

June 2011

JOHN W. GARDNER CENTER for Youth and Their Communities

Educational Outcomes for Preschool for All Participants in Redwood City School District

Background

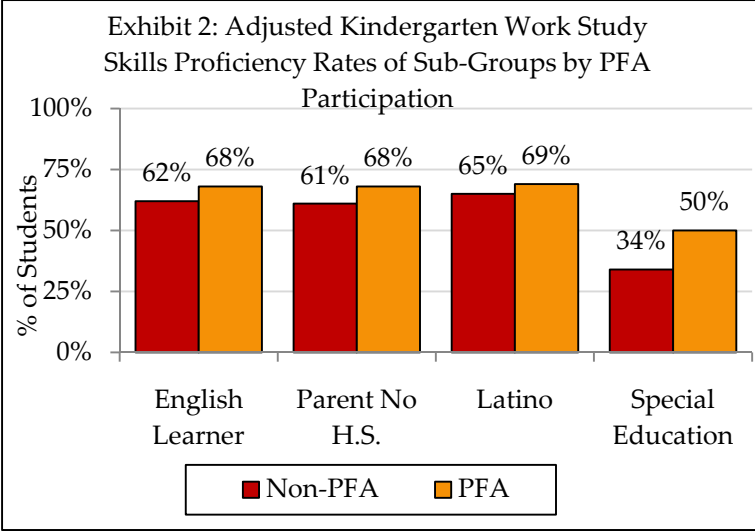
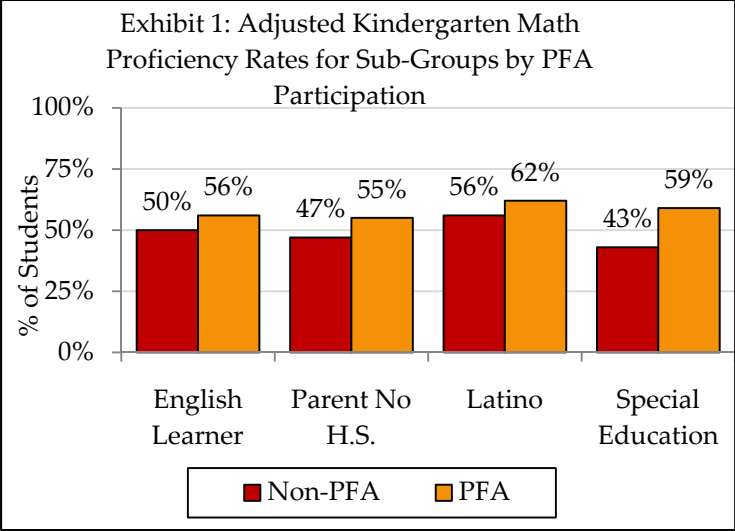
Partners at the San Mateo County Office of Education, which administered the *Preschool for All* (PFA) program, and Redwood City School District (RCSD) approached the John W. Gardner Center for Youth and Their Communities (JGC) at Stanford University to conduct a study of the early elementary school outcomes of PFA graduates. PFA San Mateo County was established in 2004 as a five-year demonstration project aimed at reducing the achievement gap by supporting high-quality, targeted preschool programs for three- and four-year-old children. This snapshot examines elementary school outcomes for PFA participants using the Youth Data Archive (YDA) to link individual records of PFA students to their records in RCSD. We followed three cohorts of PFA participants as they transitioned into elementary school, 876 of whom we could track into Kindergarten and 497 of whom we could follow through first grade.

Findings and Interpretation

Because PFA was a targeted program, demographic differences between participants and non-participants were expected. Indeed, PFA participants were more likely to be Latino, have a parent who did not complete high school, be an English learner, and receive Free or Reduced Price Lunches once they entered elementary school. In that sense, PFA participants in the Redwood City community were more similar demographically to children who did not attend preschool than those who did. However, prior research indicated that 89% of kindergarteners in RCSD had some preschool experience, typically in a private preschool. Because we were unable to identify which students attended private preschool or none at all, this study essentially compares PFA participants to children who, for the most part, attended private preschool.

Based on their report cards, the students who attended PFA had lower proficiency rates in five subject areas: math, listening/speaking, writing, reading, and work study skills compared to those who did not attend PFA (but mostly attended private preschools). However, when we adjusted for PFA participants' demographic characteristics, which place them at higher risk of academic failure, we found that PFA students had about the same outcomes as non-PFA participants. We also found that for several sub-groups of

participants, PFA was associated with a boost in academic achievement in two subjects. Exhibits 1 and 2 below show that in math and work study skills, the PFA program added an academic boost to certain student groups (all findings were statistically significant).



When we followed some of these same students into first grade, we did not find a statistically significant difference in proficiency rates between PFA and non-PFA students in any subject. However, it is unclear whether this is because the effects of the program do not last over time or because we were not able to follow as many students into first grade and it is harder to detect a program effect with a smaller number of students.

Approximately 17% of PFA participants attended the program for two consecutive years at ages three and four respectively. Children attending PFA for two years had proficiency rates that were 6 to 10 percentage points higher in all subjects than their counterparts who did not attend PFA, without adjusting for demographic differences. Children attending PFA for one year, at age four, had kindergarten proficiency rates in all five subjects that were similar to those of children who did not attend PFA. These findings speak to the importance of preschool not only the year prior to kindergarten, but also preschool at age three.

From Findings to Action

PFA San Mateo County is no longer operating, but the results of this analysis have provided fuel for county officials to attempt to revive the program. In today’s economic climate this is a challenging endeavor. Still, this analysis provides important information to local and other policymakers as they continue considering how to best serve students. The vast literature on best practices in preschool helped inform the San Mateo County PFA program, but ultimately the program developed in this area responded to the unique needs of this community. This research illustrates the value of using longitudinal administrative datasets to examine the outcomes associated with early childhood programs in the local community context. The study also points to the importance of collecting high quality data on students’ preschool experiences and using common identifiers in order to be able to link preschool data to elementary school data.