

Snapshot of the 2021 School Readiness Assessment Results

Background

In 2018, the first countywide School Readiness Assessment (SRA) in 10 years took place in Santa Clara County. Based on the *Kindergarten Observation Form (KOF)*, a teacher-administered school readiness assessment of children entering kindergarten, 50% of children in the county were *Fully Ready* for kindergarten that year.ⁱ Parents/caregivers were also surveyed that year about their child's demographics, family background, and early childhood experiences. Due to stay-at-home orders resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic, the *KOF* could not be completed in 2020, but instead, a countywide kindergarten parent/caregiver survey was conducted to identify the ways in which children and families had been impacted by COVID-19. As expected, compared to 2018, a significantly greater proportion of families surveyed in 2020 reported experiencing a variety of stressors, and across nearly all indicators, racial/ethnic and socioeconomic disparities were found.ⁱⁱ

Schools transitioned back to in-person learning in the 2021-22 school year, and FIRST 5 Santa Clara County and the Santa Clara County Office of Education decided to sponsor an SRA utilizing the *KOF* and a parent/caregiver survey. The purpose of the assessment was to determine how readiness has changed since 2018 and how families in Santa Clara County are faring as the community continues to be impacted by the pandemic. In fall 2021, 17 kindergarten teachers assessed 291 children in the county on 20 kindergarten readiness skills, which covered three primary skill domains: *Self-Regulation*, *Social Expression*, and *Kindergarten Academics*. Parents/caregivers also filled out a survey about their child's demographics, family background, and child care experiences, and how the family had been impacted by COVID-19.

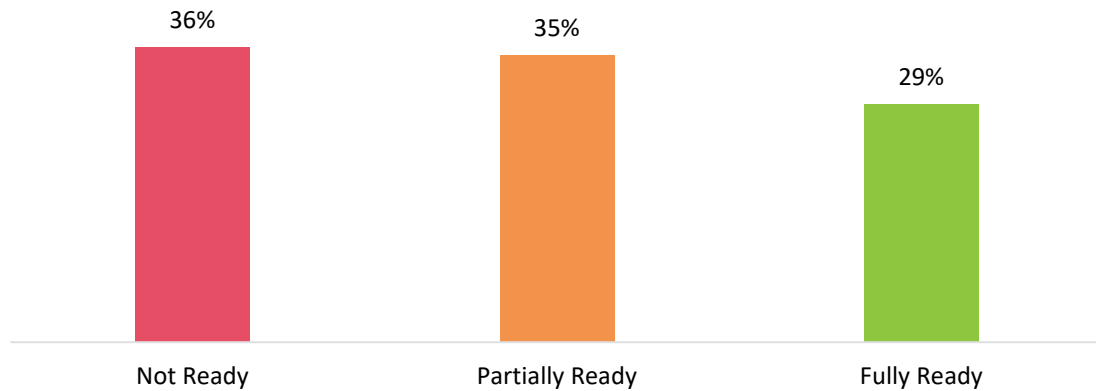
It should be noted that the sample this year is much smaller than it was in 2018 when 1,253 kindergarten students from 66 classrooms participated, and the information presented in this report only describes the students and families who participated in the assessment. Although the data presented here have been statistically adjusted to approximate the demographic makeup of the county population of kindergartners, the sample was not representative, and thus the findings should not be extrapolated to the broader population of approximately 19,000 kindergartners in the county.

Key Findings

How ready for school were children assessed in Santa Clara County?

Children who scored 3.25 or higher on the assessment in all of the three primary domains were considered *Fully Ready* and made up 29% of the Santa Clara County sample in 2021, whereas 36% of children in Santa Clara County were *Not Ready*, meaning they scored below 3.25 in all three domains. The remaining 35% of the sample was *Partially Ready*, having scored at least 3.25 in one or two of the domains.

Figure 1. **Readiness Profile**

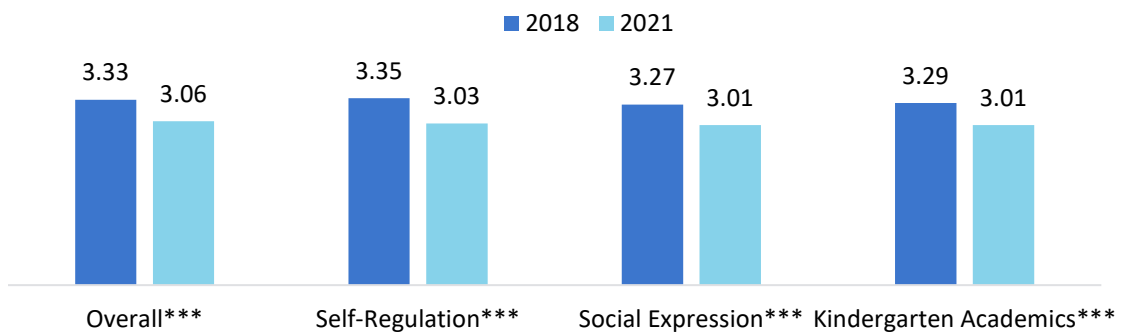


Source: Kindergarten Observation Form.

Note: N = 283 (unweighted). Sampling weights are applied to approximate the distributions of race/ethnicity and English Learner status of kindergarten students in Santa Clara County.

There was a significant drop in readiness between 2018 and 2021 (in 2018, 50% of children assessed were *Fully Ready* for kindergarten). The figure that follows shows the average readiness scores overall and on each domain in each assessment year, after statistically adjusting for differences in the sample. The drop in average scores in 2021 could be attributed to the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and to sample differences that adjustments could not fully account for.

Figure 2. **Average Readiness, by Domain and Year**



Source: Kindergarten Observation Form.

Note: N = 585-614 (2018, unweighted); N = 176-182 (2021, unweighted). Assessment not conducted in 2020. Average scores could range from 1 to 4. Sampling weights are applied to approximate the distributions of race/ethnicity and English Learner status of kindergarten students in Santa Clara County. Model controls for child race/ethnicity, gender, age, English language learner status, special needs, and family income. ***Differences are statistically significant, $p < .001$.

What child and family factors are associated with higher levels of school readiness?

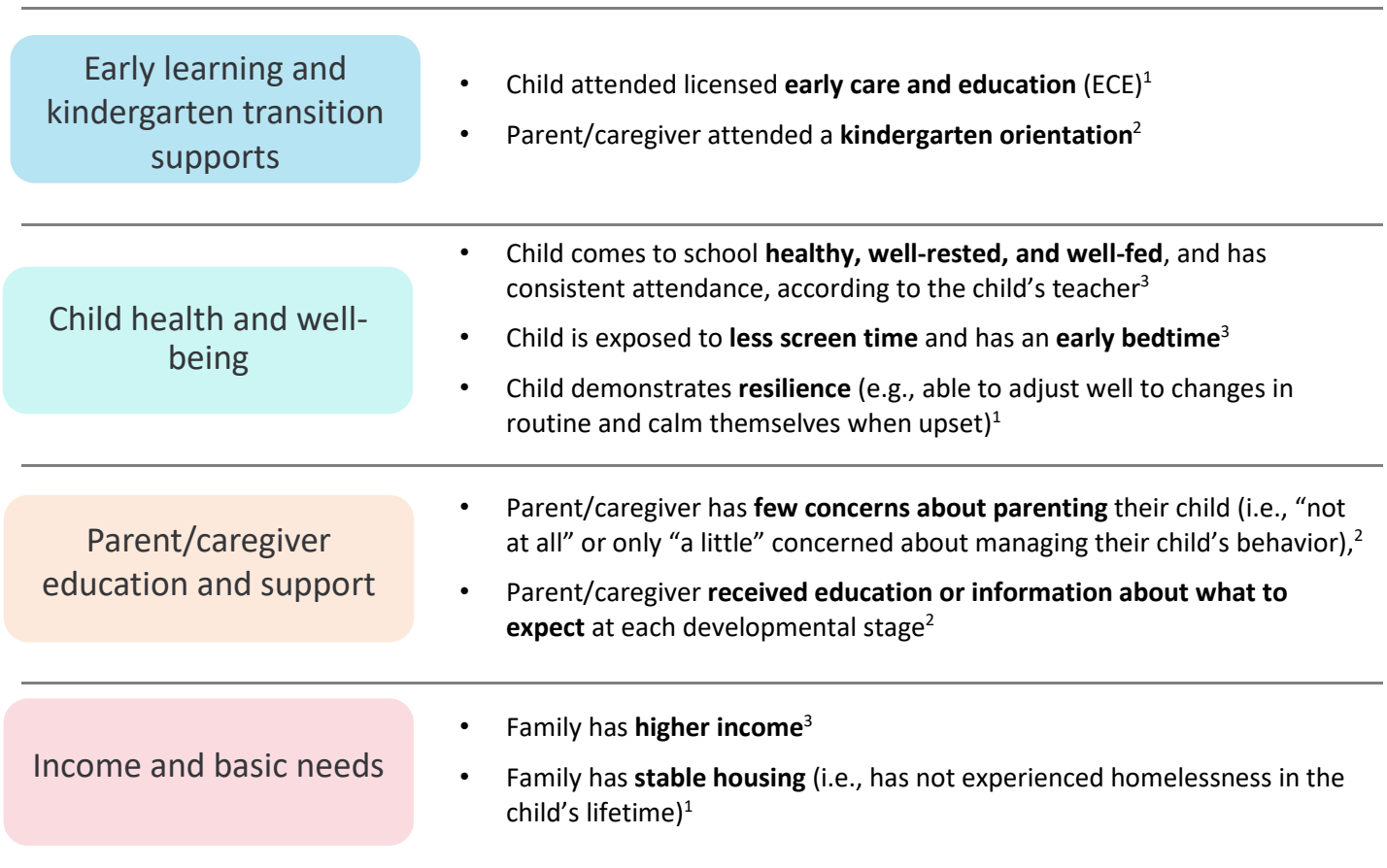
The factors that were strongly and independently associated with readiness in one or both of the past two readiness studies are described below. Although many of these factors are related to one another, each one contributes to readiness even after taking into account the contributions of the other factors. For example, the correlation between child health and well-being and readiness is significant, regardless of the family’s socioeconomic status.

Some of the factors associated with readiness were demographic, including the child being older at the time of the assessment, being female, and identifying as White or Asian American/Pacific Islander. The differences between ethnic/racial groups are likely due to structural barriers and availability of

community supports and resources. Thus, schools should be ready for the population of children they are receiving.

Other factors that were strongly associated with school readiness are experiences that can be modified with intervention; these include access to early learning and kindergarten transition supports, child health and well-being, access to parent/caregiver education and support, and family income and access to basic needs.

Figure 3. **Factors Associated with School Readiness in Recent Santa Clara County Readiness Studies**



¹ Independently associated with readiness in 2018.

² Independently associated with readiness in 2021.

³ Independently associated with readiness in 2018 and 2021.

How were children and families affected by COVID-19?

As observed earlier, school readiness was lower in 2021 compared to 2018. This could be related to the increased levels of stress families experienced and the fact that children had fewer options for enrichment outside of the home during COVID-19. For example, the majority of families in this study experienced changes to their employment during the pandemic, such as having their work hours reduced, losing their job, or having to work from home with children around. In 2021, approximately four in five families reported pandemic-related effects on their employment, with lower-income families and Latino/a families reporting higher rates of job loss, reduction in work hours or wages, and having a job that put them at risk of getting COVID-19 relative to other families. In addition, the study found families were significantly more stressed about issues like health and making ends meet during the height of the pandemic in 2020 than they were in 2018. Caregiver reports of stress declined in 2021, but health-related concerns remained above pre-pandemic levels.

The pandemic also affected families' home routines and access to kindergarten preparation opportunities. Perhaps because of COVID-19-related closures and social distancing recommendations that required families to stay at home more, over six in 10 parents/caregivers in the current year were concerned about finding enough fun and engaging activities for their children, and children in 2021 had significantly more screen time than they did in 2018. Parents/caregivers were also less likely to have received kindergarten readiness information and accessed kindergarten transition supports like kindergarten orientations and parent-teacher meetings. The ECE experience of many children was also disrupted by the pandemic; among those who left a program in 2021, the primary reason was that the program closed due to COVID-19.

Finally, access to health care was a challenge for some families during COVID-19. Although the vast majority of children in this study had received medical care in the past year and were up-to-date on their immunizations, approximately one-quarter of parents/caregivers said they had to delay getting medical care for their child during COVID-19.

What will it take to “turn the curve” on school readiness in Santa Clara County?

The current study is a snapshot of readiness based on a small sample and future studies with larger samples will be needed to develop a complete picture of readiness in Santa Clara County. Nevertheless, the findings can be used to support the community's recovery from COVID-19 and sustain and stabilize early childhood systems, including ECE. While we saw some improvements in families' experiences in 2021 relative to 2020, recovery from the pandemic has been gradual, and its lingering effects may continue to impact children's readiness for school. Children and families continue to need support to address the challenges caused by the pandemic. In particular, partners in the community should provide quality services and supports that promote the positive early experiences that are associated with school readiness and that have been most significantly impacted by the pandemic. These include, but are not limited to, access to early learning and kindergarten transition supports, medical and mental health supports, parent/caregiver education and support, and income and basic needs supports. In addition, schools need to be prepared to meet the needs of all children entering their classrooms, including those who had access to fewer resources and supports to prepare them for school.



Early Learning and Kindergarten Transition Supports

As utilization of kindergarten transition supports like parent/caregiver meetings and orientation sessions is positively associated with readiness, the availability of such supports at schools and early learning sites should be expanded. In addition, high-quality ECE has historically been associated with kindergarten readiness, but children’s access to it was more limited during the pandemic due to ECE site closures and fewer in-person learning opportunities. Expanding access to affordable ECE and stabilizing this essential system should be a priority in the county.



Medical and Mental Health Services

Children’s health and well-being is consistently linked to higher kindergarten readiness. COVID-19 led to an increased need for healthcare and mental health care services and introduced new challenges in accessing these services, including increased use of telemedicine, staff shortages, and reduced capacity at clinics and hospitals to offer routine care. The healthcare system should be strengthened and access barriers reduced (e.g., lack of technology or transportation) so that services are more affordable and accessible for families.



Support for Parents and Caregivers

Children benefit when their caregivers are informed and supported: children in this study had higher readiness when their caregivers had fewer parenting concerns and received more information about child development. As their child’s first teacher, parents and caregivers need services like parent education, peer support, and parent leadership programs to help them provide a healthy, nurturing early environment at home.



Income and Basic Needs Supports

Families that are more financially secure are less stressed and have access to more resources to promote their children’s readiness. The socioeconomic and racial/ethnic differences seen in readiness are primarily rooted in structural inequities like differences in access to school readiness opportunities such as high-quality ECE.ⁱⁱⁱ Poverty is also related to higher rates of stress and poor health among parents/caregivers, as well as less time and disposable income, which impact other key “malleable assets” linked to readiness like screen time and bedtime. COVID-19 adversely impacted families’ financial stability, and many continue to need income and basic needs supports to support their children’s readiness.