

# Georgia's Pre-K Evaluation Study of Language Development

## Executive Summary

The Frank Porter Graham (FPG) Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, in collaboration with Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning (DECAL), conducted a statewide evaluation of language and literacy development in Georgia's Pre-K during the 2022–2023 school year. This study builds on prior evaluations of Georgia's Pre-K by focusing exclusively on language and early literacy outcomes, using validated, domain-specific assessments and examining moderators of child growth.

A stratified random sample of 146 classrooms and 812 children was selected to ensure representation across public and private settings and urban and rural counties. This is the only current statewide study of Georgia's Pre-K classroom quality and the first to use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) 2nd Edition, which includes updated indicators of instructional support.

### Study Components

- Conducted classroom observations to assess:
  - Teacher-child interaction quality (*Classroom Assessment Scoring System, CLASS, 2nd Edition, 2022*)
  - Language and literacy practices (*Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation Pre-K, ELLCO-Pre-K; Smith et al., 2008*)
- Compared child language assessment scores to a nationally representative sample:
  - Receptive Vocabulary (*Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, PPVT-5; Dunn, 2019*)
  - Receptive/Expressive Vocabulary (word knowledge), Phonological Awareness (rhyming and deletion), and Listening Ability (following instructions; *Woodcock-Johnson IV Tests of Oral Language, WJ-IV; Schrank et al., 2014*)
- Administered teacher and family surveys, including open-ended questions

### Classroom Quality Results

- Similar to previous research, Georgia's Pre-K CLASS 2nd Edition Emotional Support and Classroom Organization scores were high and consistent with other studies of state pre-K. Instructional Support scores were low-moderate.
- Teachers with more years of teaching experience (birth-five years) engaged in higher quality teacher-child interactions (see Figure 1).

- Classrooms housed in public schools spent more time on literacy activities compared to those located in private center-based settings.
- Sites with a higher proportion of children with individualized education plans (IEPs) demonstrated significantly higher CLASS Instructional Support scores, indicating that inclusive classroom contexts may be associated with more frequent and higher-quality instructional interactions.

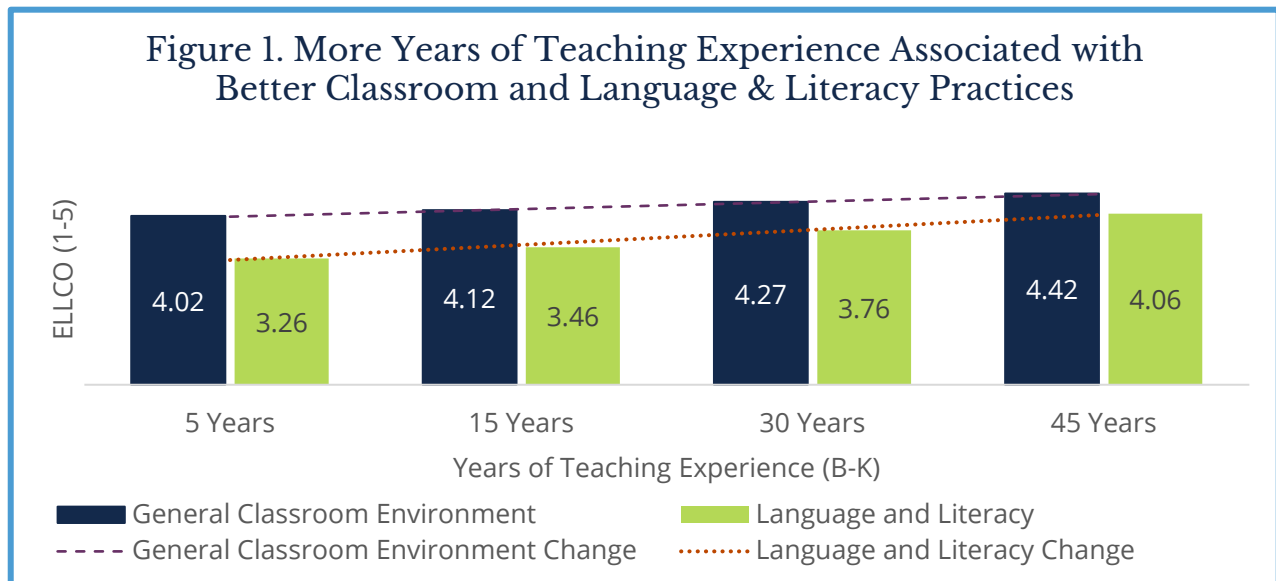


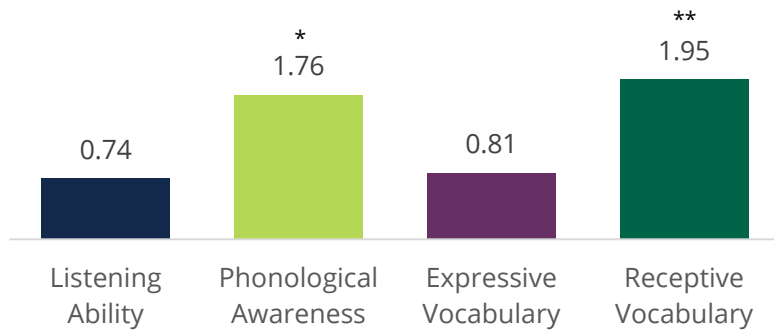
Figure 1 illustrates the positive relationship between teachers' years of experience and classroom quality scores on the ELLCO measure. These associations represent meaningful effect sizes in the small-to-medium range. For instance, each additional year of teaching experience was associated with a 0.02-point increase in ELLCO Language and Literacy scores, corresponding to an effect size of 0.22. A similar pattern was observed for the CLASS Emotional Support and Classroom Organization domains.

### Child Language Skills Results

- Children in Georgia's Pre-K demonstrated age-appropriate growth, with fall and spring scores in the typical range, but showing less growth and lower average scores than national norms and prior studies of Georgia's Pre-K. This cohort was assessed with updated assessment tools, and their toddler years coincided with pandemic-related social disruptions.
- Children in classrooms with higher-quality language and literacy practices exhibited greater-than-expected gains in vocabulary and phonological awareness, averaging nearly 2 points (see Figure 2).
- Children enrolled in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms located in public schools showed slightly greater growth in vocabulary knowledge compared to those in other settings.
- While language growth remained age-appropriate, it was comparatively smaller for dual language learners than for monolingual peers, for African American/Black children than for

White children, for female children than for male children, and for children whose caregivers had lower education levels compared to those with higher education levels.

**Figure 2. Stronger Language & Literacy Practices Associated with Better Language & Literacy Outcomes for Children**



Note. \*  $p < 0.05$ , \*\*  $p < 0.01$ .

Figure 2 shows that each 1-point increase in classroom language and literacy quality (ELLCO) is associated with a higher than expected spring phonological awareness and receptive vocabulary scores by nearly 2-points.

## Study Implications

- The study underscores a key strength of Georgia's Pre-K Program: classrooms consistently provide enriched learning environments characterized by warm, responsive, and language-rich teacher-child interactions.
- Better Early Language and Literacy Classroom Observation (ELLCO) scale scores were associated with meaningful gains in children's language skills, particularly phonological awareness and receptive vocabulary, and language and literacy practices and environments can be targeted for improvement.
- DECAL's efforts to retain teachers with greater years of experience appear promising for promoting children's language and literacy development, as more experienced teachers demonstrated higher-quality language and literacy practices.
- Further investigation is warranted to understand why enrollment in Georgia's Pre-K classrooms within public school settings confers additional benefits for vocabulary acquisition.
- Some of Georgia's Pre-K teachers expressed an interest in professional development and training focused on language development, particularly for supporting dual language learners (DLLs) and children with different abilities, but training is also needed to celebrate the strengths of and support growth for African American/Black children and children with parents/guardians with lower education levels.

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