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California Children Who Could Benefit Most Are Least Likely to be in Quality Preschool
New research from the RAND Corporation shows at best, 15 percent of them are in high-quality programs that prepare children for kindergarten

In the first comprehensive statewide look at use and quality of early care and education for preschool-age children in California, RAND Corporation researchers found that the quality of the state's preschools is mixed. Most are engaging and emotionally supportive, but they fall short on key features that prepare children for kindergarten, according to the report released today.

"California must – and can – do better," said Preschool California President Catherine Atkin. "All children deserve access to high-quality preschool that ensures they will start kindergarten with an equal opportunity to learn."

RAND researchers surveyed a representative group of 2,000 California parents with preschool-age children and more than 700 California providers, and observed and evaluated about 250 child care and preschool centers. Their top findings include challenges and opportunities for California's preschools:

- The children who could benefit most from preschool are least likely to be in it.
- At best, 15 percent of those who could benefit most are in high-quality programs that prepare them for success in K-12.
- Just under half of 3 and 4 year olds in economically disadvantaged families are in center-based preschool programs of any quality, compared to 70 percent of those in more well-off families.
- Forty-five percent of children whose mothers have less than a high school degree are in center-based preschools, compared to 80 percent of children whose mothers have a graduate or professional degree.
- Mexican American, African American and low income parents reported the most difficulty finding the care they wanted, according to the parent survey.
- Quality falls short across the board. There are no demographic or socioeconomic groups that, on average, are in high-quality programs that prepare them for kindergarten.

Today's findings follow an earlier RAND study that showed the children who could benefit most from preschool are those who start behind in kindergarten and stay behind in elementary school. That study found that significant percentages of children fall short of standards in the early grades, but some groups fall short by even larger margins – English learners, students whose

parents did not graduate from high school, African Americans, Latinos and economically disadvantaged children. “We know that high-quality preschool helps close that achievement gap by addressing the school readiness gap,” said State Superintendent of Public Instruction Jack O’Connell. “We must work toward the day when all California children have access to high-quality preschool, so no child starts school already behind.”

California’s Successful Preschool Models: What Parents Should Look For

California does have successful models for providing high-quality preschool, including some funded by state and local First 5 commissions, according to other California research. Those programs employ well-trained and qualified teachers, provide financial incentives for preschools to reach and maintain higher levels of quality and offer rich learning environments with research-based curricula.

“California must build on these successes to create a high-quality early care and education system that helps close our achievement gap and benefits our state’s economy,” said Kris Perry, executive director of First 5 California.

To find a high-quality preschool, these are a few of the things parents should look for:

1. What kind of training and education do the teachers have?
2. Are the teachers and kids engaged in conversations?
3. Can teachers tell you not only what they are doing, but why?
4. Does the program use a curriculum to guide learning?
5. Does the program welcome and involve families?
6. Does the space have separate learning centers (reading, art, dramatic play, writing, etc.) and a well-equipped playground?

For more information, including links to the RAND study and executive summary, visit: <http://www.preschoolcalifornia.org/rand>.

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Preschool California is a nonprofit advocacy organization working to increase access to high-quality preschool for all of California’s children, starting with those who need it most.