

Ready or Not: What We Do and Don't Know About Children's Readiness for Kindergarten in Colorado

Early Milestones Colorado | July 2025



Introduction

Next month, more than 50,000 children will step into Colorado public school classrooms for their first day of kindergarten.¹ Yet only some of these children will be deemed “ready” for school—that is, having the skills and knowledge expected among children to succeed at that grade-level. Children’s readiness for kindergarten matters because how prepared children are when they enter school can influence how successful they will be throughout their academic path. Children who don’t meet expectations when they enter kindergarten are more likely to struggle throughout elementary, middle,² and high school, and are less likely to graduate.³

Fortunately, Colorado state leaders recognize the importance of the earliest years. The state has taken bold steps to increase access to high-quality early learning experiences for all children—by expanding access to preschool for all 4-year-olds and funding tuition-free, full-day kindergarten for all families who choose it. As these landmark policy changes take hold in Colorado, tracking school readiness will be essential for understanding the impact of these investments and ensuring children from *all* backgrounds benefit.

How Does Colorado Measure Kindergarten Readiness?

In 2008, Colorado's state legislature passed SB 08-212, now commonly known as Colorado's Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K).⁴ This law requires the state to align its preschool through postsecondary education system to ensure that students graduate with the skills and knowledge they need to enter the workforce or pursue postsecondary education.

One piece of this law requires the Colorado State Board of Education ("State Board") to define school readiness and adopt a system for measuring it and reporting results annually. School districts* are required to assess each incoming kindergartener and report overall results to the Colorado Department of Education (CDE). The CDE began collecting kindergarten school readiness data from school districts in 2017, and the first CAP4K Annual Legislative Report was published the following year in 2018.⁵

**The terminology used in SB 08-212 refers to "local education providers." This includes school districts, boards of cooperative services, district charter schools, or institute charter schools.*

Colorado defines school readiness as "both the preparedness of a child to engage in and benefit from learning experiences, and the ability of a school to meet the needs of all students enrolled in publicly funded kindergarten." Every kindergartener in Colorado public schools is assessed at the outset of the school year, and each receives an Individual School Readiness Plan. Colorado school districts can use an approved kindergarten school readiness assessment tool or apply for a waiver from the State Board of Education to use a different tool.⁵

To reflect that school readiness encompasses more than knowledge of letters or numbers, kindergartners are assessed across six domains of school readiness:

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| →Physical well-being and motor development | →Social and emotional development |
| →Language and comprehension development | →Cognition |
| →Mathematics | →Literacy |

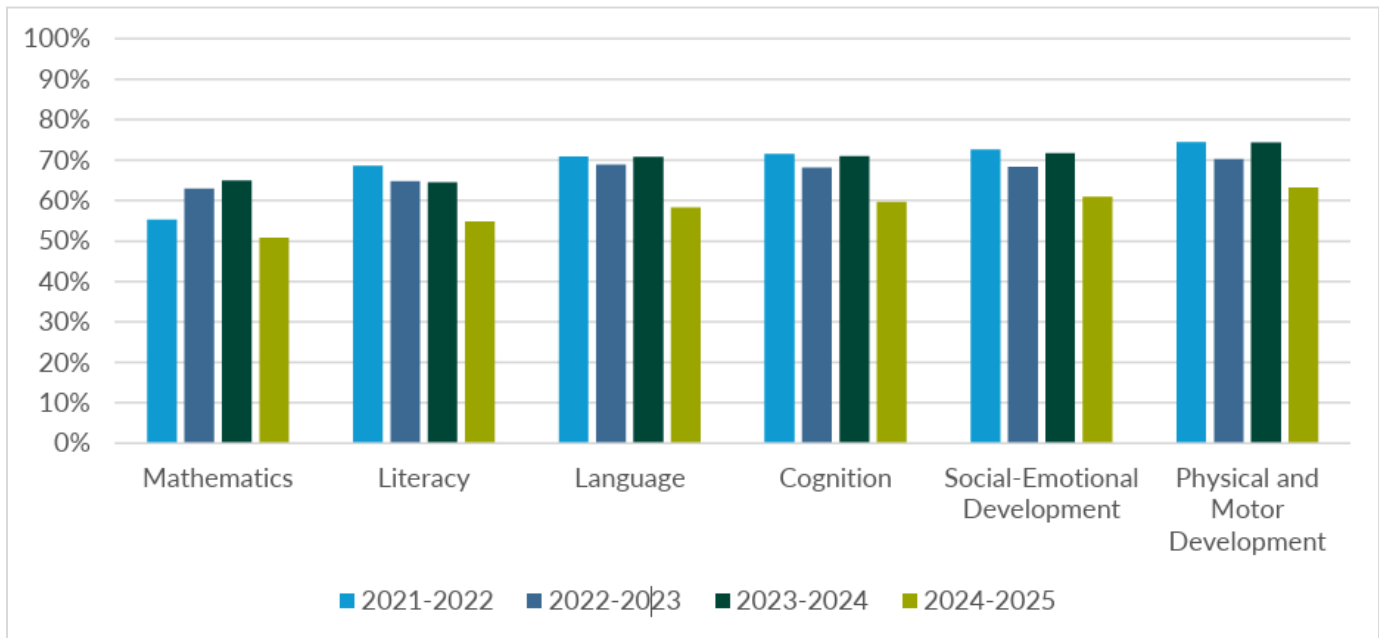
What We Know About Kindergarten Readiness in Colorado

Data from last school year (2024-2025) show that the share of Colorado kindergartners who met school readiness expectations varied significantly by domain.⁵ **Across the different domains, the share of kindergartners who met or exceeded school readiness expectations ranged from roughly half to two-thirds of students.**

Incoming kindergartners fared best in physical and motor development, where nearly two-thirds (63%) of students met or exceeded expectations. Incoming kindergartners fared worst in mathematics, where just over half (51%) of students met expectations or exceeded expectations. Along all other domains, the share of incoming kindergartners who meet or exceeded school readiness expectations fell somewhere in between—with about 55% of students meeting expectations for literacy, 58% for language, 60% for cognition, and 61% for social-emotional development.

When compared to the previous school year (2023-2024), the share of kindergartners who met or exceeded school readiness expectations *decreased for every domain*. (See Figure 1.) In the three prior school years, the share of kindergartners meeting readiness expectations had been showing signs of improvement, particularly in mathematics. Last year, however, the share of kindergartners meeting expectations fell in each domain between about 10 to 14 percentage points, with the largest drop in mathematics.

Figure 1. Percentage of Colorado Children Who Met or Exceeded Kindergarten School Readiness Expectations by Domain, School Years 2021-2022 to 2024–2025



Source: Colorado Department of Education. 2025. *Colorado's Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K): Annual Legislative Report*. Archived by the Colorado State Publications Library. Retrieved July 20, 2025 (<https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/edserials/ed278internet/ed2782025internet.pdf>).

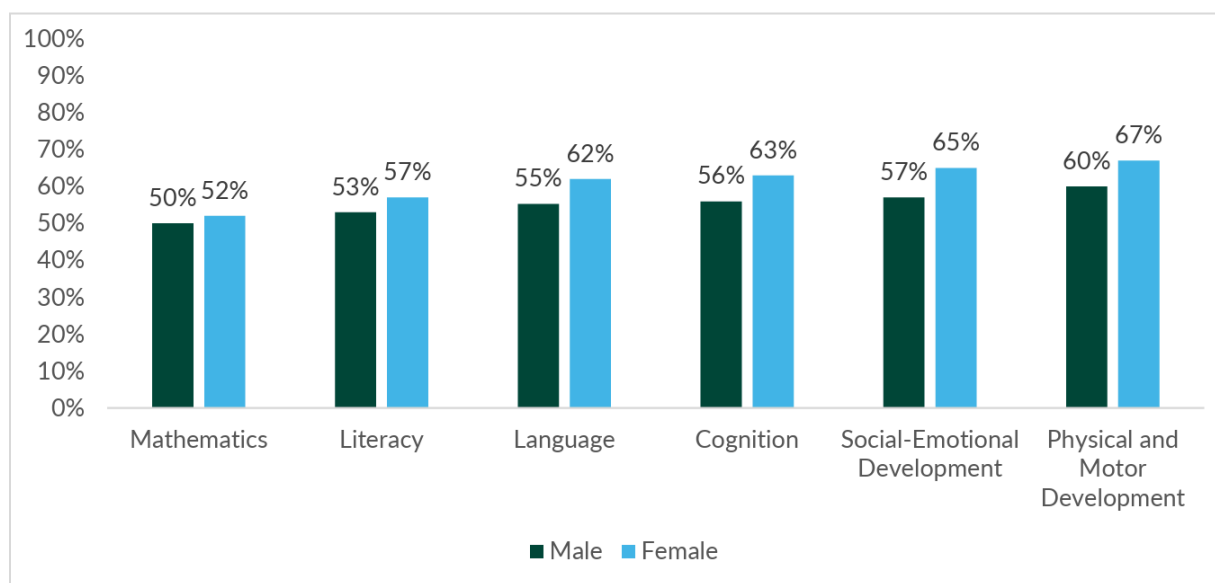
What explains this drop? The CDE notes in the report that all assessment tools were reviewed and updated in 2023. The CDE does not specify what changes were made to each assessment tool, but according to the report, this drop is partially attributable to changes in the cut scores that determine whether students are meeting or exceeding expectations. The report seems to suggest that the cut score may have been changed for one of the most commonly used assessment tools—Teaching Strategies GOLD, which was used by almost 64% of schools last year.



The data from last year also show that more kindergarten girls met school readiness expectations than boys in every domain.

The difference was greatest for social-emotional development, where 8% more girls than boys met readiness expectations. The smallest difference was for mathematics, where only 2% more girls than boys met readiness expectations. (See Figure 2.)

Figure 2. Percentage of Colorado Children by Gender Who Met or Exceeded Kindergarten School Readiness Expectations, 2024–2025 School Year



Source: Colorado Department of Education. 2025. *Colorado's Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K): Annual Legislative Report*. Archived by the Colorado State Publications Library. Retrieved July 20, 2025 (<https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/edserials/ed278internet/ed2782025internet.pdf>).

What We Don't Know About Kindergarten Readiness in Colorado

Understanding kindergarten readiness beyond the share of students meeting expectations in each domain is challenging with the way data are currently collected and reported. Three issues, in particular, limit what we can know about kindergarten readiness in Colorado.

Missing Data on Student Demographics

Missing demographic data for thousands of Colorado kindergartners limits the ability of policymakers, educators, and advocates to address school readiness gaps. Although state statute requires that data be broken down by children's free and reduced-price lunch (FRL) eligibility status, and race/ethnicity (in addition to gender), the current kindergarten school readiness data collection system allows schools to report this information as "unknown". Last school year (2024-2025), FRL eligibility status was reported as "unknown" for more than 10,000 of the students who met school readiness expectations in most domains. This means that the data reported on students by FRL status are incomplete, and accurate comparisons between children who do and do not qualify for FRL are not possible.

Students Excluded from Reporting due to Waivers for Assessment Tools

Colorado school districts are required to assess the school readiness of each incoming kindergarten within the first 60 calendar days of the school year. Districts can use an assessment tool that is approved by the State Board or apply for a waiver to use a different tool. Each school year, thousands of Colorado kindergartners are assessed in districts that receive waivers to use different assessment tools. All of these children are excluded from the reporting due to concerns about the compatibility of these assessment tools. Last school year, this resulted in roughly 7% of the total kindergarten population being excluded from the reporting.

Readiness Reported by Domain Only (and Not Overall)

In 2020, the State Board updated the reporting system so that Colorado could identify which school readiness domains children were faring best in and where they needed additional support. Prior to that change, districts reported only *the*

number of domains in which students met readiness expectations. Although the new reporting system improves upon the former in some ways, Colorado no longer reports on the share of kindergarteners who are ready for school across all domains. In other words, Colorado no longer tracks how many kindergarteners are totally ready for school each year.

Recommendations

The State Board has the power to update and improve Colorado's reporting system for kindergarten readiness data, as they did in 2020 by directing the CDE to report school readiness by domain. The State Board has an opportunity to build on this progress, ensuring the reporting system more clearly highlights disparities in school readiness while preserving the privacy of individual students. Specifically, Colorado's kindergarten school readiness assessment reporting system should:

- 1) **Require schools to submit students' race/ethnicity, gender, and FRL eligibility status as part of the kindergarten school readiness data collection and eliminate the "unknown" option.** Schools already collect this information for other purposes. Reporting this information alongside school readiness assessment results is essential for tracking progress among students of different backgrounds and circumstances.
- 2) **Report kindergarten school readiness data for students in all schools, regardless of assessment tool used.** All students should be included in the reporting, even those in districts that receive waivers from the State Board to use a different assessment tool. These children should be included to accurately reflect the share of Colorado children who are ready for kindergarten across each domain.
- 3) **Report on the share of children who meet kindergarten readiness expectations across all domains, in addition to reporting by domain.** Colorado needs to know the share of incoming kindergarteners that are totally ready for school when they enter. These data were previously reported and should be again.

Coloradans made a landmark investment in school readiness with the creation of the Universal Preschool Colorado program. As more of Colorado's youngest children gain access to early learning opportunities, a clear system for understanding school readiness—and how it varies among students of different backgrounds—is essential to the state's ability to track progress, celebrate successes, and make further investments where needed.

Acknowledgments

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Suggested Citation

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¹ Legislative Council Staff. 2024. Economic & Revenue Forecast December 2024. Denver, CO: Colorado General Assembly. Retrieved from https://leg.colorado.gov/sites/default/files/images/dec2024forecastwithcover_0.pdf

² Duncan, Greg J., Chantelle J. Dowsett, Amy Claessens, Katherine Magnuson, Aletha C. Huston, Pamela Klebanov, Linda S. Pagani, Leon Feinstein, Mimi Engel, Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, Holly Sexton, Kathryn Duckworth, and Crista Japel. 2007. "School Readiness and Later Achievement." *Developmental Psychology* 43(6):1428–1446. doi:10.1037/0012-1649.43.6.1428.

³ San Francisco Department of Early Childhood. 2024. Examining the K-12 Journey through San Francisco Unified School District: Longitudinal Study Report. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Department of Early Childhood. February 2024. Retrieved from <https://sfdec.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/SFUSD-Longitudinal-Study-Report-FINAL-1.pdf>

⁴ Colorado General Assembly. 2008. Senate Bill 08-212: Colorado's Preschool to Postsecondary Education Alignment Act (CAP4K). Denver, CO: Colorado General Assembly. Retrieved from <https://highered.colorado.gov/sites/highered/files/documents/sb08-212.pdf>

⁵ Colorado Department of Education. 2025. Colorado's Achievement Plan for Kids (CAP4K): Annual Legislative Report. Archived by the Colorado State Publications Library. Retrieved from <https://spl.cde.state.co.us/artemis/edserials/ed278internet/ed2782025internet.pdf>