

Texas Early Childhood Education

Initial Research Framework
— Working Draft —

March 2026



LONESTAR**P3**

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Early Childhood Education

A wave of legislation from the 89th session — touching Pre-K funding, child care subsidies, data infrastructure, and cross-agency coordination — has created new tools alongside new implementation questions, and the decisions being made now will shape the system's architecture for years to come. At the same time, the governance landscape remains in flux, with multiple state agencies sharing jurisdiction over early childhood education (ECE) and new coordination structures still finding their footing. Gaps in workforce compensation, preparation, and career pathways continue to shape whether programs can operate at quality and scale. Parallel gaps persist between program availability and who the system is reaching. These conditions invite research that is both timely and consequential.

The Purpose of this Document

The purpose of this document is to present an initial research framework focused on Early Childhood Education in Texas. The framework reflects areas of convergence that emerged from a recent LONESTARP3 strategy team session and is intended to serve as a starting point for discussions to generate a consensus research agenda. By sharing this draft, LONESTARP3 aims to support collective sensemaking toward a shared agenda that reflects the shared priorities of its members and key actors across the state.

Toward a Shared Research Agenda

LONESTARP3 will facilitate iterative feedback and revision cycles with researchers, practitioners, and policy advocates across the state to refine this initial research framework. Feedback will be used to clarify, revise, and prioritize themes and potential research questions. The goal is to generate a shared research agenda that reflects common priorities, practical relevance, timeline insights, and mutual ownership across the LONESTARP3 network.

THEME ONE: Enrollment, Access, and Family Reach

Why this is important

Texas has made meaningful progress in expanding Pre-K access, including increased participation rates and new investments aimed at improving affordability and availability. At the same time, significant gaps remain between who is eligible and who actually enrolls. An estimated 282,000 eligible children are not participating in public Pre-K, and many families live in areas with limited access to high-quality options. These gaps reflect not only supply constraints but also differences in awareness, navigation, and family preferences. A better understanding of how families make decisions, how they experience the system, and where breakdowns occur between eligibility and enrollment can help ensure that existing investments translate into broader,

Key idea clusters

- Enrollment vs. eligibility gap (access doesn't always equal reach)
- Family decision-making, preferences, and trust
- Structural barriers (cost, geography, time, care needs)
- Awareness, outreach, and system navigation
- Variation across communities, regions, and populations

Potential areas for investigation

1.1 Enrollment gaps and patterns

- 1.1a What factors explain the gap between Pre-K eligibility and actual enrollment across Texas?
- 1.1b Where are enrollment gaps most pronounced across regions, communities, and student groups?
- 1.1c How does participation in PK-3 and PK-4 change over time within and across programs?
- 1.1d How do early enrollment patterns (including movement between programs) relate to later participation and persistence?

1.2 Family perspectives and decision-making

- 1.2a How do families make decisions about whether and where to enroll their children in Pre-K?
- 1.2b What beliefs, experiences, and concerns shape participation in public Pre-K programs?

- 1.2c How do families define a “good fit” or “quality” in early childhood programs?
- 1.2d How do these perspectives vary across cultural, linguistic, and community contexts?

1.3 Structural barriers to access

- 1.3a How do geography, transportation, and child care deserts influence access to Pre-K programs?
- 1.3b In what ways do scheduling constraints (including non-traditional work hours) affect enrollment?
- 1.3c How does affordability shape participation, particularly for families near eligibility thresholds?
- 1.3d How do program design features (e.g., eligibility rules, limited flexibility) enable or constrain access?

1.4 Outreach, navigation, and system design

- 1.4a Which outreach and engagement strategies are most effective in connecting families to available Pre-K options?
- 1.4b Where do families encounter challenges in navigating eligibility, application, and enrollment processes?
- 1.4c How do system navigation supports (e.g., community-based outreach, family resource centers) affect enrollment outcomes?
- 1.4d How do mixed-delivery systems influence family access, continuity of care, and overall experience?

THEME TWO: Workforce Preparation, Support and Retention

Why this is important

There is growing recognition across Texas that a strong early childhood workforce is essential to expanding access and sustaining program quality. State and local efforts have begun to address workforce challenges through new training pathways, professional development opportunities, and targeted supports. At the same time, persistent issues related to compensation, benefits, and uneven preparation continue to affect recruitment and retention across settings. Questions also remain about how well current certification pathways and leadership support prepare educators to meet the needs of young learners. Building on recent momentum will require a clearer understanding of how educators enter, experience, and remain in the field—and what conditions best support their effectiveness over time.

Key idea clusters

- Preparation pathways (EC-3, EC-6, alternative certification)
- Training, professional learning, and instructional capacity
- Compensation, working conditions, and retention
- Leadership, mentorship, and system support
- Workforce well-being and sustainability

Potential areas for investigation

2.1 Preparation pathways and credentials

- 2.1a What pathways are individuals using to enter the early childhood workforce in Texas?
- 2.1b How does the distribution of EC-3, EC-6, and other certification routes vary across regions and over time?
- 2.1c How do preparation pathways relate to classroom practice and student outcomes?
- 2.1d How accessible are early childhood-focused preparation programs, and where are gaps in availability?

2.2 Training, professional learning, and instructional capacity

- 2.2a What preparation and ongoing training do Pre-K educators receive before and during their time in the classroom?

- 2.2b How well do preparation and professional learning experiences equip educators to support early learning and development?
- 2.2c How prepared are bilingual and special education teachers to work in early childhood settings?
- 2.2d What approaches to professional learning and coaching are most effective in supporting consistent, high-quality instruction?

2.3 Retention, compensation, and working conditions

- 2.3a What factors most influence retention and turnover among early childhood educators across settings?
- 2.3b How do compensation, benefits, and working conditions vary across school-based and community-based programs?
- 2.3c How do workload, job expectations, and workplace supports shape educators' decisions to stay in or leave the field?
- 2.3d What strategies are associated with improved retention and stability in the early childhood workforce?

2.4 Leadership, mentorship, and system support

- 2.4a How prepared are school and program leaders to support and evaluate Pre-K and early grade instruction?
- 2.4b To what extent do educators have access to mentors and coaches with early childhood expertise?
- 2.4c How do leadership practices and supports influence instructional quality and teacher retention?
- 2.4d What system-level supports strengthen workforce effectiveness (e.g., coaching infrastructure, regional supports, leadership development)?

THEME THREE: Systems Alignment, Implementation, and Continuous Improvement

Why this is important

Texas is in an active period of development in early childhood education, with new efforts to strengthen coordination across agencies, improve data infrastructure, and align programs serving young children. Initiatives such as cross-agency collaboration and the development of an integrated data system create new opportunities to better understand and support early learning statewide. At the same time, the system remains complex, with multiple programs, settings, and decision points that can lead to fragmented experiences for families and educators. Differences in how programs connect, how data are used, and how children are identified for support highlight the importance of focusing not just on policy design, but on how the system functions in practice. Strengthening alignment and implementation will be key to realizing the full potential of recent investments.

Key idea clusters

- Alignment across Pre-K through early grades (Pre-K–K–3)
- Mixed-delivery system and coordination across settings
- Data systems, access, and use in practice
- Identification, screening, and support pathways
- Local and regional capacity to implement effectively

Potential areas for investigation

3.1 Alignment across Pre-K and Early Grades

- 3.1a How well aligned are expectations, instruction, and supports across Pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades?
- 3.1b Where do disconnects occur as children transition from Pre-K into K–3 settings?
- 3.1c How do accountability and instructional priorities in later grades influence early childhood practice?
- 3.1d What conditions support stronger continuity of learning and development across early grades?

3.2 Coordination across programs and settings

- 3.2a How are partnerships between school-based Pre-K programs and community-based providers structured and implemented?

- 3.2b What patterns exist in participation across settings (e.g., enrollment, staffing, funding, and services)?
- 3.2c How do shifts in Pre-K enrollment affect community-based providers and overall system stability?
- 3.2d What supports enable effective coordination across programs serving young children and families?

3.3 Data, measurement, and use in practice

- 3.3a What data are currently available to inform early childhood decision-making in Texas?
- 3.3b How are data used by educators, leaders, and systems to guide instruction and program improvement?
- 3.3c What challenges limit the effective use of data across settings and agencies?
- 3.3d What additional data or linkages would strengthen understanding of access, quality, and outcomes?

3.4 Identification, screening, and support pathways

- 3.4a How are children identified for additional support in early childhood settings?
- 3.4b How consistent and reliable are current screening and referral processes across programs?
- 3.4c Who is responsible for implementing and interpreting screening tools, and what preparation do they receive?
- 3.4d How are screening results used to inform instruction, services, and family support?

THEME FOUR: Learning Experiences and Outcomes

Why this is important

Texas has invested in strengthening early childhood programs, including expanding full-day Pre-K and supporting improvement efforts such as the Texas Rising Star system. Research shows that high-quality early learning experiences can produce meaningful benefits for children. At the same time, variation in how quality is defined and experienced—and ongoing tensions between academic readiness goals and developmentally appropriate, play-based learning—continue to shape implementation. This theme focuses on what children experience and how those experiences translate into outcomes over time.

Key idea clusters

- Defining and measuring quality
- Developmentally appropriate curriculum and instructional practice
- Outcomes and persistence over time

Potential areas for investigation

2.1 Defining and measuring quality

- 2.1a How is “high-quality Pre-K” defined across different program settings, and how do those definitions vary across stakeholders?
- 2.1b To what extent do existing measures of quality – including the Texas Rising Star framework – reflect aspects most central to children’s development?
- 2.1c How well do current assessments and screening tools reflect children’s skills across their development, and variations in their language and learning needs?

2.2 Curriculum and instructional practice

- 2.2a To what extent are current approaches developmentally appropriate, and how do they balance academic, play-based, and whole child learning?
- 2.2c How is curriculum implemented in practice, and how does that vary across classrooms and settings?

2.3 Early learning outcomes and lasting impact

- 2.3a What outcomes are associated with participation in Pre-K programs, and how do these connect to longer-term academic trajectories?
- 2.3b Under what conditions do the effects of PK-3 and PK-4 participation persist into later grades?

Appendix. Developing a Shared Research Framework

Background

To develop an initial research framework focused on Early Childhood Education in Texas, LONESTARP3 convened a strategy team on March 12, 2026. Participants brought perspectives spanning research, practice, and policy and represented a range of roles, sectors, and geographies across Texas. Prior to the sessions, LONESTARP3 prepared a landscape analysis of Early Childhood Education for shared context.

The strategy team meeting was designed to support collective sensemaking around key problems of practice and policy and to surface areas for potential future research. Rather than finalizing priorities or identifying specific studies, the team used a structured protocol to generate and refine questions that reflect areas of alignment and momentum across the field. This draft framework represents an intermediate step.

How Themes Took Shape

This draft research framework was developed through a structured, collaborative sensemaking process designed to surface shared problems of practice and policy related to early childhood education in Texas. Using a common **Generate–Categorize–Refine** protocol, participants independently generated ideas and then collectively identified patterns, points of convergence, and areas of productive tension, drawing on a shared landscape analysis for context. This framework is intentionally provisional and designed to support further refinement through feedback and continued engagement across the LONESTARP3 network.

Potential Ares for Investigation

The questions included here reflect where participants were heading, rather than a fixed set of research priorities. They are meant to:

- Illustrate the substance and direction of each refined theme,
- Capture the types of questions participants were converging on after multiple rounds of reflection and refinement,
- Provide a concrete entry point for discussion and collective sensemaking,
- Remain flexible enough to be refined, combined, or replaced as the framework continues to evolve, and
- Propose questions that could plausibly be studied within an 18–24 month timeframe.

Acknowledgements

We are grateful to the strategy team contributors who offered their time, expertise, and perspectives to inform this initial research framework. Their thoughtful insights shaped the themes and questions presented here and will continue to inform the eventual consensus agenda.

Contributors	Organization
Dareem Antoine	University of Texas at Dallas
Barbara Boneta	United Way of Greater Austin
Becky Calahan	Philanthropy Advocates
Melodi Faris	Child Care Associates
Lauren Hampton	University of Texas at Austin
Lauren McKenzie	Commit Partnership
Cinthia Palomino	E3 Alliance
Arianna Pikus	Texas A&M University
Robyn Pinilla	University of Texas at El Paso
Lawana Pulliam	Education Service Center Region 16
Margaret Quinn	Texas A&M University
Monica Romero	University of Texas at Austin
Irasema Salina Gonzalez	University of Texas Rio Grande Valley
Courtney Thrash	Houston Education Research Consortium