



Durham PreK Update ~ May 12, 2026
Prepared for the Joint Meeting of the Durham Board of County Commissioners
and the Board of Education

Applications

- **For the upcoming 26-27 school year** the universal program application opened on March 2, 2026. As of May 1, 2026, our online application platform has received 1,025 applications. These applications are in various stages of review. Placements will begin on a tiered schedule in late May.
- **For the current 25-26 school year** as of May 1, 2026, our online application platform has received 1,833 applications. The current enrollment rate is 94%.

Public Engagement

- In March 2026, Durham PreK hosted a bipartisan group of 19 legislators from 13 states participating in the Early Childhood Policy Academy (ECPA), a collaboration between The Hunt Institute and the Saul Zaentz Charitable Foundation. The visit gave policymakers a firsthand look at how local communities can expand access to high-quality early childhood education through coordinated funding and partnerships.
- Results from parent surveys in the 2024 - 2025 school term are available and overall are very positive.
 - 95% of families said they would recommend Durham PreK to a friend or fellow family.
 - 93% of respondents rated their overall experience with Durham PreK as Very Good or Good.
 - 93% of families feel that their child is more prepared for kindergarten as a result of participating in Durham PreK.
 - Families reported which aspect of Durham PreK needs to be changed the most? 30% pre-K site placement process; 26% Transportation; 25% Availability of before/after care

Workforce Development

- Durham PreK has a much higher retention rate than early education programs typically report.
 - 95% Lead Teacher Retention Rate
 - 81% Instructional Assistant Retention Rate
- With scholarship support and coaching, three unlicensed teachers earned their residency license in 2024 – 2025 and are continuing to work towards their initial license this school year.
- **Statewide Award:** [The Durham Early Childhood Educator Apprenticeship Program](#) has been selected as the **ApprenticeshipNC Outstanding Group Program for 2026!** This is a statewide award for apprenticeships across all industries. [See full press release from ApprenticeshipNC.](#) The award will be presented May 19, 2026 during an Apprenticeship Employer Appreciation Breakfast at Durham Tech.
- **May 2026 Graduation:** The program celebrated 5 apprentices who completed their Associate Degree in Early Childhood Education at Durham Tech in May 2026.
- **Higher Education Access:** To date in FY2026, Early Years has actively assisted **178 current/future early educators** in the process of enrolling or re-enrolling in higher education to pursue Certificates, Associate's Degrees, Bachelor's Degrees, Birth to Kindergarten Licensure, and Master's Degrees. This includes **45 current registered apprentices**, and **11 apprenticeship graduates** this year.
- **Durham Early Educator Academy:** Collaborated with Durham Tech to support 3 Academies from January-July, serving 75 new early childhood students. These culminated with an Early Education Job Fair featuring 11 child care centers and 3 supportive programs for job seekers.

Preschool Providers

- The biennial Request for Applications (RFA) process for child care sites interested in becoming NC PreK and/or

Durham PreK sites concluded with four new programs approved for potential allocations. Sites will be waitlisted as eligible while we seek funds for new seats.

Outreach Activities

- Durham PreK outreach this quarter focused on increasing awareness and access for families and providers.
 - We expanded communication through shared calendars, materials, and direct engagement. Ongoing collaboration with sites continues to strengthen participation and family engagement.

Durham PreK Website

- An [application promotional video](#), highlighting a private, public and Head Start location for the 2026 - 2027 school year launched on the opening day of the DPK application.
- New frequently asked questions videos in [English](#) and [Spanish](#) are on the [application page](#).
- In April, the website had **11,175 pageviews** from **3,589 users**. The event count, which is a user's specific action on a site, such as clicking a button, playing a video, or submitting a form, was **32,127**. The average number of sessions per user was 3.21, and the average session duration was 1:31.

Durham PreK Social Media

- In the month of April, the [DPK YouTube channel](#) received **303 views** and **12 hours** of watch time! Our video content includes application tutorial videos, videos providing an overview of the application process, recordings of past family information sessions, and more. All of our videos are available in English and Spanish.
- We continue conducting virtual tours at our sites! The tours are posted on our social media to highlight our sites to parents and families for the upcoming school year—most helpful to those families who are unable to visit.
- In addition to the virtual tours, we conduct teacher, student and parent interviews for testimonials. The purpose of the testimonials is to highlight positive feedback about DPK and show how it is serving our community.
- In preparation for Teacher Appreciation Month in May, we are celebrating our educators by interviewing them on their experiences in Early Childhood Education and giving them shoutouts on our social media each week.

Durham PreK Newsletters

- Durham PreK newsletters continue to be published bimonthly. Our latest issues included an article on [Durham PreK Students Strike 'GOLD' in Meeting or Exceeding Academic and Developmental Expectations](#), featured a [Kids 'R' Kids Site Visit](#), and much more! Links to both issues are below. The next issues will be published in June.
- The newsletters were sent to 2,332 **total subscribers**.
 - [Community Connections](#)- 11.96% open rate and a 4.67% click rate
 - [Teacher Talk](#)- 42.39% open rate and a 19.23% click rate

Technical Assistance (*Capacity building, Teacher and Director Quality Support and Professional Development*)

- 5 child care centers are participating in coaching to build capacity and readiness to apply as a Durham PreK program site: All My Children II, A New Beginning V, Latino Educational Achievement Partnership (LEAP), Lightbridge Academy, and Little Kidz Preschool. The focus of this coaching is to support community-based early education programs to strengthen their program quality, build educator and leadership capacity and expand access to meaningful professional development.
- In April, Quality Improvement Specialists conducted coaching sessions for current DPK sites- 82 with teachers and 23 with child care center directors.
- Coaches led 5 Professional Development Workshops in April on topics such as Math Activities, Teaching Strategies Gold assessments, Bridging to Kindergarten, Language Modeling, Early Literacy Assessment and others.



2024-2025 Durham PreK: A Study Focusing on Children's Growth

Background

Access to affordable, high-quality early childhood education is fundamental. For young children, a stimulating and caring environment as well as interactions with trusted adults and other young children strengthen their development in a wide range of areas, including social-emotional, physical, and cognitive development. For families, such access offers peace of mind as they go to work, pursue further education or any other endeavors they may be seeking. For society at large, offering child care to the community allows businesses to access a wider pool of qualified, educated, and motivated workers. Early childhood education exists in a wide range of settings, including private- or public-funded centers, and family child care homes. In recent years, universal preschool programs have also been on the rise, offering affordable access to early care and learning to all children living in a designated area.

Durham PreK (DPK) is a universal preschool initiative established by Durham County and managed by Early Years (formerly known as Child Care Services Association). DPK braids local funding to enhance federally and state-funded public preschool classrooms and creates new seats using a mixed delivery model in public schools, Head Start and private child care. Classrooms across the county began opening in 2019. Durham PreK pushes for equitable access to quality preschool education for all Durham preschool-age children, as well as for fair compensation and access to professional development and technical assistance for early childhood educators. The program is open to all four-year-olds in Durham County. It is free for families with incomes below 400% of the Federal Poverty Level (e.g., \$124,800 for a family of four, for the year of 2024/2025¹) and is offered at a sliding scale for families with higher incomes. All classrooms are required to be licensed as 5-star rated classrooms, an indication of high quality of care, with the ability to support dual language learners, children with special needs, and robust family engagement. Also, in addition to having a bachelor's degree, all lead teachers are required to have, or to be working on, their North Carolina Birth to Kindergarten Teaching License.

Durham PreK offers high-quality early childhood education to all children served and creates a responsive, supportive, and inclusive environment that promotes every child's growth and development. A developmentally appropriate research-based curriculum, the Creative Curriculum® is used in all classrooms, combined with ongoing tracking of children's progress, through the SmartTeach (formerly Teaching Strategies) GOLD® Assessment. GOLD® is a well-known assessment tool used in early childhood education to measure the developmental progress

¹ <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2023/01/19/2023-00885/annual-update-of-the-hhs-poverty-guidelines>

of children from birth through third grade. Educators use the tool to track children’s milestones, support individualized learning, and communicate progress to families, making it a valuable tool in the field. The assessment relies on observational data collected during everyday classroom activities. Teachers document children’s progress through notes, photos, and work samples, using these observations to assess each child’s development accurately. The assessment comes with a user-friendly digital platform, offering real-time insights and visualizations to help educators make data-driven decisions for individualized instruction. The assessment tool aligns with state and national early learning standards, ensuring that educators can effectively track progress toward specific educational goals. GOLD® is designed to be inclusive for children with different learning needs and children with disabilities. The tool provides strategies to support and assess these diverse learners effectively. Assessment features involve families in the assessment process, providing them with updates on their child’s progress and describing ways to support learning at home. The tool further provides professional development resources for educators, helping them to better understand and implement assessment strategies within their teaching practice. Finally, GOLD® ensures that all data are securely stored and compliant with data privacy standards to protect the information of students and families.

The goal of the present study was to investigate the growth of children who attended publicly funded PreK at private child care sites and Durham Public School sites in the school year of 2024-2025, in different developmental areas, using data collected through the GOLD Assessment. Six domains of development were assessed, i.e., social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics, all considered as critical cornerstones of child development².

Methods

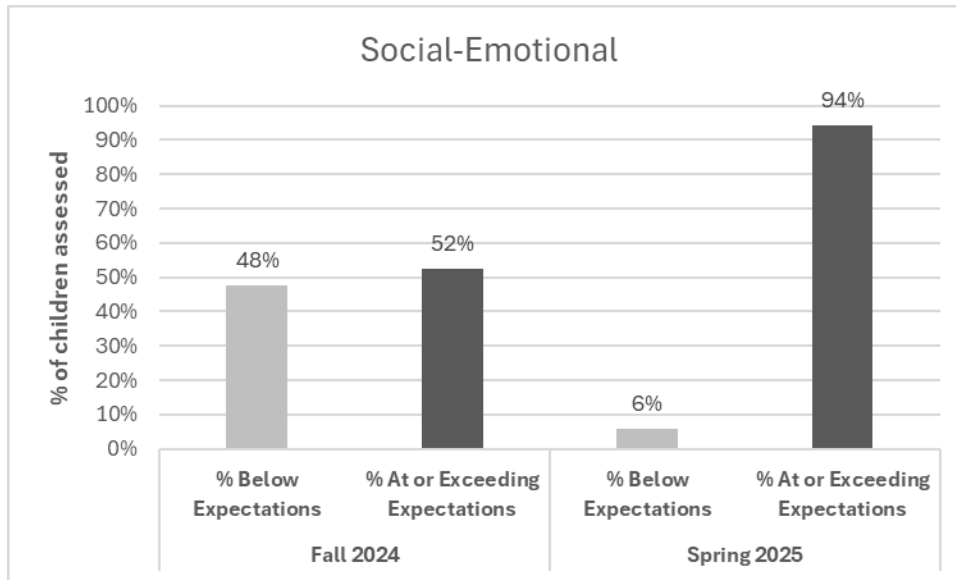
GOLD® Comparative reports were used to extract checkpoint data from all Durham PreK children in publicly funded seats (including NC Pre-K, Durham PreK, Title I, or a combination of these thanks to the braided funding model), who were assessed in both Fall of 2024 and the Spring of 2025, in private child care sites and Durham Public School sites. Check point data were collected to assess six developmental domains: social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy and mathematics, and are classified as below, meeting, or exceeding levels for widely held expectations for preschool-age children according to the GOLD® assessment. For the report, two categories were created: levels below expectations of preschool-age children, and levels meeting or above expectations widely held for preschool-age children. The levels were compared from the Fall of 2024 to the Spring of 2025, for all six domains.

Findings

Social-Emotional Domain

The social-emotional domain focuses on a child’s ability to understand and manage emotions, build relationships, and develop empathy. This domain includes self-regulation, cooperation, sharing, and expressing feelings in a socially appropriate way.

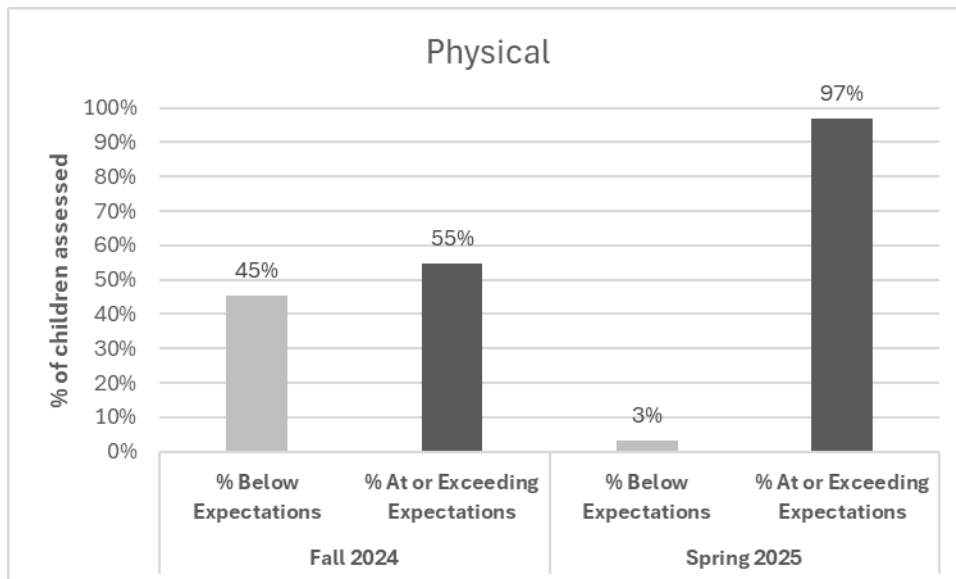
² North Carolina Foundations Task Force. (2013). North Carolina foundations for early learning and development.



A total of 744 children were assessed in the social-emotional domain. In the fall of 2024, 349 children were at a level below expectations widely held for preschool-age children, and 385 children were at or exceeding those expectations. In the Spring of 2025, 43 children were at a level below expectations of preschool-age children, and 691 children were at or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 94% of children assessed throughout the year were at or above expectations related to social-emotional development.

Physical Domain

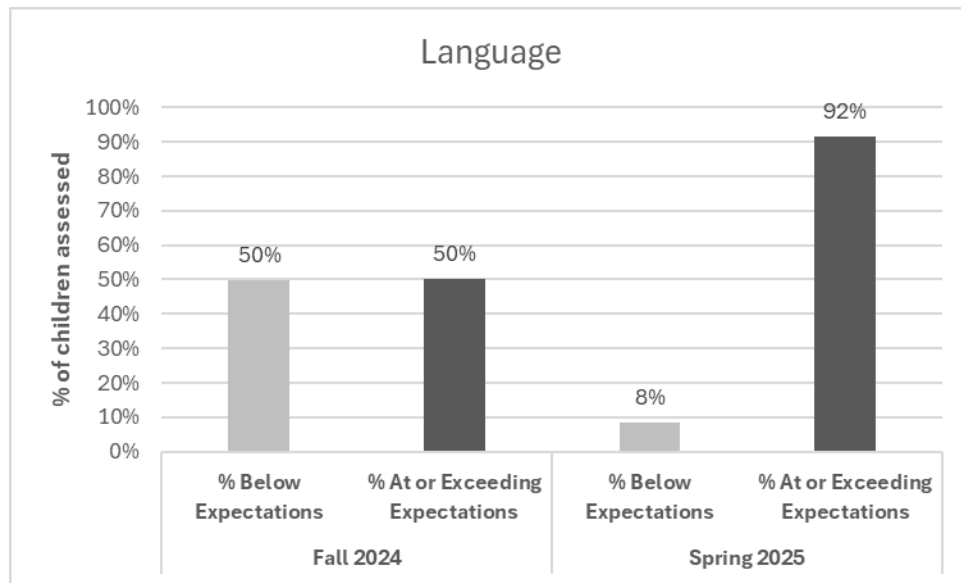
Physical development is essential for overall health, coordination, and independence, and includes both gross motor skills (large movements such as running, jumping, and climbing) and fine motor skills (small movements such as holding a pencil, cutting with scissors, and buttoning).



A total of 742 children were assessed in the physical domain. In the fall of 2024, 336 children were at a level below expectations widely held for expectations of preschool-age children, while 406 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In the Spring of 2025, 23 children were at a level below expectations, and 719 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 92% of the children assessed throughout the year were at or above physical expectations of preschool-age.

Language

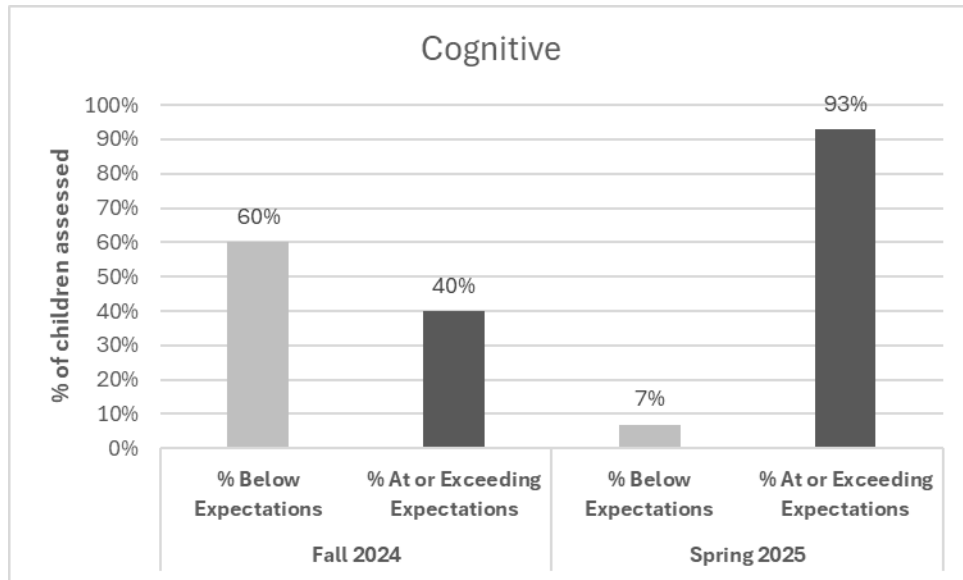
The language domain focuses on the development of communication skills, including listening, speaking, vocabulary, and grammar, understanding and using language to express needs, ask questions, and engage in conversations.



A total of 740 children were assessed in the language domain. In the fall of 2024, 368 children were at a level below expectations of preschool-age children, while 372 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. By contrast, in the spring of 2025, 62 children were at a level below expectations, and 678 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 92% of the children assessed were at or above expectations in language development.

Cognitive

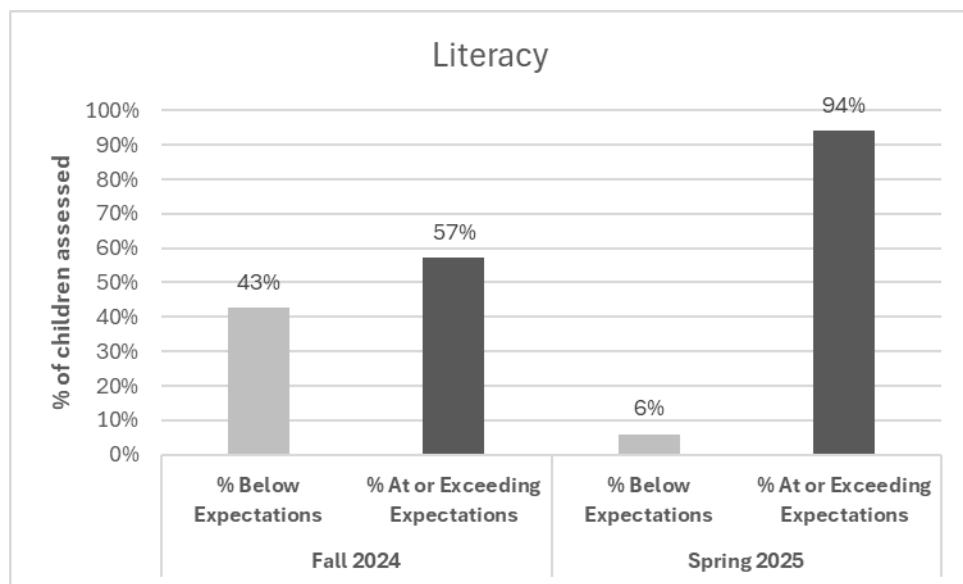
Cognitive development involves thinking skills, problem-solving, reasoning, memory, and understanding concepts, fundamental in children's ability to make sense of the world and apply their knowledge in different situations.



A total of 744 children were assessed in the cognitive domain. In the fall of 2024, 446 children were at a level below expectations of preschool-age children, while 298 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. By contrast, in the spring of 2025, 52 children were at a level below expectations, and 692 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 93% of the children assessed were at or above expectations in language development.

Literacy

The literacy domain focuses on recognizing letters and the sounds they make and beginning to read and write. Literacy skills are built through activities like storytelling and identifying words.



A total of 740 children were assessed in the literacy domain. In the fall of 2024, 316 children were at a level below expectations of preschool-age children, while 424 children were meeting or

exceeding those expectations. In the spring of 2025, 44 children were at a level below expectations, and 696 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 94% of the children assessed were at or above expectations in language development.

Mathematics

The mathematics domain includes number sense, counting, understanding shapes, patterns, measurement, and basic math concepts like addition and subtraction. Mathematical development helps children develop logical thinking and problem-solving skills.

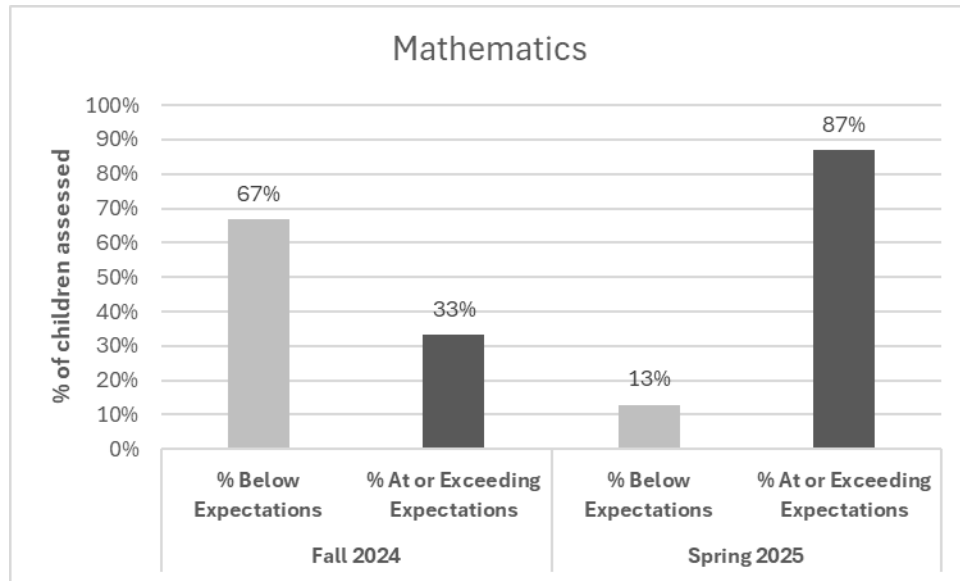


Figure 1

A total of 741 children were assessed in the mathematics domain. In the fall of 2024, 494 children were at a level below expectations of preschool-age children, while 247 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In the spring of 2025, 96 children were at a level below expectations, and 645 children were meeting or exceeding those expectations. In other words, by the end of the school year, 87% of the children assessed were at or above expectations in language development.

Conclusion

The goal of the present study was to investigate the growth of children who attended Durham PreK in the school year of 2024-2025 (private child care sites and Durham Public School sites), in a variety of child development areas, using data collected through the GOLD® assessment. Six domains of development were assessed, i.e., social-emotional, physical, language, cognitive, literacy, and mathematics.

By the end of the school year, a large majority of the children assessed throughout the year, were meeting or above expectations widely held for preschool age children, in each domain; 94% in social-emotional development, 97% in physical development, 92% in language development, 93% in cognitive development, 94% in literacy development and 87% in mathematics development.