

## Executive Summary

First 5 Sacramento piloted a new study in winter 2019 to evaluate developmental playgroups across First 5 Sacramento's nine partner school districts. Developmental playgroups provide play-based opportunities for caregivers and their child(ren) ages 0-3 through facilitated direction and guidance in a safe and structured environment. Conducted by Applied Survey Research, the purpose of this evaluation was to gather formative data about the programmatic elements in use across First 5 Sacramento's playgroups to guide quality improvement. Specifically, the evaluation gathered data regarding four main dimensions: curriculum, classroom environment, schedule, and staffing/infrastructure.

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### Overall Scores Across the Four Playgroup Dimensions

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#### **Four out of 9 sites received scores that indicated their practices were exemplary.**

- Of the remaining sites, 4 out of 9 sites received scores that denoted average overall success in the indicators assessed, while 1 out of 9 sites received a score that indicated room for significant improvement.
- "Classroom environment" and "staffing/infrastructure" were the highest-scoring dimensions, with 4 out of 9 sites scoring well (a score at or above 2.4 on a 3-point scale) on these dimensions, while only 3 sites scored well on "curriculum," and 2 sites scored well on "schedule."

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### Summary of Results Across the Four Playgroup Dimensions

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#### **Curriculum:**

- Playgroup sites that scored highest on curriculum by parent satisfaction and evaluative measures offered playgroup curricula that were engaging, thematic, culturally responsive through language, and provided take-home supplemental activities for families.

#### **Classroom Environment:**

- Overall, the most effective classroom environments utilized shared resources (e.g., school-site designated as a 0-3 or preschool classroom and school staff infrastructure) to benefit both the classroom environment and coordination and accessibility of resources and referrals to participating families. Playgroup staff perceived the location of playgroups on preschool or elementary school sites as vital for providing a pipeline toward school readiness.
- Next-best effective classroom environments were those where the playgroup facilitator created safe, warm spaces with curriculum-driven stations, similar to a preschool environment, regardless of whether the location was mobile or in a temporary, shared space setting.

#### **Schedule:**

- Overall, **schedule satisfaction correlated with classroom location**. Sites that were less satisfied with their schedule referenced the desire to expand sites with an ideal location that offered a successful classroom environment while reducing sites with less ideal locations that offered more challenging classroom environments.
- While playgroup communities face multiple barriers, the **two most common barriers** were: 1) lack of awareness of program offering, or program value, and 2) transportation. The majority of barriers named can be addressed through program strategies, which are described in the recommendations at the end of this report.

### Staffing/Infrastructure:

- **Staffing** provides the frontline assurance of playgroup quality and connection, while **infrastructure** provides the baseline strategy for overall family support. District sites with enthusiastic and intentional staff that practice engaged parent support, employ Multi-Disciplinary Teams, and administer the ASQ tool to all registered families, reflect preventive, as opposed to reactive, approaches to participation and engagement, and overall family support.

We offer recommendations at the end of this report on elements per dimension to be implemented as standard practice across all developmental playgroup sites. Overall, we encourage all sites to promote information sharing beyond the regular School Resource Coordinator meetings, and encourage all sites to observe all other district sites to absorb promising practices and view measures of success in action.

## Introduction

This Data Snapshot presents the results of a new study that was piloted in winter 2019 to evaluate developmental playgroups across First 5 Sacramento's nine partner school districts. Developmental playgroups provide play-based opportunities for caregivers and their child(ren) ages 0-3. Developmental playgroups uniquely combine parent education and child-centered education through a parent participation model that utilizes staff facilitators as coaches and teachers to provide direction and guidance to both parents/caregivers and children. First 5 Sacramento supports playgroups as a way to provide opportunities for parents to connect with other parents while learning about age-appropriate expectations for their developing children, and learning skills around reading children's cues. Children in playgroups are provided opportunities for social-emotional development and social interaction with other children.

The benefits of developmental playgroups have been noted to improve a broad range of learning and psychosocial outcomes for both children and their parents/caregivers, including providing an important community support for parents with young children from diverse communities<sup>1</sup>. Leading experts from Australia's playgroup sector—renowned for their government-supported, robust early childhood education initiatives—note that developmental playgroups provide five common benefits for children and caregivers: 1) offer opportunities for creative, unstructured learning through play, 2) build attachments between adults and children as they play together and share time and experiences, 3) help children develop social skills as they learn to interact with others, take turns, share, and make friends, 4) provide experiences that enable them to manage stress and cope with change, and 5) offer opportunities for children to explore, invent, reason, and solve problems<sup>2</sup>.



Picture 1: This site exemplifies high parent/child and staff/child engagement.

<sup>1</sup> Williams, Kate E., Berthelsen, Donna, Nicholson, Jan M., & Viviana, Maria (2015). *Systemic literature review: Research on supported playgroups*. Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane, Australia.

<sup>2</sup> Playgroup NSW (2015). "What is a playgroup?" Accessed on May 3, 2019 at: <https://www.playgroupnsw.org.au/AboutUs/Whatisaplaygroup>.

# Study Purpose, Sample and Methods

Conducted by Applied Survey Research, the purpose of this evaluation was to gather formative data about the programmatic elements in use across First 5 Sacramento’s playgroups, to understand where these are similar or different across sites, and to learn which aspects seem to be related to program quality. Specifically, the evaluation gathered data regarding curriculum, classroom environment, schedule, and staffing/infrastructure.

The sample included all nine school districts that participate in First 5 Sacramento’s School Readiness Initiative and that are implementing developmental playgroups, including:

- San Juan Unified School District
- Elk Grove Unified School District
- Twin Rivers Unified School District
- Galt Joint Union Elementary School District
- Folsom Cordova Unified School District
- Natomas Unified School District
- Sacramento City Unified School District
- River Delta Unified School District
- Robla Elementary School District

The methods to gather data included interviews with districts’ school readiness coordinators, observations made via site visits and parent discussion groups. ASR observed and interviewed staff at one playgroup site per district, and held parent discussion groups at four of the nine district sites. All names of sites and staff have been suppressed in this report to protect the privacy of participants.

To quantify data gathered from the above methods, ASR created a **scoring rubric** (Table 1, right). The rubric included four dimensions, which were defined by indicators. These dimensions and indicators were selected based upon common outcome measures of developmental playgroups, including implementation processes and local contextual factors (Williams and Berthelsen, et. al. 2015), as well as First 5’s specific interest in *curriculum*, *classroom environment*, *schedule*, and *staffing/infrastructure*. The majority of indicators per dimension were developed in advance, but additional indicators emerged during the interviews (marked with an asterisk). As for scoring, each site was scored in each indicator using the following scale:

- 1 = Indicator is not present
- 2 = Indicator is present/somewhat present
- 3 = Indicator is present and ideal

*Table 1 — Scoring Rubric*

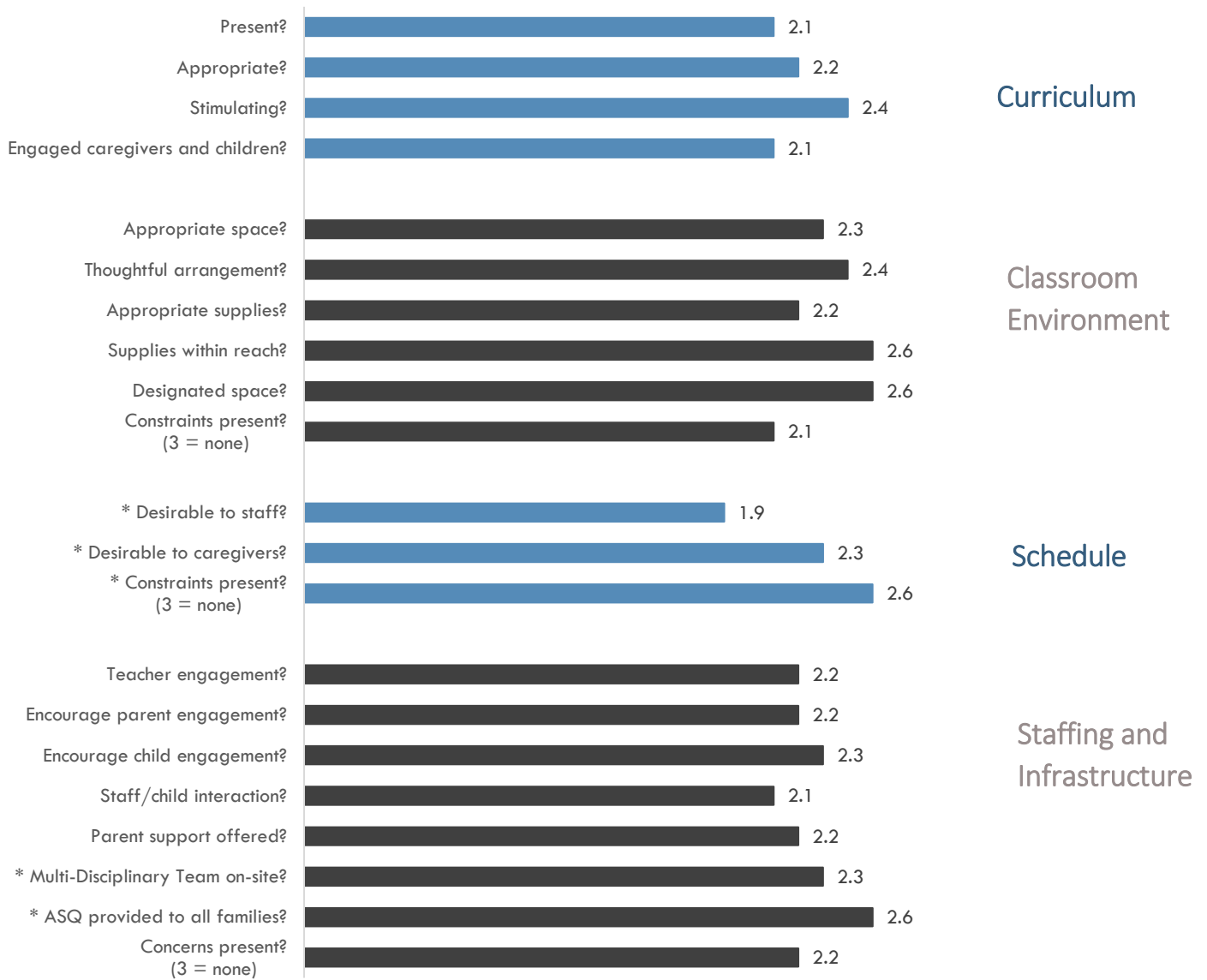
Dimensions / Indicators
<b>Curriculum</b>
Present?
Appropriate?
Stimulating?
Engaged caregivers and parents?
<b>Classroom Environment</b>
Appropriate space?
Thoughtful arrangement?
Supplies within reach?
Designated space (preschool, community center) *
Constraints present?
<b>Schedule</b>
Desirable to staff?*
Desirable to caregivers?*
Constraints present?
<b>Staffing/ Infrastructure</b>
Teacher engagement?
Encourage parent engagement?
Encourage child engagement?
Staff/ child interaction?
Parent support offered?
Multidisciplinary team onsite? *
ASQ provided to all families? *
Concerns present?

*The following presents the findings within the four identified dimensions: curriculum, classroom environment, schedule, and staffing/infrastructure, as well as the findings of the overall benefits of developmental playgroups.*

# Overall Profile Across the Four Playgroup Dimensions

In Figure 1 below, indicators with a total score below 2.0 indicate the need for improvement, while indicators with a total score of 2.4 or higher indicate stronger, more exemplary practices. Overall, 4 out of 9 sites received scores between 2.4-2.7, indicating that their practices were exemplary. Similarly, 4 out of 9 sites received scores within the 2.0-2.3 range, indicating average success in the indicators assessed, while one out of 9 sites received a score of 1.3, indicating room for significant improvement.

*Figure 1 - Average Score per Indicator, All Sites*



The cumulative scoring in Table 2 offers a summary of overall areas of strengths per dimension across the 9 district sites assessed. Noted examples provide context as to which sites are performing well per indicator, while also citing specific lower scoring indicators that may need improvement.

*Table 2. Cumulative Scores, per Dimension*

Dimension	# Sites Scoring Well (scored 2.4+)	Highlights	Lower scoring indicators
Curriculum	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Site 1: Wonders Curriculum</li> <li>Site 6: Creative Curriculum</li> <li>Site 8: Frog Street</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presence of curriculum,</li> <li>Low level of caregiver/child engagement</li> </ul>
Classroom Environment	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sites 1, 3, 6, 9: These sites were located on a preschool or elementary school campus with a designated classroom for playgroup.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Appropriate supplies</li> <li>Appropriate space</li> </ul>
Schedule	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sites 1, 3: While staff had ideas for expansion or improvement, caregivers were satisfied with the existing schedules, and no schedule constraints were assessed.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Schedule desirable to staff</li> </ul>
Staffing/Infrastructure	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Sites 1, 5, 6, 8: Presence of a coordinated Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) on-site, along with very high levels of staff engagement.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Staff/child interaction</li> </ul>

Source: Developmental Playgroup data, 2019.

This profile of strengths and areas for improvement offer guidance for continued strengthening of curriculum design, playgroup location/space, professional development of playgroup staff, and playgroup policy alignment across sites to ensure consistency in design and implementation.

The following sections offer more specific findings for each of the four dimensions assessed.



Picture 2: One of the classrooms that exemplified ideal curriculum integration with high parent/child/teacher engagement, through singing and movement.



## Dimension 1: Curriculum

Five different curriculums are implemented across developmental playgroups within the nine participating First 5 Sacramento school districts. Frog Street and Creative Curriculum were the most commonly-selected curriculums, and were present in 2 of the top 3 scoring sites for curriculum. Frog Street’s curriculum appeal (present in 1 of the top 3 scoring sites for curriculum) seems to address ages and stages, and is offered in both English and Spanish language curriculum formats, it requires heavy supplemental activities. Creative Curriculum’s appeal (present in 1 of the top 3 scoring sites for curriculum) seems to flexibly address interest-based learning, and teachers have successfully utilized supplemental activities to support these interests. A top-scoring site for curriculum also used the Wonders curriculum, whose greatest feature included adaptability for theme development across both playgroups and preschool. Staff explained that this creates a smooth transitional path from playgroup to preschool, as themes remain consistent as curriculum becomes more developmentally scaffolded. The site that utilized their own curriculum scored lower overall for curriculum, and The Comprehensive Curriculum cannot be assessed at this time, as it has not yet been implemented.

- Overall, the top 3 scoring sites in curriculum demonstrated curriculum-rich, themed activities with numerous choices for the children, offered in multiple languages, facilitated through culturally-responsive, multiple modalities (e.g., song, movement, props, toys).
- Parent satisfaction scored highest for curriculum at those sites that provide take-home activities for families. One parent explained that her child "wants to do everything at home that she does here," and explained that teachers make that easy by removing the barrier of parents having to purchase or prepare activities on their own.

**Table 3. Curriculum Overview Across 9 Participating First 5 District Sites**

Curriculum	# Sites Implementing	Rationale for Selection	Supplemental Curriculum Used
Frog Street	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Presented to SRCs by First 5</li> <li>Infant and Toddler curriculums</li> <li>Available in English and Spanish</li> <li>Based upon CA Learning Foundations</li> <li>Addresses all 4 of the Developmental Domains (cognitive, language, social, physical)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Busy Bee Reading Program</li> <li>Teachers at one site find the curriculum “unengaging” and often utilize supplemental activities</li> <li>CA Infant/Toddler Learning Foundations</li> </ul>
Creative Curriculum	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Based upon child-directed interest</li> <li>Flexible to children’s interests, good for programs who enroll new families each session</li> <li>Allows to build thematic lesson plans</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Apple Bag Literacy Program</li> <li>CA Preschool Curriculum Frameworks measure readiness and provides additional activities</li> <li>Preschool English Learners provides language development activities for English Learners</li> <li>Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers (PITC)</li> <li>Respectful Infant Educators (RIE) by Magda Gerber</li> </ul>
Wonders	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Addresses all 4 of the Developmental Domains (cognitive, language, social, physical)</li> <li>Allows to build thematic lesson plans</li> <li>Themes allow for intentional transition to preschool (themes also implemented by preschool)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Gardening curriculum</li> </ul>
The Comprehensive Curriculum (planning phase)	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Focus on infants/ toddlers from birth to 18 mo.</li> <li>Also accommodates older children to the age 5.</li> <li>Activities scalable by age and ability, but main focus on 0-3.</li> <li>Tools used to develop this curriculum are research-based</li> <li>Offers suggested practices</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>NA because offers suggested practices</li> </ul>
Original (own) curriculum developed	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prefers to refer to the Infant/Toddler Learning Foundations 4 Developmental Domains to address the whole child through original curriculum design</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>References Infant/Toddler Learning Foundations to develop lesson plans</li> </ul>

Source: Developmental Playgroup data, 2019.

## Dimension 2: *Classroom Environment*

In the dimension of classroom environment, the most prominent factors in determining the level of success achieved were *classroom location* and *thoughtful arrangement*. Of the nine sites visited, 5 sites were located within a preschool and/or elementary school campus in a designated classroom, 1 site was located within a Community Center with a designated space, and 3 sites were located within an elementary school in a temporary, converted space.

The highest scoring sites in the dimension of *classroom environment* were those where playgroups were conducted on-site at preschools and/or elementary school campuses with permanent, designated room placement, which provided the most effective environments, allowing for classrooms to be appropriately arranged, even if they shared the space with another class. Being on a school site also best utilized school staff and resources, allowing for greater ease of coordination, referral, and/or case management, while also providing a pipeline between preschool and elementary school to ease both parent and child toward school readiness.

Understanding that not all sites have a permanent room on a school campus, the next-best options were sites that thoughtfully arranged their space to intentionally create a safe, fun, and stimulating environment, whether it was a mobile classroom in a cafeteria, or a small room on-site at an elementary school.

- Key indicators, based upon highest scoring sites in the dimension of *classroom environment* (regardless of location), include:
  - Safe space (e.g., protected cords, outlets, carpeted area)
  - Thoughtfully decorated room with color, cheer, and stimulating wall items (ABCs, calendar, student work, parent resources, etc.)
  - Learning stations (e.g., carpet area for gross motor activities, furniture for fine-motor table activities reading corner, pretend play furniture/toys, science/STEM area, and toy storage and play space)
  - Appropriate supplies that are within a child’s age-appropriate reach
  - Provision of diaper wipes or changing stations.



Picture 3: One of the classrooms that exemplified an ideal environment: thoughtfully arranged stations, warmly decorated, curriculum-rich supplies/toys.



Picture 4: Playgroup located within Preschool Center exemplified all key criteria: safe space with best-fit furniture, including infant/toddler changing station, curriculum-rich stations, warm and inviting decorations, well-labeled supplies within reach.



- Two sites named specific strategies for creating an effective classroom environment:
  - One high-scoring site mentioned the use of the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) to guide decisions on classroom environment arrangements.
  - One site in a temporary converted space at an elementary school consulted with the Master Preschool Teacher at another site in their district for guidance on how to convert the space into a stimulating classroom environment, similar to a preschool.

While noise control was the biggest challenge for the 3 sites located within an elementary school in a temporary, converted space, all 3 sites successfully achieved adequate safe, thoughtfully decorated spaces with appropriate learning stations and supplies. The two sites (of the 3) that utilized small shared spaces with school staff successfully arranged the room for safe and appropriate play, alternating use of the room so that at all times, the room is only utilized for one purpose. While the site that utilized the cafeteria for the mobile playgroup had more difficult challenges, including lack of carpeting and high ceilings for noise control, they provided a soft floor mat and played to their strengths by providing a wealth of curriculum-rich table activity stations.

The lowest scoring site for classroom environment was a site that conducted their playgroup at a Community Center with a designated space. While the potential existed for all key ingredients to be present to achieve a successful classroom environment, the challenge was due to staff disengagement and disciplinary performance issues, and not spatial constraints. In this case, examples of neglectful classroom environment included lack of providing: stations with supplies linked to curriculum, cheerful/stimulating wall decorations, and outlet covers for open wall sockets. [One parent commented that she had personally purchased outlet covers and given them to the teacher, because the teacher had not provided covers for the wall sockets.](#) At the time of observation, the classroom environment had felt cold and stale, despite the existing potential to create a warm and inviting space as a designated, non-shared room devoted just to playgroup. Participant attendance at this site was extremely low, with only two families and two children in attendance.

The numbered pictures here portray the variety of site locations and their varied classroom environments. Pictures 3-4 scored highest for classroom environment (i.e., exhibited the key indicators per dimension), pictures 5-7 portray sites with constraints that were still able to provide a thoughtful and appropriate classroom environment, compared to picture 8 of the site at the Community Center, which lacked warmth and thoughtful arrangement.



Picture 5: Tight converted space, yet warm. High parent/child/staff engagement.



Picture 6: School office converted to temporary playgroup room. Small, yet warm, safe, and thoughtful curriculum-rich activity stations.



Picture 7: Mobile Playgroup in school cafeteria. Provided floor mat, curriculum-rich activity stations, warm and welcoming.



Picture 8: Community Center playgroup location. Low attendance. Lacked warmth and curriculum-focused arrangement, felt cold and sparse.

## Dimension 3: *Schedule*

While 6 out of 9 playgroup sites did not believe there were scheduling constraints and were satisfied overall with their schedule, district staff from 3 playgroup sites offered feedback for improvement on playgroup schedules.

### **Expand sessions and reduce the number of sites.**

Both a higher-scoring site and a lower-scoring site offered similar feedback, although their operational definitions of expansion varied (given their varied community needs and district resources). Both sites agreed that the First 5 mandate of having to serve playgroups at 50% of their district's school readiness sites was difficult, and not always in the best interests of their community's needs.

- Expand sessions from 2 times per week to Monday thru Friday, and reduce the number of sites so that we can expand our best classroom environments (higher-scoring site).  
“This will allow us to better reach our mandated numbers, because we can focus on our established quality playgroup sites, include returning families, and offer expanded program opportunities.” - School Resource Coordinator
- Increase the length of sessions to include both AM and PM sessions, continuing at 2 days per week, and reduce the number of sites (lower-scoring site).  
“If we had fewer sessions on a more consistent basis, we'd get higher participation from families... We want the flexibility of placement programming. Right now, we are required to provide a one-to-one ratio. Instead, we would like to offer playgroups at 4 specific sites, 2 times a week, per semester, AM and PM, because it's where the most interest and walkers are, so we can build stronger, long-term relationships with families. *In and out drop-in sessions don't build community.*” - School Resource Coordinator

Both of these sites emphasized depth of programming over breadth of services. Overall, schedule satisfaction correlated with classroom location. Sites that were less satisfied with their schedule referenced the desire to expand sites from an ideal location that offered a successful classroom environment (thereby requesting the reduction of sites with less ideal locations in more challenging classroom environments).

### **Difficulty determining sudden lack of participation**

One site explained the difficulty of determining why one particular site on Mondays was not well attended, despite having high participation in previous years. The School Readiness Coordinator described to me how their team tried two different ways to vary the playgroup times offered, per suggestion of their school site Principal, but neither variation was successful, and they are still struggling to meet their numbers at this site on this particular day. The barrier remains unknown.

Acknowledging that varied communities require varied approaches, out of the 6 playgroup districts that were satisfied with their schedule, 5 districts offered drop-in playgroups, and 1 district offered registered sessions (and had a waitlist of 47 families, with plans for expansion to more sites). A parent at one site summarized the benefits of a flexible drop-in schedule: “If we miss the 9am playgroup because my son was fussy or had a rough night, I can go to the 3pm session, or go to another site on a different day. I don't miss our chance because there's so many options.” - Parent

### **Barriers to participation**

Regardless of whether playgroups were offered as drop-in or registered sessions, attention toward each district's community needs were vital toward scheduling success. Across all districts, 13 parents and 9 playgroup staff (n=22) named barriers, or multiple barriers, to participation, in this order of prevalence:

**Table 4. Summary of Participation Barriers**

Barrier	Prevalence	Comments
Lack of awareness of program offering, or value of program	9	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“People have a hard time locating First 5 playgroup information because it’s not well publicized, and participation is largely through word of mouth. It’s hard to find on our website, and not easily accessible.” - School Site Coordinator/Facilitator</li> <li>“Parents can be shy and not know how to reach out. We need more program outreach.” - Parent</li> <li>“Even busy moms need a break from laundry and cooking! This is the perfect break—but parents don’t know about it.” - Parent</li> <li>“Parents of younger infants are less likely to attend playgroup because they don’t realize they can engage with their children, even when they’re very young.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> <li>“There’s a cultural value and education piece to deciding to attend. Once parents come and learn about the playgroup as a resource and see it as valuable, safe, and okay, they use it instead of just letting the grandparents serve as the child’s teacher at home.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> </ul>
Transportation	7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Many families rely upon Lyft, Uber, or the bus.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> <li>“I am disabled and have to take multiple busses with my child to get to this playgroup site.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Weather	4	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“If the weather is bad, no one comes, especially if transportation is difficult.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> <li>“If it’s raining, I don’t want to bring my baby out in the cold, wet rain.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Child’s mood	3	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Some days, it just ain’t going to happen.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Work/scheduling	2	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“I’m lucky that sometimes I can get off work to attend playgroup with my daughter, but sometimes I can’t.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Child illness	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“If kids are sick, they all stay home.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> </ul>
Language	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Language can be a barrier for non-English speaking families.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Non-compulsory nature of playgroup	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Playgroups are non-mandatory, unlike elementary school, so this discourages attendance. To get around this, we stress the importance of attendance at registration to emphasize consistency.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> </ul>
District site schedule - Too many playgroup sites scheduled in one day	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Our facilitator does 3 sites per day, and lugs all materials around with her to each site – it’s inefficient.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> </ul>
Personal challenges	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Parents can be scared to come if they have family trouble and don’t want CPS involved, they have to learn it’s an okay and safe environment to grow.” - Parent</li> </ul>
Early mornings are inconvenient	1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>“Some older siblings ride the bus to school, so their parents don’t come onto the school site in the mornings.” - School Resource Coordinator</li> </ul>

Source: Developmental Playgroup data, 2019.

Low attendance plagued 2 out of the 9 playgroup sites observed (and slightly impacted the other 7 sites), with staff citing rain, the link between rain and transportation issues, and cold/flu season as factors for low attendance. While playgroup communities encounter numerous barriers, the majority of these barriers can be addressed through playgroup program strategies, which are described in the recommendations at the end of this report.



## Dimension 4: Staffing and Infrastructure

Teachers are the first point of contact for children (and often parents) at a playgroup site, and investment in the connection between teacher/child and teacher/parent is vital toward achieving a trusting and successful partnership. Developmental playgroups provide teacher/facilitators and employ varying levels of infrastructure to support their district playgroup program.

### Staffing and Facilitation

Parents and School Readiness Coordinators agreed that experienced teacher/facilitators are valued most when they can engage both children and parents by encouraging fun and discipline with the kids, while coaching parents by drawing upon examples and resources. The School Readiness Coordinator from the site that scored the highest on staffing and infrastructure commented that their site's facilitator "is amazing because she engages the adults as well as the kids. She empowers and honors parents."

This was observed on-site, as the facilitator not only engaged parents and children in a stimulating manner through movement, song, and curriculum, but also went beyond the basics and connected parents and children with hands-on resources. For example, during Welcome Circle, when some children became loud and lost focus after dancing with scarves (see picture), the facilitator refocused the group by bringing out a Kinex-style ball that expands and contracts, and encouraged the children to take a breath in when the ball expanded, and out when the ball contracted, noting to parents that this ball is "a great tool to keep in your diaper bag for when you are out in public and need to refocus your child's attention."



Picture 9: This site demonstrated ideal parent/child/teacher interaction: engaging, playful, and interactive with appropriate props.

Additionally, teacher/facilitators scored higher when their manner of engagement and interaction was fun, stimulating, and responsive to both children and adults. All top-scoring sites for staffing and infrastructure had teacher/facilitators that got down on the ground on the child's level to engage, while also actively encouraging parents to join in the activities. While facilitators at 3 district sites incorporated multiple languages into their welcome circle and/or story time, one particular teacher acknowledged there are 8 different languages spoken by participating families, and greeted families in several of the languages. One participating father expressed his appreciation of being addressed in his native language, stating he felt "thankful and comfortable in this trusting environment." Sites with lower-scores reflected teachers that lacked enthusiasm, connection, and intention.

"It's the first place where they greet us and allow us to speak in our first language."

- Parent

### Infrastructure

Infrastructure among district developmental playgroups was assessed for overall family support based upon the degree of: 1) parent support, 2) staff resources to case manage as a team, and 3) administration of the ASQ tool. Sites with higher scores (3 sites out of 9) reflected preventive, as opposed to reactive, approaches to overall family support. Sites with high parent support scores modeled 1-1 interaction between parents and facilitators or district



staff when discussions about their child’s developmental concerns, or other confidential areas of support, were needed or requested. One site described ideal communication efforts to de-escalate parent fear and anxiety by having a trusted fellow playgroup parent or other staff member translate or support the difficult conversation.

Staff resources to case manage as a team varied by site. Higher-scoring sites revealed the ideal practice to have a Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) in place, where district staff work together on-site to refer and triage families with particular needs or referrals. While 3 out of 9 sites employed this practice without formally recognizing it as MDT, one additional site specifically coordinated an MDT team to provide case management and 1-1 attention to families, providing proactive referrals when needed. For each playgroup site within this district, their team kept a log of needs requested, or identified as needed, to then triage and coordinate follow up among their MDT team. Additionally, this MDT team also particularly honed in on providing culturally-responsive curriculum (such as noting the large population of Cantonese-speaking families and hiring a translator to build stronger partnerships), which strengthened overall family engagement and program satisfaction.

The following chart reflects the team member roles described by all 4 sites that employed MDT-style teams:

**Table 5. Summary of Multi-Disciplinary Team Members and their Role**

Team Member	Role
Director of School Readiness	Oversees district department
School Readiness Coordinator	Oversees programming within department
Parent Liaison or School Site Coordinator/Facilitator	Playgroup teacher/facilitator
Program Educator	Translates, conducts 1-1 screenings, observations, and referrals
Bilingual Family Advocate (at one site is also the SW intern)	Provides translations and resources
Speech Pathologist	Provides 1-1 speech screenings, observations, and referrals
School Psychologist	Provides 1-1 behavioral screenings, and/or behavioral support or referrals
School Nurse	Provides health support through resources and referrals

Source: Developmental Playgroup data, 2019.

Whether or not sites employed MDT teams, 5 out of 9 sites administered the ASQ tool to all registered playgroup children (beyond administering to just those who are flagged), an ideal practice that promotes a preventive, as opposed to interventive, approach. One School Site Coordinator/Facilitator explained this further, in terms of how it is communicated to parents:

We keep it easy, we talk to the parents, not at them, to see what concerns they have. For example, if a parent is worried about their child's fine motor skills, or it showed up on their ASQ, then I will provide an activity at home where they can practice that skill. It's as simple as bringing a sponge into the bathtub with your child. Parents can't believe that a child playing with a sponge for two weeks will soon be able to grasp a pencil to start writing! If a concern becomes a sole need of most of the class, we will then provide in-class activities from the ASQ guide and take-home activities to support their learning.

This responsive style of prevention reflects a high-level of district infrastructure to coordinate and implement across all playgroup families, and could be implemented by the support of an MDT team, if not already in place.

# Overall Reported Benefits of Developmental Playgroups

Parents and playgroup staff strongly agreed upon the benefits of developmental playgroups. For children, developmental playgroups offer an opportunity to grow their social-emotional skills among age-mates, in what one parent described as a “worry free, safe environment with controlled supplies and resources.” Parents and staff also described the benefits of children’s first exposure to a class-based structure, with discipline and routine, as priming children for school readiness. As one mom described, “This is like pre-preschool.” Parents and staff agreed that the largest draw for parents is the social support and connections made for parents and children who would otherwise be isolated, followed by a need to be connected to resources. One playgroup father aptly stated, “This playgroup has become a part of our lives.”

“Playgroup is a bridge for families to the school environment, and provides a social and academic outlet for the child and parent.”

- School Site Coordinator/  
Facilitator

## Summary of Results

- Overall, the criteria of curriculum, classroom environment, schedule, and staffing/infrastructure were measured to determine strengths and areas of improvement for developmental playgroup sites to encourage program improvement and celebration.
- Playgroup sites that scored **highest on curriculum** by parent satisfaction and evaluative measures offered playgroup curricula that were engaging, thematic, culturally responsive through language, and provided take-home supplemental activities for families.
- Overall, the **most effective classroom environments** utilized shared resources (e.g., school-site designated as a 0-3 or preschool classroom and school staff infrastructure) to benefit both the classroom environment and coordination and accessibility of resources and referrals to participating families. Playgroup staff perceived the location of playgroups on preschool or elementary school sites as vital for providing a pipeline toward school readiness.
- Next-best effective classroom environments** were those where the playgroup facilitator created safe, warm spaces with curriculum-driven stations, similar to a preschool environment, regardless of whether the location was mobile or in a temporary, shared space setting.
- Overall, **schedule satisfaction correlated with classroom location**. Sites that were less satisfied with their schedule referenced the desire to expand sites with an ideal location that offered a successful classroom environment while reducing sites with less ideal locations that offered more challenging classroom environments.
- While playgroup communities face multiple barriers, the **two most common barriers** were: 1) lack of awareness of program offering, or program value, and 2) transportation. The majority of barriers named can be addressed through program strategies, which are described in the recommendations at the end of this report.
- Staffing** provides the frontline assurance of playgroup quality and connection, while **infrastructure** provides the baseline strategy for overall family support. District sites with enthusiastic and intentional staff that practice engaged parent support, employ Multi-Disciplinary Teams, and administer the ASQ tool to all registered families, reflect preventive, as opposed to reactive, approaches to participation and engagement, and overall family support.

# Recommendations

We encourage the following elements to be implemented as standard practice across all sites:

## Curriculum

- Utilize curriculum-rich lesson plans with themed activities that provide numerous choices for children of varying ages, offer in multiple languages, and facilitate through multiple modalities (e.g., song, movement, tangible props, themed toys for free play that enhance curriculum theme).
- Provide supplemental take-home activities for families that encourage skill development from school to home.

## Classroom Environment

- Wherever possible, conduct playgroups on-site at preschools and/or elementary school campuses with permanent, designated room placement to ensure a thoughtful, appropriate, and safe location.
- Next-best options are sites that thoughtfully arrange space to intentionally create a safe, fun, and stimulating environment, whether it's a mobile classroom in a cafeteria, or a small room on-site at an elementary school.
- Regardless of location, key criteria include:
  - Safe space (e.g., protected cords, outlets)
  - Thoughtfully decorated room with color, cheer, and stimulating wall items (ABCs, calendar, student work, parent resources, etc.)
  - Learning stations (e.g., carpet area for gross motor activities, furniture for fine-motor table activities reading corner, pretend play furniture/toys, science/STEM area, and toy storage and play space)
  - Appropriate supplies that are within a child's age-appropriate reach
  - Provision of diaper wipes or changing stations
  - Utilize the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS) to guide decisions on classroom environment arrangements.
  - Sites in a temporary converted space should consult with a Master Preschool Teacher in their district for guidance on how to convert the space into a stimulating classroom environment, similar to a preschool.

## Schedule

- Allow districts the flexibility to determine their schedule based upon their community's most successful locations and needs.
- Relax the First 5 mandate of having to serve playgroups at 50% of each district's school readiness sites to allow for expansion of more heavily-utilized sites, as determined by each district's community needs and resources.
- If barriers to playgroup participation are unknown at a particular site, work with the site principal or director to determine ways to survey prospective participants on their preferences and barriers. Consider hosting a "coffee and donuts" table during peak site traffic or a Parent Night, and poll passersby—they get a donut (and perhaps some free First 5 swag) if they stop and answer your 3 questions (e.g., 1. Would you attend on X day, AM or PM? 2. Why or why not? 3. What are other barriers? Preferences?)
- Consider investing in bus passes for families in need of transportation assistance. Look into options for those who are disabled and may qualify for further assistance. When appropriate, consider helping to organize playgroup carpools among participants.
- A successful strategy for increasing participation at one high-scoring site was to keep an attendance log, use the Remind App for phones, and follow up with families when they don't attend, and gently inquire why. Then, learn from and adapt your site's program for improvement, based upon their responses.

- Playgroup sites looking to increase participation might also consider publicizing and holding a “bring a neighbor” event, where attendees receive a prize if they bring a neighbor caregiver and child.
- Playgroups located on preschool sites conduct tabling outreach outside of the preschool at the beginning of the year to attract parents of preschoolers who have younger children.
- One parent suggested putting a playgroup reminder in the nearest elementary school monthly newsletter, and putting up playgroup posters in the school’s front office.

### Staffing and Infrastructure

- Hire and train teachers/facilitators that can foster participation, fun, and discipline while supporting and engaging both children and caregivers in stimulating and creative ways.
- Make standard practice for every playgroup during Welcome Circle to greet families in all languages represented by participants to foster culturally-responsive, trusting communication.
- Model 1-1 interaction between parents and facilitators or district staff to de-escalate fear and anxiety when having discussions about a child’s developmental concerns, or other confidential areas of support.
- Make standard practice for every district to have a developmental playgroup Multi-Disciplinary Team (MDT) in place, where district staff work together on-site to refer and triage families with particular needs or referrals. Each playgroup site should keep a log of needs requested, or identified as needed, to then triage and coordinate follow up among their MDT team.
- Make standard practice for every district to administer the ASQ tool to all registered developmental playgroup children to ensure a preventive, as opposed to reactive, approach to family support. This could be implemented by the support of an MDT team, if not already in place.

Overall, we encourage all sites to promote information sharing beyond the regular School Resource Coordinator meetings, and encourage all sites to observe all other district sites to absorb promising practices and view measures of success in action.

“This playgroup taught me what kind of mom I want to be.” - Parent



Picture 10: Developmental playgroups teach parents and children how to establish ideal parent/child engagement, while laying the foundation for school readiness.