

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

Deanna S. Gomby

Executive Summary

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 more detailed descriptions of these services):

- ***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 – 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)
- ***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.

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 (1) to describe results obtained through the School Readiness initiative; and (2) to 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** with 60 individuals (24 parents, 17 kindergarten teachers, 5 principals/school personnel, 7 outreach workers/transition coordinators, 4 program administrators, and 3 school district administrators) across the participating communities.
- **New analyses of existing data** derived from (1) service logs; (2) 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) surveys of parents concerning characteristics of their families and aspects of parent behavior, and (4) surveys of kindergarten teachers, principals, and administrators concerning the kindergarten transition practices in place in their schools.
- **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).

Results

Results suggest that the First 5-funded services have done a great deal to reach families in the target communities and that families appreciate the services. Change is more visible in outcomes associated with easing children's transition to kindergarten than in promoting their developmental skills. Bolstering quality and implementation of services and altering the service mix would likely produce better outcomes. The following summarizes the results, highlighting first the most promising results, and then describing the more mixed findings.

Good News

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; more than 800 children and their parents have participated in the family literacy and cooperative preschools; and close to 650 children have participated in the summer preschool programs.

Parents and kindergarten teachers praise many of the services. Parents praise the services they or their children have received and are very appreciative of the materials (e.g., Tigo, Raising a Reader, kindergarten backpacks) that they have received. Kindergarten teachers are less familiar with parent education activities, but they do like the summer preschool services and kindergarten backpacks.

Changing kindergarten transition practices: Evidence of a changing school system, and associated with better outcomes for children. Since funding began, 32 of

35 targeted schools (all except the schools in Antioch) have developed plans to ease children's transition into kindergarten. Since 2004, more parents are reporting they have participated in kindergarten transition activities, and children who attend schools that have more of the 21 "best practices" for kindergarten transition in place show greater child development skills. (See Attachment 2 for details on parent participation in kindergarten transition activities over time. See Attachment 3 for a list of the 21 kindergarten transition activities.)

Children in Contra Costa low API schools score above their California counterparts on many aspects of school readiness. In 2007, children in low-API schools in Contra Costa County 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 included in the Contra Costa County sample did not receive First 5 funded school readiness services, so this measure reflects the average school readiness of children compared to that of their counterparts in California, rather than the results of First 5 services.)

Children who attend First 5-supported family literacy and cooperative preschools show improvements in development, with greater benefits for those who participate for longer periods of time. At enrollment in the preschool programs, from 0-12% of children had almost or fully mastered all MDRDP items. By the end of 6 months, the percentage had risen to 17%. Between 29% and 52% of children who had been enrolled for a year had almost or fully mastered all MDRDP items. Between 60-67% of children who attended the preschools for 2 years had almost or fully mastered all the MDRDP items. In comparison, in 2007, just 15% of children in Contra Costa County's low API schools were rated by their *kindergarten* teachers as having almost or fully mastered all MDRDP items.

Mixed News

Results were not uniformly positive. Many services were of fairly low intensity. Service implementation, family engagement, and commitment to the goal of school readiness varied across schools and districts, and benefits for children could be detected for only some of the First 5-funded services.

Low-intensity services. The parent education services provided by outreach workers (Tigo workshops and home visits, other parent education workshops) are increasing in intensity over time, but still remain relatively low intensity interventions. In 2006-07, families received an average of just 4-5 contacts and less than 7 hours of time from outreach workers.

Enrolling and engaging families is challenging. Across districts, program staff talked about the challenges of enrolling and keeping families in services, suggesting that increasing the intensity or duration of parent education services is difficult.

It is difficult to detect benefits for children or parents from many of the First 5-funded services. Harder+Company conducted multivariate analyses that examined the effects of many demographic, parent behavior, early childhood education, and school/district characteristics on important outcomes, such as parents' daily reading of books with their children, and children's school readiness (MDRDP) scores.

Results of the analyses of children's school readiness (MDRDP) scores suggest that children who attend preschool or who attend elementary schools that have many kindergarten transition activities in place are more likely to have mastered a broad range of developmental skills. In contrast, analyses revealed no benefits on children's school readiness scores associated with participation in other First 5-funded services (e.g., Tigo, parent workshops, summer preschool). Instead, child and family characteristics were associated with children's MDRDP scores (e.g., child gender, age, special needs status, and child's language), as well as whether the kindergarten teacher spoke the child's language, or the parent attended school events. Maternal education and family income were also associated with children's school readiness scores, although not significantly so.

In other words, analyses suggest that the effects of child and family background swamp the effects of most of the First-5-funded interventions, except for preschool and school transition practices, when considering children's developmental skills. When considering changes in parents' behavior (e.g., reading to their children each day), none of the First 5-funded interventions aimed at changing parent behavior (e.g., Tigo, parent education workshops) appears to be strong or intensive enough to generate change.

District commitment to school readiness differs, and where commitment is least, outreach workers feel the least connected or successful. Most district and school administrators support school readiness services as helpful precursors 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. 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, and First 5 outreach workers feel disconnected from schools and teachers.

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.***
 - Expanding access to preschool services will provide a more intensive intervention, directly focused on the child.
 - National research suggests that 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 also make sense.
2. ***Continue to distribute kindergarten backpacks, Tigo, and books, but mostly to encourage parent/child involvement in other, more intensive ongoing services.***
 - Some of the most important benefits of services that provide enjoyable educational materials to families could be that they encourage parents and children to become involved in more intensive, ongoing activities.
3. ***Enhance focus on transition to kindergarten services.***
 - Offer training for school principals and kindergarten teachers concerning the importance of the early childhood years and activities that can ease children's transition to kindergarten.
 - Consider expanding kindergarten transition activities, beginning during the child's preschool year and continuing through kindergarten.
4. ***Align services with kindergarten requirements.***
 - Aligning services with kindergarten requirements will reinforce their effect.
5. ***Connect school readiness services with other First 5-funded activities.***
 - Connecting school readiness services with other First 5-funded activities will deepen the impact of each individual service.
6. ***Consider incorporating routine health and development screenings and referrals into school readiness services.***
 - First 5 Contra Costa could, as many other counties do in their school readiness initiatives, 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. (See Attachment 4 for a list of common activities funded through school readiness efforts in other counties.)

Program Implementation and Quality

7. Increase consistency of implementation.

- Work toward greater consistency in services (e.g., in kindergarten transition activities, activities of outreach workers, and in the content and approach to parent education) across schools both within and across school districts.

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

- Use a rapid improvement cycle approach to test strategies aimed at increasing family engagement.

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

- Staff should have appropriate backgrounds in early childhood education to meet their parent education and other responsibilities.
- Compensation should be adjusted to match any new responsibilities.

Sustainability and Systems Change

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

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

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.

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

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.***
- 15. *Consider new strategies and measures for evaluating the effectiveness of First 5 program services.***
 Alternatives could include some or all of the following:
- More targeted evaluation of individual program services, employing external observers and standardized measures
 - Additional measurement of intermediate outcomes
 - Longitudinal studies to see how children who participated in First 5 services fare over time.
- 16. *Consider new approaches to assessing countywide school readiness.***
- First 5 Contra Costa could work with school districts and other key partners to design the approach to sampling and to select the measures to be used.

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).

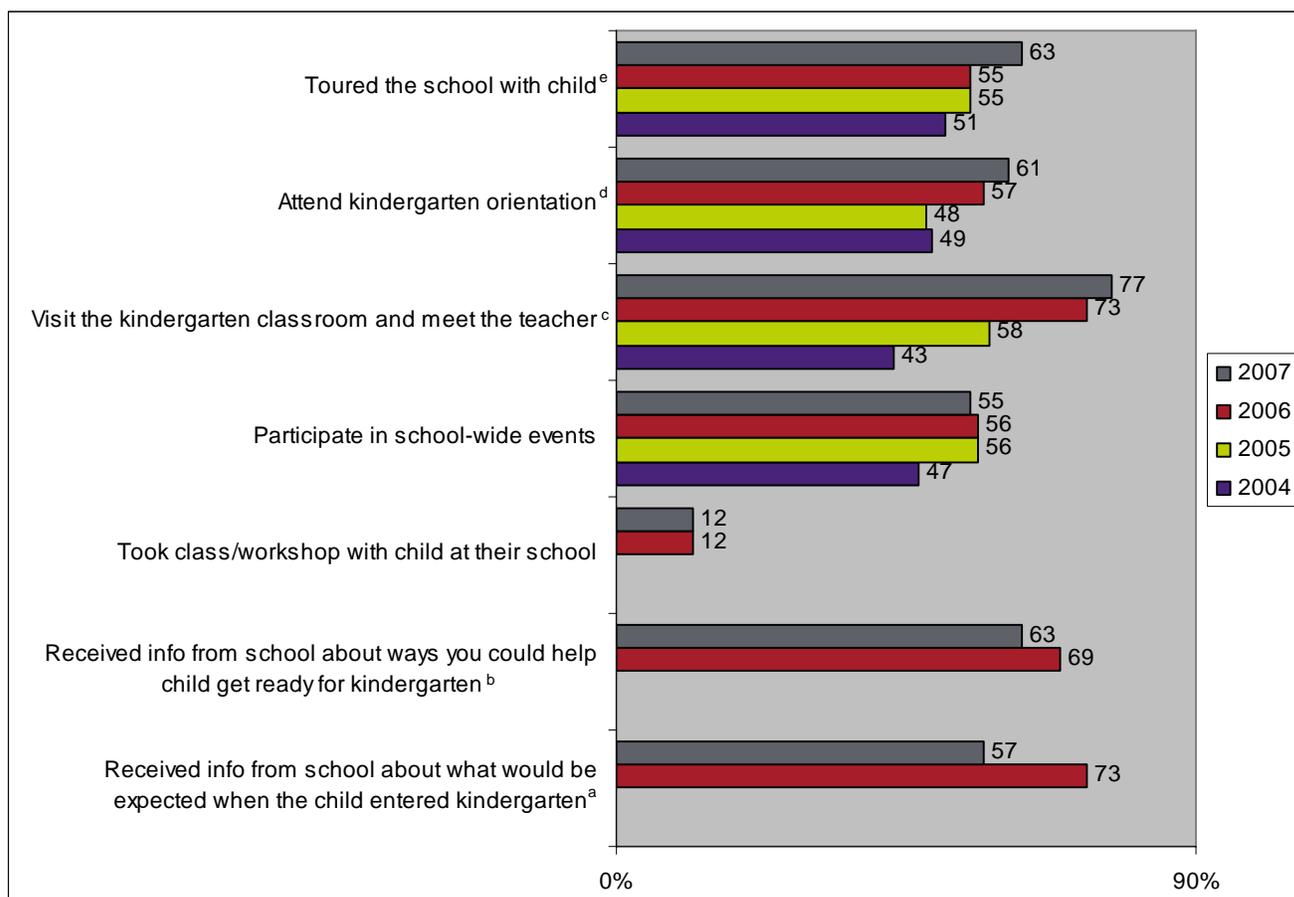
Summer pre-kindergarten programs: Offered primarily in the West Contra Costa and Pittsburg Unified School Districts, these 4-6-week programs are for children entering kindergarten in the fall who have never been to preschool and/or for children who have

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.

Attachment 2.

**Parent Participation in School-Based Transition Activities:
Targeted Schools, 2004-2007**



*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

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

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

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

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

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

Attachment 3. Kindergarten Transition Planning Activities

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	67%

readiness skills of every entering kindergarten child.	
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%

Attachment 4.
School Readiness Services Offered 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 (e.g., HIPPIY, PAT, PCHP)	Articulation activities between preschool and kindergarten teachers
Treatment (including referrals to treatment for children identified during screenings)	Assessment/case management	Playgroups, Mommy and Me groups for infants/toddlers	Early kindergarten registration day(s)
Health and nutrition education (workshops/home visits)	Family counseling	Family literacy/early literacy programs	Workshops/day(s) for parents on kindergarten readiness
Counseling	Male/father involvement	Summer preschool bridge programs	Kindergarten orientation day(s)
Safety programs	Parenting education (classes, home visits)	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/other 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	