

EDUCATIONAL INNOVATION



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Report to the Education Interim
Committee

Preschool: Grants for High-Quality School Readiness Programs

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Preschool: Grants for High-Quality School Readiness Programs

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. This report is provided to the Education Interim Committee as a summary of an evaluation of and the efficacy of both the high-quality school readiness grant programs. During the 2021-22 school year, both grant programs served a total of 28 preschool programs consisting of 11,106 students with 9% of those students qualifying as eligible students as defined in statute. Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality public programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in both literacy and numeracy compared to students entering from non-high-quality public programs. High-quality program participants performed at higher levels than the state average in literacy. Students from both high-quality and non-high-quality preschool programs performed at lower levels than the state average in numeracy.

BACKGROUND

In the 2014 General Session, the Legislature passed House Bill 96, *Utah School Readiness Initiative*, which provided funding for preschool programs. The Utah School Readiness Initiative operated with the goals of increasing school readiness, improving academic performance, and reducing remediation costs associated with poor academic outcomes. Under the Initiative, the School Readiness Board could enter into results-based financing contracts with private entities to fund proven high-quality early childhood education programs serving at-risk students. The High Quality School Readiness (HQSR) Grant Program was also established with this Initiative. Existing preschool programs could apply for this funding to improve the elements of quality in their program. The program was designed so that the improvements were implemented over the course of three years, at which point the participating program could transition to the HQSR Expansion program.

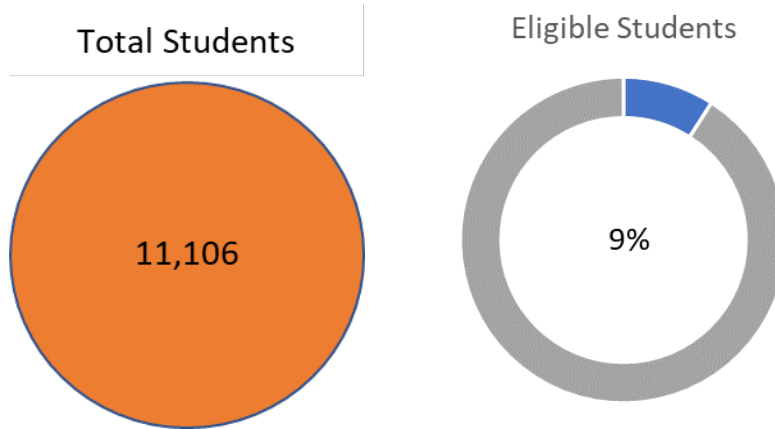
In 2016 in Senate Bill 101, the High Quality School Readiness - Expansion (HQSR-E) grant program was established to expand access to high-quality school readiness programs for eligible children. The HQSR-E program provided grant funds to LEAs and private providers with existing early education programs deemed high quality, as determined by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Third Edition (ECERS-3) and some additional rubric criteria. School readiness programs were eligible to apply for HQSR-E funding if they provided services to 4-year-old children who were economically disadvantaged, could illustrate how funds would be used to expand their preschool programs, and were deemed high quality based on the criteria noted above. The HQSR-E program ended in June 2019 but was replaced by the Expanded Student Access (ESA) to High Quality School Readiness Programs grant program.

During the 2019 General Session, the Legislature passed Senate Bill 166, *School Readiness Amendments*, to improve the coordination and alignment of preschool programming. The state appropriated \$6 million from the General Fund to continue the support of program funding previously provided by Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) reserve funding through the HQSR-E grant. This appropriation was combined with the ongoing \$3 million from the previous HQSR grant, for a total of \$9 million supporting both the Becoming High Quality (BHQ) and ESA grant programs.

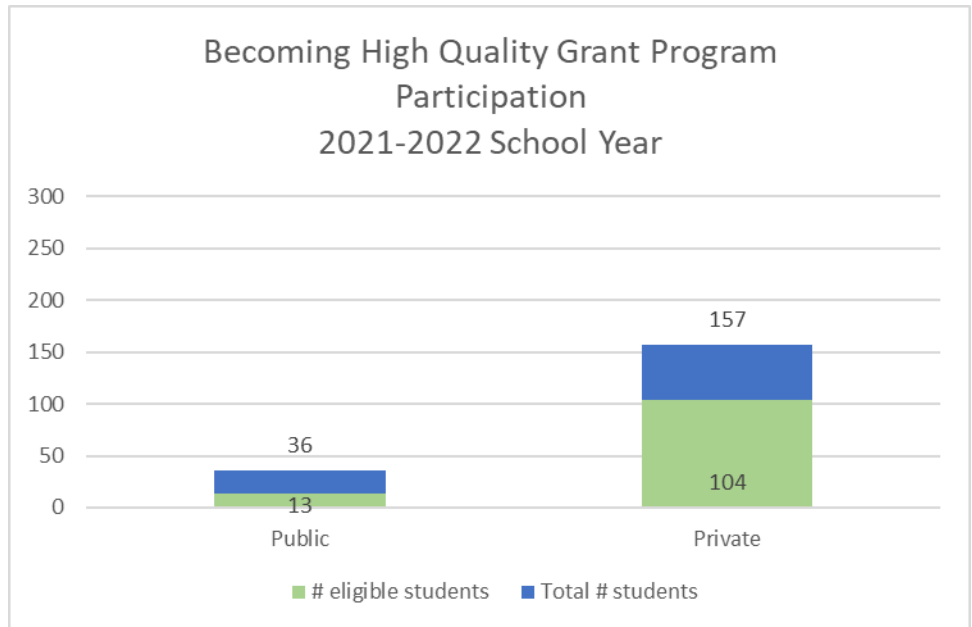
Also included in Senate Bill 166, the School Readiness Board governs both the BHQ and ESA grant programs for both public and private providers. The BQ program provides funding to help existing preschool programs increase elements of high quality. The ESA program allows high-quality preschool programs to expand access and provide seats to eligible students. An eligible student is one who is economically disadvantaged and whose parent or guardian reports they also have experienced at least one risk factor (mother is 18 or younger, parents with a low reading ability, exposure to substance abuse, etc.) or a student who is an English learner.

PROGRAM PARTICIPATION

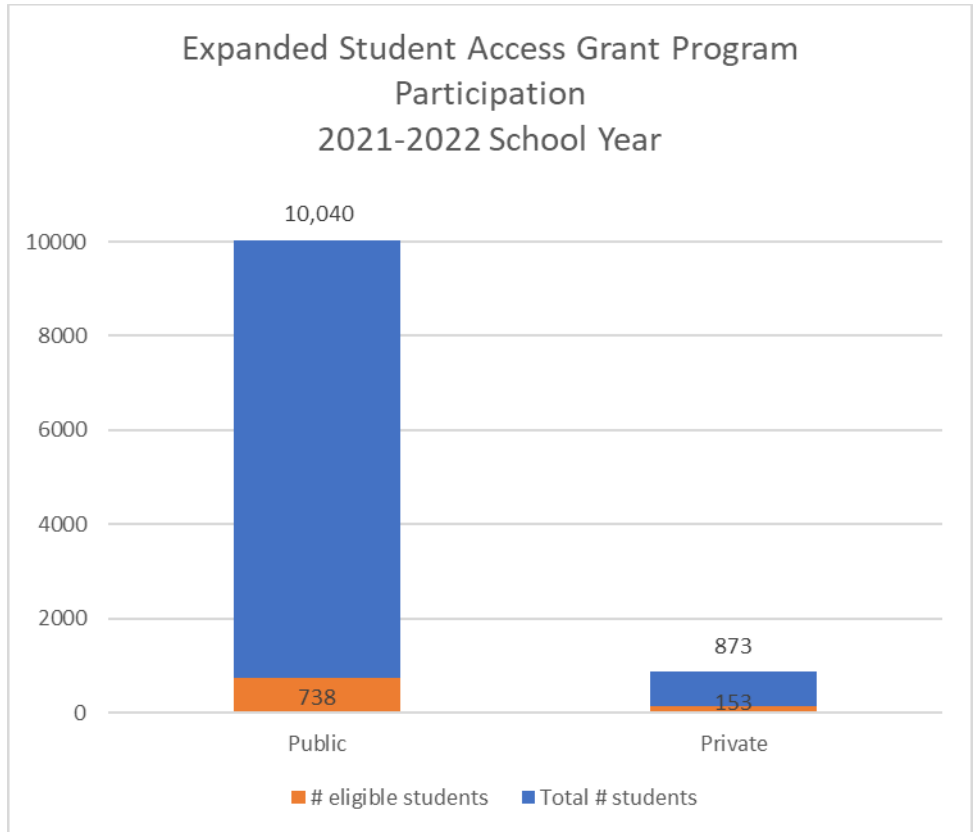
During the 2021-2022 school year, the Becoming High Quality and Expanded Student Access programs served a total of 28 preschool programs consisting of 11,106 students. Of these students, 1,008 (9%) were eligible based on the criteria described above.



The Becoming High Quality grant program served a total of 193 students with 36 students in public programs and 157 students in private programs. Of the 36 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 36% (13 students) qualified as eligible students. Of the 157 students in a grant-receiving private preschool program, 66% (104 students) qualified as eligible students. The proportion of eligible students in the program is reflected below.



The Expanded Student Access grant program served a total of 10,913 students with 10,040 students in public programs and 873 students in private programs. Of the 10,040 students in a grant-receiving public preschool program, 7% (738 students) qualified as eligible students. Of the 873 students in a grant-receiving private preschool program, 18% (153 students) qualified as eligible students. The proportion of eligible students in the program is reflected below.



PROGRAM EVALUATION

The Utah State Board of Education (USBE) and the School Readiness Board have been tasked with determining or developing a tool to determine whether a school readiness program is a high-quality program. This determination is still under discussion by the School Readiness Board. The tool currently in use is the *Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale Third Edition (ECERS-3)*. The School Readiness Board has also convened a Quality Tool Research Subcommittee to investigate or develop other available tools. The Subcommittee has primarily researched the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool. The ECERS-3 and CLASS tools are the most widely used in the field and both tools are currently under consideration by the School Readiness Board for future school years. Six observers who have been classified as “reliable” by the ECERS-3 creators conduct the observations; the team consists of one employee from the Department of Workforce Services, three from USBE, and two external coaches.

The ECERS-3 is a tool designed to assess classroom quality for children ages 3-5. One of principal characteristics of the ECERS-3 is the reliance on observation as the primary source of information on which to base assessment of classroom quality. It views the physical environment, children’s relationships with one another and with significant adults, and instruction as intertwined. Assessors examine 35 indicators across six subscales. The subscales include Space and Furnishings, Personal Care Routines, Language and Literacy, Learning Activities, Interaction, and Program Structure.

The CLASS tool emphasizes interactions between students and adults as the

primary driver of childhood development. The CLASS examines 10 dimensions across three domains looking only at interactions between teachers and students. The domains include Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. The CLASS emphasizes the use of materials or curriculum by the teacher over the evaluation of the materials themselves.

In March 2020, the School Readiness Board approved cut scores for participant programs. The ECERS-3 has a total possible score of 7. For LEAs, a minimum overall score of 3 is required. For private providers, a minimum overall score of 3.67 is required with a score of 4 on the Language and Literacy and a 4 on the Interaction subscales. These cut off scores were originally determined with the implementation of HQSR and HQSR-E grant programs and have been recently approved by the School Readiness Board members for the Becoming High-Quality and Expanded Student Access grants. The Department of Workforce Services Office of Child Care (OCC) chose minimum scores to align with the Childcare Quality Rating System used in private programs. As ECERS-3 scores are highly dependent on time in the classroom, and the majority of LEA programs run half-day sessions, a minimum score of 3 was selected. The research committee is planning to align expectations for both public and private preschool programs when a tool is finalized.

In November 2021 the School Readiness Board approved the following observation ratios: for public providers a minimum of three observations per 500 students with one additional observation per every 500 students over 500. Due to the generally smaller size of private programs, OCC recommended observing a minimum of one third of classrooms in a program. If a private provider serves over 500 students, OCC will follow USBE guidelines.

In 2019 the School Readiness Board approved a look-back period for ECERS observations. This decision was made to reduce the workload of grant administrators. Observations were conducted for new applicants, and ECERS observations conducted within the look-back period were used for returning applicants.

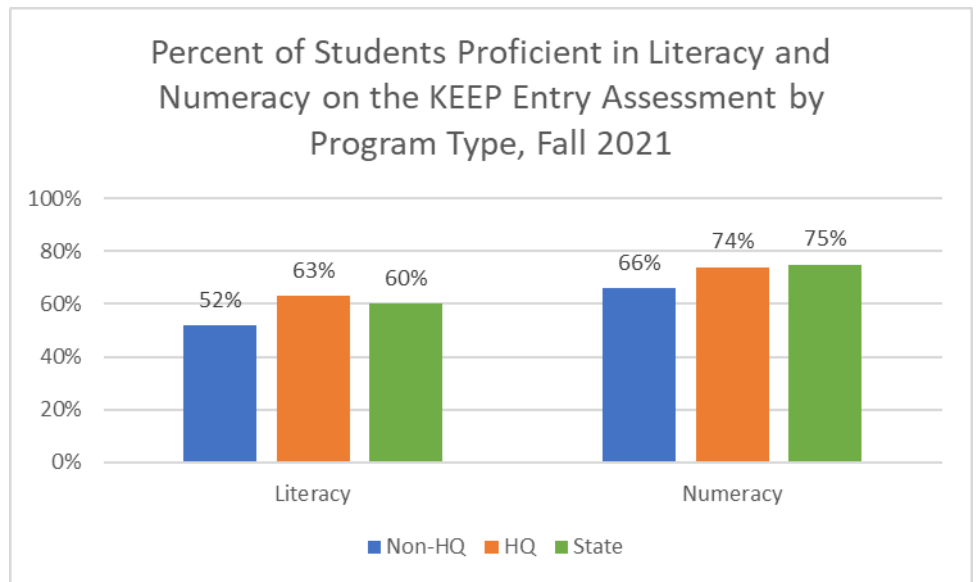
PROGRAMMATIC OUTCOMES

In order to evaluate programmatic outcomes for students exiting the ESA program, USBE looked at school year 2021-2022 Kindergarten Entry Exit Profile (KEEP) proficiency levels assessed at the beginning of the academic year. Students entering kindergarten who attended high-quality preschool programs in school year 2020-2021 were compared to students entering kindergarten who attended public preschool programs that are not participants in the High-Quality School Readiness Grants programs.

Overall, students entering kindergarten from high-quality programs had a higher proportion of students proficient in both literacy and numeracy than students entering from non-high-quality public programs (see figure on the following page). High-quality program participants performed at higher levels than the state average in literacy. Students who attended both high-quality and non-high-quality preschool programs performed at lower levels than the

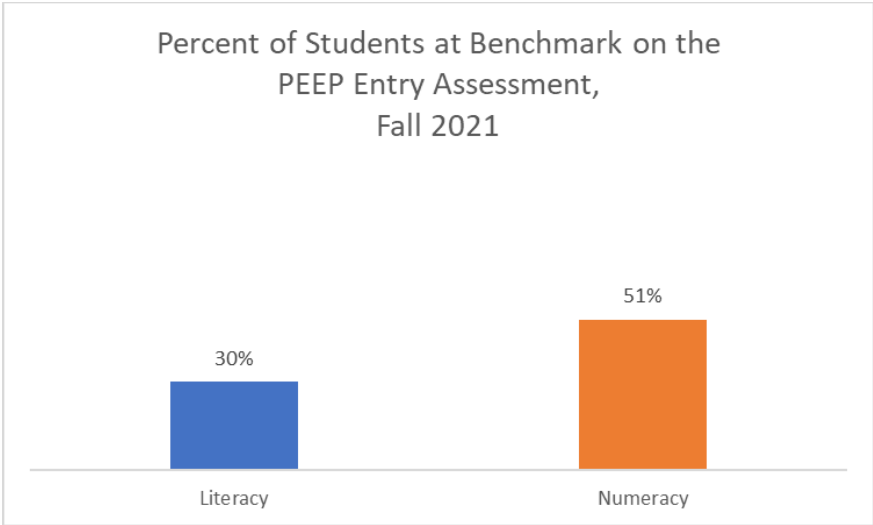
state average in numeracy. However, it should be noted that public preschool programs serve a relatively small proportion of students and a higher proportion of at-risk students. Of the 45,789 students who took the KEEP Entry, 4,485 attended high-quality preschool programs and 4,010 attended public preschool programs that are not participants in the High-Quality School Readiness Grants programs.

The School Readiness Board has been tasked with determining assessment benchmarks for schools participating in the BHQ and ESA grant programs. In previous years, the grant has only required that programs administer a pre-, mid-, and post-year assessment based on their selected curriculum. As such, it has not been possible to set a benchmark since a variety of assessments have been used. As of 2019-2020 the Preschool Entry Exit Profile (PEEP) has become available. It is the intention of the School Readiness Board to use this assessment in future years to determine benchmarks after sufficient data has been collected and analysis conducted.

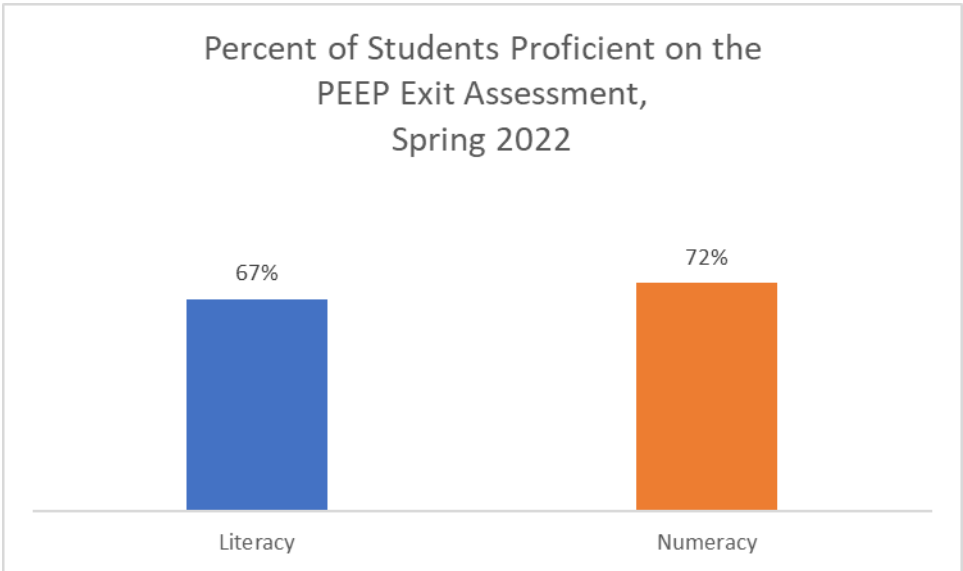


The PEEP Entry assessment is based on Utah’s Early Learning standards. Students taking the PEEP Entry assessment are considered as either performance level 1: “Support Needed” or performance level 2: “At Benchmark.”

In the fall of 2021, 6,612 preschool students took the PEEP Entry. Of this group, 30% were At Benchmark in literacy and 51% were At Benchmark in numeracy.



The PEEP Exit is the same exam as the KEEP Entry and is designed to track academic losses over the summer between preschool and kindergarten. A student can score within either performance level 1, 2, or 3. A student earning a performance level 3 is considered “Proficient”. In the spring of 2022, 6,755 students took the PEEP Exit. Of this group, 67% of were Proficient in literacy and 72% were proficient in numeracy. It should be noted that the Entry and Exit assessments are different tests and based on different sets of early learning standards, so increased proficiency does not necessarily reflect growth.



Conclusion

The Becoming High Quality Grant and Expanded Student Access grants served a total of 11,106 students across 28 programs in the 2021-2022 school year. Of these students, 1,008 (9%) qualify as eligible by the program’s definition. These students generally showed greater readiness for kindergarten than their peers who attended non-high-quality public programs. Students who had attended high-quality preschools also showed higher proficiency in literacy than other students

entering kindergarten statewide. These data reflect the positive impact of high-quality preschool on students who come from more academically at-risk backgrounds.