

## The Chicago Program Evaluation Project: C-PEP

**Key findings:** children in Chicago’s early childhood programs are making significant gains

This report will inform program improvement efforts and policy, and provide a baseline for future research. Advisory committees made up of experts in the field are reviewing the study and formulating recommendations in the areas of program improvement, research and policy. In this context, C-PEP is a launch pad for further improvements that will help children make greater gains.

### Chicago’s early childhood programs serve a diverse population with a high concentration of at-risk children.

- **Language barriers:** Roughly half of C-PEP children speak Spanish or another non-English language at home.
- **Family demographics:** Children entered Chicago preschool programs with high levels of family demographic risk factors, including poverty, single parenthood, and low parental education. Forty percent are considered *high-risk* (three or more factors). Half-Day Head Start programs have the largest proportion of high-risk children (62 percent); Preschool for All programs have the lowest (28 percent). The average annual family income of all children in C-PEP Half-Day Head Start and Full-Day programs is \$10,500 and \$12,100 respectively and the average annual family income of all children in C-PEP Preschool for All programs is \$25,600.
- **Behavioral risk:** In the C-PEP study, 16 percent of children scored in the *high-risk* ranges across five key behavioral and emotional areas; this is consistent with national findings.
- **Where they start:** As they enter preschool in the fall, a substantial proportion of C-PEP children were nearly at national norms in early literacy, but *significantly below* national averages in vocabulary and early mathematics achievement.

### Children are making significant gains, but we need to do more.

- **Cognitive progress overall:** Children across the programs made *significant* progress in a relatively short amount of time in early mathematics, vocabulary development and pre-literacy. If measured over the course of the entire preschool year, even greater gains could be expected.
- **Social-emotional progress:** Children’s attention/persistence and social behavior improve during the preschool year, with the greatest gains in areas of social interaction and cooperation. Behavior problem-related incidents were below expected levels for this age. These skills – being able to settle into an activity or concentrate, cooperate and show empathy towards other children – are critical for success in elementary school and beyond.
- **Helping those who need it most:** Kids at highest risk—English language learners and those with three or more risk factors—made *substantial* progress in terms of vocabulary development, early literacy achievement, and early mathematics achievement. Despite these gains, English vocabulary and early mathematics scores of C-PEP children in the spring remain below the national norms for all children. Math gains are smaller than those in language development.
- **Narrowing the achievement gap:** During the preschool year, C-PEP children made progress relative to *all* children, not just to children considered “at-risk” for school failure or developmental progress.

## Classroom quality matters in many areas, and Chicago's meet national norms.

- **Nationally comparable:** The findings of quality in C-PEP classrooms are consistent with results in national studies of Head Start and state Pre K (for example, recent Multi-State, "SWEEP," Virginia Pre K and Tulsa Head Start and Pre K studies).
- **Quality classrooms:** Overall, classrooms have a positive environment (*middle-high* range for emotional support and provisions for learning); are productive and well-managed (in the *middle range* for classroom organization); teachers are challenged in areas of concept development and language modeling (in the *low-mid* range for instructional support). These instructional support findings are consistent with findings for early childhood classrooms generally.
- **Smaller is better:** Lower child-staff ratios were related to more positive quality ratings.
- **Teachers measure up:** Teachers in C-PEP meet or exceed the programs' education requirements and are at the high end of such requirements nationally. Instructional quality was higher when teachers had graduate degrees vs. associate's degrees, and when they had 10 or more years of preschool teaching experience.
- **High job satisfaction:** Teachers in all C-PEP programs report high levels of satisfaction with teaching as their daily work and career.

## Where we need to learn more.

- **Starting earlier:** Although Chicago's preschool children are making significant gains, C-PEP findings suggest they *enter* preschool considerably below national averages and need additional support to get up to national norms in time for kindergarten. This finding highlights the importance of investing in early childhood programs and services that help children as early as possible.
- **Unexpected findings:** While the quality of C-PEP classrooms is comparable to classrooms studied in other rigorous national studies, C-PEP uncovered some unexpected findings. Most significantly, higher levels of instructional support *were related* to improvements in children's social emotional development (reduction in social withdrawal and attention problems/overactive behaviors) *but not related* to cognitive gains.
- **Role of family risk factors:** Classroom quality and teacher characteristics are not consistently associated with children's cognitive gains; however, family risk status is a related factor.
- **Role of classroom quality and teacher characteristics:** These are inconsistently related to *cognitive gains*, while high levels of instructional support are related to improvements in *social-emotional development*.

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