The Program

The *Get Ready for School*™ program is offered through the Strong Start Charitable Organization, in partnership with community organizations in Waterloo Region. It is a free, early intervention program designed to prevent vulnerable preschoolers from being disadvantaged at school entry.

The children in the program are immersed in a literacy and language-rich classroom and receive **88 hours of instruction** through a curriculum focused on **emergent literacy skills**, **classroom learning behaviours** and **self-regulation.** It is a free, targeted early learning program that supports school readiness for preschoolers facing developmental, linguistic, or socio-economic challenges."

The program addresses developmental disparities between equity-deserving populations and their higher-income peers by fostering long-term outcomes through a focus on early learning, with a supplementary component of parent/guardian education and engagement.

The program helps to address the developmental gap that often exists between these groups and their higher income peers and helps improve lasting and long-term outcomes through its emphasis on parent education and parental involvement.

The Participants

The 2024 *Get Ready for School* cohort was comprised of 420 children across 21 programs. Participating children were 3-4 years of age and set to start Year 1 of Kindergarten in the fall. Out of the 420 enrolled children, 377 completed the program, resulting in a completion rate of 89.8%.

Our program continued to serve diverse populations. A total of 189 of the 420 children did not speak English at home and an additional 55 children spoke some English, as well as a second language at home.

Approximately 49 languages were spoken among participants with Tigrinya, Arabic, Punjabi, Urdu and Spanish being the most prominent.

- **21 programs**
- **420 children benefited**
- **89.8% completion rate (377 children)**
- **58% of children spoke a language other than English at home**
- **49 languages were represented**

A total of 43 children withdrew part-way through the program, mostly due to changing family circumstances (change in employment, change in caregivers or moved out of area). This year's attendance variability range was higher than in than in pre-pandemic years, ranging from 3 to 19 classes. This can be directly attributed to the newly adopted, post-pandemic best practice of staying at home even if feeling mildly unwell.

The Gains

To help determine the impact and effectiveness of the program, each child was given a **pre-test** and **post-test** on a number of literacy measures (e.g., phonological awareness and vocabulary knowledge) and one behaviour measure. Overall, the analysis of the data indicates that the children made statistically significant gains in all areas as a result of participating in the program.

Phonological Awareness

Phonological awareness is one of the most reliable predictors of children's future reading ability and a foundational skill for achieving reading success**.** It is the ability to focus on and manipulate the sounds in spoken language.

As an intervention program, the children in the *Get Ready for School* program received explicit instruction in each class that followed a carefully researched and planned progression of skills.

Assessment	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain
Letter Sounds Knowledge (x/26).0	1.3	10.3	9
Phonological Awareness Task (x/30)	0.3	1.9	1.6
Receptive Vocabulary Task (percentile)	38.6	47.6	9.1
Learning Behaviours (x/36)	21.8	29.3	7.5

Through activities such as identifying letter sounds, segmenting syllables, rhyming, and blending sounds to form words, the children improved their phonological awareness skills and began developing the foundational ability to recognize and use phonemes to build words.

By the end of the program the children were able to recognize their name in print, clap out syllables and identify, on average, 9 more letter sounds by the end of the program.

Vocabulary Development

An important component of literacy development, vocabulary knowledge, is a critical prerequisite for reading comprehension and reading achievement. The children in the *Get Ready for School* program were introduced to new words and concepts that built upon their prior knowledge. They were provided with numerous opportunities to experience words in a meaningful context, through play, sorting games, storytelling, book reading, and conversations.

The improvements the children made in their knowledge of word meanings were demonstrated by the growth of their receptive vocabulary, which was assessed using the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT-V).

The children who participated in both the pre- and post-tests, completed the program with a vocabulary similar to that of their same-aged peers (47.6%).

Vocabulary Development	Pre-Test	Post-Test	Gain
PPVT-IV Raw Score	56.7	74.6	17.9
PPVT-IV Age Equivalency (y:m)	3:3	3:11	0:8
PPVT-IV 1 year (12-month) Vocabulary Growth			25%
PPVT-IV 1.5 year (18-month) Vocabulary Growth			7%

At the end of the program children demonstrated an increase in vocabulary knowledge that exceeded what is typically expected during natural development over a six-month period. On average, the children age equivalency score changed from 3:3(y:m) to 3:11(y:m), indicating 8-month improvement in receptive vocabulary. An astounding 25% of children increased their vocabulary by 1 year (12 months) or more, with 7% increasing their word knowledge by 1.5 years (18 months). This accelerated rate of vocabulary acquisition is essential in bridging the gap in vocabulary knowledge.

The increase in the children's scores at the post-test, and more importantly, the accelerated rate of acquisition of new word knowledge, demonstrates the effectiveness of the program in bridging any gaps that existed at the start of the program.

Classroom Learning Behaviours and Self-Regulation

Researchers have found that intentional self-regulation predicts school success and that it serves as a foundation for a child's long-term physical, social, psychological and behavioural well-being.

The children in the *Get Ready for School* program experienced the expectations that will be set for them in the formal school system. They had many opportunities to practise classroom learning behaviours, such as raising their hands, cleaning up, transitioning between tasks, following instructions, negotiating play, and sharing. As the program progressed and routines and structures were well established, many children were able to self-regulate routinely without the assistance of an adult.

Through effective scaffolding and by setting developmentally appropriate expectations, children in the program experienced **significant 7.5-point improvement in their ability to self-regulate**. At the end of the program, children were more independent, attentive to the class routines, and engaged with the learning materials.

Improvement in these social competencies helped the children feel confident and ready for school, thereby shaping their attitudes and views towards school and education.

Parent/Guardian Involvement and Engagement

Family engagement and involvement in schools is strongly associated with academic success across all socio-economic groups. It is also a focus for educational improvement in Ontario.

The *Get Ready for School* program promotes and facilitates parent/guardian education and involvement. Information along with practical strategies and take-home resources are shared with families during parent/guardian meetings and in monthly newsletters.

The parents/guardians of children attending the *Get Ready for School* program were interested and eager to be involved in their children's learning. They felt better equipped to support their child's learning after receiving tips and practical strategies. As a result, almost all parents were actively engaged in their child's learning. Along with attending the Parent/Guardian Meetings, most used the materials their child brought home to practise the skills their child was learning in class.

The commitment of parents/guardians to the program was also demonstrated by the frequent, daily interactions with our *Get Ready for School* staff. The program helped to develop the habit of caregiver engagement, an important impact considering the children are at the beginning of their academic journey.

The Impact

Our consistent program results provide evidence that the *Get Ready for School* program uses effective strategies that promote emergent literacy skills and school readiness. For the past e13 years, since 2011, the program's assessment results have consistently demonstrated statistically significant gains for the children in the areas of phonemic awareness, vocabulary development and self-regulation (improved classroom learning behaviours).

The *Get Ready for School* program is an effective intervention program, which promotes the acquisition of these vital skills, thereby ensuring the children's successful transition into kindergarten, and their readiness for formal reading instruction.

A multitude of letter testimonials, submitted by parents/guardians every year, have cited the importance of the program for their children. Many parents/guardians openly discussed the positive impact the program has had not only on their child but on the entire family. Ultimately, this program impacts child development, self-regulation, reading achievement and school success. Here is some feedback to further illustrate the impact of the program:

"I love this program, and I see a big difference with my son, he is ready to go to school and excited to be at school after this program." -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"I was very grateful for this program. It helped my child tremendously. His speech and sounding out words improved. Also helped with confidence and separation anxiety." -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"The program is well designed, absolutely love the pace of the program. My child learnt how to follow instructions, also the importance of keeping safe. She would be most excited to see her teachers and the friends she made. She has also developed the love to read!" -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"A wonderful program that I recommend to everyone. My daughter's come out of her shell and has so much confidence. She's gained independence from being away." -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"We love this program! My child points out letter sounds in many different words now. Such a difference in only 5 months!" -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"This was an amazing program I would recommend to anyone. I would have loved to have my child in it more days per week. Her confidence has increased. I see how proud she is of herself when she sounds out letters and words. She loved her teachers and all of the activities done. She also loved the books read!" -parent/guardian, 2024 program

"Excellent program! Would recommend it to anyone!" -parent/guardian, 2024 program

******A comprehensive version of this report is available upon request.***