

DIVISION OF ACCOUNTABILITY AND RESEARCH
Early Childhood Education

2011 Evaluation

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Introduction

This report reviews Aurora Public Schools' Early Childhood Education (ECE) programming. The report begins by presenting background information on ECE program funding and outlining the actions that the ECE department has taken to align preschool learning with higher level instructional practices. The report then provides statistics that describe the population served by ECE programming and presents an analysis of the ECE department's performance in meeting the standards it has established for professional development and student achievement.

ECE Overview

Background

The Aurora Public Schools Early Childhood Education (ECE) department strives to provide preschool students with experience and skills that will prepare them to reach high levels of learning throughout their academic careers. This supports the VISTA 2015 goal of improving student achievement and increasing high school graduation rates.

Research has established that effective ECE programs help ensure that children succeed academically. In the first five years of life, children develop basic skills and cognitive frameworks that shape their ability to learn throughout their academic careers. Studies have shown that children who attend high-quality preschools are less likely to be retained in the primary grades, have fewer behavior problems, and have higher graduation rates from high school (International Reading Association: Preschool Literacy Collection). Children who attend preschool perform better on standardized achievement tests at age 14, and are nearly twice as likely to be economically self-sufficient by age 19. Preschool attendees also score higher on assessments of nonverbal intelligence and, on the whole, require fewer special education services (Perry Preschool Project, reviewed 2002).

ECE Programming and Funding

To be eligible for ECE programming in APS, children must be three or four years old on or before Oct 1 and families must attend a screening for program eligibility. Following placement, a child must be registered as an APS student. Depending on slot availability and the circumstances of the particular child and his or her family, the child will then be enrolled in one of the program sites operated by the ECE department.

The majority of ECE children are enrolled through the Colorado Preschool Program. Others may be served through preschool special education, Title I Preschool, and tuition-based preschool.

The state supports the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP) through the School Finance Act. Funding for the program is allocated to the district as part of K-12 funding. Each year, the state allocates a number of slots to be funded, and on the October 1 count date the district reports the children who will actually be served. The state does not provide funding for children who are not eligible to be counted during the count period.

The state allocates funding for CPP slots on a half-day basis. However, if the district determines that a child has a significant need for full-day services, the district may petition the state Department of Education for permission to serve the child in a full-day program. For each child that is approved to be served in a full-day program, the state deducts two slots from the district's total preschool allocation. The state does not permit districts to exceed their preschool allocation, and will not authorize more than five percent of total allocation to be used for children requiring double slots.

Preschool special education is a state and federally mandated program for three- and four-year-old children who meet state eligibility criteria of developmental delay or disability and are experiencing challenges in their learning and development. In APS, services are provided through school-based programs and through contracts with Head Start and other community-based preschool programs. In accordance with state and federal mandates, services are provided at no cost to parents. Preschool special education is funded through a combination of federal and state special education funding, along with some funds provided through the School Finance Act. Funding for special education is distinct from funding for CPP. Law prohibits children from receiving state per-pupil revenue from both sources.

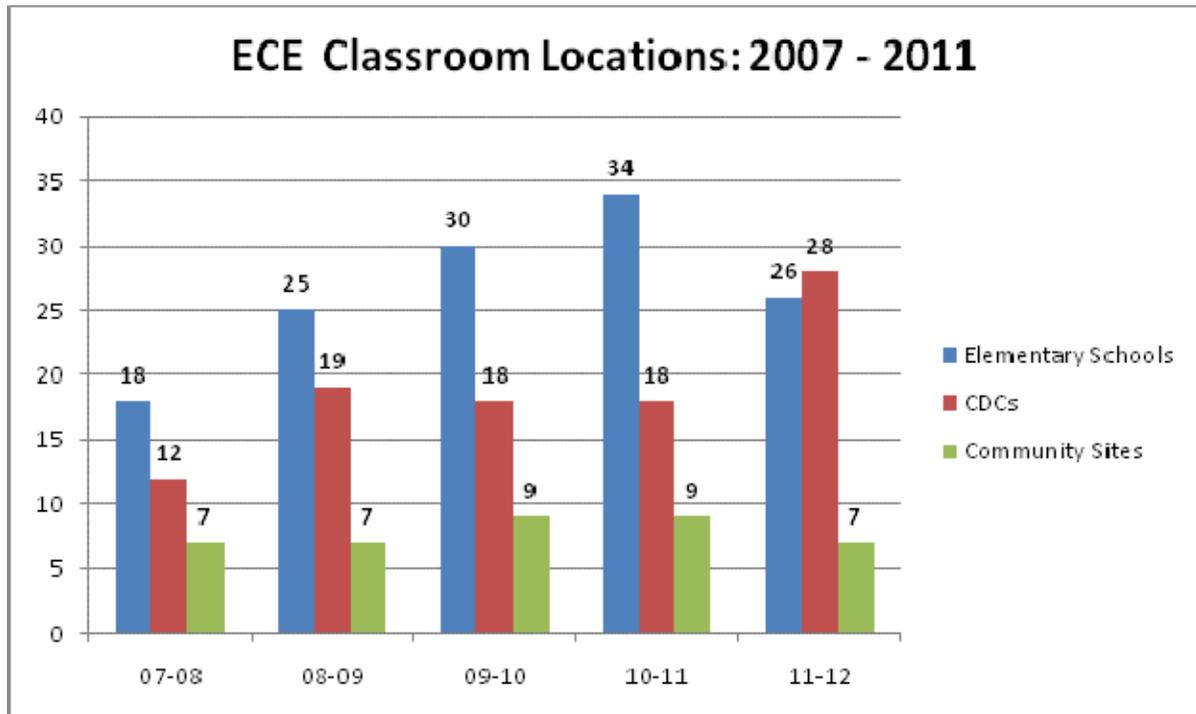
The federal Title I program provides additional funding that may be used for disadvantaged students not served through CPP and preschool special education. Title I funds are administered by the district and ECE services are provided through district and community based preschool programs. ECE has utilized Title I funds in the past, but will not use them in 2011-12.

Program Sites and Slot Allocation

ECE programming is offered at multiple sites throughout the district and surrounding community. Historically, most ECE children in APS have attended preschool at an elementary school site. However, in 2011, APS opened its third Childhood Development Center (CDC). This will be the first year that the majority of preschool classrooms are located in CDCs. Elementary schools still have a large number of preschool

classrooms, and many children continue to be serviced through community sites. Overall, preschool classrooms are located at 22 APS elementary schools, three CDCs, and seven community child care centers. The graph below shows the number of classrooms at each type of ECE site.

Figure 1. ECE Classroom Locations: 2007 – 2011



The number of slots available to preschool aged children in APS has increased each year over the past five years. In 2007-08, there were 1,131 slots available. In 2008-09, there were 1,694. The following year there were 1,859. In 2010-11, there were 1,900 slots available, and in the current year there are 1,905.

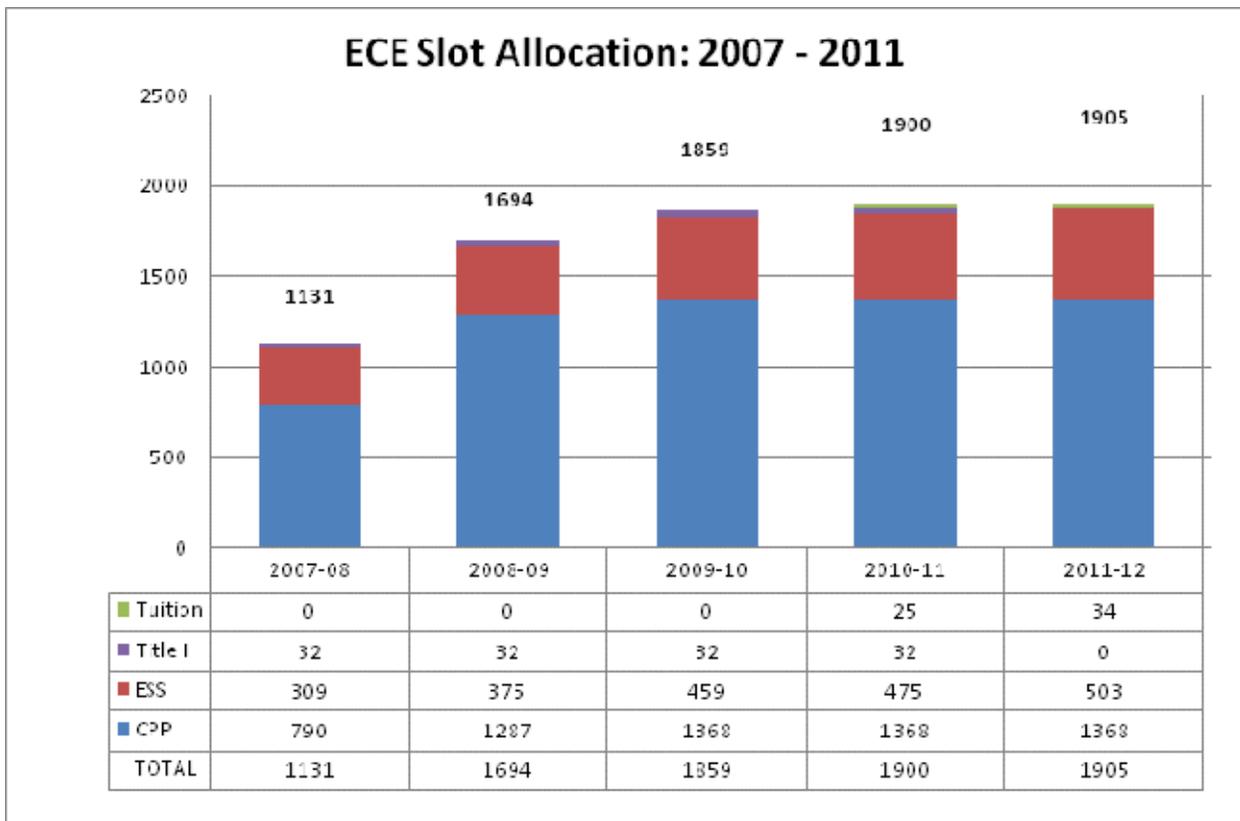
The expansion of ECE programming in APS reflects changes in funding that have occurred since 2007. These changes have primarily occurred around state funding for CPP, which serves the majority of ECE children. In 2008, following a legislative review of the state's public education system, funding for CPP increased dramatically. In 2007-08, the state had funded only 795 CPP slots in APS. In 2008-09, funding was increased to provide 1,287 slots. Funding increased again the following year, bringing the number of CPP slots to 1,368. Since 2009-10, the number of CPP slots has remained constant at 1,368 as state budget cuts have limited funding for public education.

The number of preschool slots funded through special education has also increased since 2007-08. In that year, 300 preschool slots were available through special education funding. In the current year, there are just over 500 slots.

There has been an increase in the number of children enrolled in tuition-based preschool in recent years as well. From 2007 through 2010, no children attended preschool on a tuition basis. In 2010-11, there were 25 children enrolled on a tuition basis, and in the current year there are 34.

Title I funding for preschool had remained constant for several years in APS. Each year from 2007 through the 2010-11 school year, 32 program slots, the equivalent of one classroom, had been supported by Title I funding. In 2011-12, however, no preschool classrooms will be funded under Title I. Table 2 below shows the total number of slots made available through each funding source over the past five years.

Figure 2. ECE Slot Allocations: 2007 – 2011



Curriculum Design & Alignment

ECE programming that has been developed aligns well with the APS P-2 Initiative, which is intended to ensure that preschool through second grade learning incorporates structures and supports that align with higher level instructional practices. ECE curriculum guides, designed for teachers working with children aged three to five, outline the skills and content knowledge that children are expected to acquire at this stage of development. The guides explain the rationale for these expectations and link content to assessments in order to help teachers plan instruction. Teachers monitor student progress on an ongoing basis by recording data and creating reports with tools like TeachingStrategies.com. They also administer emergent writing and reading assessments three times each year. Assessment data is recorded in Infinite Campus so that future teachers will be able to determine where a particular student is on the development trajectory.

Quality Standards

To ensure that programming effectively prepares children for K-12 schooling, the ECE department has preschool sites reviewed for ratings from Colorado Qualistar. Colorado Qualistar is a non-profit that rates ECE programs, with programs being given a rating of one to four stars, four being the highest. Over the last three years, Qualistar has rated 27 APS sites; eight have received the top rating of four stars. An additional five sites will be rated in 2011-12. The ECE department has established the goal of having all district preschool classrooms earn the highest rating by 2015.

Professional Development

The ECE department provides teachers and administrators with on-going professional development in order to ensure that preschool curriculum and instruction are aligned with K-12 practices. As part of this training, the department provides opportunities for vertical team planning, which allows teachers at each grade level to develop knowledge of the expectations for work in previous and subsequent grades. Central to the ECE department's vision for establishing a learning continuum across grade levels are the component skills of early literacy development: oral language, comprehension, alphabet knowledge, phonemic awareness, and vocabulary. Professional development is focused on providing teachers with the resources and knowledge base necessary to impart these component skills.

Student Achievement

Efforts to align preschool curriculum with K-12 instruction support the VISTA 2015 goal of increasing student achievement. At the higher grade levels, student achievement is measured using a variety of assessments, most notably the Colorado Student Assessment Program (CSAP), which is administered annually to students in grades three through ten. Because literacy plays a central role in all learning, assessments at the lower grade levels focus on measuring early literacy development. For students in kindergarten through second grade, the district uses the Developmental Reading Assessment (DRA2) to do this. At the preschool level, the district assesses students through an observational assessment system called Teaching Strategies GOLD.

Evaluation

Methods

This evaluation included in this report is intended to provide both a quantitative and qualitative analysis of ECE programming within APS. The evaluation begins by presenting enrollment statistics and demographic data that describe the population served by ECE programming over the past five years. Enrollment and demographic data from 2005-06 through the 2010-11 school year are included.

Following the review of demographic data, we look at results from the 2011 Staff Climate Survey. Data from this survey is meant to shed light on employees' attitudes toward their jobs and on the quality of their relationships with supervisors and coworkers. This information can be analyzed to gain insights into how well the ECE department is meeting the standards it has set for professional development.

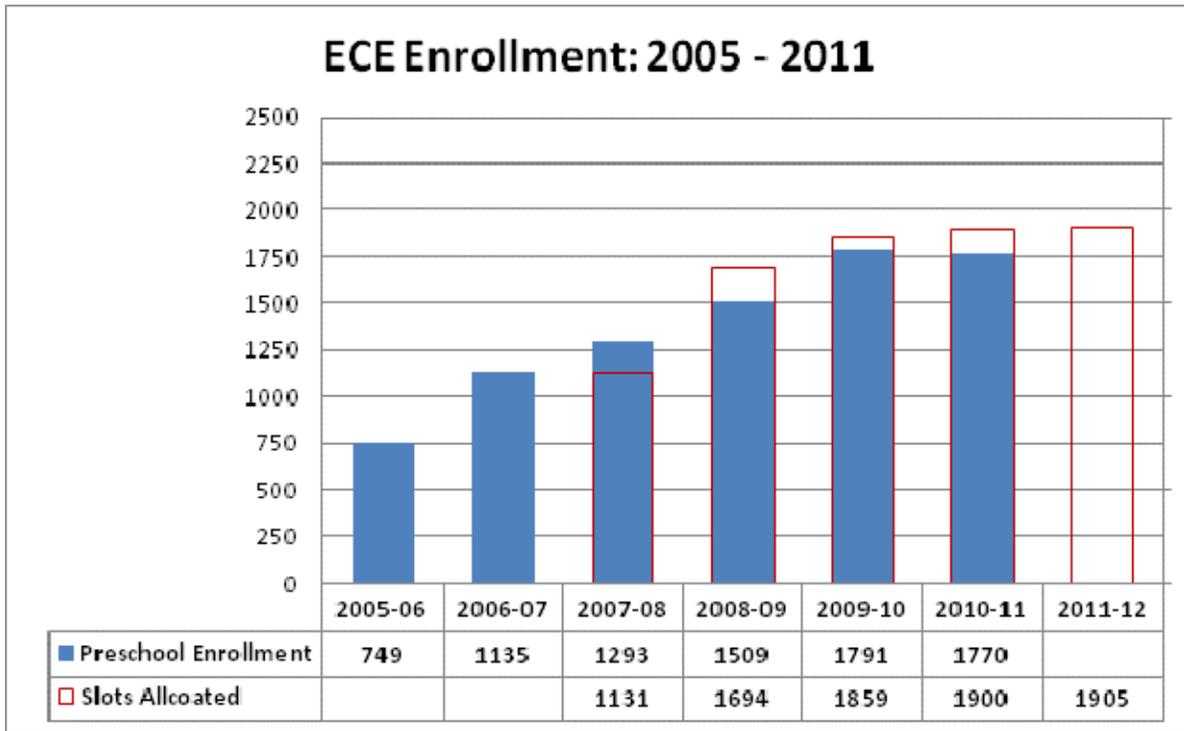
After examining climate survey data, the evaluation turns toward analyzing student achievement data. We reviewed DRA2 and CSAP assessment results from the last two years for matched cohorts of ECE and non-ECE students. The comparison of assessment results provides some indication of the impact of the ECE program on subsequent learning outcomes.

Enrollment

Increased funding for ECE programming has been matched by increased enrollment since 2008-09. The graph below shows total preschool enrollments from 2005- 2011. The enrollment counts are based on end-of-year records submitted to the state, which include all students who were enrolled in an APS school at any point during the

academic year. The graph also shows the number of slots allocated from 2007 through the present school-year. Records for slot allocations were not available for earlier years.

Figure 3. ECE Enrollment: 2005 – 2011

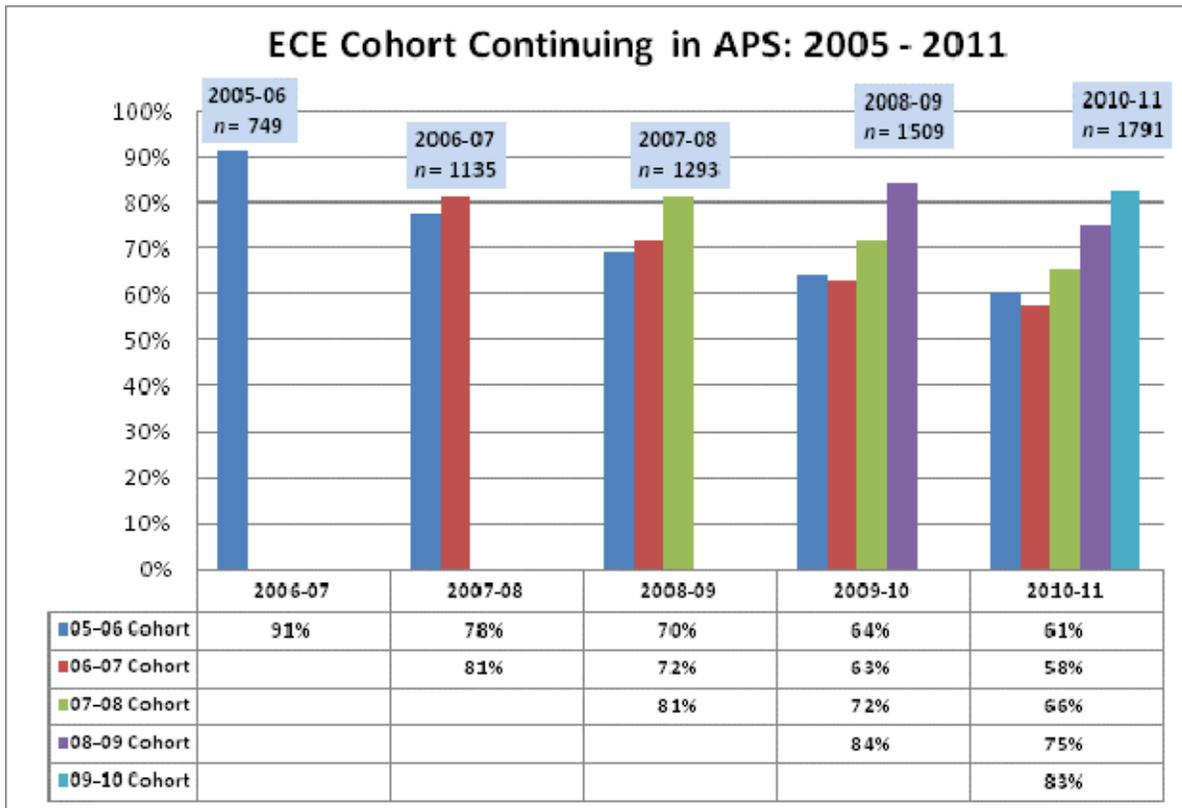


In the final year before the state acted to increase funding for CPP (2007-08), enrollments actually exceeded the number of slots allocated for preschool. Keeping in mind that these counts include all students who were enrolled in preschool at some point during the year, the excess indicates that the district struggled to keep up with demand for preschool services. During the course of a school year, a certain number of preschoolers leave the district. When this happens, a preschool slot reopens and the ECE department places a new child from the waitlist. In 2007-08, there were always parents waiting for slots to open up so their children could get into preschool.

From 2008-09 to the present, the ECE department has been better able to meet the demand for preschool programming. CPP slots have remained filled throughout each year, as waitlisted children have continued to be moved into slots that open up as children leave the district. At the same time, special education has been able to maintain a surplus of slots that can be used to accommodate children in need of special education services as they are identified during the course of the year. This surplus accounts for the difference between allocations and enrollment shown on the graph.

Examining the proportion of ECE students who continue in APS either for a second year of preschool or for K-12 education provides a sense of the level of stability amongst the preschool population. The graph below shows the proportion of students from each of the previous five preschool cohorts who have been enrolled in APS during subsequent years.

Figure 4. ECE Cohort Continuing in APS: 2005 – 2011



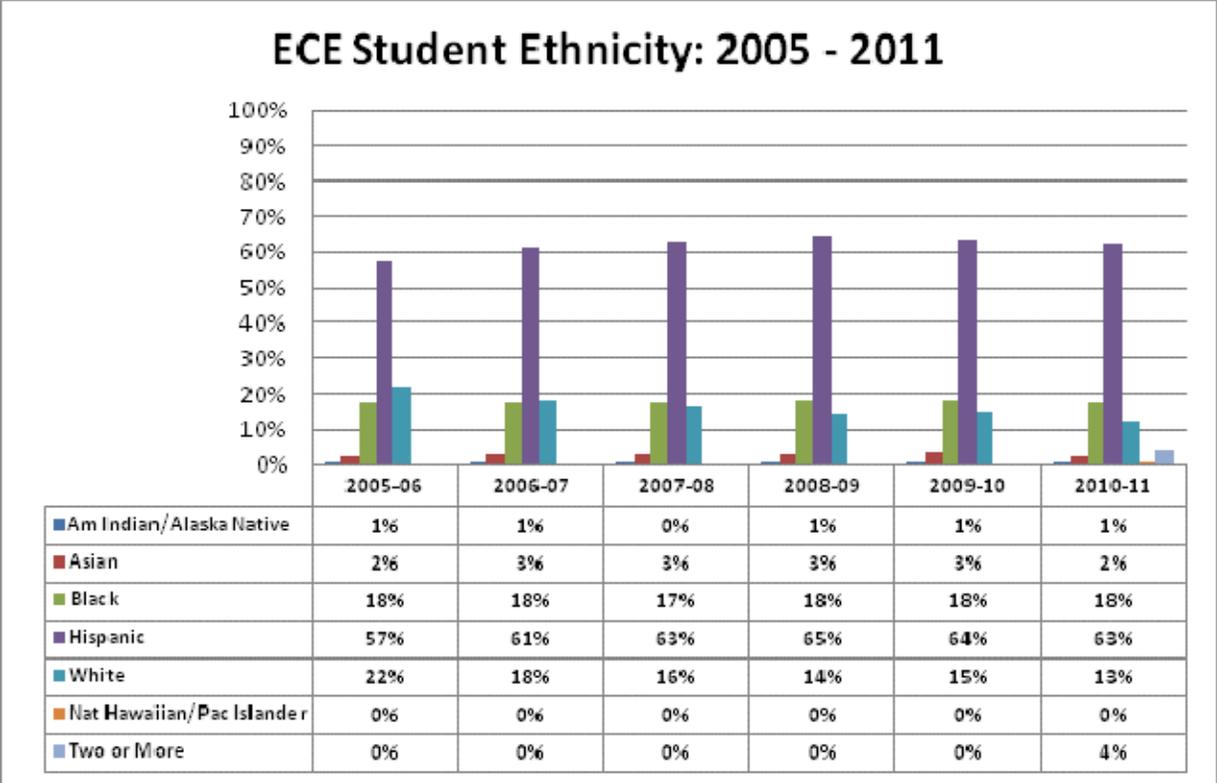
Over the past five years, the proportion of children who have returned to APS for the first year after attending preschool has ranged from 81 to 91%. Seventy-two to 78% have continued in APS for at least two years after attending preschool, and 63 to 70% have remained for at least three years. Of the 749 students in the 2005-06 cohort, 61% were still enrolled in APS five years after attending as preschoolers. Fifty-eight percent of the 2006-07 cohort were still in APS four years after attending as preschoolers.

Student Demographics

Demographic data helps to construct a picture of the population that is served by ECE programming. The graph below shows the breakdown of ECE students according to ethnicity for the past five years. During this time, the largest group of preschool students

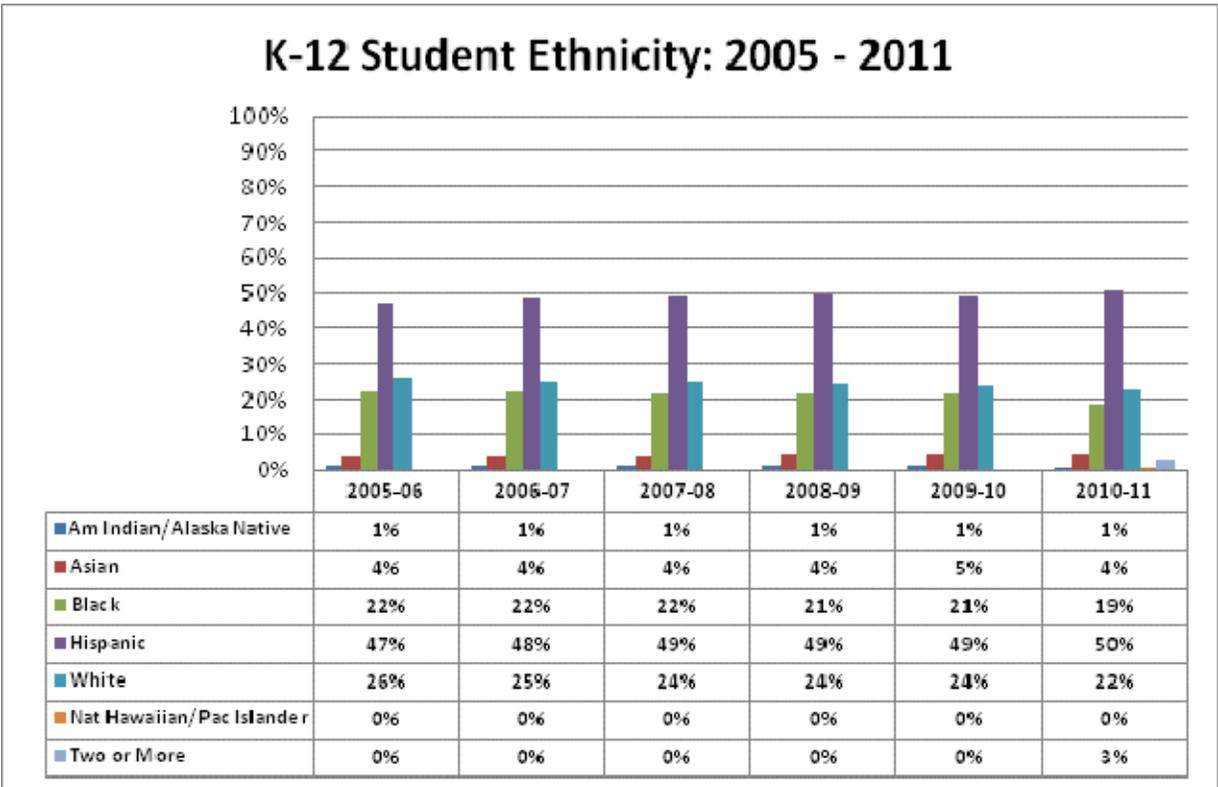
has been Hispanic, ranging from 57 to 65%. African American and black students have consistently made up about 18% of the preschool population over this same period. The proportion of white students has decreased over time, ranging from 22% in 2005-06 to 13% in 2010-11. The proportion of Asian children enrolled in preschool has been steady at two or three percent for the past five years.

Figure 5. ECE Student Ethnicity: 2005 – 2011



The status of Hispanics as the largest group of preschoolers served by APS is consistent with their representation in the K-12 population. However, the proportion of Hispanic students is significantly higher at the preschool level than it is at the K-12 level. Over the past five years, approximately 60% of preschoolers have been Hispanic. Over the same period, Hispanics have accounted for only about 50% of the K-12 population. This can be seen by comparing the graph below, which shows the ethnic make-up of the K-12 population, with the graph above.

Figure 6. K-12 Student Ethnicity: 2005 – 2011



Note: Percentages based on end-of-year data. May differ from October 1 calculations.

While Hispanics have been proportionally overrepresented amongst preschoolers, white students have been underrepresented. Over the past five years, whites have made up approximately one quarter of the K-12 population. At the preschool level, whites have made up only about 15% of the population. The proportions of blacks and Asians have also been lower at the preschool level than at K-12.

Given that APS does serve a high proportion of students of color, it would be valuable to have data showing what percentages of children who attend preschool speak English as a second language. This would be helpful in determining what resources are necessary to prepare children to transition successfully into K-12 education. Currently, records of language proficiency records of language proficiency are not formally kept for preschool students.

Staff Climate Survey

Research across a range of employment sectors has shown that the professional climate of an organization has significant influence on staff performance. In order to

gauge the climate of workplaces throughout the district, APS administers an annual staff climate survey. The survey is meant to provide insights into staff perceptions of program support, communication, vision, morale, trust, and general working conditions. Each year, the survey includes between 30 and 35 items. For each item, staff members are asked to indicate their level of agreement with a statement: strongly agree, agree, neutral, disagree, or strongly disagree. A 70% combined rate of strongly agree and agree indicates a high level of satisfaction with the work climate.

For this analysis, we examined ECE staff responses to survey items associated with the professional development goals established by program administrators. ECE professional development activities focus on aligning curriculum to K-12 practices, facilitating teamwork, and providing teachers with resources and support. We selected nine items from the surveys that are pertinent to these goals. A summary of responses from the past two years, the only years for which disaggregated data is available, is included in the table below. The overall average is also included.

Table 1. ECE Staff Climate Survey Results: 2009 –2011

Item	2009-2010		2010-2011	
	Dis/St Dis	Ag/St Ag	Dis/St Dis	Ag/St Ag
Overall Results (All 35 items)	10.1%	75.6%	9.7%	73.6%
APS has set a clear direction for improving student achievement.	7.1%	90.6%	2.7%	87.7%
I know how my work relates to the district's goals and priorities.	2.3%	90.7%	5.6%	83.3%
The district sets high and realistic expectations for students.	9.3%	76.7%	7.0%	77.5%
There is a spirit of teamwork and cooperation at my worksite.	16.3%	66.3%	12.5%	69.4%
I am treated with respect by my co-workers.	15.3%	72.9%	7.0%	83.1%
I receive the necessary training to do high quality work.	9.4%	80.0%	8.6%	80.0%
I have the necessary resources to do high quality work	9.3%	72.1%	12.9%	68.6%
I am satisfied with professional development opportunities	9.4%	80.0%	8.5%	71.8%
I am satisfied with my job	5.9%	84.7%	2.7%	80.8%

Three items included on the staff climate survey are concerned with teachers' awareness of district goals and of expectations for students. For each of the last two years, the rate of agreement among ECE staff in response to these three items has

been very high. In 2009-10, 90.6% agreed that APS had established a clear direction for improving student achievement, and 90.7% indicated that they understood how their work relates to the district's goals and priorities. The corresponding rates for 2010-11 were 87.7% and 83.3%. Teachers were also asked whether they agreed that APS had set high and realistic expectations for students. In 2009-10, 76.7% agreed, and in 2010-11, 77.5% did. The rates of agreement with all three of these statements were well above the 70% threshold, indicating that professional development activities are effective in establishing goals and instilling ECE teachers with knowledge of the expectations for student work.

Two items included on the survey asked teachers about teamwork and relationships with coworkers. Here, the rates of agreement were right around 70% mark. In 2009-10, 66.3% of ECE teachers agreed that there was a spirit of teamwork and cooperation in the workplace, and 72.9% said that they were treated with respect by coworkers. The rates of agreement were higher in 2010-11, 69.4% and 83.1% respectively. These rates of agreement indicate that the ECE department is doing a fairly good job of creating a collaborative work environment.

Three survey items asked teachers to share their opinions of their access to training, resources, and professional development opportunities. For both 2009-10 and 2010-11, 80.0% of ECE teachers agreed that they were provided with the necessary training to do high quality work. In 2009-10, 72.1% agreed that the district provided them with the resources necessary to do their work; the rate was 68.6% in 2010-11. Eighty percent of ECE teachers were satisfied with professional development opportunities in 2009-10. In 2010-11, 71.8% were. High rates of agreement to these statements suggest that the ECE department is providing effective professional development.

A final survey item asked teachers directly whether they were satisfied with their job. In 2009-10, 84.7% indicated that they were satisfied; 80.8% indicated that they were in 2010-11. Again, these rates of agreement indicate a high level of job satisfaction amongst ECE staff.

Student Achievement

To determine whether participation in the ECE program had any effect on student outcomes, assessments results for both ECE and non-ECE students were analyzed. The analysis consisted of comparisons of 2010 and 2011 CSAP and DRA2 results for matched cohorts of ECE and non-ECE students. Statistical procedures were used to create cohorts that were evenly matched not only on overall numbers but also on representation within the specific demographic categories of free/reduced priced lunch eligibility, ethnicity, language proficiency, and gender. The balance in the overall groups

can be seen in the tables below wherein each count for an ECE demographic category has an equal count for the same non-ECE category.

Table 2. ECE and Non-ECE Ethnicity

		Non - ECE					
ECE	Am Ind	Asian	Black	Hispanic	White	Pac Islndr	MultiRace
Am Ind	16	0	0	0	0	0	0
Asian	0	115	0	0	0	0	0
Black	0	0	530	0	0	0	0
Hispanic	0	0	0	3130	0	0	0
White	0	0	0	0	519	0	0
Pac Islndr	0	0	0	0	0	2	0
MultiRace	0	0	0	0	0	0	76

Table 3. ECE and Non ECE Free/Reduced Lunch

		Non - ECE	
ECE	Non-FRL	FRL	
Non-FRL	844	0	
FRL	0	3544	

Table 4. ECE and Non-ECE Gender

		Non - ECE	
ECE	Female	Male	
Female	2044	0	
Male	0	2344	

Table 5. ECE and Non-ECE Lang Proficiency

		Non - ECE			
ECE	Eng Prof	NEP	LEP	FEP	
Eng Prof	1371	0	0	0	
NEP	0	944	0	0	
LEP	0	0	1845	0	
FEP	0	0	0	228	

Once balance was established, matched ECE and non-ECE students were grouped into smaller cohorts based on the ECE students' year of enrollment in the program. The cohort year determined which assessments would be analyzed from 2010 and 2011. For example, most of the students who were enrolled in the ECE program in 2006 were in the 3rd and 4th grade in 2010 and 2011, respectively, so comparisons on achievement outcomes with their non-ECE counterparts used the CSAP tests for these grade levels; students enrolled in the ECE program in 2008 were mostly in 1st grade in 2010 and 2nd grade in 2011 so the DRA2 assessment was used as the comparison with their non-ECE counterparts. Overall, there were five cohort groups that were created for the analysis as illustrated in table 6 below. The darker shaded cells indicate analysis of CSAP tests and DRA2 is represented by the lighter shaded cells.

Table 6. Matched Cohorts by ECE Initial Enrollment Year

	2006	2007	2008	2009	2010	2011
Cohort 1	ECE	K	1	2	3	4
Cohort 2		ECE	K	1	2	3
Cohort 3			ECE	K	1	2
Cohort 4				ECE	K	1
Cohort 5					ECE	K

The metric used to compare outcomes between ECE and non-ECE students was the percentage of students either meeting grade level benchmarks on the DRA2 or meeting the proficient or advanced cut points on the CSAP tests. Statistical tests were performed to determine if there were substantive differences in percentages between the ECE and non-ECE students.

Overall, the analysis revealed that ECE participation does not appear to have any substantive, differential impact on student achievement as measured by the aforementioned assessment metrics. While there are higher percentages of ECE students proficient in CSAP for grade 3 math in 2010, grade 4 writing in 2011, and all grade 3 content areas in 2011, the differences between non-ECE participants were too slight to be meaningful. This was also true for DRA2 in kindergarten and grade 2 in 2010 and kindergarten in 2011. Conversely, for the assessments where a higher percentage of non-ECE students met the grade level/proficiency cut points, the differences between the two groups were not substantive. A summary of the comparisons are presented in tables 7 through 11 below.

Table 7. ECE and Non-ECE Cohort 1 CSAP Proficiency Percentage

		Grade 3 2010		Grade 4 2011	
		ECE	Non-ECE	ECE	Non-ECE
Reading Prof+	Pct	46.1%	47.6%	41.4%	43.9%
	N	330	328	309	305
Math Prof+	Pct	48.5%	47.5%	51.0%	53.8%
	N	330	326	308	305
Writing Prof+	Pct	29.1%	31.8%	35.1%	33.4%
	N	330	327	308	302

Table 8. ECE and Non-ECE Cohort 2 CSAP Proficiency/DRA Grade Level Percentage

		Grade 2 2010		Grade 3 2011	
		ECE	Non-ECE	ECE	Non-ECE
Reading Prof+	Pct	36.5%	36.0%	47.0%	46.6%
	N	416	414	436	429
Math Prof+	Pct	----	----	43.0%	42.7%
	N	----	----	437	436
Writing Prof+	Pct	----	----	29.0%	23.4%
	N	----	----	438	432

Table 9. ECE and Non-ECE Cohort 3 DRA2 Grade Level Percentage

		Grade 1 2010		Grade 2 2011	
		ECE	Non-ECE	ECE	Non-ECE
DRA2 Grade Lvl	Pct	38.1%	38.4%	35.1%	38.2%
	N	474	481	465	468

Table 10. ECE and Non-ECE Cohort 4 DRA2 Grade Level Percentage

		Grade K 2010		Grade 1 2011	
		ECE	Non-ECE	ECE	Non-ECE
DRA2 Grade Lvl	Pct	69.8%	69.1%	37.6%	37.8%
	N	470	466	582	576

Table 11. ECE and Non-ECE Cohort 5 DRA2 Grade Level Percentage

		Grade K 2011	
		ECE	Non-ECE
DRA2 Grade Lvl	Pct	73.3%	70.5%
	N	738	719

Summary

Key Findings

- For 2011-12, 1,905 slots have been allocated for preschool. There are preschool classrooms in 22 APS elementary schools, three CDCs, and seven community child care centers.
- Over the last three years, Qualistar has rated 27 APS sites; eight have received the top rating of four stars.
- For each of the past five years, all slots allocated for CPP have been filled. At the same time, special education has been able to maintain a surplus of slots that can be used to accommodate children as they are identified during the year.
- The proportion of Hispanic students enrolled in preschool is significantly higher than the proportion enrolled in K-12; the proportion of white students is lower.
- Results of the annual staff climate survey indicate that the majority of ECE teachers are aware of district goals and feel that the student expectations are high, yet attainable. Most also feel that the ECE department provides them with the training and resources necessary to succeed.
- Analysis of available student achievement outcomes did not show substantive, positive effects of ECE enrollment.
- While not substantive, the largest difference in achievement outcomes is in kindergarten for the 2011 school year.

Recommendations

- Continue to monitor expanded achievement data for cohorts to evaluate the impacts of recent changes made to ECE programming.
- Conduct a longitudinal analysis of attendance and discipline data to determine whether there are any significant differences between students who participated in ECE programming in the district and students who did not.
- Consider collecting formal data on language proficiency, which would be valuable in determining what impact ECE has on language development and what additional resources are necessary to prepare children to transition successfully into K-12 education.
- Develop and implement a program for a more formal evaluation of professional learning initiatives and curriculum alignment.
- Review the process for projecting the number of preschoolers who will need special education services in order to achieve a more efficient allocation of special education funds.