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Who is prepared for kindergarten?

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By **DANA HULL—MERCURY NEWS**

Most children in Silicon Valley start kindergarten with a good grasp of the basic skills teachers say they need -- from the alphabet to knowing how to sit still -- according to a survey released today.

But the survey of kindergarten teachers and parents discovered major differences in the skills young students bring to the classroom -- and found that children in San Mateo County are generally better prepared than those in Santa Clara County.

Educators and parents are increasingly focused on the concept of "kindergarten readiness," in part because kindergarten is more academically rigorous than it was a generation ago. The survey, conducted by the Santa Clara County Partnership for School Readiness and the Peninsula Partnership for Children, Youth and Families, is sure to generate discussion -- particularly with a proposal for universal preschool on California's June ballot.

Among the findings:

- Just under half of children in the two counties are well-equipped in a wide range of categories, including motor skills, social expression, kindergarten academics and self-regulation -- a category that includes the ability to sit still, listen and solve conflicts. Twelve percent have significant catching up to do in all of those areas. The remaining children are stronger in some categories and weaker in others: They might be able to count to 10, but have no self-control, for instance, or the other way around.
- Children generally arrive at kindergarten least proficient in academics, but that is the area teachers say they are most able to influence. Children with self-regulation problems pose a bigger challenge, the survey found.



Kindergartner Teresa Vela laughs at Seven Trees elementary school.

- Children who manage conflict well are most likely to be ready for kindergarten, the survey found. Other factors: a well-educated mother, being at least 5 years old and attending preschool.
- Teachers don't expect children to have mastered all 20 of the skills the survey examined. Seventy-four percent of kindergartners in San Mateo County met teachers' expectations in terms of overall readiness -- though they may not be proficient in all areas -- compared with 62 percent in Santa Clara County.

Combined data

The survey marks the first time that the two counties have combined their data for analysis; last year, Santa Clara did a "Ready for School" survey on its own.

"By looking at this at the county level, we get a better lay of the land," said Lori Burns of United Way Silicon Valley, one of the local group's spearheading Santa Clara County's School Readiness efforts. "We're making progress, but we're not there yet. San Mateo County should get a lot of credit."

It's not entirely clear why San Mateo County children appear to be more prepared to enter kindergarten. But the survey yields two important clues: a higher portion of children in San Mateo are attending preschool, and San Mateo parents say they spend more time on enrichment activities.

"We don't want to shy away from the differences," said Burns, who hopes that Santa Clara County leaders will look closely at the report and see it as a call to action. "We want to figure out what we should invest in going forward."

Survey sample

The survey included a representative sample of more than 1,400 children in 76 kindergarten classrooms in 38 school districts. Kindergarten teachers across both counties observed how children did on 20 different "readiness" skills, from how they managed conflicts to their ability to pay attention during circle time.

"This gives all of us a common language by which to evaluate student readiness," said Santa Clara County schools chief Colleen Wilcox. "We know that we can teach academics, but I don't know if we can teach self-regulation. Is it something that can be taught, or is it neurologically developed?"

Local kindergarten teachers say they can immediately tell if a child has attended preschool or not.

"The ones who didn't go to preschool run around and push each other and act like they are at home, so it's hard for us because we need to go through the basics of getting them used to a routine," said Cristina Oterino, a kindergarten teacher at Seven Trees School in the Franklin McKinley School District in San Jose. "They need to understand the difference between play time, quiet time, and listening time. If they can't follow directions, they can't learn anything else."

For an executive summary and copy of the report, including detailed explanations and analysis, go to www.uwsv.org or www.pcf.org.