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Report to the Education Interim
Committee

Preschool: Grants for High Quality School Readiness Programs

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Preschool: Grants for High Quality School Readiness Programs

STATUTORY REQUIREMENT

U.C.A. Section 35A-15-303

requires the Utah State Board of Education, in consultation with the School Readiness Board, to conduct an ongoing review and evaluation each school year of grant recipients under the Becoming High Quality School Readiness Program and Expanded Student Access to High Quality School Readiness Program. The State Board is required to submit an annual report including a summary of an evaluation of these programs to the Education Interim Committee.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. This report is provided to the Education Interim Committee as a summary of an evaluation of and the efficacy of both the high-quality school readiness grant programs. During the 2019-2020 school year, both grant programs served a total of 24 preschool programs consisting of 9,864 students with 29% of those students qualifying as eligible students as defined in statute. Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality public programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in both Literacy and Numeracy compared to students entering from non-high-quality public programs. High-quality program participants performed at higher levels than the state average in Literacy. Both groups performed at lower levels than the state average in Numeracy. Due to disruptions from COVID-19, the Preschool Entry Exit Profile (PEEP) exit assessment was not administered in the 2019-2020 school year. In future years, entry data will be paired with exit outcomes to evaluate program efficacy.

BACKGROUND

In the 2014 General Session, the Legislature passed House Bill 96, *Utah School Readiness Initiative*, which provided funding for preschool programs. The Utah School Readiness Initiative operated with the goals of increasing school readiness, improving academic performance, and reducing remediation costs associated with poor academic outcomes. Under the Initiative, the School Readiness Board could enter into results-based financing contracts with private entities to fund proven high-quality early childhood education programs serving at-risk students. The High Quality School Readiness (HQSR) Grant Program was also established with this Initiative. Existing preschool programs could apply for this funding to improve the elements of quality in their program. The program was designed so that the improvements were implemented over the course of three years, at which point the participating program could transition to the HQSR Expansion program.

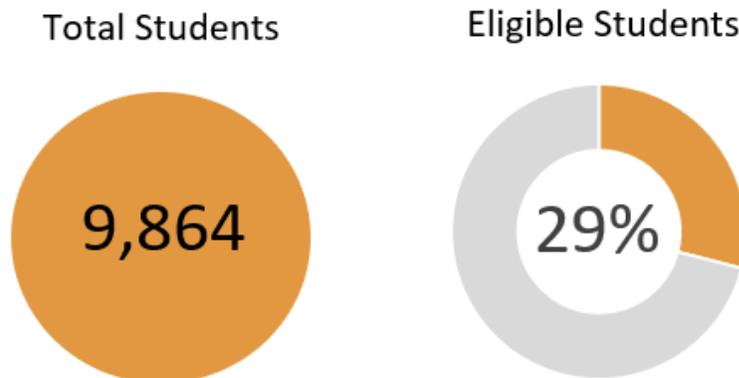
In 2016 in Senate Bill 101, the High Quality School Readiness - Expansion (HQSR-E) grant program was established to expand access to high-quality school readiness programs for eligible children. The HQSR-E program provided grant funds to LEAs and private providers with existing early education programs deemed high quality, as determined by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Third Edition (ECERS-3) and some additional rubric criteria. School readiness programs were eligible to apply for HQSR-E funding if they provided services to economically disadvantaged 4-year-old children, could illustrate how funds would be used to expand their preschool programs, and were deemed high quality based on the criteria noted above. The HQSR-E program ended in June 2019 but was replaced by the Expanded Student Access to High Quality School Readiness Programs (ESA) grant program.

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. The state appropriated \$6 million from the General Fund to continue the support of program funding previously provided by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reserve funding through the HQSR-E grant. This appropriation was combined with the ongoing \$3 million from the previous HQSR grant, for a total of \$9 million supporting both the Becoming High Quality (BQ) and ESA grant programs.

Also included in Senate Bill 166, the School Readiness Board governs both the BQ and ESA grant programs for both public and private providers. The BQ program provides funding to help existing preschool programs increase elements of high quality. The ESA program allows high-quality preschool programs to expand access and provide seats to eligible students. An eligible student is one who is economically disadvantaged and whose parent or guardian reports they also have experienced at least one risk factor (mother is 18 or younger, parents with a low reading ability, exposure to substance abuse, etc.) or a student who is an English learner.

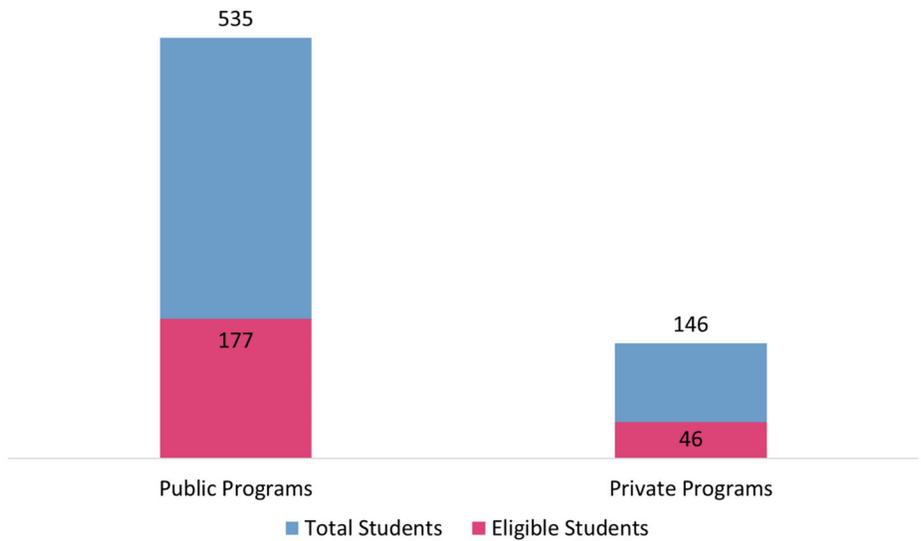
PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

During the 2019-2020 school year, the Becoming Quality and Expanded Student Access programs served a total of 24 preschool programs consisting of 9,864 students. Of these students, 2,481 (29%) were eligible based on the criteria described above.



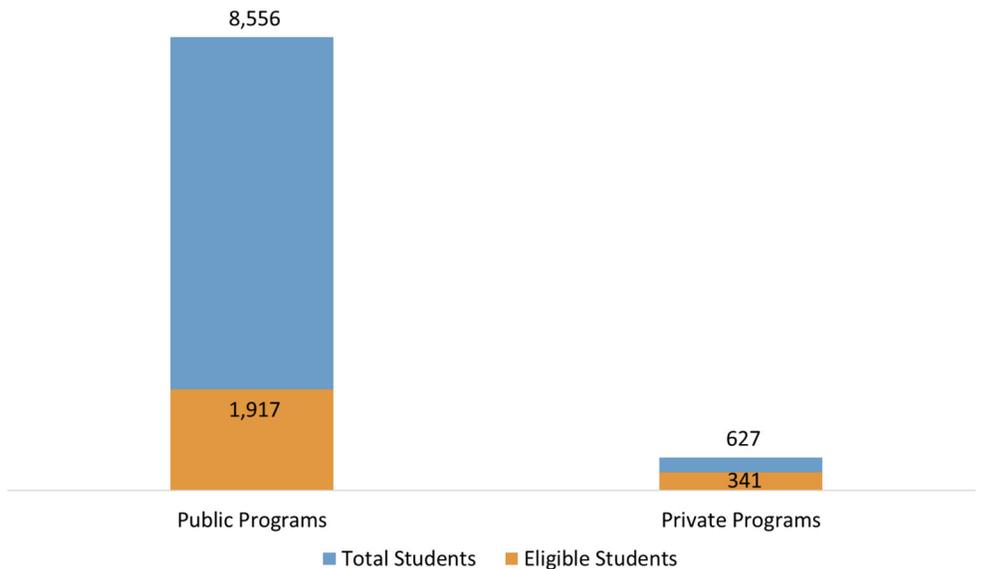
The Becoming Quality grant program served a total of 681 students with 535 students in public programs and 146 students in private programs. Of the 535 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 33% (177 students) qualified as eligible students. Of the 146 students in a grant-receiving private preschool program, 32% (46 students) qualified as eligible students.

Becoming High Quality Grant Program Participation, 2019-2020 School Year



The Expanded Student Access grant program served a total of 9,183 students with 8,556 students in public programs and 627 students in private programs. Of the 8,556 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 22% (1,917 students) qualified as eligible students. Of the 627 students in a grant-receiving

Expanded Student Access Grant Program Participation, 2019-2020 School Year



private preschool program, 54% (341 students) qualified as eligible students.

PROGRAM EVALUATION

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the School Readiness Board have been tasked with determining or developing a tool to determine whether a school readiness program is a high-quality program. This determination is still under discussion by the School Readiness Board. The tool currently in use is the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Third Edition (ECERS-3). The School Readiness Board has also convened a Quality Tool Research Subcommittee to investigate or develop other available tools. The Subcommittee has primarily researched the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool. The ECERS-3 and CLASS tools are the most widely used in the field and both tools are currently under consideration by the School Readiness Board for future school years. Four observers who have been classified as “reliable” by the ECERS-3 creators conduct the observations; the team consists of one employee from the Department of Workforce Services, two from USBE, and 1 external coach.

The ECERS-3 is a tool designed to evaluate classroom relationships and physical environment for children ages 3-5. ECERS-3 emphasizes environmental conditions that contribute to child development. Evaluators examine 35 indicators across six subscales. The subscales include Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure.

The CLASS tool emphasizes interactions between students and adults as the primary driver of childhood development. The CLASS examines 10 dimensions across three domains looking only at interactions between teachers and students. The domains include Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The CLASS emphasizes the use of materials or curriculum by the teacher over the evaluation of the materials themselves.

In March 2020, the School Readiness Board approved cut scores for participant programs. The ECERS-3 has a total possible score of 7. For LEAs, a minimum overall score of 3 is required. For private providers, a minimum overall score of 3.67 is required with a score of 4 on the Language and Literacy and a 4 on the Interaction subscales. These cut off scores were originally determined with the implementation of HQSR and HQSR-E grant programs and have been recently approved by the School Readiness Board members for the Becoming High-Quality and Expanded Student Access grants. The Department of Workforce Services Office of Child Care (OCC) chose minimum scores to align with the Childcare Quality Rating System used in private programs. As ECERS-3 scores are highly dependent on time in the classroom, and the majority of LEA programs run half-day sessions, a minimum score of 3 was selected. The research committee is planning to align expectations for both public and private preschool programs when a tool is finalized.

At the same meeting the School Readiness Board approved the following observation ratios: for public providers a minimum of 1 observation per 500 students. Due to the generally smaller size of private programs, OCC recommended observing a minimum of one third of classrooms in a program. If a private provider serves over 500 students, OCC will follow USBE guidelines.

In 2019 the School Readiness Board approved a look-back period for ECERS observations. This decision was made to reduce the workload of grant administrators. Observations were conducted for new applicants, and ECERS observations conducted within the look-back period were used for returning applicants. Observations were planned for Spring 2020, but due to the COVID-19 pandemic the observations were not conducted. Classroom observations conducted in 2018 and 2019 ranged from 3.09 to 6.29 for LEAs and 3.92 to 5.09 for private providers. LEAs averaged a score of 4.39, and private providers averaged a score of 4.49.

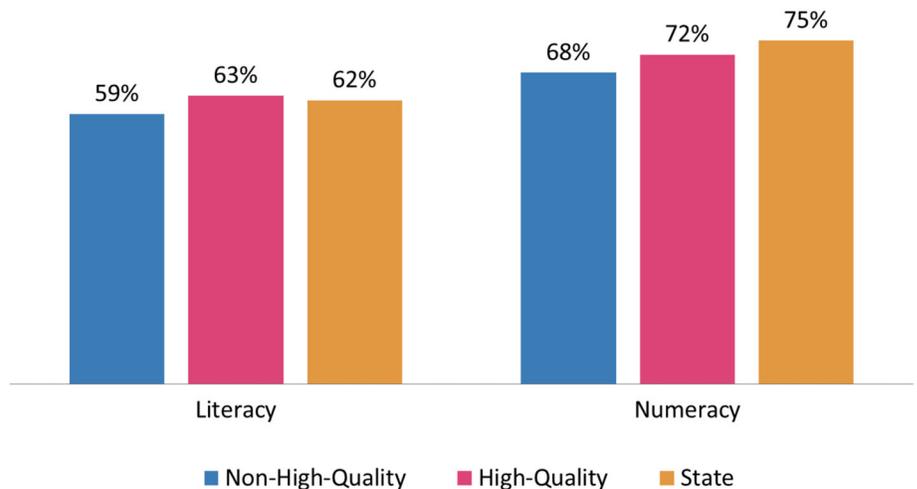
PROGRAMMATIC OUTCOMES

In order to evaluate programmatic outcomes for students exiting the ESA program, USBE looked at school year 2019-20 Kindergarten Entry Exit Profile (KEEP) proficiency levels assessed at the beginning of the academic year. Students entering kindergarten who attended high-quality public preschool programs in school year 2018-19 were compared to students entering kindergarten who attended public preschool programs that had not been deemed high quality in the same year. Student records for private preschool programs were not available for the examined school year.

Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality public programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in both Literacy and Numeracy than students entering from non-high-quality public programs (see figure on the following page). High-quality program participants performed at higher levels than the state average in Literacy. Both groups performed at lower levels than the state average in Numeracy. However, it should be noted that public preschool programs serve a relatively small proportion of students and a higher proportion of at-risk students. Of the 47,284 students who took the KEEP Entry, 5,555 attended high-quality preschool programs and 4,107 attended public preschool programs that were not deemed high quality. In future years it is intended that KEEP Entry scores will be paired with Preschool Entry Exit Profile (PEEP) scores in order to evaluate the student's proficiency in Literacy and Numeracy upon entering preschool in relation to their proficiency upon entering kindergarten.

The School Readiness Board has been tasked with determining assessment benchmarks for schools participating in the BQ and ESA grant programs. In previous years, the grant has only required that programs administer a pre-, mid-, and post-year assessment based on their selected curriculum. As such, it has not been possible to set a benchmark since a variety of assessments have been used. As of 2019-2020 the PEEP has become available. It is the intention of the School Readiness Board to use this assessment in future years to determine benchmarks. However, due to disruptions related to COVID-19, the PEEP Exit was not administered. As such, the School Readiness Board will only be able to establish benchmarks after a full year of PEEP administration. This full administration is anticipated during the 2020-2021 school year and will be applied to grant participants in the 2021-22 academic year.

Percent of Students Proficient in Literacy and Numeracy on the KEEP Entry Assessment by Program Type, Fall 2019



Of the 47,284 students who took the KEEP Entry Assessment, 5,555 attended high-quality preschool programs and 4,107 attended non-high-quality preschool programs.

The PEEP Entry assessment is based on Utah’s Early Learning standards. The PEEP Exit is the same exam as the KEEP Entry and is designed to track academic losses over the summer between preschool and kindergarten. The PEEP Exit is anticipated to be administered for the first time at the end of school year 2020-21. Students taking the PEEP Entry assessment are considered as either proficiency level 1: “Support Needed” or proficiency level 2: “At Benchmark.” A student earning above a 20 out of 31 possible points in Literacy is considered “At Benchmark.” A student must earn 24 out of 32 possible points to be “At Benchmark” in Numeracy.

In the fall of 2019, 6,100 preschool students participating in the BQ and ESA programs took the PEEP Entry for the first administration of the assessment. Of this group, 30% were At Benchmark in Literacy and 47% were At Benchmark in Numeracy. In future years Entry data will be paired with Exit outcomes to evaluate program efficacy (see the figure on the following page).

Percent of Program Participants At Benchmark on the PEEP Entry Assessment, Fall 2019

