



## BRIEF

# A Two-Generation Learning Program Educates and Empowers Parents and Children

## An Assessment of Families Forward Learning Center in Pasadena, California

Parents are their children's first teachers—therefore, children's and parents' well-being are inseparable. Two-generation learning programs are built on this premise. These programs aim to promote children's long-term success in school and in life by educating both parent and child together at a critical time of a child's life, between birth and five years old.

### Key Findings

**Mothers who participated in the program experienced benefits.** Mothers noted how they benefited from the program's educational and professional opportunities, such as parenting and English lessons. Mothers also noted their improved access to services, such as mental health care and increased engagement in their children's education.

**Mothers who participated in the program perceived benefits for their children.** Benefits included their children's improved academic outcomes and social and emotional development.

**Students who participated in the program demonstrated several short- and longer-term educational outcomes when compared with demographically similar peers in their school district.** Program participants had statistically significant higher attendance and reduced chronic absenteeism in kindergarten, though the effects appeared to diminish by third grade. The program's former students also demonstrated meaningfully higher scores on third-grade English Language Arts (ELA) and mathematics assessments.

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I would work in the kitchen or in different classes—this helped me learn how to work as part of a group.



**One** such program, Families Forward Learning Center (FFLC), has served disadvantaged families in the Pasadena – Los Angeles area since 1961. FFLC aims to foster young children’s social and cognitive development and prepare them for a successful transition to kindergarten, while helping their parents gain the skills and confidence needed to actively support their development and success. The program, previously known as Mothers’ Club, currently serves mostly low-income, Latinx families. FFLC hosts a wide variety of targeted activities designed to increase child and parent knowledge, develop skills and resiliency, improve social networks, and increase access to other kinds of support, such as mental health counseling. FFLC sought

help from RAND Corporation researchers to understand the effects of the program on participants after leaving the program. Specifically, the research team conducted a mixed-methods assessment to assess

- how mothers perceive the program’s benefits after they complete FFLC
- how the program affects children’s educational outcomes.

This research brief summarizes some of the key findings of the study and several insights that should be of interest to other providers and stakeholders committed to improving or interested in two-generation early learning programs.

# What Does Families Forward Learning Center Offer?

## FOUR COMPONENTS OF THE HALF-DAY PROGRAM FOR FAMILIES WITH CHILDREN BIRTH TO FIVE YEARS OLD

### **1 EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION**

Daily classes are designed to promote school success by developing social and emotional, physical, cognitive, language, and literacy skills and identifying developmental delays. The program meets Early Head Start and California State Preschool Program quality standards.

### **2 PARENT EDUCATION**

Classes for parents help increase the understanding of child development and promote positive parenting skills. Special classes that focus on family literacy, time management, conflict resolution, budgeting skills, personal skill recognition, and other topics are also offered. Mental health counseling is made accessible.

### **3 ADULT EDUCATION**

English as a Second Language classes from beginner through advanced levels are offered to parents, who can also access one-on-one tutoring and financial help for books and other learning supplies.

### **4 PARENT-CHILD ACTIVITIES**

Weekly classes, during which parents assist the teachers in the classroom to observe child development and behavior firsthand, are available. Family celebrations help families support and show appreciation for each other in positive ways.

## How the Study Was Conducted

To understand participating mothers' perceptions of FFLC, the research team interviewed a randomly selected sample of 20 mothers from the five most-recent program cohorts (2013 through 2017) at the time of data collection. The research team identified common themes from completed interview responses.

Near- and longer-term student outcomes are based on data from 94 former FFLC students and a comparable peer group drawn from all 12,328 kindergarten students enrolled in the Pasadena Unified School District from 2010 to 2018. The peer group matched the program participants in terms of race or ethnicity, parental education level, and home language. All effects were derived using regression analysis. School attendance, chronic absen-

teeism, and suspension rates were estimated using school attendance and discipline records. Impacts on English language proficiency were estimated using 2010–2017 California English Language Development Test (CELDT) scores and 2018 English Language Proficiency Assessments for California (ELPAC) scores. Impacts on academic achievement were based on California Assessment of Student Performance and Progress (CAASPP) scores. Methods for the study can be found in full in the main report.

Readers should be cautious of causal inferences when reviewing the results. The research team was unable to guarantee that FFLC students were comparable with their peers in ways that may influence the outcomes.



## STUDY FINDINGS

### Parent Perceptions

#### PROGRAM BENEFITS: FOR MOTHERS

**Parenting skills.** 18 out of 20 mothers said that learning about child development helped them respond to their children in ways that are developmentally appropriate, and 18 out of 20 reported increased engagement in their child's education.

**Educational opportunities.** 17 out of 20 mothers identified English lessons and other educational and/or professional opportunities as primary benefits of participating in the program.

**Personal well-being and mental health.** 13 out of 20 mothers said that access to mental health and counseling services and more general well-being and empowerment programming was a specific benefit.

**Social relationships.** 13 out of 20 mothers said that they appreciated how the program gave them access to a network of mothers and friends and also opportunities to increase their civic engagement, learn to navigate institutions, and advocate for themselves and their families. All mothers indicated they would recommend the program to others with young children.

Now I have a job in which I'm constantly speaking in English and that's thanks to what I learned in the program. I've never had difficulty in making myself understood. ”



#### PROGRAM BENEFITS: FOR THEIR CHILDREN

**Academic readiness.** 18 out of 20 mothers talked about how the program readied their children for kindergarten by increasing their vocabulary and speech; teaching them to read, write, or count early; or improving general cognitive and motor skills.

**Social and emotional development.** All of the mothers interviewed discussed how the program improved their children's behavior, self-control, independence, ability to share and communicate, and self-confidence.

**Parent participation.** 18 out of 20 mothers said that the program inspired them to help their children with homework, read to them, and play educational games with them more.

**School choice.** 16 out of 20 mothers said that they learned about school choice options and how to choose a school through the program's workshops and classes.

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I made beautiful friendships that I still keep. . .  
Now I have a support community.

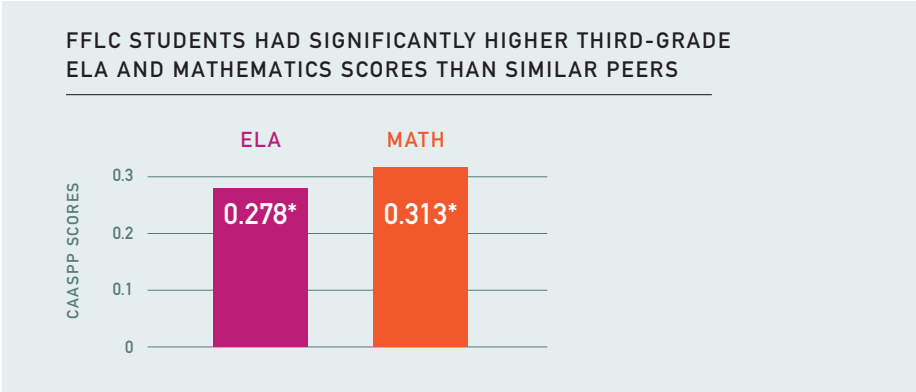
STUDY FINDINGS

Student Outcomes

Overall, the study suggests several positive short- and longer-term effects on educational outcomes for FFLC participants compared with demographically similar peers. The researchers could not measure all potential systematic differences between FFLC students and their peers, so, although findings are promising, they should be interpreted with caution. Here are some highlights.

**Absenteeism.** Former FFLC students had higher overall attendance rates (2 percent higher), attending approximately four more days of school in kindergarten than non-FFLC peers in their school district. They were also 8.1 percent less likely to be chronically absent compared with their peers. This promising effect continued in third grade, where former FFLC students had higher overall attendance rates (two more days) compared with other similar third graders in the district.

**ELA and mathematics achievement.** Analysis showed that the FFLC program substantially improved third grade-students' performance on ELA and mathematics standardized tests (CAASPP). More specifically, FFLC students' scores were nearly one-third of a standard deviation higher than non-FFLC peers in the district. The effects can be seen in the figure below.



Effect size is calculated as the covariate-adjusted difference between the average standardized CAASPP scores of the FFLC participants and the average standardized scores of the comparison students. \* = Statistical significance at  $p < 0.05$ .

**Learning gaps.** The analysis suggests the potential for the program to help close learning gaps between Latinx and white peers in the sample. The estimated ELA learning gap was closed by approximately 37 percent and the mathematics learning gap was closed by approximately 45 percent.

**Other outcomes.** The researchers also examined the data to look for potential effects of the program on English language proficiency (e.g., CELDT/ELPAC scores), grade retention, and school suspension. They did not find any significant differences between students who attended the FFLC program and those who did not.



FFLC PROGRAM'S  
POTENTIAL TO CLOSE  
LEARNING GAPS

ELA 37%  
MATH 45%



“  
I didn't know he  
was going to get all  
this inspiration and  
eagerness to learn.

## Recommendations

Overall, the study found that the FFLC program is achieving its goals of fostering parent and child education and general quality of life. Analyses also suggest several ways that the program can build on or maintain its positive momentum.

**Fully understand and communicate all program benefits.** Most mothers acknowledged unexpected benefits of the program, such as improved parenting skills for other caretakers (i.e., husbands and partners) and help getting access to such services as mental health care. Leaders of programs might consider ways to more fully communicate some of the benefits of their two-generation model to parents prior to their enrollment.

**Hire staff who are professional but also fit in well with the culture.** Most mothers noted how program staff created a welcoming and trusting environment, and how important it is for participants to feel like they are a part of a community. Mothers appreciated the holistic and flexible support that program staff provided, and that they could continue relying on program staff as a resource after they completed the program. Staff training and development should emphasize these characteristics.

**Remember the importance of word-of-mouth.** Nearly all mothers in the study were referred to the program by others who had participated or were currently doing so. Moreover, all program participants indicated that they would recommend the program to others with young children. Personal referrals appear to be an effective recruitment strategy for the program.

**Continue to assess the implementation of program components.** Further assessment will help FFLC leadership and team members to better understand which parts are working as expected and what other components could be strengthened to help achieve all program goals.

This brief describes research conducted in RAND Education and Labor and documented in *Evaluation of Families Forward Learning Center: Participant Perspectives and Student Outcomes*, by Jill S. Cannon, Jonathan Schweig, and Rachel Perera, RR-A358-1 (available at [www.rand.org/t/RR-A358-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RR-A358-1)). To view this brief online, visit [www.rand.org/t/RBA358-1](http://www.rand.org/t/RBA358-1).

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RB-A358-1

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