

San Francisco Chronicle

September 10, 2008

Half S.F. kindergartners not ready for school

By Jill Tucker

Every year, San Francisco teacher Ann Marin watches wide-eyed kindergartners stream into classrooms on the first day of school.

Only about half are ready for the academic and social rigors they'll face that first year.

"Some kids come in and haven't held a pencil before," she said, demonstrating the fist grip those students use. "And other kids know the alphabet and can write their name."

Researchers who evaluated 447 of last year's kindergartners across the district found that while half lack at least some needed skills, 11 percent were deficient both academically and socially. They were the most at-risk for failure now and in the future, according to results released Tuesday.

Those who lag on the first day of school still lag three years later, said Lynne Mobilio, director of research, Applied Survey Research, which conducted the study for San Francisco Unified School District and First 5 San Francisco.

The research was the first of its kind in the city, giving officials a baseline to measure whether solutions are working, school board member Hydra Mendoza said.

It also looked at personal or family characteristics and how they were related to school readiness.

Those who were ready more often were girls, attended preschool, were older, had no special needs, and had mothers who went to college, researchers found.

The mother's education was the most closely aligned with a child's readiness, trumping all other characteristics including family income, ethnicity and English language ability.

The study didn't address why these characteristics were associated with being ready for kindergarten, but only noted the connection.

Nonetheless, that information could help school officials identify those most likely to need help before they get to kindergarten.

Researchers found that preschool experience was a common trait among kids who showed up ready to learn.

They also found that preschool could bridge the gap for those most at-risk: younger kindergartners, low-income tots, boys, Latinos, African Americans and those who did less reading with their families.

The city and school district is ahead of schedule in expanding San Francisco's Preschool for All program, which is serving 2,400 children this year in every ZIP code. The program offers free preschool regardless of family income level, funded by city Proposition H money as well as state, federal and school district resources.

Within three years, the city hopes to offer 4,800 spots, serving most of the city's 6,000 4-year-olds. San Francisco is the only county in the state offering free universal preschool, Mayor Gavin Newsom said Tuesday.

"This city gets it," Newsom said. "But it not only gets it, it funds it."

The school district contributes \$40 million a year and the city chips in \$11 million. There is also federal funding.

Get ready, get set, start kindergarten

These are the 24 skills associated with success in the first year of school

Academics

Recognizes letters
Recognizes shapes
Recognizes colors
Counts 10 objects
Engages with books
Writes own first name
Can recognize rhyming words

Self-regulation

Comforts self
Pays attention
Controls impulses
Follows directions
Negotiates solutions
Plays cooperatively
Participates in circle time
Handles frustration well

Social expression

Expresses empathy
Relates well to adults
Has expressive abilities
Is curious and eager to learn
Expresses needs and wants
Engages in symbolic play

Self-care and motor skills

Uses small manipulatives (teaching objects)
Has general coordination
Performs basic self-help/self-care tasks

Source: School Readiness Assessment 2007, San Francisco Unified School District

S.F.'s kindergartners

Here's a look at San Francisco kindergartners on the first day of school

25 percent were younger than 5

97 percent were well rested and well fed

20 percent were overweight

8 percent have special needs

47 percent are designated English learners

72 percent attended preschool

40 percent from families with annual income below \$32,000

25 percent from families with annual income above \$100,000

25 percent from single-parent households

17 percent had a primary parent/guardian who lost a job in past year

Source: 2007 survey of 447 kindergartners, commissioned by San Francisco Unified School District/First 5 San Francisco

Characteristics associated with higher levels of readiness for kindergarten

- Higher maternal education level
- No special needs
- Female
- Attended preschool
- Older
- Greater parental coping skills

Characteristics associated with lower levels of readiness for kindergarten

- Lower maternal education level
- Has special needs
- Male
- No preschool
- Younger
- Less family reading
- Low income
- African American
- Latino

Source: 2007 survey of 447 kindergartners, commissioned by San Francisco Unified School District/First 5 San Francisco