



**PRIME
TIME**

PRESCHOOL READING



READING RELATIONSHIPS AND READINESS

Evidence from the
Prime Time Preschool Program

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Introduction

Prime Time Preschool (PTP) is a humanities-based, family-centered early literacy program developed by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH). Implemented across Louisiana through schools, libraries, Head Start centers, and community organizations, the program brings young children and their caregivers together for shared meals, guided story reading, discussion, and play-based learning.

The goal of PTP is to strengthen early literacy, language, and learning behaviors while deepening family engagement in children's education. Currently, 80 percent of four year olds in Louisiana are enrolled in a free public preschool or Head Start preschool program. Data support the long-term impact of high-quality early childhood programming; some estimates show that states can see an 18 percent return on investment in these programs over time. Though traditionally lagging behind, Louisiana has shown marked improvements in the past years, according to U.S. News and World Report, rising from 49th in 2019 to 37th in 2024 in the nation for pre-K to 12th grade.

This evaluation examines whether participation in Prime Time Preschool is associated with stronger developmental outcomes for children in Louisiana's early childhood programs, using Teaching Strategies GOLD® (TS GOLD) assessment data. Several large, multi-site studies show that TS Gold data are valid and reliable and that teachers are accurately able to assess child development and learning across the designated age range. TS GOLD is a widely used observational assessment system that organizes multiple developmental objectives into domains such as Social-Emotional, Physical, Language, Cognitive, Literacy, and Mathematics. Children are rated on a developmental continuum in each objective, which is then summarized into domain-level indicators of whether they are below, meeting, or exceeding age-appropriate expectations. Our

original dataset included 1,333 children across five program years (2017, 2018, 2020, 2021, 2022). After applying standard data-quality and completeness criteria, the final analytic sample comprised 915 children, and we compared end-of-year (Spring) outcomes for children who participated in PTP classrooms to those who did not participate in PTP, adjusting for baseline (Fall) scores, age, and gender.

Key Findings

Children in both PTP and non-PTP classrooms made substantial gains from Fall to Spring across all TS GOLD domains, reflecting meaningful developmental progress in the participating early childhood settings. Within this overall growth, children who participated in PTP showed additional advantages in several key areas.

After accounting for baseline scores and demographics, **PTP participation was most strongly associated with higher end-of-year outcomes in Literacy and Mathematics.** On average, PTP children scored about 0.19–0.20 standard deviations higher than comparable non-participants in these domains, a difference that remained statistically significant even under conservative matching procedures. In practical terms, this is **similar to moving a child from the 50th percentile to roughly the 65th–70th percentile in early literacy and numeracy.**

PTP participation was **also associated with moderately higher scores in Cognitive and Physical development, suggesting benefits for attention, persistence, problem-solving, and motor coordination.** In Language and Social-Emotional domains, effects were smaller and less precise statistically but generally positive, indicating that PTP may be contributing to broader school readiness in ways that are encouraging, though harder to detect with certainty in a relatively short program.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

Background

The Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) is a statewide nonprofit organization dedicated to advancing educational opportunity, cultural understanding, and civic engagement through the humanities. Since its founding in 1971, LEH has worked to expand access to learning experiences that strengthen communities and promote literacy, dialogue, and lifelong learning. Central to this mission is the belief that the humanities are a shared resource that belong to everyone, regardless of geography or socioeconomic status.

Among LEH's most widely recognized initiatives is Prime Time, a family-centered literacy program implemented in partnership with libraries, schools, and community-based organizations across all 64 Louisiana parishes. The Prime Time model brings children and caregivers together to explore literature through shared reading, storytelling, and discussion. By creating welcoming spaces where families read and talk together about big ideas, the program fosters early literacy skills alongside empathy, curiosity, and critical thinking.

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Prime Time Preschool (PTP) extends this model to families with children ages three to five. Families meet once a week for six weeks; each weekly session includes:

- A shared meal for families
- Guided reading of high-quality picture books
- Open-ended group discussion of “big questions” (e.g., fairness, courage, community)
- Play-based activities connected to the story themes
- A take-home book each week to build a home library

Facilitators, often trained teachers or librarians, model interactive reading strategies such as asking open-ended questions, prompting children to predict what will happen next, and connecting story content to children's everyday lives. These practices are designed to strengthen vocabulary, comprehension, expressive language, and early critical thinking. At the same time, PTP aims to equip caregivers with simple, concrete strategies to continue these practices at home.

This type of programming is especially significant in Louisiana, where challenges in literacy, poverty, and educational access intersect. The state consistently ranks among the lowest on national measures of child well-being and literacy, with nearly one in three children living below the poverty line and more than 40 percent of fourth graders reading below grade level. In many communities, families face structural barriers to early learning opportunities, including limited access to high-quality preschool programs and age-appropriate reading materials.

Prime Time's community-based model addresses these gaps by embedding literacy within the rhythms of everyday life. The current evaluation builds on this work by examining the impact of program participation on children's developmental outcomes and placing those findings within broader research and policy contexts.

LAYING THE FOUNDATIONS



EARLY LITERACY, FAMILY ENGAGEMENT, AND DEVELOPMENTAL OPPORTUNITY

Early Childhood as a Critical Period for Development

A large body of developmental science identifies early childhood as a uniquely sensitive period during which language, cognition, and socioemotional systems grow rapidly. During these years, children's experiences with adults—especially through talk, shared activities, and responsive interaction—shape the neural foundations for later learning (Shonkoff & Phillips, 2000; Nelson et al., 2022). Rich early language input and frequent conversations support vocabulary growth, narrative skills, working memory, and early reasoning, all of which predict later academic success (Snow et al., 1998; McCoy et al., 2017; Cabell & Hwang, 2020). Because developmental gaps that emerge early tend to widen as children progress through school, high-quality early learning experiences are critical for mitigating inequities and improving long-term outcomes (Fernald et al., 2013; Pace et al., 2019).

Education research consistently links early competencies to pivotal later outcomes: children who enter kindergarten with strong vocabulary, emergent literacy, and self-regulation skills are substantially more likely to read proficiently by third grade—a milestone associated with higher graduation rates, postsecondary enrollment, employment stability, and lifelong wellbeing (Hernandez, 2011; Watts et al., 2021; National Academies, 2023). These findings underscore the importance of early investments that strengthen children's language, literacy, and learning behaviors before they enter formal schooling.

Early Literacy and Long-Term Outcomes

Literacy-focused early childhood programs yield some of the most durable long-term effects documented in education research. Longitudinal studies demonstrate that children who participate in language-rich, relationship-centered early learning environments show improved outcomes well into adulthood, including higher educational attainment, earnings, and civic participation (Reynolds et al., 2011; Campbell et al., 2012; Gray-Lobe et al., 2021). Economic analyses highlight the concept of “dynamic complementarity,” in which early skill development amplifies the benefits of later schooling and workforce training (Cunha & Heckman, 2007; Garcia et al., 2020). That is, literacy and learning behaviors developed early allow children to take fuller advantage of subsequent opportunities.

The broader societal implications are substantial. Higher literacy proficiency in adolescence and adulthood is associated with better health outcomes, lower unemployment, and greater community engagement (OECD, 2019; Wolf et al., 2022). Conversely, low literacy is tied to economic vulnerability, difficulty navigating public systems, and reduced career mobility (Baciu et al., 2017; National Academies, 2023). These patterns provide a compelling rationale for interventions—like Prime Time Preschool—that strengthen foundational literacy and language skills early, before gaps become entrenched.

The Home Literacy Environment and Caregiver Capacity

Decades of research identify the home literacy environment (HLE) as one of the strongest predictors of early language and literacy development, independent of socioeconomic status (Sénéchal & LeFevre, 2014; Hamilton et al., 2016). Children who experience frequent shared reading, abundant conversational interaction, and access to age-appropriate books demonstrate stronger vocabulary, comprehension, and early reading readiness. The quality of adult-child talk—particularly open-ended questioning, elaboration, and storytelling—is central to these gains (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2019).

However, families' ability to sustain a rich HLE is shaped by structural and contextual factors. Caregivers working irregular hours, experiencing economic stress, or lacking access to children's books may have fewer opportunities to engage in shared reading (Neuman & Celano,

2012; Kaefer, 2020). These constraints are especially pronounced in communities facing persistent poverty or limited access to early learning resources. Effective family literacy programs must therefore not only promote reading at home but also reduce barriers, increase access to high-quality materials, and strengthen caregiver confidence.

By meeting families where they are—libraries, Head Start centers, cultural institutions, and community spaces, PTP addresses gaps in access while strengthening the family environments that support children long before they enter school.



Dialogic Reading and Family Literacy Interventions

One consistent finding from early literacy research is that dialogic and interactive reading approaches yield substantial benefits for young children. When adults turn book reading into a conversation—asking questions, encouraging predictions, connecting stories to children’s experiences—children show accelerated growth in expressive and receptive language, story comprehension, and conceptual reasoning (Mol et al., 2008; Morgan et al., 2010; Pillinger, 2022).

Meta-analyses show that dialogic reading is particularly effective for dual language learners and children from under-resourced communities, making it a promising tool for addressing early literacy disparities (What Works Clearinghouse, 2022; Dowdall et al., 2023). Family literacy programs that combine caregiver modeling, high-quality books, and culturally sustaining discussion practices also produce lasting improvements in parent-child reading routines, caregiver self-efficacy, and children’s emergent literacy skills (de Bondt et al., 2020; Guevara et al., 2020; Kim et al., 2022). These findings directly align with Prime Time Preschool’s design, which centers shared reading, open-ended dialogue, and culturally relevant texts within a supportive group setting.

Louisiana’s Early Childhood Landscape

Louisiana faces a complex set of challenges in early childhood education. The state ranks near the bottom nationally on indicators of child poverty, adult literacy, and early-grade reading proficiency (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2023; NCES, 2023). Access to publicly funded early learning seats varies widely by parish, with rural communities and families of color experiencing the largest gaps (Barnett et al., 2023; Louisiana Policy Institute for Children, 2023). High turnover in the early childhood workforce, limited access to developmentally appropriate materials, and the economic pressures many families face further hinder children’s early learning opportunities.

Despite these challenges, the state has made notable progress—including governance reforms, literacy initiatives, and expanded early learning funding. Yet many children still begin kindergarten without the foundational skills necessary for later

reading success. In this context, community-based, family-centered literacy programs like Prime Time Preschool (PTP) provide an essential complement to the formal early childhood system. By meeting families where they are—libraries, Head Start centers, cultural institutions, and community spaces—PTP addresses gaps in access while strengthening the family environments that support children long before they enter school.

Prime Time Preschool as a Humanities-Based Model

PTP’s unique contribution lies in its integration of dialogic reading, caregiver engagement, and humanities-based inquiry. The program is grounded in sociocultural theories emphasizing that children learn through shared meaning-making with more knowledgeable others (Vygotsky, 1978; Rogoff, 2003). By framing each session around big questions—fairness, courage, friendship, problem-solving—the program creates rich opportunities for children to build language, critical thinking, empathy, and narrative competence.

PTP also aligns with ecological theories of development, which emphasize the importance of consistent, nurturing interactions across the home, school, and community (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Its structure—shared meals, group discussions, take-home books—extends learning into everyday routines, giving families simple, sustainable tools for supporting literacy at home. These program features help explain the evaluation’s quantitative findings: the largest gains appeared in literacy, mathematics, and cognitive development, the domains most directly influenced by shared reading, conversation, and reasoning.

The Current Study

This study used a quantitative, observational design to examine the associations between participation in PTP and children’s growth across several early learning domains. The evaluation drew on several years of Teaching Strategies GOLD® (TS GOLD) assessment data merged with administrative records documenting PTP participation, child demographics, and program characteristics. These linked data allowed comparison of children who participated in PTP with similar children who did not, while accounting for important differences in children’s starting points.



DATA MEASURES AND ANALYTIC APPROACH

Data Sources and Context

This evaluation draws on five years of linked administrative data compiled through a partnership between the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities (LEH) and early childhood education providers in Ouachita Parish. Participating programs—including Head Start sites, community-based early learning centers, and public pre-kindergarten classrooms—use Teaching Strategies GOLD (TS GOLD) as their primary developmental assessment tool. TS GOLD ratings provide rich observational data in both Fall and Spring, offering a consistent picture of children’s developmental trajectories over the academic year.

Prime Time Preschool (PTP), implemented by LEH, is a family-centered early literacy and humanities program that convenes young children and caregivers for weekly shared reading and facilitated conversation. The program is designed to strengthen early literacy, socioemotional development, and conceptual reasoning by deepening adult-child interactions around high-quality children’s literature. Attendance in PTP is recorded independently of TS GOLD and served as the primary indicator of program participation for this evaluation. Because both TS GOLD and PTP datasets used the same longitudinal child identifier, we were able to merge records across academic years and create a unified, child-level analytic file spanning Fall 2017 through Spring 2022.

Data Cleaning and Preparation

Preparing the dataset required extensive work to ensure accuracy, comparability, and analytic integrity across multiple years and data sources. The raw data contained inconsistencies typical of complex early childhood administrative systems,

particularly when multiple providers contribute data over time.

We began by reconciling child identifiers. The datasets included several ID formats—some site-specific, others district-generated, and some carrying over from earlier years. LEH provided a longitudinal ID that linked children across years, and this became the backbone of the merged dataset. All records associated with a given longitudinal ID were combined into a single child-level file.

Next, variable names and item labels were standardized. TS GOLD data extracts vary considerably in implementation from year to year, partly due to Teaching Strategies’ platform updates and partly due to local data entry practices. Items such as “SocialEmotional” and “Social Emotional” referred to the same domain but appeared under different labels. We combined these into a consistent naming structure, allowing items to be reliably matched across cohorts. When duplicates represented the same rating captured twice, we averaged them to maintain data integrity while avoiding unnecessary loss.

Demographic cleaning included harmonizing race and ethnicity fields, resolving inconsistent formatting (e.g., “African-American” vs. “Black”), and collapsing categories when necessary for analytic clarity. Missing gender and age were rare; when present, we used cohort-specific modal imputation for gender and mean imputation for age, ensuring that these demographic fields were complete for all children included in the analysis.

To be included in the final analytic sample, a data source needed to contain Fall and Spring composite scores for at least one TS GOLD domain, a valid PTP participation indicator, and non-missing demographic variables. After applying all cleaning steps, the analytic dataset included 915 children, each with reliable longitudinal identifiers and complete Fall-Spring developmental data.

Domain Construction

TS GOLD is designed as a multi-dimensional developmental assessment, with objectives organized into broad domains. Each objective is rated along a developmental continuum that reflects age-appropriate progression from early infancy through kindergarten readiness. Administrative extracts, however, often vary in which objectives are present across years and seasons. For this evaluation, it was essential to construct domain composites that were both conceptually consistent and empirically comparable across cohorts.

We began by identifying only those objectives that appeared across most of the study period and were consistently rated in both Fall and Spring. These objectives were mapped to domains using Teaching Strategies' published framework and the 2020 TS GOLD Technical Manual. Only items in which variation was sufficient to contribute meaningful information to a composite score were retained.

Once objectives were selected, we created domain scores by averaging all available items within each domain for both Fall and Spring. This approach preserves the conceptual structure of TS GOLD while ensuring year-to-year comparability across the full five-year window.

The domains were constructed as follows:

Social-Emotional: items capturing children's expression and regulation of emotions, adherence to expectations, relationships with adults, peer interactions, and emerging social problem-solving skills.

Physical: items reflecting gross and fine motor development, including traveling, balancing, coordinating large movements, drawing, grasping, and manipulating small objects.

Language: items assessing comprehension of oral language and directions, expressive vocabulary, clarity and intelligibility of speech, grammatical construction, and sustained conversational engagement.

Cognitive: items capturing attention and persistence, flexibility in thought and behavior, recall of information, problem-solving, and participation in symbolic or pretend play.

Literacy: items representing phonological awareness (rhyming, alliteration), understanding of print concepts, letter recognition, letter-sound correspondence, book-handling behaviors, and narrative comprehension.

Mathematics: items assessing foundational numeracy skills, such as number recognition, one-to-one correspondence, comparing quantities, emerging operations concepts, patterning, and basic geometry.

To avoid artificially inflating scores, we did not impute missing objectives at the item level. If a child had ratings for at least half of the items within a domain, a composite score was calculated. If more than half of the items were missing, the child was excluded only from analyses of that specific domain.

Finally, because TS GOLD objectives vary in scale structure, all domain composites were standardized within each season (Fall and Spring) to produce z-scores. This ensures consistent interpretability across domains and avoids distortions arising from scale differences.

Analytic Strategy

The goal of the analysis was to estimate how PTP participation was associated with children's developmental progress across the school year, while ensuring that comparisons between PTP participants and non-participants were as fair and meaningful as possible. Because this was not a randomized study—and families self-selected into PTP—we used a series of complementary analytic approaches designed to strengthen the credibility of findings and make the results easy to interpret.

The first step was to account for where children started. Children enter the school year with different developmental strengths, and these differences strongly influence growth over time. To address this, we used a baseline-adjusted regression model that predicts children's Spring scores while controlling for their Fall scores in the same domain. In practical terms, this allows us to estimate how much additional progress PTP children made beyond what we would expect based on their starting point. We also controlled for age, gender, and school year. Including cohort year was especially important because the five-year span included both pre-pandemic and pandemic-disrupted years, each of which may influence children's developmental trajectories.

To avoid overstating effects simply because we examined multiple developmental domains, we applied a standard false discovery rate (FDR) correction. This approach ensures that our conclusions account for the fact that evaluating many outcomes increases the likelihood of finding a significant result by chance alone.

However, adjusting for baseline scores and demographics cannot fully rule out differences between families who choose to participate in PTP and those who do not. For example, PTP families may have greater access to transportation or more flexible schedules. To provide a more conservative estimate of PTP's contribution, we conducted a robustness check using Coarsened Exact Matching (CEM). CEM improves comparability by pairing each PTP child with non-PTP peers who shared similar background characteristics—most importantly, similar Fall scores. By comparing children who started the year at similar developmental levels, attended school during the same cohort year, and shared demographic characteristics, CEM reduces bias arising from differences in who chooses to participate. Within these matched groups, we then re-estimated the same baseline-adjusted models described above. Because CEM creates a more balanced analytic sample, any associations that remain after matching represent particularly robust evidence of PTP's relationship with key developmental outcomes.

Taken together, these analytic choices prioritize interpretability, fairness, and rigor. The baseline-adjusted regression models show how PTP participation relates to end-of-year readiness when children begin the year at similar developmental levels. The matched analyses serve as a more conservative check that helps rule out alternative explanations. When both approaches point to similar conclusions—as they do in this study—the results can be interpreted with greater confidence and clarity.

Limitations

Although our analytic approach addresses many sources of bias, the study remains observational and cannot establish causality. Families who participate in PTP may differ from non-participating families in ways not captured in administrative data—such as motivation, interest in literacy, time availability, or transportation access. In addition, the TS GOLD composites used here approximate, but do not replicate, Teaching Strategies' proprietary scoring algorithms.

Nonetheless, these composites draw on consistently available items, follow accepted evaluation practices, and behave as stable indicators of children's developmental performance. The alignment of findings across both OLS and matched analyses strengthens the overall credibility of results.

Non-Technical Methods Summary

This evaluation brings together several years of developmental assessment data and participation information from PTP to understand how the program may support young children's learning. To do this, we combined children's scores from the TS GOLD system, a commonly used early childhood assessment, with attendance records from families who participated in Prime Time Preschool sessions.

Because children naturally start the school year at different levels of development, and because families choose whether or not to participate in PTP, we designed our analyses to make the groups as comparable as possible. First, we looked at how each child was doing in the Fall and used that information to understand their growth over the school year. This allowed us to estimate how much progress children in PTP made above and beyond what we would expect based on where they began.

We also recognized that some families may be more able or motivated to attend programs like PTP. To address this, we used a second, more conservative method that compared PTP children only with non-participating children who looked very similar at the start of the year, in age, gender, race, school year, and Fall assessment results. By looking at matched children who began at nearly the same place, we can be more confident that any remaining differences by Spring reflect something meaningful about the program.

Together, these two approaches—baseline adjustment and matching—give a strong, balanced picture of PTP's contribution to children's learning. They help ensure that the comparisons are fair and easy to interpret while still being rigorous enough for research and evaluation purposes.

These methods strengthen confidence in the findings that follow: that Prime Time Preschool is associated with stronger progress in literacy, early math, and key areas of children's cognitive development.



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FINDINGS

Sample Characteristics

The final analytic sample includes 915 children with linked TS GOLD and PTP data across the 2017–2018 through 2021–2022 school years. Some data were missing due to the COVID-19 Pandemic. Of these, 232 children (25.4%) participated in Prime Time Preschool and 683 children (74.6%) did not (Table 1). Gender was balanced, with 436 girls (47.7%) and 462 boys (50.5%) in the sample. Due to data entry errors or reporting discrepancies, a small proportion of the participants were missing gender data,

though the impact on the results is negligible.

In the sample, 859 children (93.9%) were identified as Black or African American, 25 (2.7%) as White, 15 (1.6%) as two or more races, 12 (1.3%) as Other/Unknown, three (0.3%) as American Indian/Alaska Native, and one child (0.1%) as Asian. Ethnicity data indicate that 867 children (94.8%) were classified as not Hispanic/Latino, while 10 (1.1%) were identified as Hispanic/Latino; the remainder had missing or other/unknown ethnicity codes. Children's mean age at baseline (Fall) was 3.65 years (range 1–10), with the vast majority in the preschool age range.

Table 1. Sample Characteristics (N = 915)

Characteristics	N	%
PTP participants	232	25.4%
Non-PTP participants	683	74.6%
Total	915	100.0%
Gender		
Female	436	48.6%
Male	462	51.4%
Race		
Black or African American	859	93.9%
White	25	2.7%
Two or more races	15	1.6%
Other	16	1.7%
Ethnicity		
Hispanic or Latino	10	1.1%
Not Hispanic or Latino	867	88.7%

Table 1 summarizes the demographic and participation characteristics of the analytic sample. The final sample includes 915 children with linked TS GOLD assessment data and Prime Time Preschool (PTP) participation records across five academic years. The sample is evenly balanced by gender and is predominantly Black/African American, reflecting the population served by participating early childhood programs.

Chart 1: PTP vs Non-PTP

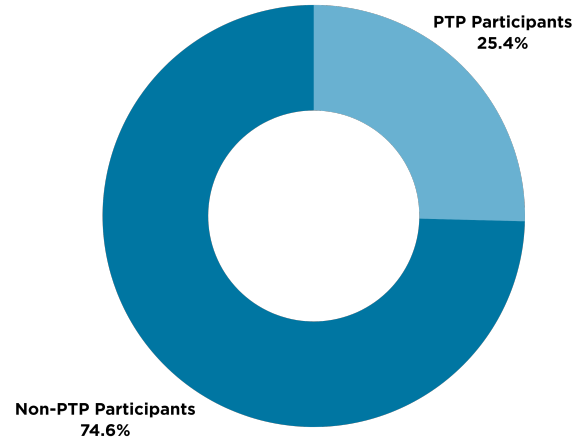


Chart 2: Sample by Gender



Table 2. TS GOLD Domain Descriptives by PTP Status (Standardized Scores)

Domain	PTP Status	Fall Mean	Fall SD	Fall N	Spring Mean	Spring SD	Spring N
SE	Non-PTP	-0.083	0.966	681	-0.103	1.011	682
	PTP	0.246	1.057	231	0.302	0.905	232
PHYS	Non-PTP	-0.050	0.999	474	-0.073	1.007	475
	PTP	0.113	0.995	211	0.163	0.968	212
LANG	Non-PTP	-0.059	0.965	683	-0.092	1.025	683
	PTP	0.173	1.081	232	0.27	0.869	232
COG	Non-PTP	-0.088	0.969	682	-0.103	1.001	683
	PTP	0.26	1.046	231	0.305	0.933	232
LIT	Non-PTP	-0.103	0.947	678	-0.132	0.995	682
	PTP	0.301	1.09	231	0.387	0.911	232
MATH	Non-PTP	-0.090	0.973	680	-0.119	1.009	682
	PTP	0.264	1.034	231	0.35	0.887	232
SCI	Non-PTP	-0.061	0.982	387	-0.062	1.02	437
	PTP	0.198	1.036	187	0.058	0.946	209
SS	Non-PTP	-0.051	0.977	390	-0.053	1.013	439
	PTP	0.173	1.036	187	0.095	0.959	208
ARTS	Non-PTP	-0.011	0.993	395	-0.009	1.017	438
	PTP	0.154	1.026	188	-0.003	0.965	209

Table 2 describes the domain descriptives by PTP Status by semester where Mean is the average effect of participating in the program compared to the control group, SD is the standard deviation, and N is number of students enrolled.

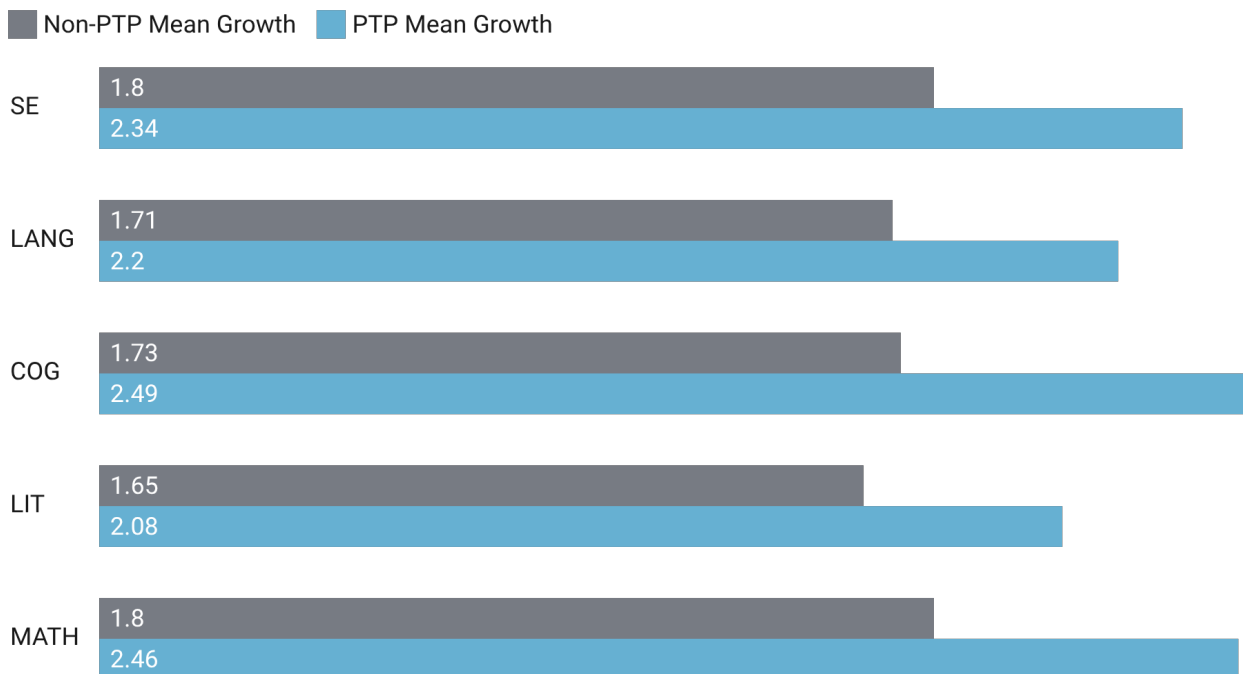
How to Read the Tables

The tables in this section summarize who participated in the study, how children performed on developmental assessments, and how Prime Time Preschool participation relates to children's learning outcomes. Scores are standardized, so values reflect performance relative to the study sample. Descriptive tables show raw differences, while adjusted tables account for where children started and other key characteristics. Together, these tables provide a clear and fair picture of the program's association with children's development.

How to Read the Chart Below

This chart shows average developmental growth from Fall to Spring using raw TS GOLD scores for children who participated in Prime Time Preschool and those who did not participate. Growth reflects the within-child change between Fall and Spring assessments. Across all domains, both groups made meaningful gains, and PTP participants demonstrated consistently larger gains, indicating greater developmental progress associated with participation in Prime Time Preschool.

Chart 1: Average growth across domains from Fall to Spring for PTP and non-PTP students



Created with Datawrapper

PTP vs Non-PTP Descriptive Differences

Before adjusting for baseline differences, PTP participants began the year ahead of non-participants in all domains and ended the year further ahead. Table 2 summarizes Fall and Spring means by PTP status. At baseline (Fall), PTP participants were about 0.17–0.39 standard deviation (SD) higher than non-participants across the core domains. For example, in Literacy PTP children averaged 0.30 SD in the Fall compared to -0.10 SD for non-PTP peers. By Spring, these gaps widened: in Literacy, PTP participants averaged 0.39 SD, while non-participants averaged -0.13 SD, a raw difference of 0.52 SD. Similar patterns appear in Mathematics (Spring difference ≈ 0.47 SD), Cognitive development (0.41 SD), approaches to learning-like Cognitive

measures, and Social-Emotional development (0.41 SD). For Science and Social Studies, Spring differences were smaller (0.12 and 0.15 SD, respectively), while The Arts showed essentially no difference (≈ 0.01 SD). These descriptive patterns underscore the need for baseline-adjusted models and matching: PTP children started ahead and then gained additional ground, particularly in academic domains.

Baseline-Adjusted Regression Results (OLS)

To move beyond descriptive differences, we estimated baseline-adjusted OLS models for each domain. These models predict Spring z-scores from PTP participation while controlling for Fall z-scores in the same domain, age, gender, and cohort year. Table 3 summarizes the regression coefficients,

confidence intervals, and model fit. The estimated PTP effect is expressed in standard deviation units. Across domains, the PTP coefficient is positive in every case. The largest and most robust effects appear in Literacy and Mathematics. In Literacy, the adjusted association between PTP participation and Spring outcomes is $\beta = 0.193$ SD, with a 95% confidence interval of [0.065, 0.321] and an FDR-adjusted q-value of 0.017 (N = 892, $R^2 = 0.34$). In Mathematics, the effect is $\beta = 0.198$ SD [0.064, 0.333], $q = 0.017$ (N = 893, $R^2 = 0.27$). These are moderate, educationally meaningful effects that remain statistically significant after controlling for

baseline scores and multiple comparisons.

The Cognitive domain shows a positive and statistically significant association of $\beta = 0.176$ SD [0.034, 0.319], with $q = 0.046$ (N = 896, $R^2 = 0.18$). The Physical domain has a smaller but still positive and marginally significant effect ($\beta = 0.161$ SD [0.003, 0.319], $q = 0.102$, N = 676, $R^2 = 0.11$). Social-Emotional and Language domains show positive but smaller estimates ($\beta \approx 0.10$ – 0.11 SD), with wider confidence intervals that include zero and q-values above conventional thresholds. Science, Social Studies, and The Arts also show small, non-significant estimates.

Table 3: Baseline-Adjusted Estimates of PTP Effects on Spring Outcomes

Domain	OLS β	p	q	CEM β	p	q
Social-Emotional	0.109	0.108	0.194	0.11	0.114	0.205
Physical	0.161	0.045	0.102	0.163	0.049	0.116
Language	0.103	0.142	0.212	0.093	0.196	0.294
Cognitive	0.176	0.015	0.046	0.147	0.052	0.116
Literacy**	0.193	0.003	0.017	0.199	0.003	0.026
Mathematics**	0.198	0.004	0.017	0.188	0.008	0.035

Note: Coefficients represent standardized differences in Spring scores between PTP and non-PTP children, adjusting for Fall scores, age, gender, and cohort year. Q-values reflect false discovery rate (FDR) adjustment across domains.

Summary of Findings

Across five years of data, children who participated in Prime Time Preschool consistently ended the school year ahead of their peers on the TS GOLD assessment. Even after we took into account where children started in the Fall, their age, gender, and which year they were assessed, Prime Time participants performed better by Spring—especially in early literacy and early math.

In practical terms, the size of these differences is meaningful. On average, children who attended Prime Time scored about one-fifth of a standard deviation higher in literacy and math at the end of the year compared to similar children who did not attend. In early childhood research, effects of this size are considered educationally important, particularly for relatively short programs. These gains appeared not only in one year, but across multiple cohorts, including years disrupted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We also used a more conservative method that

compares Prime Time children only to non-participating children who looked very similar at the start of the year. Even with this stricter comparison, the advantages for Prime Time participants in literacy and math remained strong and statistically reliable. This gives us more confidence that the results are not simply due to differences in which families choose to participate.

Beyond literacy and math, we found positive but somewhat smaller benefits in cognitive skills (such as attention, persistence, and problem-solving) and physical development. In areas such as language, social-emotional development, science, social studies, and the arts, Prime Time children also tended to score higher, but the differences were modest and less precise statistically. Taken together, the results suggest that Prime Time Preschool is most strongly associated with the skills it targets most directly—early reading, rich language use, and foundational numeracy—while also contributing to broader school readiness in ways that are encouraging, though sometimes harder to detect with precision.

INTERPRETING THE FINDINGS



WHAT PRIME TIME PRESCHOOL CONTRIBUTES TO EARLY LEARNING

Purpose

The purpose of this evaluation was to better understand how participation in the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities' Prime Time Preschool (PTP) program relates to children's development in the early years of school. Across the five years examined, one message is clear: children enrolled in PTP made strong developmental gains, and in the areas the program is designed to influence most directly—early literacy, vocabulary-rich conversations, and learning behaviors—PTP children consistently finished the school year ahead of similar peers who did not participate.

These findings emerge in the context of Louisiana's ongoing efforts to improve early childhood education and expand literacy supports for families. Many children in the state begin school with significant barriers to learning, and families often face structural challenges—access to books, time for shared reading, and limited early learning resources. In this landscape, PTP offers a distinctive model: it brings families together in trusted community spaces for shared meals, high-quality children's literature, and open conversations about the “big ideas” in stories. Rather than asking caregivers to do more in isolation, PTP positions families as partners and gives them tools, confidence, and joyful routines that can carry into everyday life.

PTP Children's Growth: Clear and Consistent Advantages

Across all domains measured by the TS GOLD

assessment, children showed meaningful developmental progress from Fall to Spring. This reflects the strengths of the early childhood programs in the sample and the efforts of educators and caregivers supporting children each day. Within that broader progress, however, PTP children demonstrated additional advantages. After adjusting for where children started in the Fall, PTP participants scored about 0.19–0.20 standard deviations higher in literacy and math by Spring than similar children who did not participate. In practical terms, this is the equivalent of moving a child from the 50th percentile in early literacy to roughly the 65th–70th percentile—an educationally meaningful shift, especially for a short, community-based program.

These findings were not a one-time pattern: they held across multiple cohorts, including years disrupted by COVID-19. And when we used a more conservative analytic technique—matching PTP children with non-PTP children who looked almost identical at the start of the year—the literacy and math advantages persisted. That stability across analytic methods gives us greater confidence that PTP participation is linked to these gains, rather than simply reflecting differences in who enrolls.

We also saw encouraging patterns in other areas. PTP children showed moderately stronger performance in cognitive development—skills like attention, persistence, and problem-solving—and in the physical domain. These findings make sense given the structure of PTP sessions, which regularly ask children to stay focused on stories, think about characters' choices, and engage with books and materials in hands-on ways. Language and social-emotional development also trended

positive, though results were more modest and less precise statistically. For science, social studies, and the arts, the small and inconsistent effects are unsurprising for a short program that focuses heavily on literacy and shared reading rather than formal content instruction.

Why the Program Works: Alignment with Established Research

One of the strengths of PTP is that its design aligns closely with what decades of research tell us about how young children learn. Across fields—from developmental psychology to economics to literacy studies—there is broad agreement that early literacy and learning behaviors grow fastest when children experience frequent, high-quality interactions with caring adults. These interactions are most powerful when they take place around meaningful content, involve back-and-forth conversation, and connect learning to real life.

PTP’s model embodies these principles. Each session invites families to share a meal, listen to a story, explore complex ideas (such as fairness,

friendship, or courage), and reflect together. These conversations are not only enjoyable—they directly build vocabulary, comprehension, narrative skills, and early reasoning. Caregivers observe facilitators modeling practices such as asking open-ended questions, encouraging children to make predictions, and relating story themes to children’s own experiences. Research shows that these kinds of conversational practices are among the strongest predictors of children’s language and literacy development, and the PTP results reflect this established evidence.

PTP’s structure also resonates with sociocultural theories of learning, which emphasize that children develop through meaningful interactions within their families and communities. By grounding learning in books, stories, questions, and shared discussion, PTP makes literacy feel accessible and relevant—not a school assignment, but a shared family experience. This community-rooted approach is especially powerful in Louisiana, where storytelling, food, and cultural traditions are deep sources of connection. In these ways, the program builds on strengths already present in families’ lives rather than introducing practices that feel foreign or burdensome.



Why These Findings Matter for Louisiana’s Early Learning System

Louisiana has made significant strides in early childhood education in recent years, expanding access to public preschool seats and strengthening the quality of early learning centers. Yet many children still face barriers to consistent, high-quality early literacy experiences—particularly in rural parishes, communities of color, and areas with limited early childhood infrastructure.

Prime Time Preschool helps fill this gap in three important ways:

1. It reaches families who may not have access to formal preschool or who may attend programs with fewer literacy resources.

By anchoring programming in libraries, schools, Head Start centers, and community sites, PTP removes logistical barriers and expands the reach of early literacy support.

2. It strengthens the home literacy environment—one of the strongest predictors of children’s future reading success.

Families leave with new books each week, along with strategies that can be used at home long after the six-week series ends.

3. It promotes the kinds of early academic and learning behaviors that set children up for long-term success.

Gains in literacy, numeracy, and cognitive skills reflect foundational competencies associated with kindergarten readiness and later achievement.

When viewed alongside Louisiana’s statewide focus on literacy improvement, these findings underscore that community-based programs like PTP can play a critical role—not as replacements for preschool classrooms, but as partners that strengthen family engagement and extend learning beyond the school day.

Considering Limitations with Care

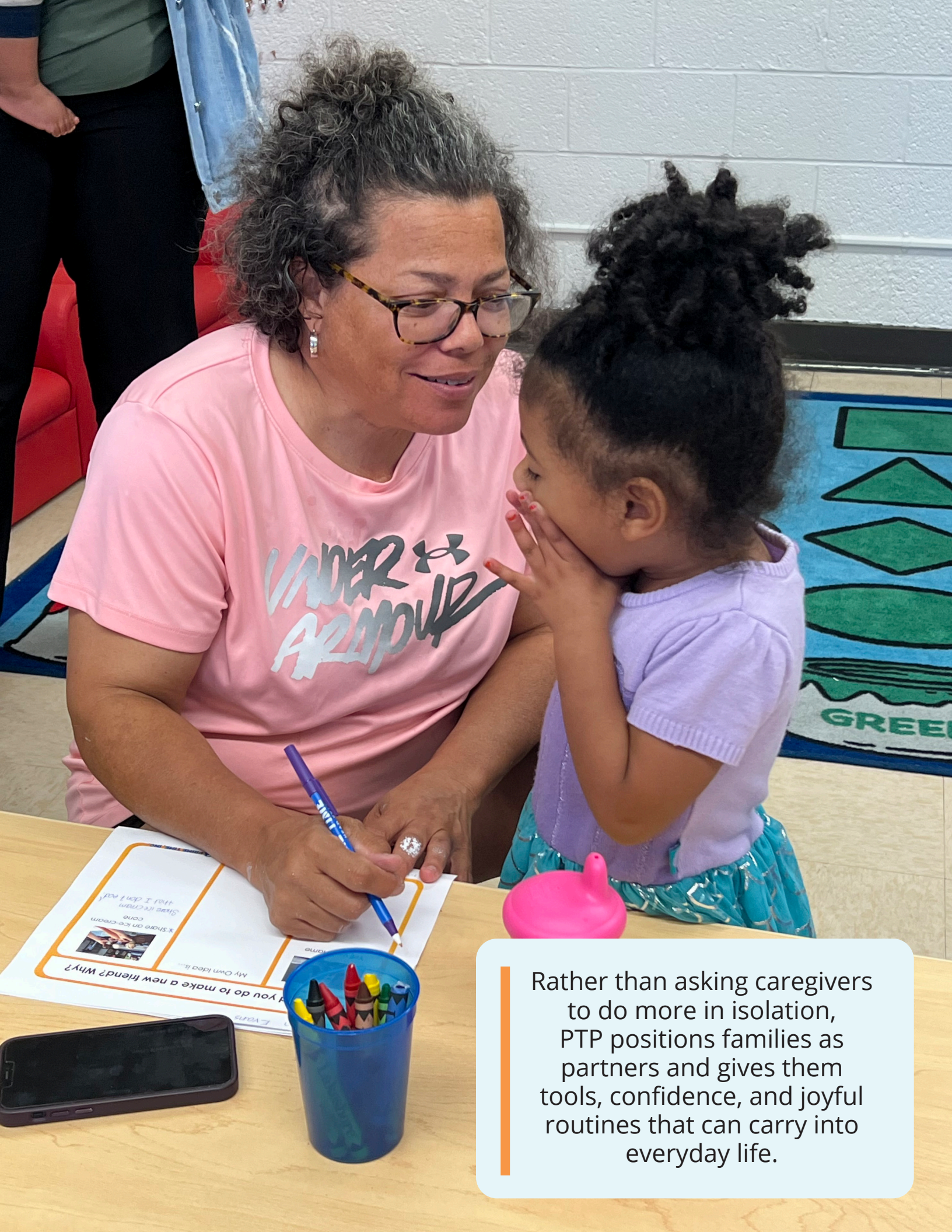
As with any observational study, there are limitations. Families choose whether to participate in PTP, and some of the children who enroll may differ from those who do not in ways we cannot fully observe—such as motivation, transportation access, or caregiver availability.

The TS GOLD composites we constructed are carefully aligned with Teaching Strategies’ framework but are approximations rather than official scale scores. Some domains had more missing data, reducing our ability to detect smaller effects. And without detailed records of program implementation (such as facilitator fidelity and session quality), we cannot identify which specific components of the model are most influential.

These limitations mean we cannot claim causation with certainty. Still, the consistency of results across years, analytic methods, and developmental domains—and their alignment with established research—suggests that PTP is meaningfully contributing to children’s early learning.

Conclusion

Taken as a whole, the evidence suggests that Prime Time Preschool offers a meaningful, research-aligned, and culturally grounded way to support young children’s development. Children in the program consistently demonstrate stronger growth in early literacy, numeracy, and cognitive skills—the building blocks of later academic success. In a state working hard to expand early learning opportunities and address longstanding inequities, PTP represents a promising, community-centered approach that meets families where they are and supports the foundational skills that matter most for school readiness.



Rather than asking caregivers to do more in isolation, PTP positions families as partners and gives them tools, confidence, and joyful routines that can carry into everyday life.

IMPLICATIONS AND LOOKING AHEAD

STRENGTHENING EARLY LEARNING THROUGH FAMILIES AND COMMUNITIES

Implications for Practice

Strengthen Family Literacy Routines Through High-Quality Books and Dialogic Reading

The evaluation indicates that Prime Time Preschool (PTP) strengthens early language, literacy, and learning behaviors—skills closely tied to shared reading and adult-child conversation. Practitioners can build on these findings by providing families with ready-to-use strategies such as open-ended questioning, prediction prompts, and opportunities for children to connect stories to their lived experiences. Embedding dialogic reading prompts within take-home books or sending short video demonstrations can further reinforce these practices.

Use PTP as a Complement to Formal Early Learning Systems

PTP's greatest value may be its ability to reinforce the home literacy environment—one of the strongest predictors of long-term reading outcomes. Educators, home visitors, and early learning centers can use PTP as a structured bridge between the classroom and the home, ensuring that learning continues beyond the school day. Encouraging teachers and caregivers to coordinate around shared story themes can amplify the developmental skills most related to literacy and numeracy growth.

Leverage PTP to Support Learning Behaviors and Self-Regulation

The evaluation shows moderately positive associations with cognitive and physical development,

including attention, persistence, problem-solving, and motor coordination. Facilitators and educators can use PTP discussions, story sequencing activities, and play-based extensions to help children build these foundational behaviors. These skills are central to kindergarten readiness and can be intentionally reinforced during PTP sessions.

PTP's greatest value may be its ability to reinforce the home literacy environment—one of the strongest predictors of long-term reading outcomes.

Implications for Policy

Integrate Family Literacy Programs into Statewide Early Childhood Strategies

Given Louisiana's ongoing investments in early childhood quality and literacy, PTP offers a scalable, culturally grounded strategy to strengthen the home environments where early learning begins. Policymakers can consider embedding PTP within statewide literacy improvement plans, early childhood networks, or local community partnership grants.

Target Resources to Underserved Communities and Family Systems

Because PTP thrives in libraries, community sites, and early childhood centers, it can expand access to high-quality literacy experiences in communities with

fewer formal preschool seats or higher structural barriers to early learning. Policymakers might prioritize PTP expansion in rural parishes, multi-lingual communities, and areas with limited book access or fewer early childhood literacy supports.

Invest in Data Infrastructure and Longitudinal Tracking

This evaluation demonstrates the value of linking TS GOLD and PTP participation data using a shared longitudinal identifier. State and district leaders can strengthen decision-making by creating or improving longitudinal early childhood data systems that follow children across community programs, early learning centers,

and kindergarten. Such systems would enable deeper understanding of long-term effects and inform continuous improvement.

Support Workforce Training and Community-Based Facilitation

PTP relies on skilled facilitators—educators, librarians, community leaders—who model high-quality language interactions. Policy efforts that support facilitator training, stipends, and ongoing professional learning can further enhance program quality and consistency across sites. This aligns with broader efforts to strengthen Louisiana’s early childhood workforce.



About the Principal Investigator

Dr. Kate Babineau is the Director of Pathways Research at Digital Promise Global, a national education research non-profit organization, and a professor of practice in Tulane’s School of Professional Advancement, where she teaches Education Research Methods. Prior to joining Digital Promise in March 2024, Kate worked for eight years as the Director of Research at the Cowen Institute at Tulane University, where she conducted research on early childhood education, K-12 and postsecondary education in New Orleans and beyond. Kate has a deep working knowledge of the local Louisiana educational landscape as well as national education policy. For the past 10 years, Kate has also worked as a research consultant and has partnered with a wide range of education-focused non-profit organizations including New Orleans Public Schools, the American Montessori Society, EdNavigator, Harvard University’s Strategic Data Project, and Barnardos. Prior to pursuing a career as an education researcher, she worked as a classroom teacher in New Orleans public schools. She earned her PhD in Social Policy and MSc in Applied Social Research from Trinity College Dublin and her BA in Philosophy from Loyola University New Orleans. She is the proud parent of a New Orleans public school student. Kate will serve as the lead researcher and project manager.



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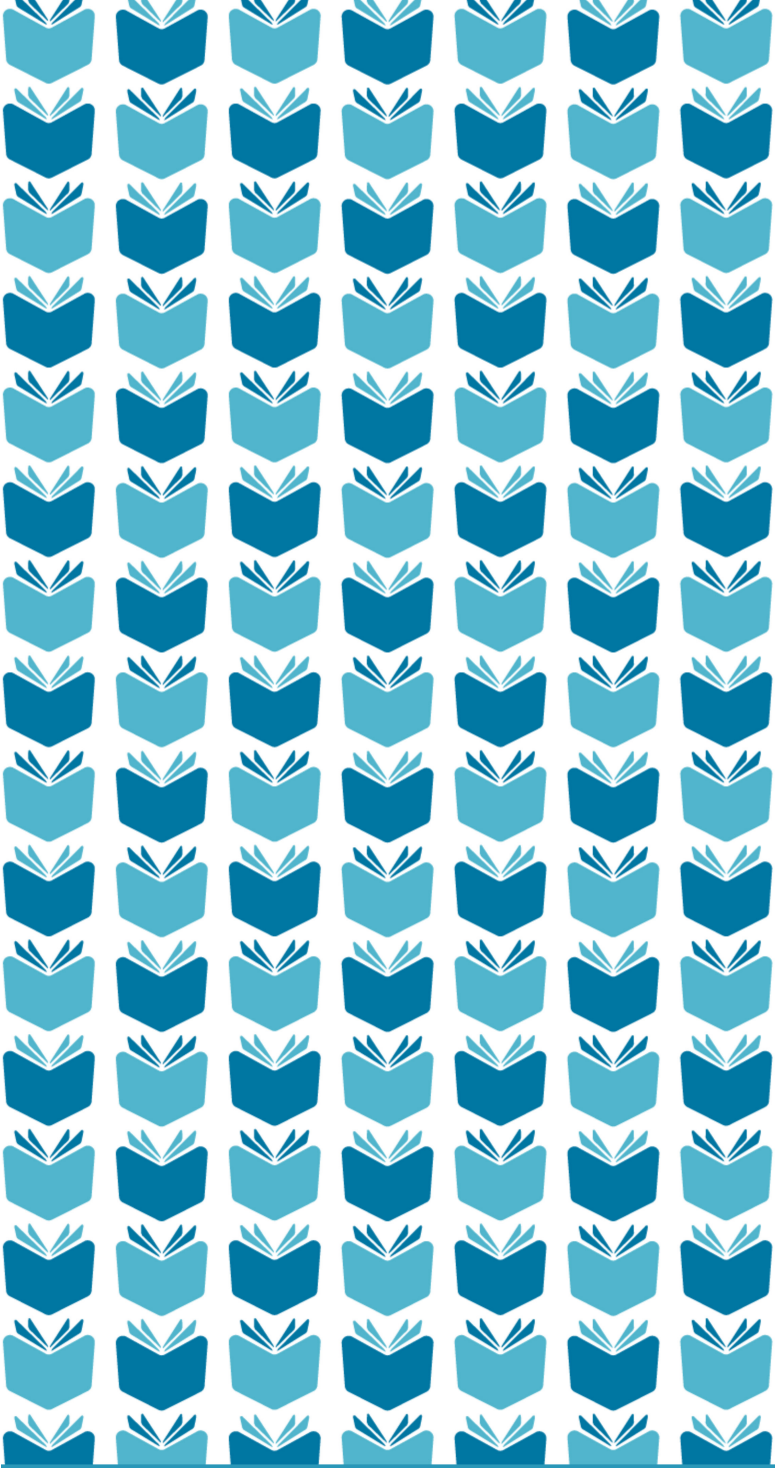
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