what’s best for their child. UPCOS shows how over time such a system can have a cumulative effect on program quality and provide parents a choice for their children. However as of 2013, fewer than one-tenth of all center-based programs and only approximately 2% of home-based programs were participating in a QRIS effort in L.A. County (Advancement Project ECE Landscape).

The 5-star QRIS modeled by LAUP appears equally applicable in both center-based preschool and home-based child care, so the wide variety of types of ECE programs in the county should not alone be taken as a barrier to adopting a uniform countywide QRIS.

Table 1. Information used from UPCOS and LAUP

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Star ratings</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observed classroom quality</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher education and/or permits</td>
<td>X</td>
<td></td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s and families’ characteristics</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children’s outcomes</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>X</td>
<td>Linked UPCOS datac</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Additional data are available in both UPCOS-2 and 3. This table focuses on data used for this brief.

*Not all information from LAUP is available in all program years.

CONCLUSION

By reviewing data on classroom quality and child outcomes in the LAUP preschool network, First 5 LA identified three essential findings. First, teachers and other adults in the classroom are the key to quality. Second, the level of quality in the classroom matters to outcomes. Substandard early childhood education does not help young children develop. Third, not all children experience or benefit from quality the same way. Most notably dual language learners excel when provided emotional support in the classroom.

As First 5 LA’s 2015-2020 investment strategy shifts from supporting a limited number of direct services to countywide policy and advocacy aimed at having the greatest possible impact for children prenatal to 5 in L.A. County and their family, lessons learned from past investments are of vital importance. Only by bringing best practices to scale will we ensure all children in L.A. County start kindergarten healthy, protected and ready to succeed in school and life.

“This research further validates what’s been learned across the nation: implementing a quality rating improvement system positively impacts children and propels them onto a successful academic path. With our partners, we are striving to increase the number of early learning programs participating in QRIS, so these beneficial outcomes can impact more and more families throughout L.A. County and California.”

– Scott Hippert, Chief Executive Officer, LAUP