Santa Clara County Kindergarten Readiness Assessment

A Closer Look at Children *Not Yet Ready* for Kindergarten

INTRODUCTION

Children enter kindergarten with diverse strengths, experiences, and developmental skills that shape their transition into school. Kindergarten readiness reflects children's developing academic, social-emotional, and self-regulation skills, as well as the early learning experiences and supports that contribute to their development. These foundational skills help children engage in classroom learning, build relationships, and navigate the transition to formal schooling.

Kindergarten readiness is associated with outcomes well beyond the transition into school. Research has found that early mathematics, reading, and attention skills are associated with academic achievement in later grades.[i] More recent research has also identified relationships between executive functioning skills at kindergarten entry, particularly working memory, and third-grade reading and mathematics achievement.[ii] Beyond academics, research has linked social and behavioral readiness to later school experiences, including grade retention and the use of additional school-based services, as well as longer-term health and well-being.[iii,iv]

Longitudinal studies using the Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF) have also examined the relationship between kindergarten readiness and later academic achievement. A 2010 study of children in Santa Clara and San Mateo counties found that KOF scores at kindergarten entry predicted third-grade English Language Arts and mathematics achievement.[v] Subsequent longitudinal studies using the KOF have extended these findings. A 2018 Alameda County study found that children classified as *Fully Ready* at kindergarten entry were more likely to meet third-grade academic standards than children classified as *Not Ready*, with Kindergarten Academics and Self-Regulation emerging as particularly important predictors. The relationship between kindergarten readiness and academic achievement also persisted through sixth grade.[vi] More recently, a longitudinal study in San Francisco Unified School District found that kindergarten readiness was associated with academic achievement throughout elementary and middle school, as well as higher middle school grade point averages and a greater likelihood of graduating from high school on time.[vii]

These studies demonstrate the value of kindergarten readiness as an early indicator of later academic achievement. Assessing and tracking kindergarten readiness can help communities identify areas where additional supports may be beneficial, monitor readiness trends over time, and inform efforts to strengthen early learning, family and community supports, and school transitions.

The 2025 Santa Clara County Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) used the Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF) to assess children's readiness across three developmental domains—*Self-Regulation*, *Social Expression*, and *Kindergarten Academics*. Approximately one in three children (34%) entered kindergarten classified as *Not Ready*, meaning they scored below the readiness benchmark across all three domains.

This supplemental report takes a closer look at these children—the factors associated with readiness, the characteristics of children entering kindergarten *Not Ready*, and opportunities to strengthen supports before kindergarten. For additional information on the study design, assessment measures, data collection procedures, scoring methodology, and statistical analyses, see the *2025 Santa Clara County Kindergarten Readiness Assessment Comprehensive Report*.[viii]

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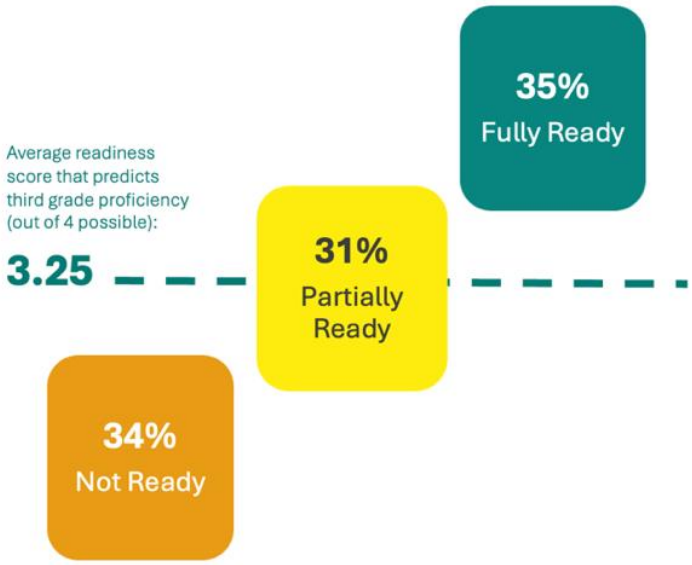
KINDERGARTEN READINESS

The KOF measured children's readiness skills across three developmental domains—*Self-Regulation*, *Social Expression*, and *Kindergarten Academics*. Scores ranged from 1 (Not Yet) to 4 (Proficient).

Children were classified as *Fully Ready* when they met the readiness benchmark[1] in all three KOF domains, *Partially Ready* when they met the benchmark in one or two domains, and *Not Ready* when they scored below the benchmark across all three domains. These classifications provide an overall picture of readiness while recognizing that children may demonstrate different levels of development across individual domains and skills.

In 2025, 35% of children were *Fully Ready*, 31% were *Partially Ready*, and 34% were *Not Ready*. The results were nearly evenly distributed across readiness classifications, underscoring the importance of looking more closely at the one-third of children who entered kindergarten *Not Ready*.

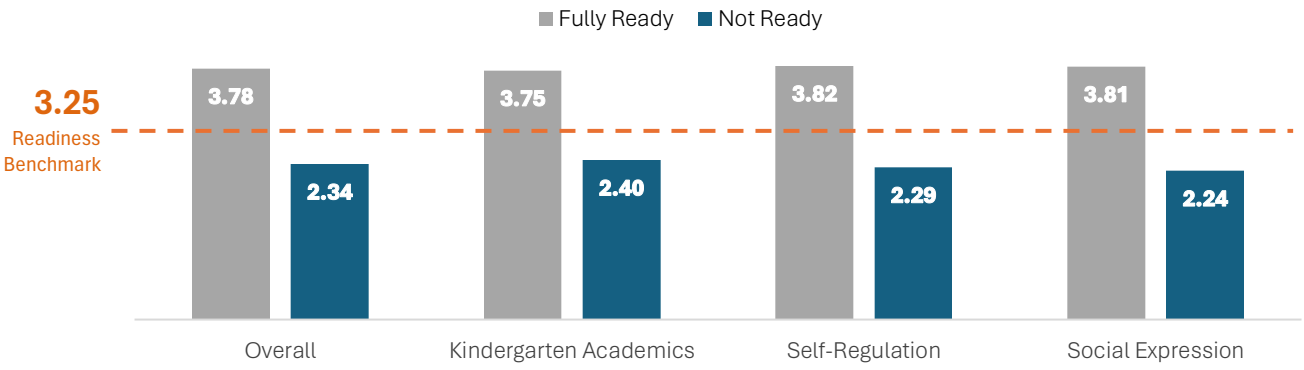


What Did Readiness Look Like Among Children Who Were *Not Yet Ready*?

READINESS ACROSS DEVELOPMENTAL DOMAINS

By definition, children classified as *Not Ready* scored below the 3.25 readiness benchmark across all three KOF domains, indicating room for continued development across each area. Scores were highest in *Kindergarten Academics*, followed by *Self-Regulation*, and lowest in *Social Expression*. The variation in scores across domains shows that, even within the *Not Ready* group, children demonstrated differing levels of developing skills across areas of readiness.

Exhibit 1. Average Kindergarten Readiness Scores, by Readiness Classification



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form 2025. Fully Ready N = 239; Not Ready N = 233.

[1] The 3.25 cutoff score is a validated longitudinal readiness benchmark on the KOF and has been shown in prior research to be associated with later school achievement, including outcomes beyond kindergarten.

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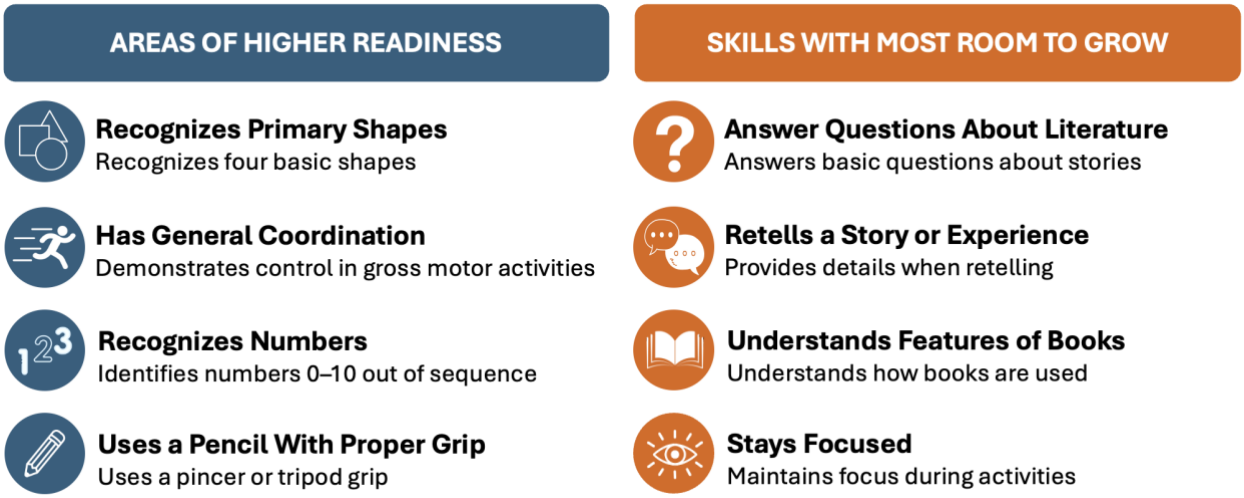
A CLOSER LOOK AT INDIVIDUAL READINESS SKILLS

Looking beyond the domain averages provides a more detailed picture of the specific skills children were developing as they entered kindergarten. Among children classified as *Not Ready*, average scores varied across individual readiness skills, with some skills more developed than others.

Children had higher average scores in skills related to early math concepts and motor development, including recognizing primary shapes and numbers, general coordination, and pencil grip. Skills with the most room for growth were concentrated in language and literacy and classroom engagement, including answering questions about literature, retelling a story or experience, understanding basic features of books, and staying focused during group activities.

Exhibit 2. Highest and Lowest Readiness Skills Among Children Classified as *Not Ready*

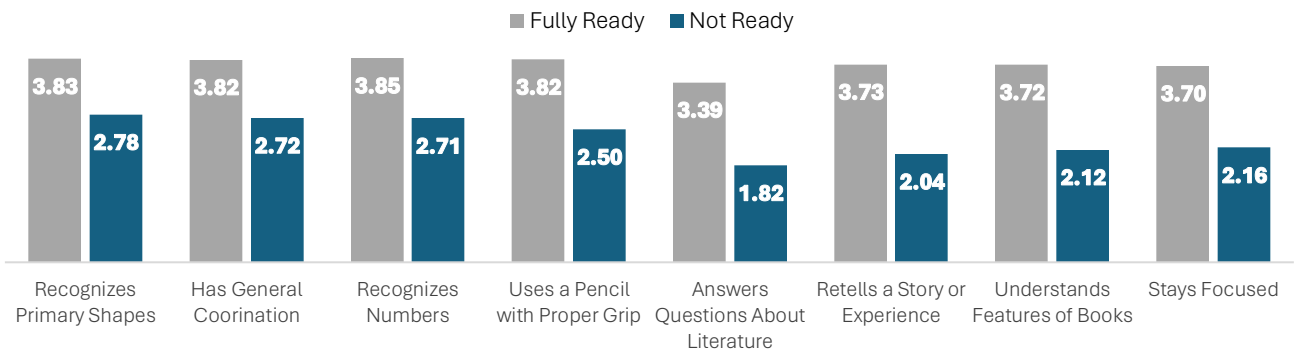


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form 2025, N = 233.

Differences between children who were *Fully Ready* and *Not Ready* were evident across each of the selected readiness skills. Children who were *Fully Ready* had higher average scores than children who were *Not Ready*, although the size of the differences varied by skill.

The largest differences were concentrated in **language and literacy**, including retelling a story or experience, understanding basic features of books, and answering questions about literature. Differences were also observed in **staying focused during activities**.

Exhibit 3. Selected Readiness Skills, by Readiness Classification



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form 2025. Fully Ready N = 239; Not Ready N = 233.

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WHAT FACTORS WERE ASSOCIATED WITH READINESS?

The 2025 KRA identified seven factors that were significantly associated with higher kindergarten readiness scores. These included children's basic needs and well-being, participation in formal early learning, caregiver education, lower weekday screen time, and family engagement in learning and kindergarten transition activities.

Readiness was also higher among children who experienced a greater number of these factors, suggesting that readiness may reflect the combination of multiple experiences and conditions rather than any single factor.

How Common Were These Factors Among Children Who Were *Fully Ready* and *Not Ready*?

Exhibit 4 compares how common each readiness-related factor was among children classified as *Fully Ready* and *Not Ready*. Percentages are calculated within each readiness group and indicate the proportion of children for whom each factor was present. For example, 95% of children classified as *Fully Ready* appeared well-rested and well-fed, compared with 78% of children classified as *Not Ready*—a difference of 17 percentage points. Similarly, 88% of children who were *Fully Ready* attended a formal early learning program, compared with 63% of children who were *Not Ready*, a difference of 25 percentage points.

Each of the seven readiness-related factors was less common among children classified as *Not Ready*. The largest differences were related to participation in formal early learning and school-based kindergarten transition orientations, followed by shared reading, reading about kindergarten, and basic needs well-being. Differences in weekday screen time and caregiver education were smaller but followed the same overall pattern.

The differences spanned several areas of children's lives, including early learning, family engagement, basic needs and well-being, and the transition to kindergarten. This pattern suggests that readiness is associated with a range of experiences and conditions rather than any single factor.

Exhibit 4. Percentage of Children With Each Readiness-Related Factor, by Readiness Classification

Readiness Factor	% of *Fully Ready* Children	% of *Not Ready* Children
Basic needs well-being (well-rested and well-fed)	95%	78%
Attended formal learning program	88%	63%
Caregiver earned a bachelor's degree or higher	67%	59%
Limited weekday screen time (one hour or less)	57%	43%
School-based transition orientation	54%	33%
Reading about kindergarten	51%	33%
Reading books with child daily	45%	27%

Source: Kindergarten Observation Form and Parent Information Form 2025. Fully Ready N = 97; Not Ready N = 73.

WHO WERE THE CHILDREN CLASSIFIED AS *NOT READY*?

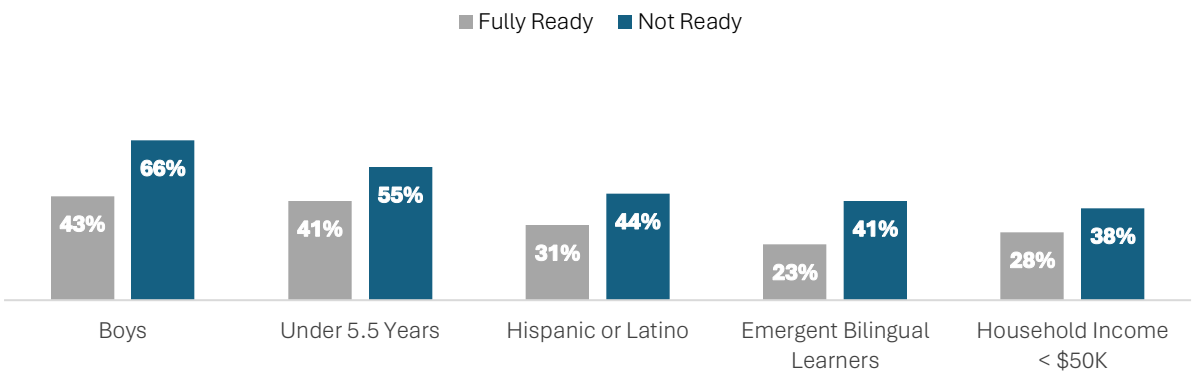
Demographic and Socioeconomic Patterns

Children classified as *Not Ready* represented diverse families and communities across Santa Clara County. Comparing their characteristics with children who were *Fully Ready* helps identify demographic and socioeconomic patterns that were more common among children who entered kindergarten *Not Ready*.

Several differences stand out. Children classified as *Not Ready* were more likely to be boys, under 5.5 years old, Hispanic or Latino, and emergent bilingual learners than children who were *Fully Ready*. Among children with Parent Information Form data, children classified as *Not Ready* were also more likely to live in households reporting annual incomes below $50,000.

These patterns describe differences in the demographic and socioeconomic composition of the two readiness groups. The findings are descriptive and should not be interpreted as evidence that demographic or socioeconomic characteristics cause differences in kindergarten readiness. Rather, they provide context for further examining children's early learning experiences and the supports available to children and families.

Exhibit 5. Characteristics of KRA 2025 Children, by Readiness Classification



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form and Parent Information Form 2025. Fully Ready N = 239; Not Ready N = 233. Note: When a PIF was not available, teachers provided the child's gender or ethnicity. Income data are from the Parent Information Form; Fully Ready N = 97 and Not Ready N = 73.

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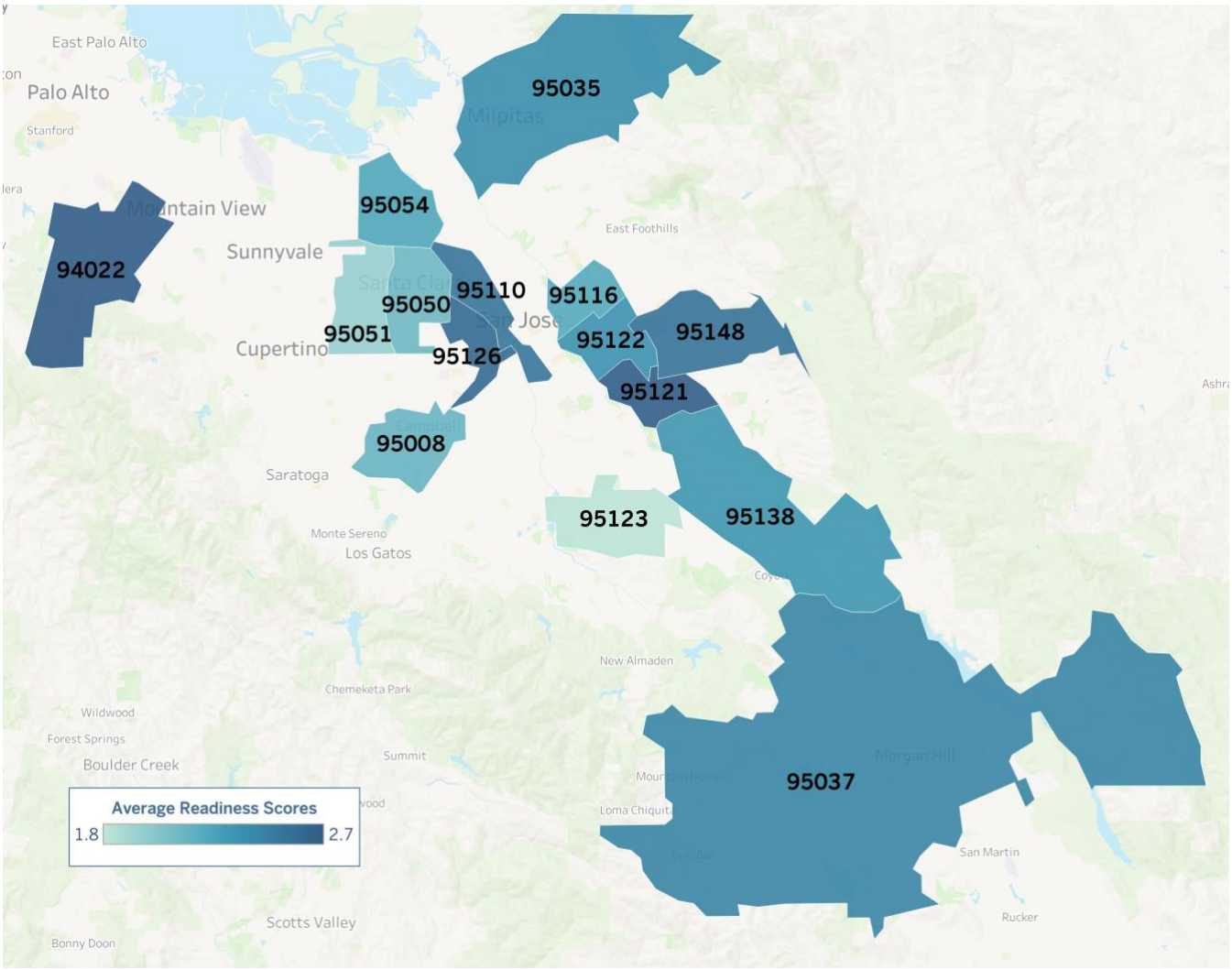
Geographic Variation Among Children Classified as *Not Ready*

Average readiness scores among children classified as *Not Ready* varied across the ZIP codes of participating schools. Higher average readiness within this group was observed in school ZIP codes 94022, 95121, and 95126, while lower average readiness was observed in 95123, 95051, and 95050. Although all children included in this analysis were classified as *Not Ready*, these differences show that children within the group entered kindergarten with varying levels of developing readiness skills.

These geographic differences show variation within the *Not Ready* group across participating school communities and may warrant further examination of children's readiness experiences and available supports. ZIP code findings should be interpreted with consideration of sample size and reflect the ZIP codes of participating schools rather than children's residential ZIP codes.

Exhibit 6. Average Kindergarten Readiness Scores Among Children *Not Ready*, by School ZIP Code



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form 2025, N = 233.
Note: Darker blue indicates higher average readiness scores among children classified as *Not Ready*.

OPPORTUNITIES TO STRENGTHEN KINDERGARTEN READINESS

The findings highlight several areas for families, early learning programs, schools, community organizations, and public systems to consider in efforts to support kindergarten readiness.

Support children's basic needs and well-being.

Connect families with food, health, housing, and other resources that help children arrive at school rested, nourished, and able to participate in classroom learning.

Expand access to formal early learning.

Continue efforts to connect families with preschool, Transitional Kindergarten, Head Start, licensed family child care, and other high-quality early learning opportunities.

Strengthen family learning at home.

Provide families with accessible strategies and resources that support shared reading, early language and literacy development, play-based learning, and developmentally appropriate screen use.

Increase kindergarten transition supports.

Offer kindergarten orientations, classroom visits, school tours, and opportunities for children to practice school routines before the first day of kindergarten. Provide families with clear, accessible information about what to expect and how they can help children prepare for the transition.

Build on children's developing skills.

Provide opportunities to strengthen early language and literacy, storytelling, book knowledge, and sustained attention while continuing to build on children's developing motor, early mathematics, and other readiness skills.

Use data to inform outreach.

Demographic and school ZIP code patterns can help partners better understand the children and communities represented in the data and inform further examination of readiness experiences and available supports.

Continue monitoring kindergarten readiness.

Ongoing assessment can help Santa Clara County understand how readiness changes over time and whether readiness-related experiences and supports are reaching children and families across the county.

CONCLUSION

Children who entered kindergarten *Not Ready* were not a single or uniform group. They brought a range of developing skills, strengths, and experiences with them to the classroom. Their readiness profiles varied across developmental areas, reflecting the different ways children learn and grow. While some skills may benefit from additional support, these children also demonstrated strengths that can serve as a foundation for continued learning and development.

The results reinforce the importance of supporting kindergarten readiness across multiple areas of development and across the settings in which children learn and grow. Continued attention to basic needs, early learning, family learning, and the transition to kindergarten can help strengthen the opportunities and supports available to children and families.

Looking ahead, the 2025 KRA findings can help guide systems-level planning and improvements across Santa Clara County. Schools, early learning providers, community organizations, and other partners can use these results to build on existing efforts, strengthen coordination across services, and expand access to early learning opportunities and family supports. Continued monitoring of kindergarten readiness can also help assess progress over time and inform strategies that create more supportive conditions for children and families, helping more children enter kindergarten ready to learn and thrive.

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ABOUT THE RESEARCHER

Applied Survey Research (ASR) is a non-profit social research firm dedicated to helping people build better communities by creating meaningful evaluative and assessment data, facilitating information-based planning, and developing custom strategies. The firm has more than 40 years of experience working with public and private agencies, health and human service organizations, city and county offices, school districts, institutions of higher learning, and charitable foundations. Through community assessments, program evaluations, and related studies, ASR provides the information communities need for effective strategic planning and community interventions.

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Endnotes

[i] Duncan, G. J., Dowsett, C. J., Claessens, A., Magnuson, K., Huston, A. C., Klebanov, P., Pagani, L.S., Feinstein, L., Engel, M., Brooks-Gunn, J., Sexton, H., Duckworth, K., & Japel, C. (2007). School readiness and later achievement. *Developmental Psychology, 43*(6), 1428–1446.

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[viii] First 5 Santa Clara County. (2025). *2025 Kindergarten Readiness Assessment.* https://first5kids.org/data-and-evaluation/#KRA