School Readiness in Alameda County

Results of the 2008 Pilot Assessment

Executive Summary

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Background

In 2008, over 16,000 children began kindergarten in Alameda County, entering school settings that ranged from the urban neighborhoods of Oakland to the suburban settings of outlying Livermore. Although the students in Alameda County represent a disparate mix of demographic and socioeconomic backgrounds, a large portion of them come from households that are struggling; according to American Community Survey estimates, 15 percent of children under 18 in Alameda County are living in poverty.   First 5 Alameda County (F5AC) delivers services and support to many of these families in need, providing community support to enhance the health and well-being of children through their first five years. In 2008, F5AC commissioned Applied Survey Research (ASR) to conduct a pilot research project to assess how ready for school new kindergarten students were in three targeted school districts with low Academic Performance Index (API) scores. These districts have been the focus of many F5AC services, as schools with Low API scores tend to be located in neighborhoods with higher than average levels of poverty, neighborhood violence, and poor health outcomes, as well as less access to formal ECE experiences. The Fall 2008 readiness assessment investigated three primary questions:

1. How – and to what extent – are the sampled kindergarten students ready for school?

2. What family factors and child characteristics are associated with heightened school readiness?

3. What is the relationship between participation in F5AC programs and children's school readiness?

Overview of the Assessment Method

Nine years ago, ASR created a method of school readiness assessment that has since been used in several Bay Area counties, as well as other parts of California and in other states. F5AC contracted with ASR to implement a pilot assessment in Alameda County in 2008, inviting schools and classrooms in three districts – San Lorenzo Unified School District, Livermore Valley Joint Unified School District, and Oakland Unified School District – to participate. Participating kindergarten teachers were trained to serve as expert observers, rating the proficiency of each child in their classroom across 24 readiness skills. Over eighty percent of parents agreed to have their children assessed (consent rate = 81%), yielding observations of 577 children. These observations delivered very detailed information about the sampled children's readiness as they entered kindergarten– both the areas in which children were well-skilled, as well as the areas in which they needed extra supports.

Detailed observations of the children were enriched by information gathered on each child's family; parents of those children in the assessment were asked to complete a survey that provided a window into the family and community factors that are associated with children who arrive ready (and not) for kindergarten. The response rate for the *Parent Information Form* was very high – 93

percent of families returned a completed form. In addition, all participating teachers reported their viewpoints on and priorities for readiness via a *Teacher Survey*. ASR drew upon these sources of information – child assessments as measured by the *Kindergarten Observation Form (I and II)*, family information as measured by the *Parent Information Form*, and teacher viewpoints gathered via the *Teacher Survey* – to construct a comprehensive picture of children's readiness for school, as well as the factors associated with higher readiness levels. An additional source of data came from F5AC's ECChange database, which contains records of those who have received F5AC services. Children in the assessment were matched to this database in order to examine the association between their readiness levels and their participation in F5AC programs and services.

Figure A. **Sources of Information to Assess the Readiness of Incoming Kindergarten Students**
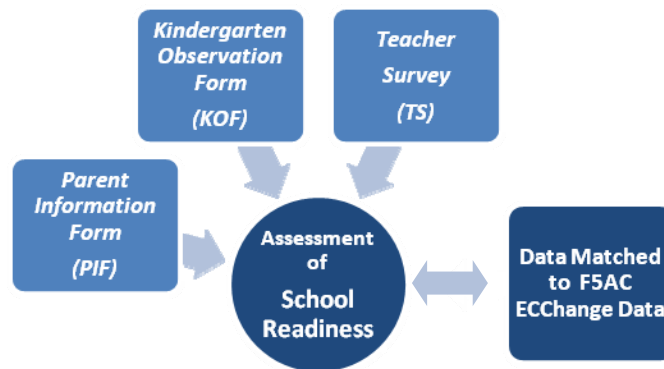
Findings

Students and families in the assessment

Information collected in the Alameda County school readiness assessment underscores the challenges that are present both in these low API schools and among many of the families of the students, including the following:

- Sixty-three percent of the students were English Learners.

- Forty-nine percent of students spoke Spanish as their primary language, 36 percent spoke English, and six percent spoke Chinese. Small percentages spoke Filipino/Tagalog, Vietnamese, Farsi/ Dari, or another language as their primary language.

- Fifty-two percent of children had a mother whose highest level of education was high school or less.

- Many families were struggling financially; 51 percent indicated that their household income was less than $35,000, 39% were on Medi-Cal, and 10% were receiving insurance through Healthy Families.

- Almost one in ten students (9%) had been born to a teen mother; almost one in four (23%) were from single parent households, and another 23 percent of parents had lost a job in the past year.

Figure B.   Portrait of Students

Child/ Family Characteristic	Percent of students
Ethnicity	
Hispanic/Latino	56%
Asian	13%
Caucasian	15%
African American	8%
Pacific Islander	2%
Alaskan Native or American Indian	<1%
Multi-racial	6%
Other / don't know	2%
Percent English Learners	63%
Primary language	
Spanish	49%
English	36%
Chinese/ Mandarin/ Cantonese	6%
Filipino/ Tagalog	3%
Vietnamese	2%
Farsi or Dari	1%
Korean	0%
Other language	4%
Mother has no education post high school	52%
Markers of low income	
Household income is less than $35,000	51%
Receive Medi-Cal	39%
Receive Healthy Families	10%
Child was born to a teen mother	9%
Single parent household	23%
Parent lost job in the last year	23%

Source: *Kindergarten Observation Form (2008).*

Note: Percentages may not sum to 100% due to rounding. Sample sizes range from 422-568.

**How – and to what extent – are children ready for kindergarten?**

To be well-prepared for kindergarten, children need to know much more than their ABCs. This assessment, as well as several previous readiness assessments in the region, has demonstrated that there are multiple dimensions to kindergarten readiness. Statistical exploration of children's performance across 24 readiness skills revealed that skills reliably sort into four *Basic Building Blocks* of readiness:

1. *Self-Care & Motor Skills;*

2. *Social Expression;*

3. *Self-Regulation*; and

4. *Kindergarten Academics*

Figure C shows the 24 individual skills on which children were assessed, as well as how the skills sort into the four *Basic Building Blocks*.

Figure C. *Basic Building Blocks* **of Readiness**
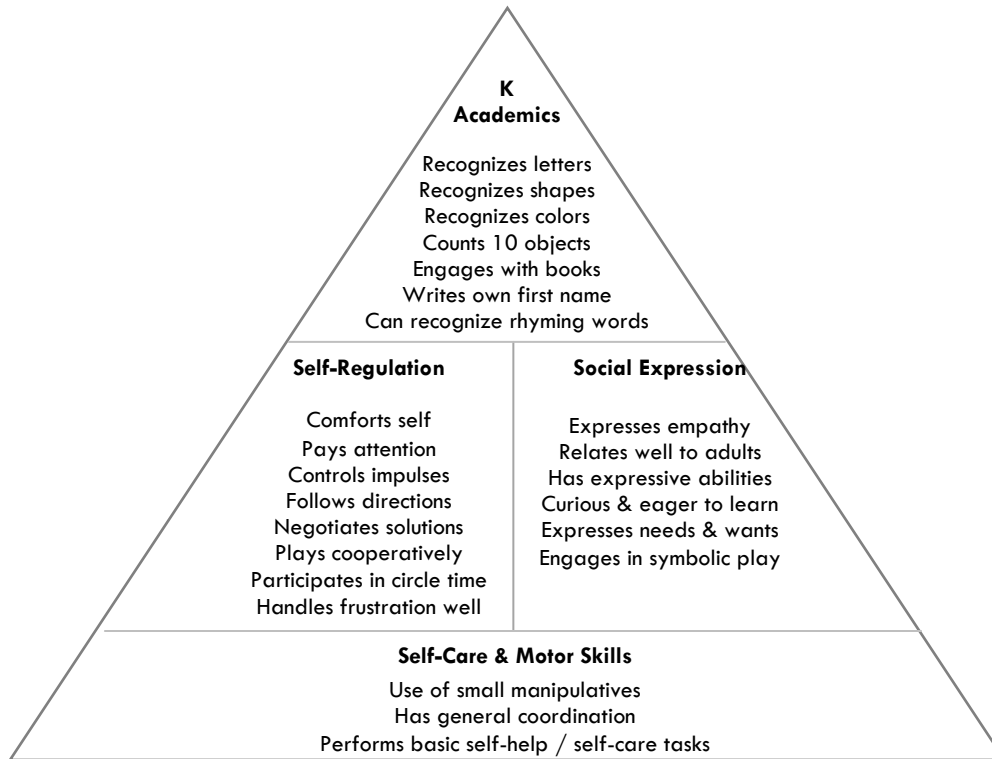
The chart that follows shows children's readiness levels across the *Basic Building Blocks*. Overall, children scored between the "In progress" and "Proficient" levels. Children tended to score highest on *Self-Care & Motor Skills* (average score = 3.51) and to have the greatest room to grow in *Kindergarten Academics* (average score = 3.01).

Figure D. **Average Readiness Scores, Overall and for Each *Basic Building Block***
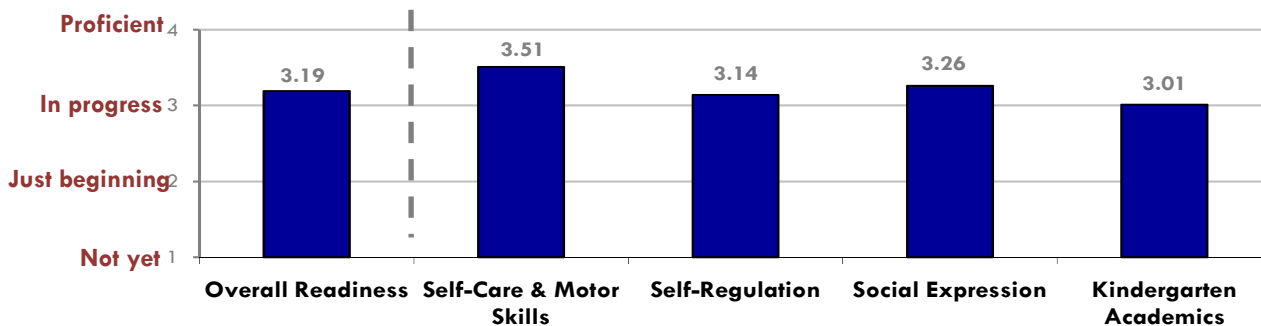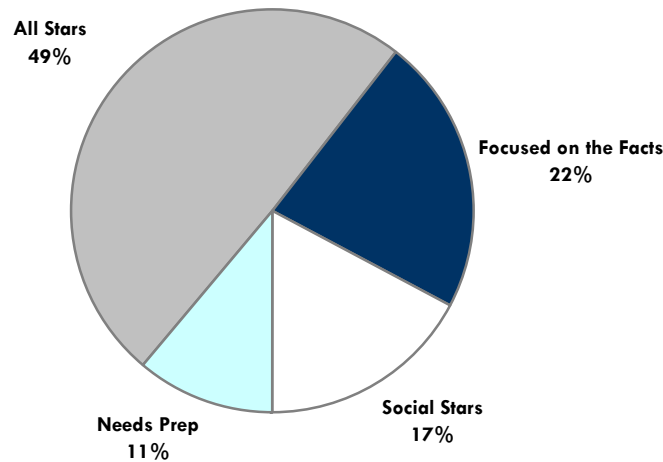

Source: *Kindergarten Observation Form I (2008)*

Note: Scores are based on 537-540 students. Means can range from 1 to 4. Scale points are as follows: 1=not yet, 2=just beginning, 3=in progress, 4=proficient.

Children assessed in Alameda County exhibited different patterns of readiness strengths and challenges. For a more detailed look at different patterns of readiness, children were sorted into one of four *Readiness Portraits – All Stars, Social Stars, Focused-on-the-Facts,* and *Needs Prep* students – based on their pattern of proficiency across the readiness skills.[1]

- Just about half (49%) half of children entered kindergarten classrooms as *All Stars* – near-proficient across the board in all four *Basic Building Blocks* of readiness. These children were well-prepared to succeed in school.

- Who demonstrated the greatest readiness needs? Children in the *Needs Prep* group had not yet learned – or were just beginning to learn – almost all of the 24 readiness skills. Approximately one in ten children (11%) sorted into the *Needs Prep* group, which is a level comparable to that found in neighboring counties.

- The remaining children exhibited mixed patterns of readiness. *Social Stars* (17% of children) were well-equipped on the social-emotional dimensions of readiness, but they had needs in the realm of *Kindergarten Academics* – learning their letters, numbers, shapes, and colors. In contrast, the *Focused-on-the-Facts* children (22% of children) had mastered their early academics; however, they demonstrated greater challenges in the social-emotional areas of readiness (skills within the *Self-Regulation* and *Social Expression* dimensions).

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[1] Children were sorted into one of the four *Readiness Portraits* via a data-driven technique called cluster analysis.

Figure E.   The Prevalence of Each Readiness Portrait

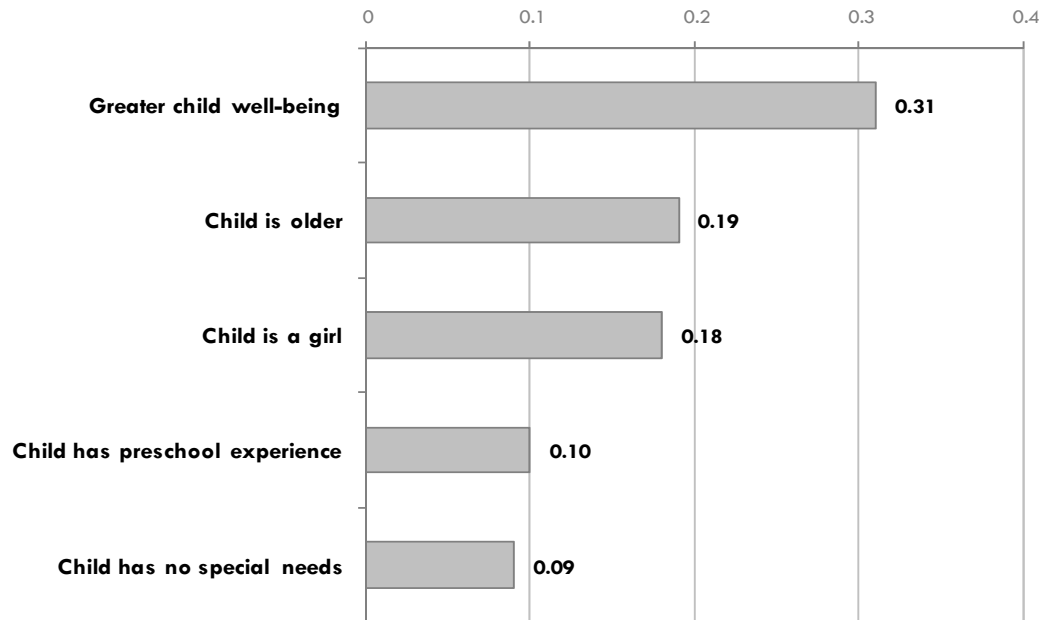Source: *Kindergarten Observation Form I (2008).*

Note: This chart is based on 540 students.

What family factors and child characteristics are associated with heightened school readiness?

A set of analyses was conducted to examine what factors were associated with greater school readiness. These analyses allowed us to take into account all important measured variables simultaneously, so that the relationship between readiness and particular family, student, and school-level factors could be examined after "ironing out" the influence of other, related factors.

Results indicated that five factors explained nearly one third of the assessed Alameda County students' readiness scores. The strongest predictor of readiness was whether children scored highly on an index of well-being. This three-item index gave children a score based on whether teachers indicated that they seemed well-rested, well-fed, and generally healthy. Most children scored highly on this index, but there were a small number of children who did not appear to their teachers to have optimal levels of well-being; these children also tended to struggle with their readiness skills. This index should be interpreted with some caution, as it was a subjective assessment provided by children's teachers.

As found in many other readiness assessments, results also showed that older children tended to be more ready for school than were younger children, and girls were typically more ready than boys. Children with special needs were not as ready for school as were children who did not have special needs. And, finally, children who had attended preschool had higher readiness levels than did children who had not been exposed to preschool.

Figure F. **Relative Strength of Factors Significantly Associated with Overall School Readiness**

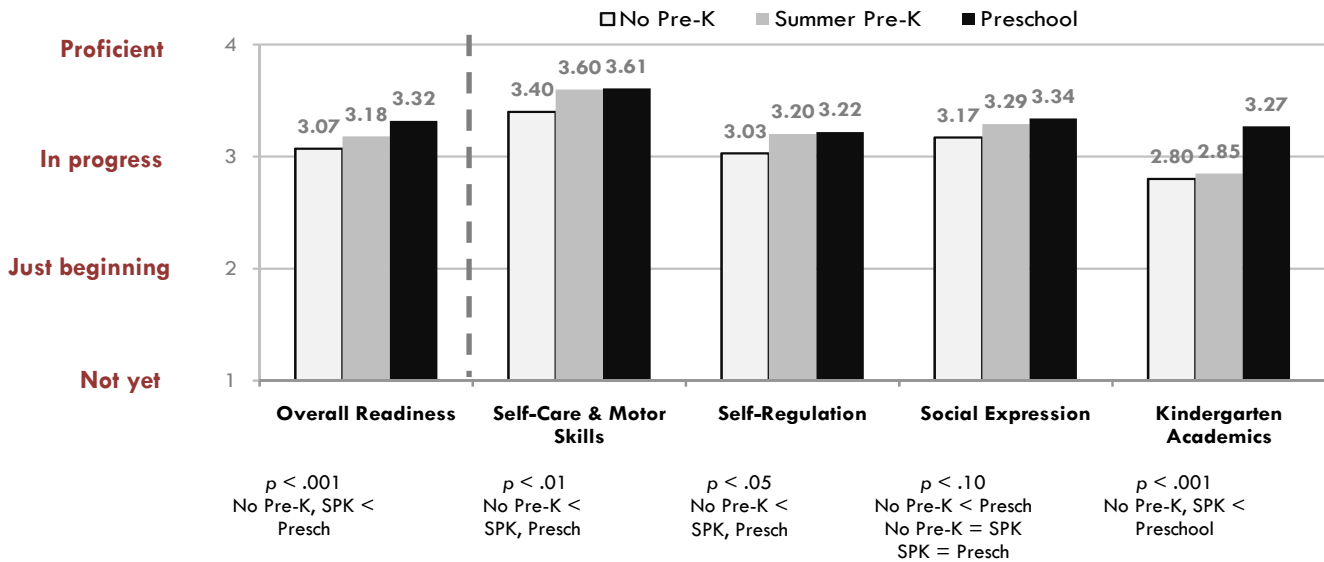Source: Kindergarten Observation Form I and Parent Information Form (2008)

Note: Values for each factor listed above represent standardized beta coefficients that were significant ($p < .05$). For a full listing of all variables entered into the model, see text. The overall regression model was highly significant, $F = 9.58$, $p < .001$, explaining 30% of the variance in kindergarten readiness ($R^2 = .34$; Adj. $R^2 = .30$).

What is the relationship between participation in F5AC programs and children's school readiness?

Analyses looking at the individual *Basic Building Blocks* of readiness found that enrollment in F5AC's Summer Pre-K was a significant predictor of enhanced *Self-Care & Motor Skills* as well as stronger *Self-Regulation* skills. In another set of analyses, ASR compared the average readiness levels of participants in F5AC's Summer Pre-K program to their peers' readiness, after adjusting for several differences across the groups of children. Children were divided into three groups: (1) those without preschool experience of any kind; (2) those who were verified through the F5AC database as having attended the Summer Pre-K program; and (3) those who had attended full (verified) preschool.

Significant readiness differences were found among the three groups. Across the spectrum of school readiness skills, Summer Pre-K students had higher readiness scores than students with no pre-K experience. This difference was statistically significant for *Self-Care & Motor Skills* and *Self-Regulation*; for *Social Expression,* the Summer Pre-K students scored higher than their no-pre-K counterparts, but the difference was not significant. There was a slight boost in the *Kindergarten Academics* scores of Summer Pre-K students, but the difference was fairly small, as might be expected given that the program focuses on social and emotional skill development more than academics. Moreover, on *Self-Care & Motor Skills*, *Self-Regulation*, and *Social Expression*, Summer Pre-K students were performing nearly at the levels of children who had attended full preschool. On *Kindergarten Academics* (which were not a core component of the Summer Pre-K) they were still significantly below students with preschool experience.

Figure G. **Students' Readiness as a Function of Pre-K Experience (Means Adjusted for Family Risk, Special Needs Status, and District)**

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form I (2008)

Note: Means can range from 1 to 4. Scale points are as follows: 1=not yet, 2=just beginning, 3=in progress, 4=proficient. Scores are based on 172-174 "No Pre-K" students, 85 "Summer Pre-K" students, and 213-214 "Preschool" students. Differences in mean scores are indicated above, according to oneway analyses of covariance, controlling for district, special needs status, and average family risk score on a 10-item risk index; post-hoc tests revealed marginal or significant group differences as indicated above.

Summary

Data from the Fall 2008 readiness assessment in Alameda County revealed a group of children and families that came from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, with almost two thirds speaking a language other than English as their primary language. Many of these families were also struggling financially.

Despite these challenges, however, children were entering kindergarten generally well-prepared for school. Average levels of readiness were well above the "In progress" level, and almost half of students were nearly proficient across the full spectrum of readiness skills. Some children – about one in ten – did enter kindergarten with strong readiness needs across the board.

Examinations of the impacts on children's readiness showed some areas where family and community supports may be able to make a difference in enhancing school readiness levels. Greater child well-being, being older, and having preschool experience are associated with higher levels of readiness upon kindergarten entry. In addition, data revealed that short-term programs like F5AC's Summer Pre-K program is a promising intervention for enhancing children's readiness for those who have not had the benefit of a longer-term preschool experience.