

Latino children make greatest gains in NC Pre-K

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A new summary of 12 years of research on North Carolina's pre-kindergarten program for at-risk 4-year-olds shows that "dual-language learners" make the greatest academic progress in the program. According to the report from the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute (FPG), while students in NC Pre-K advance across all spheres of learning, the program is especially beneficial for the state's dual-language learners.

"On the whole, [children](#) in NC Pre-K exceed normal expectations for the rate of developmental growth, both while in the program and afterward in kindergarten," said Ellen Peisner-Feinberg, director of FPG's National Pre-K and Early Learning Evaluation Center and lead author of the report. "But one of our key conclusions was that those children who enter the pre-k program with lower levels of English proficiency make gains at an even greater rate than the other students."

Peisner-Feinberg said the report's conclusions are consistent with FPG's comprehensive review of research on young Latino or Spanish-speaking children, which confirmed last year that widely available public programs help dual-language [learners](#) make important academic gains. That review determined that children with lower English-language abilities than their peers benefit the most from programs like Head Start and public pre-k—but exactly how and why remained unclear.

"We know that early childhood is a critical period for children who are dual-language learners," said Virginia Buysse, the review's lead author and co-director of the National Pre-K and Early Learning Evaluation Center. "Many of them face the difficult task of [learning](#) a new language while acquiring essential skills to be ready for kindergarten."

According to Peisner-Feinberg, Latino children in North Carolina, despite their rapid advances in the state's pre-k program, typically enter it with lower skill levels and often have not caught up to their peers even by the end of kindergarten. Maximizing gains for dual-language learners is essential, therefore, because the gap usually widens as they grow older.

"In our review of research, we did find some support across several studies both for using English as the language of instruction and for incorporating the home language into strategies that focused on language and literacy," said Buysse. She added, though, that small sample sizes and other methodological challenges necessitated more research in order

to demonstrate exactly which interventions hold the most promise for dual-language learners.

Peisner-Feinberg said focusing on classroom quality—especially on the instructional environments of dual-language learners—is essential to understanding how to maximize their opportunities for learning. She headed a new review of research in order to examine several measures of the quality of early childhood education specifically for dual-language learners.

"We found that general measures capture overall instructional quality and its associations with child outcomes similarly for dual-language learners and the wider [early childhood](#) population, but that doesn't necessarily mean that all children experience learning environments in the same way," said Peisner-Feinberg. "In fact, measures designed specifically with dual-language learners in mind do capture different dimensions of the learning environment that are especially important for these children."

Peisner-Feinberg, who has led the FPG teams in conducting annual evaluation studies of NC Pre-K since its inception as More at Four in 2001, concluded her summary report on the program's first dozen years with recommendations that included further improving instruction—even for the group making the largest advances in the program.

"As a group, Latinos now represent at least 1 in 12 children in about half of the states in the country," she said. "Given the research and demographic shifts, it's essential to carefully measure the quality of classroom experiences for dual-language learners and to optimize their learning in our state and across the country."

More information: [fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/ ... olicy-](http://fpg.unc.edu/sites/fpg.unc.edu/...olicy-)

[briefs/Summary%20of%20NC%20Pre-K%20Evaluation%20Findings%205-2014.pdf](#)

Provided by Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute

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