



Project Grow 2024 Student Progress Update

Prepared for Adopt-A-Family of the Palm Beaches

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Project Grow (PG), is an afterschool and summer learning support program for children attending kindergarten through fifth grade, provided by Adopt-A-Family of the Palm Beaches (AAF) to provide academic and social skills support to predominantly low-income children. Most of the students attend Highland Elementary School. In 2021, AAF contracted with Geo Education & Research (Geo) to conduct an evaluation of the short- and long-term outcomes of the program. In that report, using data provided by the School District of Palm Beach County (the District) and survey data from PG students and educators, student achievement and progress were analyzed in reference to program goals and in comparison to similar students in the District.

Geo compared the achievement of PG students on both State and District assessments and other measures to a sample of demographically similar students in a comparison group generated by the School District based on gender, race/ethnicity, their eligibility for free/reduced cost lunch, and participation in special programs. Two questions were addressed:

- 1. Do children currently engaged in Project Grow show differences in academic achievement compared to students of similar demographics who also attend Highland Elementary?**
- 2. Do students who were engaged in Project Grow during their elementary school years graduate at higher rates than all comparable other students in the District?**

The answer to both questions is Yes.

In 2023, AAF asked Geo to provide an update of PG student academic progress, and to include a demographic breakdown of graduation data. Those data are provided in this report.

Findings

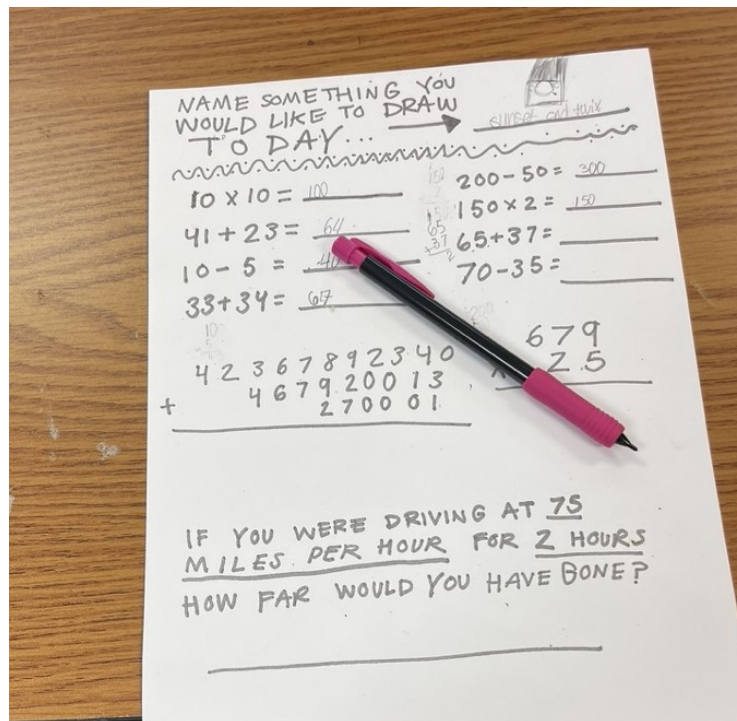
- The majority of the comparisons of PG with the matched group show the PG students doing better than their peers. The exceptions are the State math assessment, math grades, and the overall graduation rate. Considering that PG is designed to support students who are in need of additional help with their learning, this is a very positive outcome, especially considering the fact that the comparison group was not matched for the high rates of homelessness and unstable housing experienced by the PG students.
- Graduation rates, a critical academic outcome for long term success, show that previous PG students have not fallen behind and are graduating at close to the high rates found in the rest of the District. Some subgroups of PG students graduate at a higher rate than their District peers.

- PG students had a slightly higher level of attendance at school as the comparison group, and the discipline data, as indicated by the lack of any suspensions by PG students, showed discipline at school is likely not an area of concern.

Conclusion

Over many years of providing academic and social skills support to low income students who often need this additional help to succeed, Project Grow has clearly contributed to the growth of the children in the program. Almost all of the academic indicators included in this study show greater or comparable levels of achievement to a demographically equivalent comparison group. Through State and District-level test scores, grades, attendance, and discipline, the program students show positive outcomes across the board, especially considering the fact that the comparison group was not matched for the high rates of homelessness and unstable housing experienced by the PG students.

“Kids come back to say what an impact Project Grow has had on their life.”



INTRODUCTION

This report is a follow-up to the “Project Grow Student Progress Report” submitted to AAF in January 2023 by Geo Education & Research (Geo). The report will update academic data from the previous report, and present new data on the graduation rates of students who had been in Project Grow (PG), updated to include the class of 2023 and providing demographic details. Also included are observations of PG made by Geo staff during a site visit to AAF in March 2024.

About Project Grow

Project Grow is Adopt-A-Family’s afterschool/summer program for at-risk elementary school students. PG’s goal is to “reverse the detrimental effects of homelessness and poverty through a holistic approach centering on four core areas: academic support; emotional development; parental engagement; and life-enriching experiences.”

AAF started PG in 1992, and it became a licensed afterschool program in 2003. Academic lessons complement the public school curriculum, often using hands-on experiential learning as reinforcement. The program provides one-on-one tutoring, promotes parental involvement, and offers free on-site mental health services to help students overcome trauma and behavioral issues. Project Grow also includes STEAM (Science, Technology, Engineering, Arts, and Math) activities, academic advising, field trips, and recreation on the agency’s turf field and playground.¹ As of March 2024, it was serving 51 students kindergarten through grade 5.

COMPARISON OF ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

Under the terms of a data sharing agreement with the School District of Palm Beach County (the District), the PG staff contacted all of the parents of current and former program students and asked them to complete the District’s data sharing consent form in their native language. These forms were then forwarded to the District.

A roster of the PG students was transmitted to the District, and they performed a match to create an anonymous group of comparable students. Subsequently, the District compiled the necessary data from their records and sent them to Geo for analysis. The data provided by the District did not have any student names but did indicate for each record if the student was in PG or the comparison group. The following section provides the results of those analyses.

¹ Source: <https://www.aafpb.org/project-grow>

The data from the District address two research questions:

1. Do children currently engaged in Project Grow show advantages in academic achievement compared to students of similar demographics who also attend Highland Elementary?
2. Do students who participated in Project Grow during their elementary school years graduate at higher rates than all students in the District? Further, are there differences in graduation rates by demographic subgroups of students?

In order to create a meaningful comparison group, students in PG were matched with students in Highland Elementary by gender, race/ethnicity, eligibility for free/reduced cost lunch, and participation in special programs. Most of the PG students attend Highland Elementary, so the comparison group is composed of the other Highland students sharing the same demographic characteristics. It is worth noting that the comparison group was not matched on homelessness and therefore the PG students would presumably have a much a higher percentage of children who were recently homeless or unstably housed. The comparison group for the graduation data was the cohort of students who, by age, would have graduated in 2021. Thus, we compare graduation rates for PG students to the District average graduation rate. We also have breakdowns by selected demographics.

Assessment Scores

In the previous report, Geo presented data on performance of PG students and a matched comparison group on State and District testing. In the fall of 2023, the District provided an update on the scores of both groups based on fall 2023 testing.

FAST Assessment

All public school students in Florida in grades 3-8 take the FAST (Florida Assessment of Student Thinking). FAST tests students on material they should know by the end of the school year. The scores presented below are from the beginning of the 2023-24 school year. Scores are reported in percentiles. Percentile scores compare how well a student did compared to all the students who took the test. The scores range from 1 to 99. The 50th percentile is the median performance of students in Florida. The scores shown below are average scores, and therefore the differences in group size do not affect the validity of the comparison.

Table 1 | FAST Scores: English Language Arts Average Percentile

	2022	2023
Project Grow	27	35
Comparison Group	20	31

Table 2 | FAST Scores: Math Average Percentile

	2022	2023
Project Grow	38	31
Comparison Group	20	36

i-READY

In addition to the State FAST test, all elementary school students in the District take the i-Ready diagnostic assessment. The 50th percentile on i-Ready is the median performance of students in a national sample.

Table 3 | i-READY Average Percentile Score: Reading

	2022	2023
Project Grow	38	38
Comparison Group	31	30

Table 4 | i-READY Average Percentile Score: Math

	2022	2023
Project Grow	43	37
Comparison Group	29	26

NOTE: Although the average percentile scores are low, this masks the wide range of performance in both groups, from single digits to scores in the 90's. In PG, 11 students out of 40 in reading and 18 out of 40 in math, scored at the 50th percentile or better.

Analysis

On the State FAST assessments, PG students outperformed the comparison group in English Language Arts but dropped seven percentiles in math while the comparison group gained 16. On the District i-Ready, however, PG students continued to considerably outperform the comparison group. Other

than the drop in math, this is a very positive outcome. That is, had this group needed extra support and not gotten it, they could have been expected to have performed at best the same as the comparison group. The fact that they were able to overcome perceived deficits (including high rates of homelessness and unstable housing) by outperforming their peers, shows the benefit of the PG Program.

Elementary Course Grades

The District reported fall 2023 grades for PG and elementary comparison students in English language arts and math.

Elementary students in the District are not given A-F letter grades. The grading scale is:

- **EX** - Exemplary - Demonstrates broad in-depth skill/concept development that most often exceeds grade level standards;
- **PR** - Proficient - Demonstrates skill/concept development that meets grade level standards;
- **AP** - Approaching - Demonstrates skill/concept development that is beginning to meet grade level standards; and
- **ND** - Needs Development - Demonstrates skill/concept that is significantly below grade level standards.

Table 5 shows that PG students were graded proficient and approaching in assessments of English language arts at a greater rate than the comparison group. Table 6 shows an even more pronounced difference in assessments in math².

Table 5 | Elementary Grades: English Language Arts

Grade	Project Grow #	Project Grow %	Comparison Group #	Comparison Group %
EX	0		0	
PR	9	28%	91	11%
AP	12	38%	281	35%
ND	11	34%	440	54%
TOTAL	32		812	

² For both of these and for other statistics reported in this document, the small numbers of students involved in the PG group preclude finding any measures of statistical significance. Nevertheless, the trends in the comparisons tend to be consistent in showing higher achievement among PG students.

Table 6 | Elementary Grades: Math

Grade	Project Grow #	Project Grow %	Comparison Group #	Comparison Group %
EX	1	3%	2	.2%
PR	4	13%	156	19%
AP	19	61%	338	42%
ND	7	23%	313	39%
TOTAL	31		809	

In addition to the standard curriculum, Highland Elementary and some other schools in the District offer a **dual Spanish/English option** for students. 17 PG students participate in that program.³

As in the assessment data above, Table 7 shows that the elementary PG students in the Dual Language Program also had higher levels of proficiency as recorded on their report cards.

Table 7 | English Language Arts Grades in Highland Dual Language Program

Grade	Project Grow #	Project Grow %	Comparison Group #	Comparison Group %
EX	0	0%	1	.1%
PR	4	24%	74	14%
AP	7	41%	162	31%
ND	6	35%	288	55%
TOTAL	17		525	

Graduation Data

The 2022 PG report included the graduation rate for former PG students and the District overall for the class of 2021. As described in that report, in order to determine if previous participation in PG could be associated with success in high school graduation, AAF provided the District with a list of 188⁴ PG students from the school year 2007-2008⁵. From these data, the District identified 105

³ More information can be found at <https://www.palmbeachschools.org/Page/1501>

⁴ PG does not normally serve this many students, but In 2007-2008, the project expanded and moved to Highland for a summer camp, spring break, and one school year and therefore had a higher number of children participating that year.

⁵ Data release consent forms for these students were not necessary because the District could not provide any individually identifiable information, just summary statistics on the PG students and the comparison group as a whole.

students who were still enrolled in any one of the 32 high schools in the District by 12th grade of their expected year of graduation. Since the PG students were in different grade levels while in the program, they were found in District data for the graduation years 2014-2021.

It is important to note that whether a student graduates from high school depends on a wide variety of factors, many of which are beyond the impact of any one program or project and are often even beyond the ability of the students or their families to control. The data below must be viewed as a very partial indicator and not seen as a direct impact of PG.

The mean graduation rate for the District students overall for the years 2014 to 2021 was 85.3%. The mean graduation rate for PG students during the same time span was 89.7% for an advantage for the PG students of 4.4%, a notable difference. Over time, the size of the District’s graduating classes has been increasing slightly while the graduation rate has improved every year except for 2019. Notably, the PG graduation rate is only 1.3% less than the highest District graduation rate to date as shown in Table 8 below.

TABLE 8 | Comparison Data of Project Grow and District Graduation Rates

	Year	Count	% Graduates
Project Grow Graduation Rate 2014-2021 Combined		105	89.7%
Total District Graduation Rate 2014-2021 Combined		99,049	85.3%
Total District Graduation Rate by Year	2021	13,128	91.0%
	2020	13,469	90.2%
	2019	13,313	87.1%
	2018	13,061	87.2%
	2017	12,391	85.0%
	2016	11,395	82.3%
	2015	11,452	79.4%
	2014	10,840	77.9%

At the request of AAF, for this report the District provided a more detailed breakdown by demographic group data on the PG students and the District total for the class of 2021 for comparison. (In the fall of 2023, the District checked their records and no additional PG students had graduated, so the comparison to the class of 2021 is the best point of reference.) Of the 188 PG students’ names

submitted to the District, 117 (62%) were identified in the District data files from their high schools. Given that these students had been in PG several years ago, it is likely that some of them moved out of the District and may have graduated from high school in their new district. (Students who did transfer were removed from the analysis prior to summarizing the data.) The data are broken down by race and participation in special programs as shown in Table 8 below. The data on the District overall include the PG students, but there are so few students (117 out of 14,428) that they do not affect the District average. (Note that there were no COVID-related changes in the graduation requirements for the class of 2021.)

Table 8 | 2021 High School Graduation Rates of Project Grow Participants Compared to All District Graduates

		Project Grow			District	
		Total Project Grow Students in District Records	Number of High School Graduates	% who Graduated High School	2021 District Graduation Rate ⁷	PG and District Difference ⁶
Total		117	105	89.7%	91.0%	-1.3%
Race	Black	40	36	90.0%	88.8%	1.2%
	Hispanic	63	57	90.5%	88.6%	1.9%
	White	10	8	80.0%	94.7%	-14.7%
	Other	4	4	100.0%	91.6	8.4%
SWD	SWD**	22	19	86.4%	83.7%	2.7%
	Non-SWD	95	86	90.5%	92.1%	-1.6%
FRL	FRL***	66	59	89.4%	88.0%	1.4%
	Non-FRL	51	46	90.2%	96.4%	-6.2%

* English as a Second Language Learners
 ** Students with Disabilities
 *** Free and Reduced Lunch / Low Income

⁶ A positive number means the PG rate is higher than the District average. A negative number means the PG rate is lower than the District average.
⁷ The District average is for District managed schools only. Independently managed charter schools are not included.

Overall, the students who had participated in Project Grow graduated at a rate 1.3 percentage points lower than the general population of the District. However, the students identified as being Black or Hispanic slightly exceeded the District average by 1.2 and 1.9 percentage points respectively. White students, who were only 9% of the PG group, had substantially less success at graduation at 14.7 percentage points lower than the District average. Note that the small number of students in this demographic category makes any single failure to graduate more impactful on the graduation rate.

While graduation rates for students with disabilities (special education) and low income students overall were lower than the total graduation rate, the PG students in these two groups exceeded the District average by 2.7 points and 1.4 points respectively. There were no students for whom English is a second language in the PG group. (Some may have been in the program as younger students but exited before their senior year.)

The higher graduation rates for the students of color, low income, and special education are encouraging and suggest the levels of support they received through Project Grow have made a positive difference in their overall academic achievement.

NON-ACADEMIC SCHOOL INDICATORS

In addition to the test scores, the District supplied data on attendance and suspensions for PG students and the Highland comparison group.

Attendance

Table 9 shows that PG students maintain the same high level of attendance as the comparison group.

Table 9 | Average Daily Attendance

	2022	2023
Project Grow	93%	95%
Comparison Group	93%	93%

The PG students showed a 2% increase in attendance over 2022, and now exceed the District average.

Suspensions

Suspension, whether out-of-school or in-school, is uncommon in elementary schools. No PG students were suspended in 2022-2023. There were only eight out-of-school suspensions in the comparison group and two in-school.

ON-SITE OBSERVATIONS OF PROJECT GROW

The author of this report visited AAF in March of 2024 and was able to visit PG classes and to speak with staff and parents. (For simplicity of language, these observations will be reported in the first person.)

PG is housed in the AAF main office building. There are three good-sized classrooms—for kindergarten and first grade, second and third grade, and fourth and fifth grade. There is a teacher for each class who is a full time employee of AAF. One of the teachers is certificated, the others are not. To assure they are prepared to provide good instruction, PG teachers are required by AAF to complete 40 AFF paid hours of child care training during their first year with the program. There are also two AmeriCorps volunteers who work from August to June as one-on-one tutors.



I spent time in each of the classes and observed the instruction as well as the interaction among the students and teachers. The classes were very well organized and ran very smoothly. The students were familiar with the class routines and well-behaved. The teachers knew the students by name and were familiar with the level of support individual students needed. Students approached the teachers with questions and for help with their homework or work assigned by the PG teacher. The curriculum is differentiated—responsive to each student’s learning needs—and it was clear that each student was

working with material on which they needed support. Fourth and fifth graders do some lessons online, but I did not observe anyone doing that during the visit.

Lessons were interrupted on the day of my visit by work being done on the exterior of the building, but the students left the classrooms in an orderly way and played individual or group games in the large play area behind the building until they could return to the classroom. The play area has a basketball court and play structures. Classrooms also have a comfortable “cozy corner” where students can go if they need some quiet time or are upset.



This year, AAF started a parenting class for PG parents, although it is open to any AAF resident. Staff reported a good turnout at the classes.

During the site visit, I had the opportunity to speak with eight parents who are a part of AAF’s adjacent Julian Place community. All of them spoke very highly of PG including a parent who had withdrawn her child but planned to have her start again after she reflected on what the child had gained from the program. One parent said that her son likes PG so much he tells her, “Pick me up at the latest time” after the program day ends. Several parents mentioned that they plan to have their child attend the PG summer program.

CONCLUSION

The majority of the comparisons of PG with the matched group show the PG students doing better than their peers. Over many years of providing academic and social skills support to low income students who often need this additional help to succeed, Project Grow has clearly contributed to the

growth of the children in the program. The exceptions are the State math assessment, math grades, and the overall graduation rate.

Almost all of the academic indicators included in this study show greater or comparable levels of achievement to a demographically equivalent comparison group. Through State and District-level test scores, grades, attendance, and discipline, the program students show positive outcomes, especially considering the fact that the comparison group was not matched for the high rates of homelessness and unstable housing experienced by the PG students.

Graduation rates, a critical academic outcome for long term success, show that previous PG students have not fallen behind and are graduating at close to high rates found in the rest of the District. Some subgroups of PG students graduate at a higher level than their District peers.

Survey responses included in Geo's 2022 PG report showed that all of the students responding reported enjoying PG. They highlighted what they were learning and the skills they were developing.

The educators reported very high percentages of students achieving the PG goals of improving confidence in learning, improving behavior, and increasing skills in building and maintaining positive relationships with peers and adults.

RECOMMENDATIONS BY GEO EDUCATION & RESEARCH

As noted in the previous report, when a program is achieving high levels of success in meeting its short- and long-term goals it is difficult to suggest changes. The success of the program depends to a large part on highly trained staff, so AAF should continue to find ways to build the skill of the teachers and support the volunteer tutors.

Likewise, partnering with the parents is critical and PG has an opportunity to play a role beyond what their teachers at school can accomplish. Starting the parenting class is a very positive step and should be continued, with ongoing recruitment and outreach to other parents.

The staff at Highland Elementary who were also interviewed during the site visit are strongly supportive of PG and see it as a strong complement to their work with the students. Therefore, it is worth continuing all efforts to build strong connections to Highland Elementary School to coordinate services to these young learners.

Geo is grateful to the staff of AAF for their support and hospitality during the site visit and to the staff of the Department of Research and Evaluation of the District for their responsiveness and ongoing



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