A Successful Approach to Connecting Early Childhood and Elementary School Data

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Dear Colleagues,

The First 5 Commission of San Diego (First 5 San Diego) has been a leader in developing a strong system of care that includes supporting high quality early care and education. The Commission’s Vision for quality preschool in San Diego County is for all children ages 0 through 5 to be healthy, loved, and nurtured, and enter kindergarten as active learners. Promoting the vital importance of the early years has been central to First 5 San Diego’s strategic efforts.

Ninety percent of a child’s brain develops by age five, and early experiences build the foundation for lifelong learning. Early care and education ensures that foundation is strong, but the quality of early care and education settings makes all the difference. Research shows that high quality early childhood programs can deliver a 13% per year return on investment, as children who attend a high quality early care and education program get a better start in life and have better outcomes in education, health, social behaviors, and employment in the long-term.iv

The first phase of First 5 San Diego’s quality preschool journey was the Preschool for All Demonstration Project (PFA), operating from 2006 to 2012. In 2012, the newly envisioned Quality Preschool Initiative (QPI) was created to build upon the prior years of PFA and to support a comprehensive local endeavor that was aligned with the California Department of Education’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). QPI was designed to support and enhance quality in early care and education programs across San Diego County. Key elements of QPI include intensive coaching and professional development for administrators and teachers to reach improvement goals in key areas of early learning; support for early education staff to identify and address developmental and social-emotional concerns; and enhanced family engagement and parent education.

Over the years, First 5 San Diego has made significant investments in high quality preschool programs, and has collected very meaningful data related to the children that have received high quality preschool services. First 5 San Diego is ready to take the QPI endeavor to the next level by tracking children’s development and success across districts in elementary school and beyond and understanding our investments over time. First 5 San Diego is committed to supporting the quality preschool journey throughout the county. It is our hope that others will also see the value in this endeavor and join us in this very important work to better understand our collective efforts. A special thank you to the many providers that have participated in PFA and QPI over the years; the Early Care and Education workforce for your amazing commitment to our children and their families; and to our consortium partners that make this work possible, The San Diego County Office of Education, YMCA Childcare Resource Service, Grossmont Community College, and the San Diego Child Care Planning Council, we are so appreciative.

With gratitude,

Alethea Arguilez
Executive Director, First 5 San Diego

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i Harder+Company Community Research is a California-based applied social research organization. Harder+Company is the contracted evaluator for First 5 San Diego.

ii The San Diego County Office of Education is the countywide coordinator for the Quality Preschool Initiative, San Diego County’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS).

iii First 5 San Diego promotes the health and well-being of young children during their most critical years of development, from the prenatal stage through five years of age. First 5 San Diego programs and services are funded through San Diego County’s portion of the State’s Proposition 10 tax revenues. Since 2012, First 5 San Diego has been the primary funder of the Quality Preschool Initiative.

Setting the Stage for a Longitudinal Study of QPI Children

High quality preschool programs have been shown to enhance kindergarten readiness and reduce learning disparities between students from higher-income and lower-income households at kindergarten entry, and in the long-term, have been linked to higher rates of college enrollment and workforce entry. The ability to track a child’s school records starting in preschool has multiple benefits including identifying special needs as early as possible when interventions are the most effective, pinpointing the aspects of early care and education programs that are most essential in promoting student learning and development and more effectively allocating resources to preschool programs.

The Quality Preschool Initiative (QPI) launched in 2012 with a goal of increasing access to high-quality early learning for San Diego County children. QPI utilizes the San Diego Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) Rating Matrix as a key tool for assessing and supporting quality in early care and education programs. Every QPI site receives points using the San Diego QRIS matrix based on its performance in seven rated elements. Each site receives an overall quality rating from 1 (lowest) to 5 (highest) based on these points. While participation at any level demonstrates a program’s commitment to quality, programs earning tier ratings of 4 or 5 have implemented many specific practices to ensure a high-quality program for children. Over 300 early learning sites, including center-based preschools and infant/toddler programs, as well as family child care homes, have been rated using the San Diego QRIS Rating Matrix.

While we know a lot about QPI children while they are in preschool, the lack of a common data system or consistent child-level identifiers between the early care and education system and the K-12 system has prevented us from tracking children’s progress once they transition from a participating QPI setting. Therefore, we don’t know how QPI children are doing long-term as they transition to kindergarten and beyond. Recently, the San Diego County Office of Education (SDCOE), the county-wide coordinator for QPI, made a significant advancement in the ability to track QPI children into the K-12 system. SDCOE was able to identify former QPI students in the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS). The ability to locate QPI children in CALPADS offers a wealth of opportunity to better understand the long-term benefits of quality preschool by examining children’s development and academic success in elementary school and beyond.

This report outlines the process that SDCOE used to track children who attended a QRIS-rated preschool into elementary school by linking their preschool record to the CALPADS records established for each child upon Kindergarten entry. It also discusses the steps SDCOE has taken thus far to establish data sharing agreements with five elementary school districts in San Diego County and benefits for children, schools and school districts, of sharing data between the early care and education system and the K-12 system. Further, this report offers a model for identifying and tracking children across educational systems, and sets the stage for a future QPI longitudinal study that will examine primary school outcomes for children who attended a quality early care and education setting and the characteristics that contribute to student success in elementary school.

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ix https://www.childtrends.org/publications/high-quality-preschool-can-support-healthy-development-and-learning
xiii https://qpi.sdcoe.net/About

December 2019
Tracking students beyond preschool

The alignment of data systems between preschool and grades K-12 that match and track students’ records across time are critical to understanding children’s movement across districts and developmental trajectories in kindergarten and into the long-term. SDCOE leveraged the functionality of the California Longitudinal Pupil Achievement Data System (CALPADS), a centralized statewide student data system that is “the foundation of California’s K-12 education data system that allows for tracking a student’s academic performance over time”\(^6\), which makes it possible to connect children’s preschool records to their records in grades K-12. Tracking students across time has changed the way students’ movement between schools and school districts is understood in San Diego County, and will have great impact on understanding the relationship between high quality preschool and children’s development in the long-term. Details of CALPADS and the process SDCOE uses on an annual basis to match students using CALPADS is detailed below.

Matching student-level data

CALPADS was rolled out in 2009, and serves as a central, cohesive system that maintains quality K-12 student-level data and provides a vehicle for tracking individual student enrollment history and achievement data\(^7\). CALPADS contains student demographics, course data, discipline records, assessments, staff assignments, and other information for state and federal reporting. The student-level longitudinal data in CALPADS enables facilitation of program evaluation, assessment of student achievement over time, tracking of students across schools and districts, and more accurate calculations of dropout and graduation rates. Upon enrollment at any public school in California, each student is assigned a unique Statewide Student Identifier (SSID) in CALPADS. SSIDs allow for a student’s educational trajectory within the state of California to be tracked. When CALPADS registration is complete, any Local Education Agency (LEA) can search for students in the system and take ownership of their record if the child has enrolled at one of their school sites.

Though there had been a high-functioning child-level data system for students in grades K-12 since 2009, there was no such system for preschool children until 2012 when SDCOE developed a student data management system for its local QRIS. SDCOE’s data management system for its local QRIS provided a web-based platform to enter and maintain information for all children registered at centers participating in QPI. In a parallel effort, SDCOE aimed to educate all preschool providers on collecting the exact same data sets CALPADS requires in their K-12 database by utilizing the same documentation elementary schools reference when registering children and establishing their CALPADS records. However, at this point in time it was unclear how students’ preschool records would eventually be linked to their K-12 records in CALPADS.

Process used to match students across the preschool and K-12 systems

SDCOE initially attempted to gather kindergarteners’ preschool information by partnering with a pilot school district to log whether children previously attended a QPI-participating preschool during the kindergarten registration process. Parents were provided a record card with their child’s preschool information and were asked to take it to the elementary school at kindergarten registration. However, only about 15% of parents returned the cards when registering their child in kindergarten, making this an ineffective approach to circumvent the absence of data sharing agreements with school districts.

As a second approach, SDCOE obtained approval from the California Department of Education (CDE) to utilize CALPADS and considered completing the CALPADS enrollment process to obtain SSIDs for children attending QPI-participating preschools. CALPADS validation rules help prevent the creation of duplicate records when children register at a new school by requiring the registering school to “release” the child’s records from SDCOE in order for the school district to register and “own” that child’s record. These requests must be made individually for each child, and with over 12,000 annual preschool records, SDCOE quickly realized this was not a viable long-term option. A third approach, utilization of CALPADS’ “search” option, was then explored. CALPADS’ “search” option is used by school registrars to search for a child’s record using key data fields (e.g., first, middle, and last name, date of birth, gender, birth country) prior to assigning a new record and SSID. CALPADS’ search option is the process currently used to match students’ preschool records to their K-12 records in CALPADS.
SDCOE’s annual SSID matching process begins with the extraction of key data fields from the local QPI data system and converts these key data points into a CALPADS-acceptable format needed to create a Student Enrollment (SENR) upload file. At minimum, two data points are needed to run a student search within CALPADS, but the more student identifying data points included in the search the more targeted the result. To execute the CALPADS data matching process, the user must have the Student Search, Student Enrollment (SENR) view, and the SENR Edit CALPADS roles assigned. These roles will allow the user to search students’ demographic data and pinpoint possible student record matches. The annual record matching process is conducted in late Fall/early Winter after the selected cohort of four-year-olds has entered kindergarten. Matched records are displayed in the CALPADS Candidate List report and linked to QPI preschool records.

From beginning to end, SDCOE’s annual data matching effort takes approximately three weeks. This three week period does not include the time to re-run the previous years’ unmatched records through CALPADS to increase the overall number of matches. Unmatched student records can often be explained by a child moving out of the state, enrolling in private school, or remaining in preschool for another year. Re-running records that were not matched in previous years allows SDCOE to examine student migration trends whereby school districts can track the preschoolers they retained. For the 2014-2015 student dataset, SDCOE deemed a 96% record match rate successful and sufficient to continue with the next steps of the analysis. The matching effort was completed solely by SDCOE, so there were no delays in coordinating a large-scale, cross-organization effort, nor was there burden placed on school districts or outside agencies to assist in obtaining or matching SSIDs. Moreover, mining CALPADS data after the K-12 agency has registered their student in CALPADS guarantees that SDCOE is linking the preschool record with an existing SSID record already used by the California Department of Education and local education agencies.

Between the 2014-15 and 2017-18 fiscal years, there were on average 13,850 student records queried in CALPADS annually. To maintain a controlled and incremental querying and results process, and to simplify subsequent quality assurance checks, the student enrollment data file was separated by QPI agency, then exact matches by student name and date of birth were identified (including student middle names, hyphenated or doubled surnames, as well as name suffixes). This step greatly increased accuracy when linking student records between the preschool and K-12 data systems. Through this incremental querying process, SDCOE found that student matriculation into kindergarten typically remained within the boundaries of students’ QPI preschool district or in closely neighboring school districts. When query results showed a significant change in a students’ location, further examination within CALPADS was completed to ensure an accurate SSID match.

**Baseline findings**

Across the past four years of data that has been used by SDCOE to match students, children have come from 45 First 5 San Diego QPI participating agencies spanning 293 preschool sites throughout San Diego County. CALPADS data shows that when children left QPI preschools they matriculated into 346 different LEAs (including school districts, COEs, and charter schools) spanning 1,101 school sites. Enrollment into each school site varied from 1 child to 3,169 children at each LEA. Of the 49,422 four-year-old children enrolled in QPI between 2014-15 and 2017-18, between 73% and 96% of student records have been matched (Exhibit 1). The unmatched data is re-queried annually in CALPADS. The match percentage increases for the same preschool cohort as they move through the grades. From year-to-year, as the unmatched records are mined through CALPADS again the match rate continues to increase. SDCOE anticipates reaching a 95% match rate in each of the fiscal year’s dataset by the time those students enter third grade.
Exhibit 1. Percentage of student records matched from FY14/15 to FY17/18

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preschool Program Year</th>
<th>Total Preschool Students</th>
<th>Total Records Matched as of November 19</th>
<th>% Matched (per cohort)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2014-2015</td>
<td>14,066</td>
<td>13,506</td>
<td>96.02%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2015-2016</td>
<td>15,500</td>
<td>14,114</td>
<td>91.06%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2016-2017</td>
<td>13,821</td>
<td>13,017</td>
<td>94.18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2017-2018</td>
<td>12,008</td>
<td>8,785</td>
<td>73.16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Total Unduplicated Records:</strong></td>
<td><strong>49,422</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Unique students:</strong></td>
<td><strong>38,109</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Reports showing the retention rate of each district’s preschool students and the number of students that matriculated into neighboring school districts or local charter schools were generated and distributed to each school district upon request (see Appendix, Exhibit 5 for a sample Retention and Migration Report). Reporting of this data at district board meetings and to senior leadership has led to school districts increasing their efforts to share information about the available programs and education opportunities available in the district to ensure parents are informed of what the district has to offer. For example, when data showed children leaving the public school system in a specific district to attend charter schools that emphasized science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) or dual-language immersion (DLI) programs, district leadership made concerted efforts to develop those specialty programs in-house and communicate about these programs to parents to increase student retention within their district, and in many cases were successful at slowing down the district departure rate. These communication efforts have resulted in an upward trend in student retention in the district, ranging from 70% to 85%.

Establishing MOUs with school districts

SDCOE originally planned to establish memorandums of understanding (MOU’s) with elementary school districts to collect data on QPI preschoolers as they advanced from kindergarten through third grade because there is no state-level standardized method across grades prior to third-grade. Setting up a process for school district personnel to extract preschool student data from their primary Student Information Systems for QPI students and local comparable cohorts (to compare the percent of English language learners, number of students receiving free and reduced lunches, etc.) was laborious and largely unsuccessful due to the lack of human and fiscal resources needed to complete this effort on an annual basis. Of San Diego County’s 36 elementary school districts, only 12 signed data sharing agreements with SDCOE, and of those 12, only five fully participated in strategic planning for their data sharing process with SDCOE. Additionally, six districts have requested preschool enrollment data from SDCOE indicating their intentionality in receiving metrics and connecting their students’ preschool and kindergarten records. As county offices of education are not funded to provide early education data or transition coordination to school districts, the limited number of districts’ data requests aligned with the limited-time resources provided by First 5 San Diego.

Another benefit for districts to enter into a data sharing MOU with SDCOE is the retention reports SDCOE shares with school districts that provide LEAs information about the QPI-participating preschools in their attendance area (including their own preschools when applicable), and the retention rate of enrollment in their district. These reports link each child to their preschool provider, giving LEAs information about the quality of each student’s preschool setting and shows how families of children under age five access state funded, head start, and public voucher-receiving group child care settings during their last year of preschool. Several districts are tracking these students on their Student Information System (SIS), utilizing the matched SSID’s from the data sets SDCOE provides. Some participating districts have requested parent releases to obtain children’s record from their preschool provider when individual student developmental and educational concerns become evident in kindergarten. Obtaining children’s preschool records may be conducted either as part of an existing collaborative relationship with the preschool...
provider, or as part of a student's individual evaluation/assessment for Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) eligibility. In some cases, school districts operate their own preschool programs, while in others, LEAs lease spaces on their campuses to state-funded preschools. There are many preschool settings in the community with no ties to the school district other than the leveraged coordination SDCOE provides through the locally funded First 5 QPI effort.

Given the constraints associated with relying on data transfers between elementary school districts and SDCOE for an unfunded project, SDCOE approached Dr. Deborah Stipek at Stanford University’s School of Education to submit a formal data request to CALPADS to conduct a longitudinal study to determine the validity of the current CA QRIS rating matrix in predicting achievement by grade three. The study will include a deep analysis of all preschool data collected on the seven quality elements of the QRIS rating matrix, as well as elementary school data including student assessments, English language acquisition status, disability, status, attendance, and staff education and professional experience, expected to be accessed from CALPADS.

**Sample Report Highlights**

- Retention and migration reports are used to illustrate student enrollment agency-wide and by school site (Appendix, Exhibit 1).
- Google maps (Appendix, Exhibit 2) are used to plot QPI preschool school site locations within school district boundaries.
- Mapping tools also detail the number of students enrolled in districts from outside of school district boundaries.
- Appendix, Exhibit 3 details school district intake counts, showing which QPI agencies most prominently fed into primary schools.
- Data Quest reports (Appendix, Exhibit 4) detail elementary school enrollment data over a four-year period, showing the enrollment levels of QPI children within their school district by school site.
- Lastly the report in the Appendix, Exhibit 5 shows the students that moved from one QPI agency to another within one program year and whether the student was in preschool for one or two years.

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**CALPADS Background/History** [https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/background.asp](https://www.cde.ca.gov/ds/sp/cl/background.asp)

SDCOE and Santa Clara County Office of Education were the only two agencies with access to CALPADS for the purpose of piloting an approach that would result in linking early childhood and school age student records. Each of the two county offices of education implemented a different approach.

Transition coordination is a district's intentional provision of guidance to preschool providers and preschool parents about school enrollment and program options such as dual language programs, full-day kindergarten vs. half-day kindergarten, etc.
Elementary School District Perspective

Harper+Company Community Research interviewed key representatives from the five elementary school districts with whom SDCOE established data sharing MOUs. Interviewees were District Coordinators of Early Education or District Directors of Information Technology (IT). The purpose of the interviews was to understand the districts’ perspectives of the data sharing partnership with SDCOE, how the districts are leveraging shared data to improve student retention, and what districts perceive to be the long-term potential of this data sharing partnership. Interviews were conducted over the phone and lasted between 30 and 45 minutes.

Current benefits of data sharing

District representatives viewed the data sharing agreements between their district and SDCOE as having powerful potential to increase student enrollment rates and improve teaching and learning in the classroom when used to track students’ from preschool through grades K-12. Interviewees noted that tracking students’ developmental progress across time is particularly beneficial for children who come from low-income households, are dual language learners, or have special needs. One stakeholder specifically noted that it’s helpful for teachers and principals to have information about students’ learning status (e.g., dual language learner, special needs) at kindergarten entry so teachers can best tailor their lessons to meet those students’ needs.

The immediate benefit of the data sharing MOU with SDCOE is that it offered elementary school districts the ability to track former QPI students’ movement within and across districts. Districts aim to retain as many of their students as possible, therefore the ability to see preschooler’s enrollment history and where they move throughout the district has helped them understand matriculation and develop strategies to retain as many students in their district as possible (e.g., increasing communication about specialized programs offered in the district in an effort to retain students).

Future plans for shared data use

Districts hope to take information from SDCOE’s reports (example reports can be found in the Appendix) and apply it to other data points they have collected to further target their efforts to retain students in their district. One stakeholder shared his vision for building data visualizations for districts that would be updated in real time to show all of the preschool students coming in and out of the district to help monitor and improve retention strategies.

Districts also plan to use the findings of the upcoming longitudinal study to demonstrate the importance of quality preschool settings to legislators and secure more state and federal funding, enhance the quality of their program, and assess what is working and what’s not working within their programs and classrooms. District representatives were excited to see their students’ data demonstrate the impacts of preschool through 1) comparisons of students that attended QPI to children who did not attend any early care and education programs prior to entering kindergarten, and 2) comparisons of the performance of students that have consistently been in their district to students that entered their school from other districts. Positive findings in this area could demonstrate the importance of attending a QPI quality rated site to student success, be a step toward universal high-quality Pre-K in San Diego, and help guide districts’ future funding priorities. Additionally, districts reported plans to leverage preschool attendance, assessments, and disciplinary data at the preschool level to identify and serve more children in special education, and track their success, the number that transition into regular classrooms, and how many no longer have an IEP.

District leaders interviewed, recommended accelerating the process of sharing data back to districts and better alignment of each organization’s IT team to allow them to more quickly achieve their goals. For example, districts reported that it took a year or more to begin to utilize and see the benefits of sharing data with SDCOE, indicating that it may be helpful to speed up the process of sharing matched student data back with districts. Additionally, though some districts attribute IT team alignment difficulties to internal organizational issues and changes, others mentioned issues aligning their tracking software and understanding of the matching process to SDCOE’s software and understanding of the process.

December 2019
Conclusion and next steps

There is a great deal of potential for the future of the data sharing effort between SDCOE and local school districts. These data provide actionable steps for districts to improve their student retention, can demonstrate the importance of high quality preschool settings to children’s learning and development, can help to optimize classroom curriculums and improve the learning environment, and can be used to secure state and federal funding for early care and education programs. However, to fully realize these goals, county offices of education need to be funded to provide this level of assistance to school districts as they seek to address early learning and transition in their LCAP’s and other district strategic actions addressing enrollment, attendance, family engagement, and academic achievement.

Furthermore, navigating existing data systems and considering the linkages between data from preschool into elementary school can serve as a platform for a prototype of an Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) to evaluate and improve services to children and families throughout California. A key first step in this process is convening a Local Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems Workgroup as contracted by the California Department of Education that includes the Santa Clara Office of Education as part of the federal Preschool Development Grant. The goal of the Local ECIDS Workgroup is to understand and prioritize state needs regarding data elements, reporting capabilities, and users and owners. The state of California’s effort aligns with Senate Bill 75 (July 2019), Section 14, Chapter 8.5, the Cradle-to-Career Data System Act, which established a workgroup and prioritized development of the cradle-to-career data system to take place in phases: 1) K-12 and Higher Education; 2) Workforce; 3) Early Learning Care and Education; and 4) Health and Human Services and other data connections.

SDCOE and First 5 San Diego seek to better understand the impact that investments in high quality early care and education programs are having on children in the long-term, and which aspects of those investments are most critical to creating positive outcomes for students and families.

Next Steps: Improving QRIS’ Predictive Validity Study

As a next step in this initiative, Stanford University’s School of Education will conduct a study, “Improving QRIS’ predictive validity,” that will use early childhood education program data collected by SDCOE combined with third-grade data from CALPADS to examine the following:

1) which elements of QRIS (and other information on children’s ECE programs not included in the QRIS) predict academic outcomes for children;

2) for which groups of children;

3) whether different strategies for calculating QRIS ratings affect its ability to predict later academic achievement; and

4) whether the QRIS measure is effectively identifying high quality early childhood education programs that improve outcomes for children and what adjustments might be made to improve its validity.

We would like to thank the QPI partner agencies and participating programs between 2014 and 2019, and give special recognition to South Bay Union School District, Cajon Valley Elementary School District, Vista Unified School District, San Ysidro School District, and La Mesa Spring Valley School District for providing us with additional information for this report.
Appendix

Examples of student retentions reports

The student retention reports prepared by SDCOE are comprised of CALPADS data exports, custom SDCOE local databases reports, custom google mapping tools, aggregate DataQuest downloads, and various reports developed in Excel. All reports provided to partnering school districts create a visual representation of the worksheet data.

Exhibit 1.  Agency-wide student enrollment by school site

The graph below is for the partnering school district to know which QPI preschool agencies their kindergarteners are matriculating from. This data will help establish partnerships, map local resources, and assist with future projections based on preschool enrollments.
Exhibit 2. Map of QPI preschool sites within district boundaries

The address plots and Reporting LEA data provides a geographic representation of the location of each QPI preschool. The data listed in the table are counts of students that attended a preschool within the school district boundaries and where they matriculated to when entering kindergarten.
Exhibit 3. School district intake counts

The data table and graph below provides an in-depth review of which QPI preschools are the primary feeder agencies into specific district elementary schools. As in the graphs above, the information can be used by school districts to better understand their incoming student population and the preschool programs they came from.
Exhibit 4. Kindergarten to third grade enrollment by school site

The data table below displays student enrollment information extracted from the California Department of Education’s DataQuest system. When combined with the longitudinal study data, the district counts, and QPI counts, this data can be compared to show which schools have a higher concentration of QPI children attending each school by grade level. This can be used for further analysis to determine if the overall school’s performance, at each grade level, is in part due to their time in quality preschool setting.
Exhibit 5. Student movement between QPI agencies

The table below shows the number of years each child spent at a QPI preschool. As part of the upcoming longitudinal analysis study, the length of time a child participated in QPI can be factored in to determine the differential impact of attending a QPI preschool program for one year versus two years. This data could also provide insight into the ways that moving across QPI-rated preschools impact students’ outcomes.