By Amy Sylvestri

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The first day of school for San Leandro’s students was this week, but some of the youngest kids in the district have already been hitting the books.

For the second year in a row, San Leandro students entering kindergarten had a chance to participate in Alameda County’s First 5 pre-K.

It’s a summer program that allows kids who haven’t been to preschool to get acclimated to the classroom, said Jessica Straubel, First 5 program manager.

This year, 72 San Leandro students were in the 5-week program in four classrooms. Each class has two teachers – at least one is a kindergarten teacher in the district and at least one is bilingual.

The cost of running the five-week program is about $11,000 per classroom, paid for by First 5, which is in turn funded by a grant from the Thomas J. Long Foundation.

The program aims to educate parents as well as students. Parents must attend a few hours of class to learn skills like identifying development milestones and health and nutrition. They also volunteer to read to the kids some mornings.

Assistant Superintendent Debbie Wong said the program is short, but really makes a difference in how the kids are prepared for regular school.

“A few weeks into the program, you can walk into one of these classrooms and see how much they are learning,” said Wong. “They go from no school experience to writing numbers one to ten, holding their pencils correctly. They learn to sit, how to act with their peers, and to get ready to learn.”

Wong said that the first couple of days, there are tears from students reluctant to leave their parents – but by the end of the program, the kids are crying when they have to leave the classroom.

That’s because they’re doing fun activities like gluing beans on paper to learn shapes, finger painting, and making new friends.

Straubel said that First 5 surveys show that the earlier a child is exposed to a positive school experience, the more likely he or she will do well as they get older.

“In some ways it is social rather that academic, “said Straubel. “If you intervene early on with a good experience, you don’t have to play catch-up down the line.”

CAPTION: First 5 teacher Yolanda Swoopes-Jimenez helps pre-kindergarteners Carlos Franco, Gisel Calamateo Alcazar, Jazmine Caneda, and Emmanuel Ampofo learn their shapes.

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