Early Childhood Education in Texas
Preview of Landscape Analysis
RP3 February 2026 Convening

Purpose of this Preview

This preview is intended to orient Convening participants to the scope and structure of the early childhood education landscape analysis while the full analysis remains under development. The sections presented below will be treated more fully in the final report and complemented with data highlights. The final analysis will also include an Executive Summary, as well as a section—Looking Ahead—that synthesizes key opportunities and tension points across the early childhood education ecosystem.

Introduction

Texas's early childhood workforce, serving children from birth through age five, faces persistent challenges related to low compensation, high demand, and limited career advancement. These conditions contribute to ongoing recruitment and retention issues that affect program stability, quality, and access, with particular variation across regions and communities.

Program access, quality, and family engagement are also central features of the current early childhood education landscape. Recent state legislation has focused on expanding high-quality, full-day pre-K, strengthening early literacy supports, and improving alignment between pre-K and the early elementary grades.

Additional efforts emphasize coordination across systems and agencies, creating a complex policy environment shaping how early learning programs are delivered and experienced by families. Relatedly, new efforts to link information across agencies serving children from birth through early elementary grades reflect growing interest in understanding access, quality, and outcomes over time.

Purpose of the Landscape Analysis

We developed this landscape analysis of early childhood education in Texas to identify critical issues, potential products, and opportunities for LONESTARP3

collaborative research. Our analysis provides a broad overview of key trends, topics, and actors shaping early childhood education in Texas.

Operationalization of Early Childhood Education

This landscape analysis focuses on the segment of the early learning landscape most closely connected to public education systems, with primary emphasis on access to, quality of, and family engagement. Full-day Pre-K is treated as a key focal point given its role in supporting early learning outcomes, particularly in communities with historically limited access.

The analysis also considers alignment between Pre-K and Kindergarten through Grade 3, including instructional coherence across early grades. In addition, the analysis attends to early childhood workforce capacity, including educator supply, preparation, and retention, as well as the growing role of integrated early childhood data systems in linking early learning experiences to longer-term outcomes.

Topic Areas

These priority topic areas were identified through an environment scan of (1) recent news and media relating to Texas early childhood education, and (2) trends and challenges within the child care system as reported in state and local news outlets in the last five years.

(1) Access and Quality

Access to high-quality early childhood education remains uneven across Texas, shaped by variation in program availability, funding structures, and local capacity. While public pre-K participation has expanded in recent years, significant gaps persist—particularly for younger children and for families in rural or historically underserved communities. Quality improvement efforts, including participation in rating and improvement systems, intersect with broader challenges related to staffing, funding, and geographic distribution of services.

Recent policy changes and demographic trends continue to influence how access and quality are defined and pursued across settings. As the population of young children grows, the landscape reflects ongoing tension between expanding access and ensuring consistent program quality across public, private, and mixed-delivery models.

(2) Data, System Governance, and Strategic Coordination

Texas's early childhood education system spans multiple state agencies and program areas, creating a complex governance and coordination environment.

Recent efforts have focused on improving alignment across agencies, clarifying roles and responsibilities, and strengthening cross-system collaboration to better support children and families.

At the same time, increased attention to early childhood data collection and integration reflects growing interest in using shared information to inform policy, program design, and oversight. Emerging data initiatives aim to connect information across agencies and age ranges, raising questions about governance, sustainability, and how data can support coordination and decision-making over time.

③ Affordability and Financial Assistance

Affordability remains a central concern for families seeking early childhood education and care, particularly for those with young children and working parents. Public subsidies and scholarship programs play a critical role in supporting access, but demand continues to exceed available assistance in many communities.

The landscape reflects ongoing tension between rising provider costs and families' ability to pay, with financial assistance programs operating within broader market constraints. Local and regional strategies to supplement or target assistance highlight variation in how affordability challenges are addressed across the state.

④ Early Educator Workforce Challenges

Early childhood education providers across Texas face persistent workforce challenges, including difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified educators. Low compensation, limited benefits, and competition from other industries contribute to staffing shortages that directly affect program capacity and stability.

These challenges have implications not only for educators, but also for families' access to care and for the quality of early learning environments. Local efforts to address workforce conditions illustrate both innovation and limitation, as structural constraints continue to shape the workforce landscape.

⑤ Early Educator Workforce Development and Support

In response to workforce challenges, Texas has pursued a range of strategies focused on educator preparation, professional development, and career pathways. State and regional initiatives emphasize credentialing, training opportunities, and alignment across education and workforce systems to support a more sustainable pipeline.

At the same time, policy shifts related to educator qualifications and experience reflect ongoing debates about access, quality, and workforce capacity. Differences between classroom educators and program leaders in experience and tenure highlight common career trajectories and raise questions about long-term workforce development.

⑥ Funding and Finance

Funding structures play a central role in shaping early childhood education delivery across Texas. Public pre-K funding, child care subsidies, and local investments intersect in ways that influence program availability, quality, and sustainability.

Recent adjustments to funding formulas and local funding initiatives reflect efforts to better align resources with program requirements and community needs. At the same time, gaps between funding levels and the true cost of delivering high-quality early childhood education remain a defining feature of the landscape.

⑦ Family Engagement and Outreach

Family engagement is increasingly recognized as a critical component of early childhood education access and effectiveness. Efforts across the state focus on helping families navigate eligibility, enrollment, and available supports, particularly in communities where participation in early learning programs remains low.

Outreach strategies range from system-level coordination efforts to localized, community-based approaches designed to raise awareness and reduce barriers to participation. These initiatives underscore the importance of communication, trust, and responsiveness in connecting families to early childhood education opportunities.

Key Actors

We identified key actors and types in the Early Childhood Education ecosystem. Our lists of actors and types are not exhaustive. Instead, they are intended to offer a high-level view of the ecosystem and support strategic thinking about how early childhood education operates across sectors. Our list of actor types is shown below as a preview of the full analysis.

Families & Caregivers (as System Navigators). Navigate access and enrollment, partner with schools and programs to support children's learning, and influence early education experiences through decision-making, engagement, and advocacy.

Direct Instructional Providers (Pre-K–3). Deliver daily instruction and learning experiences for children in Pre-K through Grade 3, implementing curriculum, assessments, and supports that directly shape student learning and development.

Educators & the Pre-K–3 Workforce. Provide instruction, specialized supports, and instructional leadership across Pre-K through Grade 3, and engage in professional learning that influences instructional quality, continuity, and alignment across early grades.

Regional & Local Education Systems. Translate state and federal policy into local practice by making decisions about program design, instructional priorities, staffing, partnerships, and resource allocation across Pre-K through Grade 3.

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment Infrastructure. Shape what is taught, how learning is measured, and how instruction is supported across Pre-K through Grade 3 by developing curriculum, assessments, instructional frameworks, and coaching models. [*Often invisible but deeply influential.*]

Data, Research, & Continuous Improvement Actors. Generate, link, analyze, and apply data and research to inform decision-making, support continuous improvement, and strengthen alignment across Pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades.

Intermediaries, Advocacy, & Backbone Organizations. Connect actors across systems, build capacity, translate research and policy into practice, convene stakeholders, and shape agendas related to Pre-K–Grade 3 access, quality, and alignment.

State Government & Statewide Systems. Establish state-level policy, funding streams, standards, accountability systems, and governance structures that define how Pre-K through Grade 3 education operates across Texas.

Federal Actors (Indirect). Set national policy priorities, funding parameters, civil rights protections, and accountability requirements that shape early learning and early grades, primarily through legislation, regulation, and oversight rather than direct service delivery.

Philanthropy & Funders. Provide financial resources and strategic support to pilot innovations, scale effective practices, fill gaps not covered by public funding, and influence priorities across the Pre-K–Grade 3 ecosystem.