

The Big Lift Preschool, Two Years In

What Have We Learned So Far?

The Big Lift™ (Big Lift) is a preschool to third-grade initiative designed to boost literacy skills and ensure that children are reading proficiently by the third grade. First launched in 2012 by the County of San Mateo, the Silicon Valley Community Foundation, and the San Mateo County Office of Education, Big Lift comprises more than 300 community organizations. The initiative targets preschool through third-grade students in seven school districts in San Mateo County, California, that have below-average third-grade reading levels. Big Lift seeks to improve third-grade reading through a set of four coordinated and integrated “pillars”: High-Quality Preschool, Summer Learning, School Attendance, and Family Engagement.

As part of a multiphase, independent evaluation of the Big Lift initiative, researchers at the RAND Corporation are undertaking a series of descriptive reports on participation and achievement outcomes over multiple years. To date, RAND researchers have completed two outcome studies, both focusing on the Big Lift pillars for which data are available: High-Quality Preschool and Summer Learning. The first study in this series examined the early education experiences and kindergarten readiness outcomes of children in the 2016–2017 kindergarten class—in four “Cohort 1” districts—who received Big Lift services. The second study in this series, summarized here, builds on these initial analyses. RAND researchers examined kindergarten readiness outcomes of children in the 2017–2018 kindergarten class in the Cohort 1 districts and in three additional “Cohort 2”

Cohort 1 districts starting spring 2015:

- Cabrillo Unified School District
- La Honda-Pescadero Unified School District
- Jefferson Elementary School District
- South San Francisco Unified School District

Cohort 2 districts starting spring 2016:

- Ravenswood City School District
- Redwood City School District
- San Bruno Park School District

Key findings:

- Big Lift preschoolers in the 2017–2018 kindergarten class were better prepared for kindergarten than demographically similar peers who did not attend preschool—but they were less prepared than similar peers who attended non-Big Lift preschool programs.
- Children who attended two years of Big Lift preschool were more kindergarten-ready than similar peers who attended only one year.
- In the 2016–2017 kindergarten class, Big Lift preschoolers had reading levels at the end of kindergarten and the start of first grade that were on par with similar peers who attended other preschool programs and higher than similar peers who attended no preschool at all.

districts. The researchers also followed up on the 2016–2017 kindergarten class by documenting their reading skills at the end of kindergarten and the start of first grade in the fall of 2017. Although the study contains analyses of the Big Lift Inspiring Summer program—a free five- or four-week summer program for lower-income rising kindergartners, first-graders, and second-graders—this brief focuses on the Big Lift preschool findings.

Taken together, these two reports shed light on how children who received Big Lift services performed in comparison with their peers. RAND’s findings can be used to track trends over time and help Big Lift stakeholders make informed decisions on how best to serve their communities.

High-Quality Preschool for Low-Income Children

Big Lift funds have been used to increase both the availability and quality of center-based preschool programs for three- and four-year-olds from low-income families. On nearly all demographic characteristics, Big Lift preschoolers face more social disadvantages than their peers who attended other preschool programs and children who did not go to preschool at all. All Big Lift preschool programs receive a collection of

individualized quality supports, including on-site coaching and modeling for teachers, professional development supports, and technical assistance.

Study Population and Data Sources

The population for the current study consists of children in the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 kindergarten classes in all seven Cohort 1 and Cohort 2 districts. The study used data from the following three sources collected throughout the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 school years:

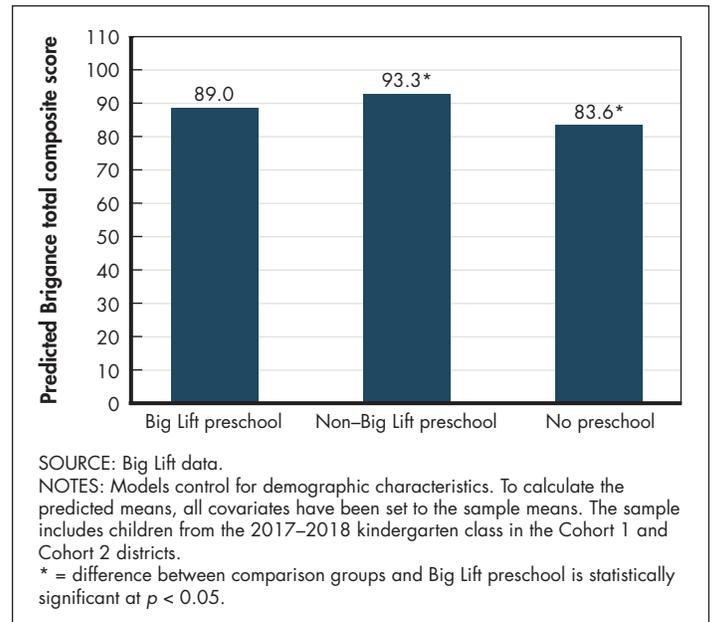
- early childhood cognitive assessments, including (1) the Brigance Early Childhood Screen III (Brigance), which measures academic/cognitive, language, and physical development, and (2) the Fountas and Pinnell Benchmark Assessment System, a reading assessment that measures decoding, fluency, vocabulary, and comprehension skills
- kindergarten and first-grade entry forms completed by parents, which capture home reading practices and child and family demographic data
- the San Mateo County Office of Education’s countywide data system, which captures Big Lift participation and some demographic data.

How Do Big Lift Preschoolers Fare in Kindergarten Compared with Their Demographically Similar Peers?

The RAND researchers found that, on average, **Big Lift preschoolers in the 2017–2018 kindergarten class scored five Brigance points higher and were significantly more likely to be kindergarten-ready** than demographically similar peers who attended no preschool. In other words, Big Lift preschoolers were 17 percentage points more likely to be kindergarten-ready than kindergartners who did not attend preschool. This finding was consistent with the results of RAND’s earlier study of the 2016–2017 kindergarten class, in which Big Lift preschoolers were likewise better prepared for kindergarten than peers who did not go to preschool. RAND’s analysis also showed that **children who attended two years of Big Lift preschool scored significantly higher on the Brigance** and were better prepared to start kindergarten than peers who attended only one year of Big Lift preschool.

The researchers also found that **Big Lift preschoolers in the 2017–2018 kindergarten class scored lower (on average by four points) on the Brigance than children who attended non-Big Lift early education programs (see Figure 1)**. This finding was *not* consistent with the results of RAND’s earlier study, which found that Big Lift and non-Big Lift preschoolers in the 2016–2017 kindergarten class were equally likely to be kindergarten-ready, but the

Figure 1. Big Lift Preschoolers in the 2017–2018 Kindergarten Class Scored Higher on the Brigance Than Children Who Attended No Preschool and Lower Than Children Who Attended Other Preschool Programs



available data did not point to a definitive explanation for this difference. It is worth noting that children who attended Big Lift preschools came from families who faced more social disadvantages than their peers in the comparison groups. Although the analysis controls for some of the ways in which Big Lift and non-Big Lift children differ from each other, it is not possible to control for all the ways in which they may differ. Given that measured demographic characteristics were similar across the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 kindergarten classes, unmeasured differences between the two classes—for example, parents’ educational expectations or changes in the quality or nature of Big Lift or non-Big Lift preschool programs—may be factors that help explain this pattern of results.

Do Big Lift Preschoolers Still Have a Cognitive Advantage at the End of First Grade?

To better understand how Big Lift preschoolers perform as they progress through elementary school, the researchers tested whether the cognitive advantages they observed among Big Lift preschoolers in the 2016–2017 kindergarten class at the start of school persisted through the end of kindergarten and the start of first grade. Their findings were encouraging: On average, the Big Lift preschoolers from the 2016–2017 kindergarten class **scored more than half a reading level higher at both the end of kindergarten and the start of first grade** than demographically similar children who did

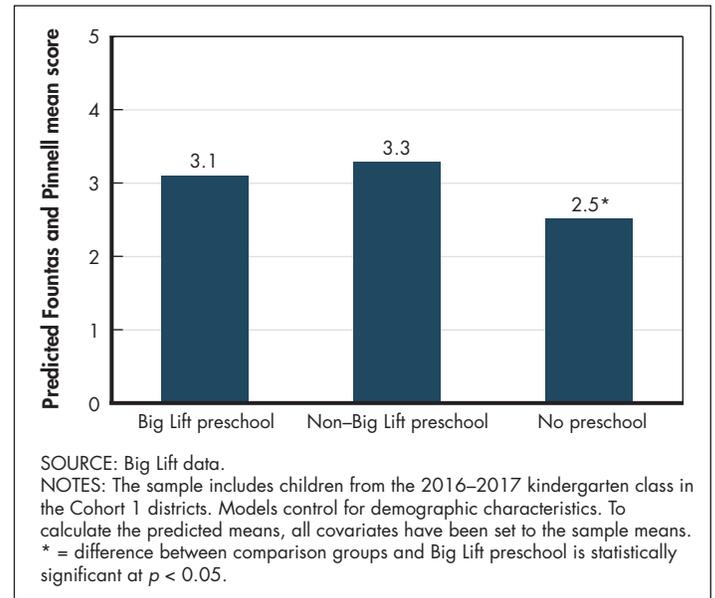
not attend preschool (see Figure 2). These Big Lift preschoolers also, on average, met an estimated (though not validated) benchmark for reading independently at the end of kindergarten. Moreover, the researchers found that the Big Lift preschoolers from the 2016–2017 kindergarten class continued to keep pace with peers who attended non-Big Lift preschool programs.

Conclusions and Future Analyses

The findings from RAND’s analyses of participation and student outcomes suggest both progress and room for growth for Big Lift preschool services and programs. In both the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 kindergarten classes, Big Lift preschoolers outperformed demographically similar peers who did not have the benefit of preschool; for the 2016–2017 kindergarten class, this cognitive advantage persisted through the start of first grade. Furthermore, children who attended a Big Lift preschool for two years appeared to benefit even more than those who only attended for one year. In the 2017–2018 kindergarten class, Big Lift preschoolers were less kindergarten-ready than peers who had attended non-Big Lift preschoolers—this was not the case for Big Lift preschoolers in the 2016–2017 kindergarten class.

Will these patterns hold true for future Big Lift participants? Subsequent annual descriptive analyses will make it possible for RAND researchers to track these and other trends as they evolve and emerge over time and across multiple kindergarten classes. By 2019, for example, there will be three school years’ worth of longitudinal data on the 2016–2017 kindergarten class that will provide insight into how Big Lift children’s skills grow as they progress through school and how students who receive Big Lift services compare with similar peers who do not. Subsequent analyses

Figure 2. End-of-Kindergarten Reading Scores Favor Big Lift Preschoolers Compared with Similar Peers Who Did Not Attend Preschool



will also continue to explore participation in other Big Lift programs, such as summer learning.

The findings from RAND’s first two outcome studies are promising: They suggest that Big Lift preschool can promote not only kindergarten readiness but also continued success throughout a child’s early school career. Although our analyses do not allow us to test the causal impact of Big Lift preschool on children, they nonetheless provide insight into how children who attended Big Lift preschool fared compared with demographically similar peers.

This brief describes work done in RAND Education and Labor and documented in Celia J. Gomez, Anamarie A. Whitaker, Jill S. Cannon, and Lynn A. Karoly, *The Big Lift Descriptive Analyses: Kindergarten Readiness and Elementary School Reading Outcomes for the 2016–2017 and 2017–2018 Kindergarten Classes* (RR-2729-SVCF, www.rand.org/t/RR2729), and in Celia J. Gomez, Jill S. Cannon, Anamarie A. Whitaker, and Lynn A. Karoly, *Big Lift Participation and School Entry Indicators: Findings for the 2016–2017 Kindergarten Class* (RR-2131-SVCF, www.rand.org/t/RR2131). To view this brief online, visit www.rand.org/t/RB10047. The RAND Corporation is a research organization that develops solutions to public policy challenges to help make communities throughout the world safer and more secure, healthier and more prosperous. RAND is nonprofit, nonpartisan, and committed to the public interest. RAND’s publications do not necessarily reflect the opinions of its research clients and sponsors. RAND® is a registered trademark. © RAND 2018

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