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LANDSCAPE ANALYSIS

Early Childhood Education in Texas

LONESTARP3

Education research practice policy partnership

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Scope of the Landscape Analysis

This landscape analysis was developed to map the early childhood education (ECE) terrain in Texas—identifying the issues, actors, and dynamics that can anchor a collaborative research agenda. Rather than evaluating specific programs or policies, the analysis offers a broad, systems-level view of how ECE is structured, funded, and experienced across the state. It draws on recent legislation, public discourse, grey literature, and peer-reviewed research, with particular attention to full-day pre-K, the early childhood workforce, family engagement, and integrated data infrastructure.

Why This Topic Matters Now

Texas is at an inflection point in 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 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—across geography, language, income, and awareness. Together, these conditions create an opening for research that is timely, consequential, and well-suited to the strengths of a statewide research-practice-policy network.

Topic Areas in Early Childhood Education Covered in This Analysis

The following analysis is organized around seven topic areas that reflect the key policy, practice, and research conversations shaping early childhood education in Texas today:

- **Access and Quality** | Reviews Texas's national standing in pre-K access, the geographic distribution of quality child care, and evidence on what high-quality programs produce—alongside the structural factors that can limit their reach.
- **Affordability and Financial Assistance** | Analyzes Texas's child care subsidy system and recent scholarship investments, with attention to which policy levers most effectively improve access and stability for working families.
- **Family Engagement and Outreach** | Explores state and local strategies to improve program awareness and enrollment, with particular attention to whether families can successfully navigate the system to access programs.

- **Early Educator Workforce Supply** | Documents staffing shortages, compensation gaps, and the pressures providers face, with attention to how these challenges vary across program type, geography, and demographics.
- **Early Educator Workforce Development and Support** | Reviews state planning efforts to build career pathways and expand professional development, alongside tensions between workforce supply and quality standards.
- **Funding and Finance Formulas** | Examines the gap between current funding structures and the true cost of quality care, recent adjustments to the Early Education Allotment, and the broader case for sustained public investment in early learning.
- **Data, System Governance, and Strategic Coordination** | Examines cross-agency coordination and the development of the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), against the backdrop of a system currently spanning multiple state agencies.

Mapping the Ecosystem of Key Actors in Early Childhood Education

The report organizes the early childhood education ecosystem into three interrelated domains: (1) the Instructional Core, where the daily experiences of children, families, and educators in pre-K through Grade 3 have the most direct impact on learning and development; (2) the Enabling Systems zone, where regional and local structures, curriculum and assessment infrastructure, and data and research actors translate policy intent into on- the-ground reality; and (3) the Shaping Context zone, where state agencies, federal actors, philanthropy, and intermediary organizations set the conditions within which the rest of the system operates. Activity is most concentrated at the state level, where legislative momentum and advocacy are converging.

Looking Ahead

This landscape analysis is intended as a starting point for inquiry, not a set of conclusions or recommendations. By identifying key topic areas and surfacing tensions, it provides a shared foundation for determining where evidence is strong, where it is thin, and where collaborative research could add value. The sections that follow offer deeper detail on issues, actors, and pathways connecting them, setting the stage for collective sensemaking and the development of future research priorities.

INTRODUCTION

Texas's early childhood workforce—serving children from birth through age five—is under significant strain. Low salaries, high demand, and limited career advancement opportunities—factors directly linked to program quality and access—contribute to persistent recruitment and retention challenges, directly affecting program stability and quality. Research can explore the supply and demand for early childhood educators, regional workforce disparities—especially in rural and underserved areas, and effective strategies for strengthening, supporting, and sustaining this workforce over time.

Program access, quality, and family engagement are also critical. HB 2 (89R) includes provisions to expand and strengthen high-quality, full-day pre-K, increase funding for early literacy intervention, and improve alignment between pre-K and K–3 instruction. HB 117 (89R) introduces additional tools for access and coordination, creating openings for research on pre-K availability, instructional quality, family-school partnerships, and how engagement strategies shape readiness for kindergarten and sustained success into the early grades. HB 4903 (89R) established the Quad-Agency Child Care Initiative, bringing together the Texas Education Agency (TEA), Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC), and Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to review and streamline state regulations affecting childcare programs (Texas AFT, 2025).

On the data side, HB 3963 (89R) establishes the Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) to link and analyze information across agencies serving children from birth to age eight. ECIDS presents a rare opportunity to shape what data Texas collects and how it is used. Research could help ensure the system captures meaningful indicators of access, quality, family engagement, and impact, enabling robust evaluation of programs and policies 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 LONESTA**RP3** collaborative research. Our analysis provides a broad overview of key trends, topics, and actors shaping early childhood education in Texas.

Methods

Our analysis began with an environmental scan of early childhood education trends in Texas to identify on-the-ground issues and how they are represented in the media. This scan included local and policy news outlets, as well as official state websites, focusing primarily on materials published within the last five years (2022-2026), with limited exceptions. We made exceptions when older sources helped illustrate long-term trends or underdiscussed issues.

From this environmental scan, we identified major themes to capture the primary trends shaping early childhood education in Texas. These themes informed a subsequent literature review, which drew on academic databases to locate peer-reviewed articles published between 2022 and 2026, with a specific focus on Texas. Exceptions were made when older sources offered greater context in the topic area. We scanned studies for journal quality and relevance to current workforce concerns. We also incorporated select studies outside of Texas to provide a broader context or fill gaps where state-specific empirical work was limited. Additionally, we conducted searches through Google Scholar to capture grey literature, including policy briefs, organizational reports, and white papers.

We identified key actor types in the Texas early childhood education ecosystem through an AI-assisted, structured review of select organizations that influence funding decisions and implementation. We compiled an inventory of actor categories from state agency reports and education policy publications, supplemented by insights from existing partnerships and initiatives.

Operationalizing Early Childhood Education

This landscape analysis focuses on the portion of the early learning landscape most directly connected to public education systems, with primary emphasis on access to, quality of, and family engagement in full-day pre-K. Full-day pre-K has emerged as a key leverage point for improving early learning outcomes, particularly in communities with historically limited access.

Central to this work is alignment between pre-K and Kindergarten through Grade 3, including instructional coherence that supports students' academic and developmental trajectories. Family engagement plays a critical role in both school partnerships to support student learning and in helping families understand and access early childhood education, relating to availability, costs, and coordination.

This position also prioritizes early childhood workforce capacity, including the supply, preparation, certification, and retention of educators whose working conditions directly affect program stability and quality. Finally, it recognizes the growing importance of integrated early childhood data systems, particularly in light of ECIDS legislation, to link early learning experiences, beginning before pre-K, to longer term educational and workforce outcomes.

Figure 1. Scope and structure of early childhood education within public education

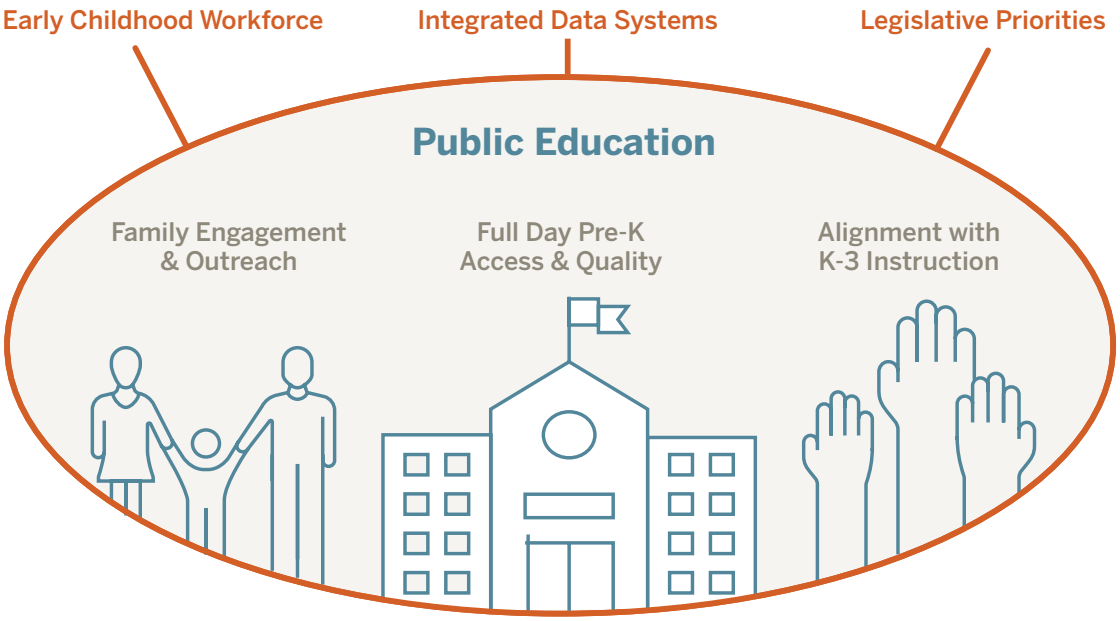


Figure 1 illustrates the scope of early childhood education within public education, centering full-day pre-K access and quality as the primary focus alongside alignment with K–3 instruction, and family engagement and outreach. Early childhood workforce capacity, integrated data systems, and legislative priorities function as external conditions that shape the early education system.

Limitations

Our report does not evaluate the effectiveness of any specific program or policy. Rather, it maps activity across news and research to offer an overview of current areas of focus and potential opportunities for future inquiry. Moreover, this analysis includes only Texas actors, and the reviewed public scholarship and grey literature are limited primarily to work produced within the last five years.

Report Sections

The landscape analysis is structured into four main sections:

INTRODUCTION	TOPIC AREAS	KEY ACTORS	LOOKING AHEAD

TOPIC AREAS

Overview of the following topics areas (2022-2026) for Early Childhood Education in Texas:

1. Access and Quality
2. Affordability and Financial Assistance
3. Family Engagement and Outreach
4. Early Educator Workforce Supply
5. Early Educator Workforce Development and Support
6. Funding and Finance Formulas
7. Data, System Governance and Strategic Coordination

Note: *Journal articles included in the following section have been uploaded to a shared Box folder. See digital version for hyperlink.*

[1] *Some exceptions were made in topic areas that had limited Texas-based research.*

TOPIC AREA 1

Access and Quality

Texas holds a competitive national standing in early childhood education access, yet persistent structural challenges—including geographic disparities in quality child care availability and gaps between eligible and enrolled children—continue to limit access, particularly for low-income families. Recent policy efforts reflect ongoing interest in expanding families' educational options, though research is needed to understand how well these approaches advance access and for whom. At the same time, literature highlights both the measurable long-term academic benefits of high-quality pre-K programs and the variability in implementation across the state's child care system. As Texas's young child population is projected to grow in the coming decades, these dynamics make early childhood education access and quality an increasingly pressing policy concern.

In The News

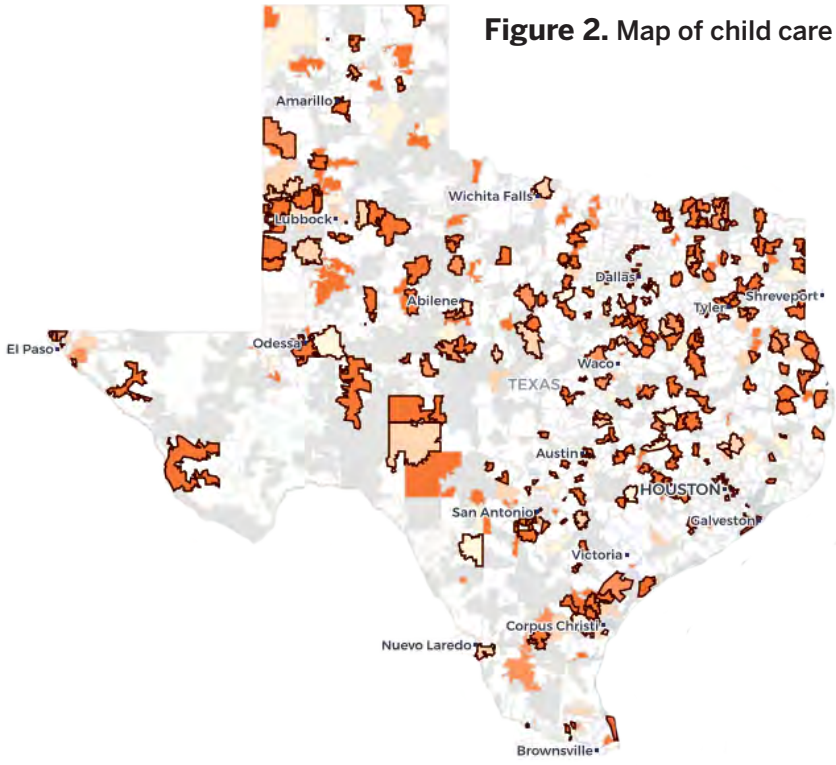
- ★ In the 2023-2024 school year, Texas ranked 11th nationally for four-year-old pre-K access, serving 52% of four-year-olds in state-funded pre-K, and ranked 15th for three-year-old access, serving 11% of the population (NIEER, 2024). State rankings were determined using an evaluation of four categories: preschool enrollment percentages for 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds and spending per enrolled child at both the state level and all reported spending levels.
- ★ Texas's new voucher program (SB 2, 89R) allows families with 3-4 year-olds to receive an estimated $10,800 annually to send their children to private pre-K (Edison, 2025). Experts say this will not significantly expand early education access since eligibility is limited to students already qualifying for free public pre-K programs and the $1 billion program only accepts 100,000 students total across all grades (Sgroi, 2025). As of January 2026, almost 800 private schools and pre-K providers have been approved to accept vouchers (known as Texas Education Freedom Accounts) (Norton, 2026). The state continues to face structural pre-K challenges, including underfunding, 282,000 eligible children not attending public pre-K, and average private pre-K costs (approximately $13,521 annually) exceeding voucher amounts (Edison, 2025).
- ★ In 2024, 88% of low-income working families in Texas lived in child care deserts. Children at Risk, a Houston-based nonpartisan research and advocacy organization, defines child care deserts as "zip codes with at least 30 children under the age of six, where demand is three times greater than the availability of quality child care seats" (Kofron & Meier, 2025). Furthermore, 92.7% of low-income students under the age of six live in a Texas Rising Star desert. The Texas Rising Star program is a child care Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) housed under the Texas Workforce Commission. It will be important to continue monitoring the landscape as projections from the Texas Demographic Center predict that the population of children under the age of 5 will reach 2.1 million by 2040, a steady increase from 1.95 million in 2023 (Castillo, 2025).

In Recent Literature

- ★ Crawford et al. (2025) examined the implementation of continuous quality improvement (CQI) approaches within the Texas Rising Star Quality Rating and Improvement System to understand how these approaches support early learning programs. Using an implementation science framework, researchers analyzed data from 1,789 child care programs, including surveys from 97 mentors, 562 directors, and 211 teachers, along with focus groups and coded CQI plans. Findings revealed variability in CQI implementation, with higher-rated center-based programs more likely to have active plans than lower-rated programs and licensed child care homes, though directors and teachers generally reported positive perceptions and promising engagement levels despite action plans showing relatively low quality with limited explicit mentoring support.

- ★ Villarreal & Lee (2022) examined whether attending pre-K 4 SA—a San Antonio program meeting all quality standards of the National Institute for Early Education Research (NEEIR)—improved students' educational achievement in third and fourth grades. Using an instrumental variable approach (distance to pre-K 4 SA centers) to address selection bias from parent preferences and child ability, researchers analyzed two cohorts of students attending P\pre-K 4 SA compared to peers in other public pre-K programs. Results showed pre-K 4 SA students gained 0.3-0.6 standard deviations in reading and 0.5 standard deviations in math by third grade, with effects sustaining and growing through fourth grade. However, distance to centers negatively affected enrollment and no consistent behavioral impacts were observed.

Figure 2. Map of child care deserts in Texas (Kofron & Meier, 2025)



Number of child care seats per 100 children of working parents:

- Not a desert
- 25-33 per hundred
- 15-25 per hundred
- 5-15 per hundred
- 0-5 per hundred

TOPIC AREA 2

Affordability and Financial Assistance

Texas has taken key steps to expand access to affordable, high-quality child care, making significant public investments to support working families and the providers who serve them. The state's child care subsidy system reflects both broad reach and a deliberate policy architecture designed to reduce financial barriers and stabilize access for low-income families. Research affirms that the policy levers Texas has prioritized are among the most effective tools for improving subsidy access and offering family stability. Taken together, Texas's recent legislative action and evidence-aligned policy design position the state to lead in building a more accessible and equitable child care system.

In The News

- ★ During the 2025 legislative session, Texas lawmakers made a $100 million investment in child care scholarships to alleviate some of the financial burden on working families and reduce the number of children on the waitlist for scholarships, which stood at 95,000 children at the start of the legislative session (Huff, 2025a). This funding came in the wake of many facilities closing the year prior due to rising costs and several areas across the state becoming childcare deserts. However, as a result of child care market rates increasing statewide by 9% (Schroeder et al., 2025), the additional funds prevented a loss, rather than an increase, of children being served by the scholarship, which must match or exceed 75% of what local providers charge (Feigen, 2025; Huff, 2025b).

$9,664
is the average cost of child-care for 4-year-old children in Texas, costing around $1,328 more than in-state tuition for a four-year public college.

- ★ The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) administers child care subsidies, or scholarships, to approximately 8,000 licensed facilities — representing roughly 60% of all providers statewide. Among young children (birth through age 5) with working parents, slightly more than half (51.3%) have family incomes low enough to be eligible for subsidized care (Kofron & Meier, 2025).

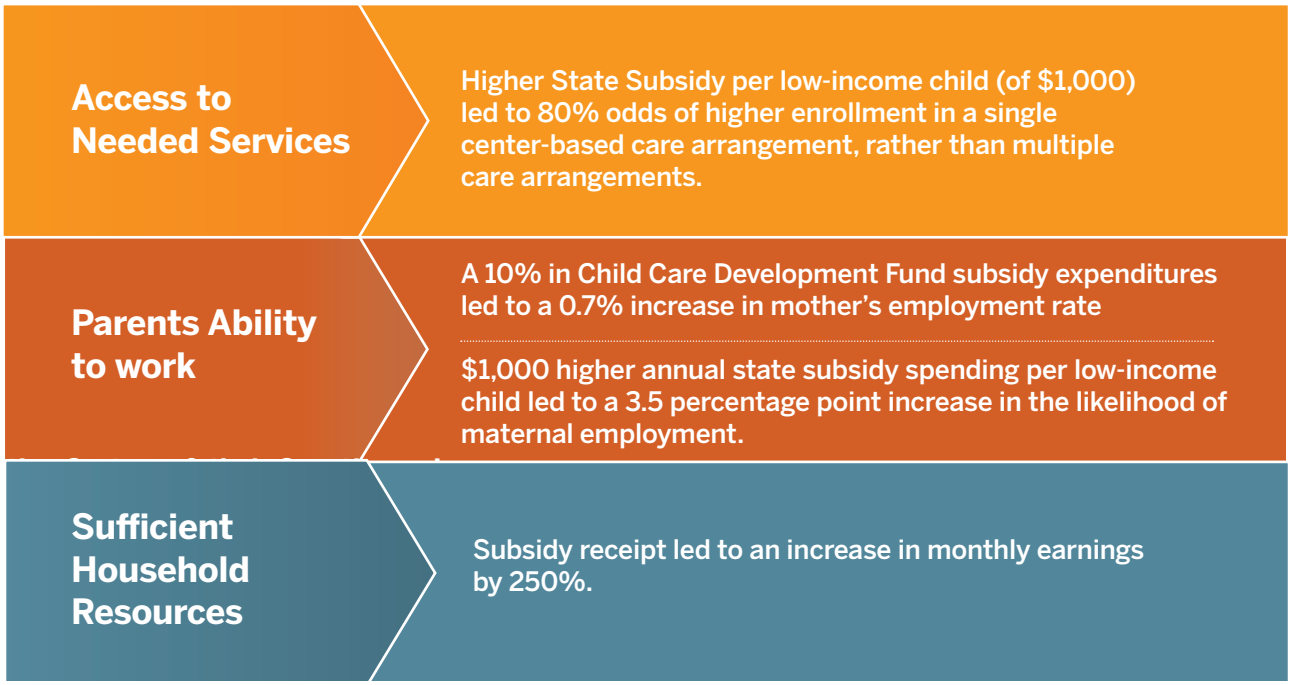
In Recent Literature

- ★ A national review of causal research on child care subsidies found that when families receive financial assistance for child care—and when states spend more per child — mothers are more likely to enter and stay in the workforce. The effects on children's development, health, and overall family earnings were less clear, likely because reimbursement rates paid to providers often fall short of what it actually costs to deliver quality care for infants and toddlers. Implementation studies demonstrate that

expanding income eligibility, lengthening recertification periods, reducing family copayments, and increasing provider reimbursement rates effectively improve subsidy stability and access to higher-rated care (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2025a).

★ Texas is one of only seven states nationwide (along with Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, New York, South Carolina, and Virginia) that has implemented all three key policy levers—identified by the Prenatal-to-3 Impact Center (2025) in accordance with federal guidance and requirements—to increase access to child care subsidies. These include (1) setting income eligibility limits at or above 85% of state median income; (2) limiting copayments to 7% of family income or less for all families; and (3) setting infant and toddler reimbursement rates at or above the 75th percentile of the state market rates (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2025b).

Figure 3. **Strong causal studies show that child care subsidies impact three prenatal-to-3 policy goals**
(Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, n.d.)



Note: *Results are based on comprehensive reviews of the evidence.*

TOPIC AREA 3

Family Engagement and Outreach

Family engagement and access to early childhood education in Texas are being addressed through both state-level and local grassroots initiatives, with recent efforts emphasizing the need to streamline information systems, improve awareness, and provide culturally responsive navigation support. Families remain unaware of available programs and resources, even when they are eligible, highlighting the persistent gap between program availability and enrollment. Research on implementation further underscores challenges that families face in navigating subsidy systems, including documentation requirements and language barriers, while also pointing to the importance of relationship-based communication channels. As literature on family involvement in early childhood education grows, it continues to grapple with inconsistent terminology and a lack of standardized measurement tools.

In The News

- ★ The 2024-2026 Texas Early Learning Council strategic plan recommends streamlining families' access to early childhood education through a common eligibility screener and an enhanced online platform (exploring AI integration), training system navigators to connect families to local resources, and publishing family feedback to inform program improvements. Additionally, it recommends expanding Texas Rising Star providers, Family Resource Centers, and home visiting programs to increase service availability (Texas Early Learning Council, 2024).
- ★ Houston ISD partnered with Good Reason Houston and Groundwork Outreach to deploy a grassroots door-to-door canvassing campaign targeting 56,000 households, hiring local residents to market free pre-K programs to families in underenrolled schools, a strategy modeled after Dallas ISD's successful enrollment turnaround. The primary barrier identified among eligible families was a lack of awareness around free pre-K availability, requiring canvassers to provide language support and hands-on assistance with applications. Despite Houston ISD adding 1,300 pre-K seats, district officials acknowledged that filling those seats remains an obstacle, particularly in neighborhoods where only 4 in 10 eligible students were enrolled in 2023-24 (Partain, 2025).

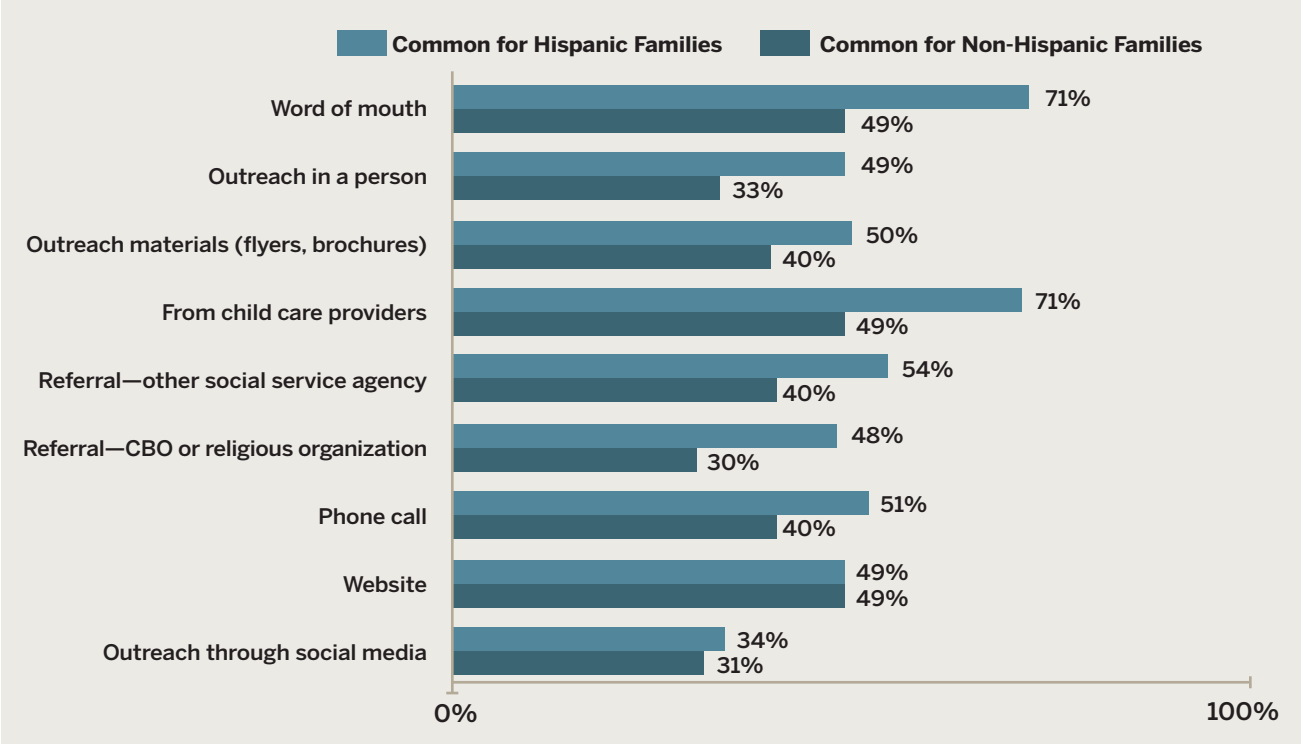
In Recent Literature

- ★ The National Research Center on Hispanic Children and Families conducted a survey of 235 Texas child care subsidy program staff and examined how policy implementation impacts Hispanic families' access to subsidies. Approximately half of the staff reported income verification, work-hour verification, and child birth certificates were difficult for families to provide. While about half of responding staff

identified as Hispanic and roughly one-third were fluent Spanish speakers, few felt prepared to serve families speaking languages indigenous to Latin America. Furthermore, staff reported that Hispanic families most commonly learned about subsidies through relationship-based methods like word of mouth and referrals rather than online resources (Stephens et al., 2023).

★ Otero-Mayer's (2025) systematic review of 97 studies—over half of which were based in the United States—found that research on family involvement in early childhood education has increased significantly since 2010, with most studies focusing on three main dimensions: home-based involvement (43%), school-based involvement (39%), and home-school communication (20%). Home-based involvement, particularly academic support activities, received the most research attention, while socioemotional development and bidirectional parent-teacher communication remain understudied. The field grapples with inconsistent terminology, lack of standardized measurement instruments (64% of studies use newly created tools), and limited inclusion of teachers' and children's perspectives.

Figure 4. **Subsidy staff report common ways by which Texas families learn about subsidized child care**
(Stephens et al., 2023)



Note: *Categories are not mutually exclusive; staff were asked to identify all methods they perceived to be commonly used by families. Sample size for responses to these items was 235. Data is from the Summer 2023 Texas Survey of the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families Multi-State Study of CCDF Implementation in Local Communities project.*

TOPIC AREA 4

Early Educator Workforce Supply

Texas communities are taking proactive steps to strengthen the early childhood workforce, with local governments, educational institutions, and policy leaders agreeing that investing in educators is essential to building a sustainable child care system. Across the state, innovative approaches—from targeted tax relief for providers to expanded educational pathways for aspiring early childhood professionals—reflect a commitment to supporting the people who make quality early learning possible. Research affirms that workforce compensation and benefits are central to the health of the entire child care ecosystem, providing a clear and actionable roadmap for what meaningful progress looks like. Texas has the knowledge, the local momentum, and the policy tools to build a workforce that is well-compensated, well-supported, and equipped to meet the growing demand for high-quality early childhood education.

In The News

- ★ Childcare providers statewide face severe staffing shortages, unable to hire qualified caregivers or compete with the higher wages offered by other industries. At the same time, raising staff pay would make care unaffordable for families, trapping providers in an impossible bind (Pointer, 2024). Efforts at the county and city levels have attempted to address these issues (Brooks Harper, 2024). For example, both the Travis County Commissioners Court and the City of Austin approved tax breaks to qualified child care providers, while the Austin City Council approved $1.8 million in workforce development and reduced zoning restrictions for child care facilities (Pointer, 2024). Tax exemptions have also been passed in El Paso County, Hays County, Aransas County, and the City of Denton. However, only about 17% of all Texas childcare centers meet the criteria established by the law to benefit from the exemption (Brooks Harper, 2024).
- ★ Texas early childhood educators earn a median wage of $12 per hour—$4.41 per hour below the state's living wage of $16.41 for an individual with no children—with only one in 10 educators earning enough to afford the minimum standard of living in their area. Early childhood educators who are Hispanic, work in a rural context, and work in a subsidy-accepting program earn significantly less, with wage disparities being additive (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2022, 2023a).
- ★ Tarrant County faces a critical child care workforce shortage, needing approximately 2,000 more early childhood educators to fully staff existing centers that currently have 13,368 open seats. This shortage particularly impacts working mothers' ability to participate in the workforce. If centers were fully staffed, they could serve 74% of children ages birth to five with working parents. Tarrant County College plans to introduce a bachelor's degree in Early Childhood Education in fall 2026 to meet North Texas's growing demand for qualified child care providers (Sanchez, 2025).

In Recent Literature

- ★ A 2022 statewide survey of 816 Texas child care directors found that 97% face major barriers to hiring and retaining educators, with low industry pay identified as the primary cause of staffing shortages. These workforce challenges prevent programs from operating at their full licensed capacity, limiting families' access to child care and their ability to participate in the workforce (Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2022, 2023c).
- ★ Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center (2023b) also found that only 30% of early childhood educators have access to health insurance through their employer, and fewer than half have access to paid sick leave or retirement accounts. For home-based educators, over 90% lack employer-provided health or dental insurance and about three-fourths lack paid sick leave. Given that 90% of Texas early childhood workers do not earn a living wage and that Texas has not expanded Medicaid eligibility, many educators fall into a coverage gap—earning too much to qualify for Medicaid but not enough to afford marketplace insurance—leaving educators without a viable plan for health coverage.

Table 1. ECE workforce median hourly wage, by early childhood educator characteristics
(Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2022).

	Center-Based Educators (n-3,563)	**Home-Based Educators** (n-132)	**Home-Based Owner Educators** (n-136)
Level of Education			
High School Educated	$11.00	$10.00	$13,09
CDA or Associates	$13.00	—	—
Bachelor's or Higher	$14.91	—	—
CDA or Higher	—	$13.17	$15.00
Years of Experience			
5 Years or Less	$11.00	$10.00	$13.33
Between 6 and 15 Years	$13.00	$12.00	$15.00
More than 16 Years	$14.66	$13.33	$14.88
Serves Infants			
Yes	$12.00	$11.00	—
No	$12.50	$11.30	—
Race			
White, NH	$12.35	$11.00	$15.00
Black, NH	$12.38	$10.25	$15.00
Hispanic	$12.00	$11.00	$12.00

Note: *Educational attainment of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or higher was combined for Home-based educators and owners due to their small sample size. Most owner-educators serve children of all ages; the authors did not include the small number who serve only infants (n=0) or only preschool-aged children (n=2). For center-based educators, n ranges from 3,344-3,563; for home-based educators, n range from 125-132. Data comes from the 2022 Texas Director Survey, Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center.*

TOPIC AREA 5

Early Educator Workforce Development and Support

Texas is actively developing workforce policy infrastructure aimed at improving retention, creating aligned career pathways, and expanding professional development opportunities for early childhood educators and administrators. Legislative action has introduced temporary adjustments to qualification requirements for certain pre-K positions, reflecting ongoing tensions between workforce supply and quality standards. Research reveals characteristic patterns in the early childhood workforce, including significant experience differences between administrators and classroom practitioners, and raises questions about the consistency and depth of teacher preparation pathways. Additionally, school leaders report difficulty prioritizing developmentally appropriate early childhood programming amid competing demands and pressures from state accountability systems focused on upper elementary grades.

In The News

- ★ The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) was tasked with creating a Child Care Workforce Strategic Plan as part of HB 619, passed in the 87th Texas Legislature (2021). This plan proposes strategies to improve the quality of childcare in the state that will be updated every three years. The second iteration of the plan pursues three interconnected goals: supporting current workers through improved benefits and retention incentives, building a qualified workforce pipeline via aligned career pathways and stackable credentials, and expanding professional development opportunities for directors and educators. To achieve these goals, the plan prioritizes collecting data on compensation, barriers facing home-based providers, and training needs, while strengthening partnerships between child care programs, local workforce boards, and education agencies to create a more sustainable and well-supported early childhood workforce (TWC, 2025b).
- ★ In 2023, the Texas Legislature passed HB 2729, which temporarily reduces qualification requirements for pre-K teachers working in public-private partnerships until the bill sunsets in 2029—a reversal of the state's longstanding policy requiring district-employed pre-K teachers to hold Bachelor's degrees, certification, and specialized early learning training (Davison & Muhlendorf, 2025; Texans Care for Children, 2023).
- ★ Texas early childhood administrators report significantly more experience than classroom practitioners, with 59% of administrators having 10-30 years in the field compared to only 29% of practitioners with the same experience level (Children's Learning Institute, 2025). Instead, the largest share of practitioners reports having less than 3 years of experience. This disparity reflects the typical career trajectory, in which educators begin in classroom roles before advancing to administrative positions. These data are further consistent among child care programs participating in Texas Rising Star, a quality improvement program (Texas Workforce Commission, n.d.).

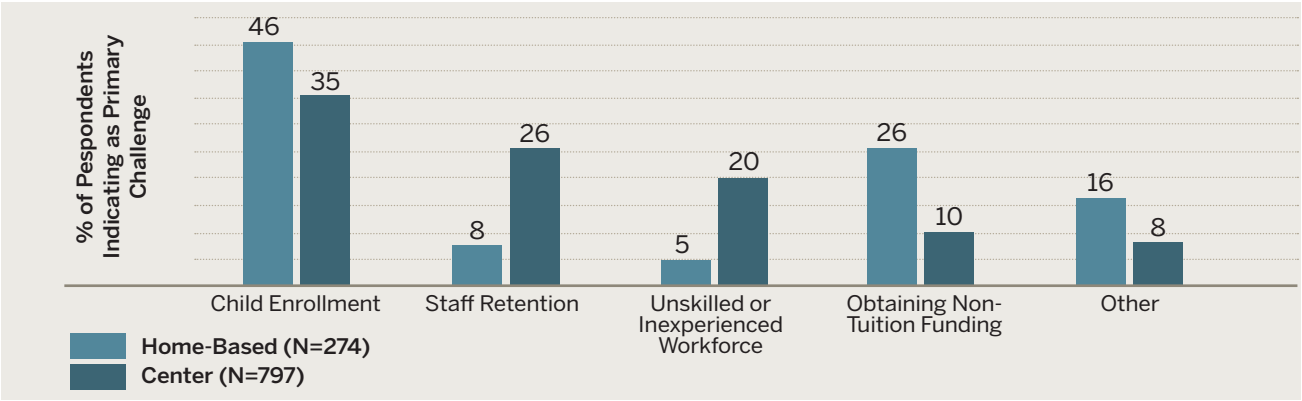
Workforce Solutions Capital Area—one of the 28 Local Workforce Development Boards operating under the TWC and located in the Austin-Travis County area—offers wage stipends to boost early childhood educators' salaries, but the program faces significant constraints. Eligibility requirements limit who can participate, and funding is limited, particularly as the federal American Rescue Plan Act resources that previously supported the program have been depleted (Pointer, 2024).

In Recent Literature

As of 2023, "over half of the early educators in Texas have earned less than an associate's degree, and two thirds have earned less than a bachelor's degree."

- In 2019, Texas was one of only four states that did not award stand-alone early childhood education (ECE) licenses. Among the three states reporting data on add-on endorsements, Texas had by far the highest rate, with add-ons constituting 46% of all new in-state teaching credentials issued between 2009-2018, more than double Pennsylvania's 19% and nearly four times Indiana's 12%. Because Texas lacks a stand-alone ECE license, Fowler (2023) could not determine what percentage of early childhood teachers obtain their credentials through shortened add-on pathways versus full preparation programs, raising questions about the quality and consistency of ECE teacher preparation in the state.
- Researchers conducted a case study with 14 Texas elementary principals to explore their approaches to leading prekindergarten and kindergarten programs and to understand what resources and assistance they identified as necessary for effective leadership of these programs. Through semi-structured interviews across diverse school contexts (urban, suburban, and rural), the study found that while principals understood the importance of developmentally appropriate practices and viewed leading pre-K and K as their responsibility, they often failed to enact these visions due to academic performance pressures from state-mandated testing in upper grades (3rd-5th). Participants urged district and state administrators to reprioritize early childhood programs, allocate more time and resources to support pre-K and K teachers, and transform pre-K into a universal, rather than an intervention-based, program (Brown et al., 2024).

Figure 5. **Primary challenge to ECE operations, by program type** *(TWC, 2025b)*



TOPIC AREA 6

Funding and Finance Formulas

Texas is taking meaningful steps to better align early childhood education funding with the needs of districts, families, and providers, through both state legislative action and local community investment. Recent policy changes recognize that sustainable early childhood systems require funding structures that more accurately reflect the true cost of delivering high-quality care and education. Research continues to build a compelling case for deeper public investment—not only as a matter of access, but as a sound economic strategy that benefits families, employers, and communities alike. Texas is well-positioned to build on this momentum, with increasing alignment between policy action, research evidence, and the shared commitment of state and local partners to expand access to high-quality early learning for every child.

$4,682
was spent on each child in Texas—more than $3,000 below the national average.
(Davison and Muhlendorf, 2025)

In The News

- Texas continues to fund pre-K at a half-day rate despite requiring full-day programs, creating a significant funding gap that forces districts to divert resources from other areas (McKenzie, 2025). In an attempt to better match funding to program needs, HB 2 (89R, 2025) made several adjustments to the Early Education Allotment (EEA), which districts can use to fund pre-K programs or provide additional literacy and mathematics supports. First, HB 2 adds a 1% weight per average daily attendance (ADA) of K–3 students to support teacher attendance at newly required achievement academies (TEA, 2025). This change is expected to generate around $90 million in additional funding (McKenzie, 2025). Second, HB 2 restructures the allotment's funding formula. Previously, the state allocated EEA funds based on districts' K–3 economically disadvantaged and emergent bilingual student enrollment, while not necessarily aligning with actual pre-K enrollment. Under the new structure, the state now distributes EEA funds, first, to cover the half-day ADA for eligible 4-year-old pre-K students, with any remaining funds then distributed proportionally to districts based on their K–3 economically disadvantaged and emergent bilingual students (TEA, 2025).
- Local governments are further assisting their communities by promoting access to early childhood education. Houston City Council approved a $100,000 grant to support low- to moderate- income families through the Infant and Early Childhood Development Enrichment Program (Lincke, 2026). The program is a partnership between the city and the nonprofit Child Care Council of Greater Houston, Inc., which offers care and development services for children under age 5, as well as services for young parents experiencing homelessness.

In Recent Literature

- In response to HB 619 (87R), Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center (2023) drew on input from a 27-member workgroup of Texas child care experts and a survey of over 750 child care directors to

recommend changes that would address significant barriers in the early education system. Two primary recommendations were: (1) retention bonuses of $6,000-$10,000 annually for educators (estimated cost of $536 million) to address the fact that 77% of directors cannot hire because wages are too low, and (2) fundamental subsidy reform by reimbursing programs at the true cost of quality care rather than suppressed market rates and expanding eligibility to serve all eligible families (estimated cost of $8.71 billion annually beyond current $871 million spending). These recommendations recognize that raising workforce quality requires first raising compensation, and that sustainable solutions must simultaneously address three interconnected challenges: keeping child care businesses open, paying educators livable wages, and ensuring families can afford high-quality care.

- ★ According to the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 2025), the United States is considered a high-risk system because it relies heavily on private spending and family fees to fund early childhood education (ECE). This creates serious affordability barriers that disproportionately exclude low-income children who would benefit the most from participation. Rather than combining targeted and universal approaches, the U.S. primarily directs ECE funding toward disadvantaged children through programs like Head Start. The OECD identifies this approach as insufficient for closing equity gaps, especially given the country's decentralized, state-by-state funding structure, which widens geographic inequalities without any mechanisms in place to balance them out. Chronic underfunding compared to other OECD countries has also contributed to a workforce compensation crisis, where ECE staff earn significantly less than other workers with similar levels of education, fueling high turnover rates. These structural funding problems are made worse as the long-term benefits of investing in ECE are only fully realized when funding is sustained across both the early childhood and school-age years.
- ★ Using a nationally representative survey of 806 working parents of children under age 3 combined with labor market economic modeling, Bishop (2023) found that the U.S. infant-toddler child care crisis costs $122 billion annually—more than double the $57 billion documented in their 2018 study —with losses distributed across families ($78 billion in forgone earnings), employers ($23 billion in productivity and hiring costs), and taxpayers ($21 billion in lost tax revenue). This dramatic increase is attributed to the compounding effects of COVID-19 disruptions and chronic policy inaction. Texas alone bore $11.4 billion in annual economic losses.

Table 2. Texas average monthly true cost of quality care in 2021 dollars *(Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, 2023)*

Age Category	Provider Type	Two-Star Quality Cost of Care	Three-Star Quality Cost of Care	Four-Star Quality Cost of Care
Infant	Center	$1,378.00	$1,471.00	$1,757.00
Toddler	Center	$1,097.00	$1,299.00	$1,548.00
Preschool	Center	$920.00	$1,038.00	$1,130.00
School-age	Center	$863.00	$899.00	$1,040.00
All ages	Home	$1,097.00	$1,299.00	$1,548.00

Note: *The table includes true cost estimates for care quality equivalent to Texas Rising Star Two-Star, Three-Star, and Four-Star levels.*

TOPIC AREA 7

Data, System Governance, and Strategic Coordination

Texas is making meaningful strides in strengthening its early childhood education system, with recent legislative action and executive leadership driving greater coordination, data integration, and cross-agency collaboration. The state has taken concrete steps to align governance across its early childhood agencies and build the infrastructure needed to better understand and serve young children and their families. These efforts reflect a growing commitment to ensuring that policy decisions are grounded in comprehensive, accessible data, and that high-quality early learning experiences reach more Texas children.

In The News

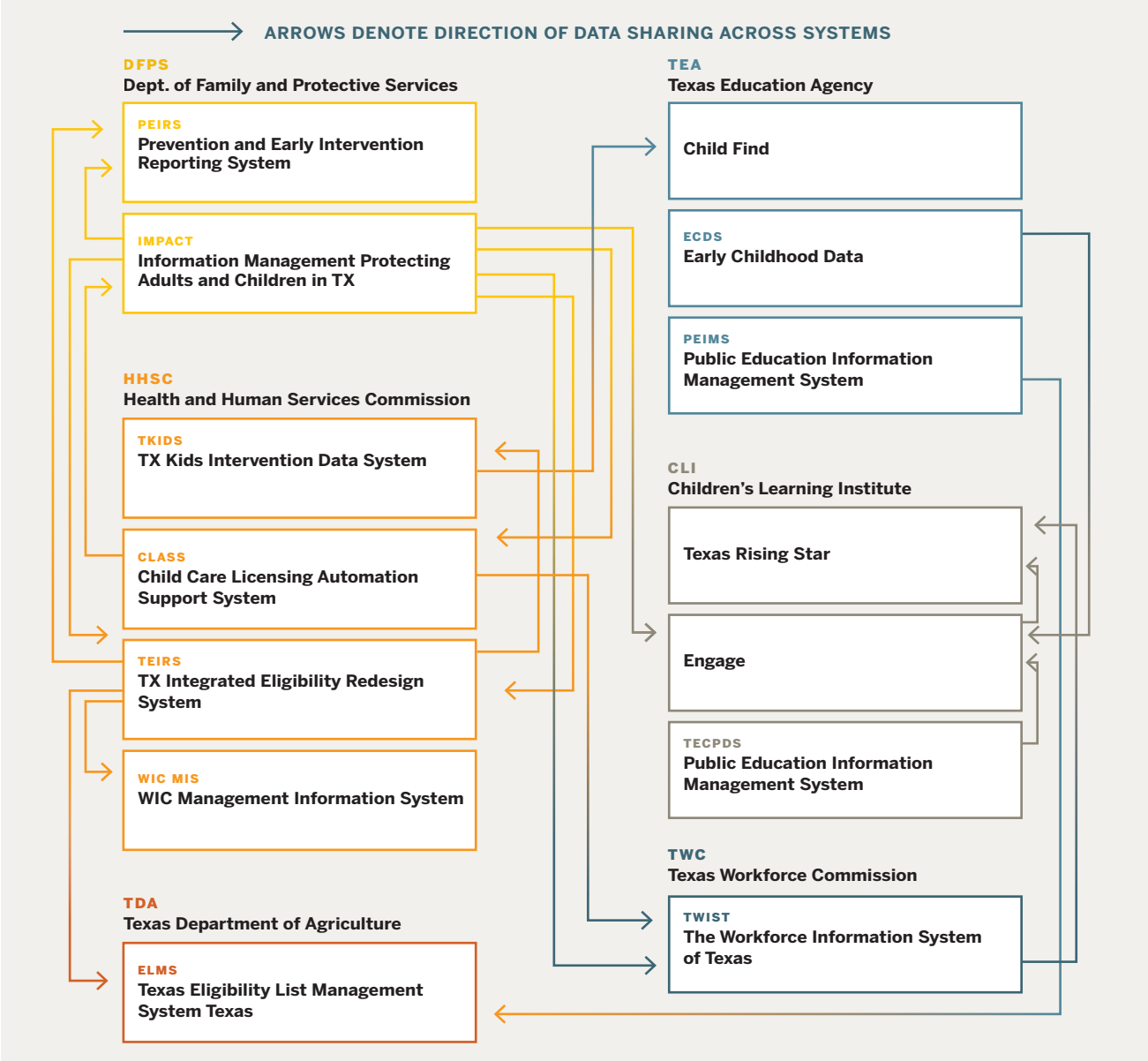
- In January 2026, Governor Abbott launched the Early Childhood Education and Care Taskforce to evaluate childcare and early learning programs statewide. The taskforce will examine the "governance and operational challenges of the early childhood education system in Texas" with the goal of improving access, quality, and affordability of child care (Office of the Texas Governor, 2026, para. 4).
- Governance over the early childhood education system in Texas currently spans at least four state agencies (i.e., Texas Education Agency, Texas Workforce Commission, Texas Health and Human Services Commission, Texas Head Start State Collaboration Office) (Texas 2036, 2025). HB 4903 (89R) established the Quad Agency Child Care Initiative, which intends "to foster collaboration, coordinate policies, and review and recommend actions to streamline regulations between the participating agencies that govern child care in the state" (2025).
- Texas's Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), mandated by HB 3963 (89R, 2025), aims to consolidate currently fragmented early childhood data from multiple state agencies into a unified system that can answer critical policy questions about population needs, program eligibility, service access, and child outcomes (Texas Early Learning Council, 2023; TWC, 2025a). With funding from the federal Preschool Development Grant Birth to Five expiring early 2026, the state must seek alternative funding streams to support the development of the ECIDS.
- School systems providing high-quality, full-day pre-K for 4-year-old students must collect student progress data in all five domains: (1) health and wellness; (2) emergent literacy language and communication; (3) emergent literacy reading; (4) emergent literacy writing, and (5) mathematics at the beginning-of-year, middle-of-year, and end-of-year (TEA, 2024).

In Recent Literature

- Currently, early childhood data in Texas are housed across multiple state agencies, making it difficult to obtain a comprehensive view of the state's early childhood care and education system. In 2025, the Texas Legislature passed HB 3963, which mandates the creation of an Early Childhood Integrated Data System

(ECIDS) to consolidate data from various programs and agencies into a unified platform. The law designates the Texas Education Agency as the lead agency, with implementation efforts beginning in 2026. While Texas conducted foundational planning work between 2022 and 2023—including the development of an ECIDS Roadmap and a Data Landscape and Inventory—research on Texas's integrated data system development and implementation remains limited, as the system is still in its early stages.

Figure 6. Early childhood data sharing among Texas agencies (3Si, 2023)



Note: *This data landscape map shows how data flows between systems that are relevant to early childhood care and education in Texas. The manner of data sharing varies from system connections to manual data pulls. The figure does not intend to capture every existing data system.*

KEY ACTORS

The Key Actor Map in Figure 7 organizes the early childhood education ecosystem into three interrelated domains that reflect how the system is experienced, supported, and shaped across levels. The domains are not hierarchical or sequential; rather, they represent distinct roles that actors play in relation to children's learning, and they interact continuously to influence how early childhood education functions in practice.

Taken together, the three domains illustrate early childhood education as a dynamic, multi-level ecosystem. The map is intended to support strategic thinking by making visible how influence and responsibility are distributed across the system and where opportunities for coordination, alignment, and partnership exist. The actor types and organizations included are illustrative rather than exhaustive—the tool is designed to offer a high-level orientation to the ecosystem, not a comprehensive inventory.

Instructional Core: Where learning and relationships happen

INSTRUCTIONAL CORE centers the daily experiences of children and families and the instructional environments in which learning occurs from pre-K through Grade 3. Actors in this domain are those who interact most directly with children and families and whose decisions and relationships have the most immediate impact on learning, development, and continuity across early grades. This domain reflects the reality that early childhood education is fundamentally relational and experiential, shaped through classroom practice, family engagement, and transitions across settings.

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.

Operational Systems: What makes the instructional core function—or fragment

OPERATIONAL SYSTEMS includes the systems and infrastructure that enable, coordinate, or constrain what happens in the instructional core. Actors in this domain often operate behind the scenes, translating policy into practice, shaping instructional expectations, and supporting (or undermining) coherence across pre-K, kindergarten, and the early grades. While these actors may be less visible to families and children, their decisions about curriculum, data, professional

learning, and system coordination play a critical role in whether early childhood education functions as an aligned continuum or as a set of disconnected programs.

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.

Policy Influences: What sets the conditions for the system

POLICY INFLUENCES captures the broader policy, governance, and resource context within which early childhood education operates. Actors in this domain shape priorities, incentives, and constraints through legislation, funding, advocacy, and agenda-setting, often at a distance from daily practice. Although these actors do not typically engage directly with children or classrooms, their influence is felt throughout the system, affecting access, quality, alignment, and sustainability over time.

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.

Figure 7. Map of key actor types in the Pre-K through grade 3 ecosystem in public education

Instructional Core:
Where learning and relationships happen

Families & Caregivers (as System Navigators)

- Parents & caregivers
- Family engagement staff
- Enrollment & supports
- Community-based family organizations (school connected)

Direct Instructional Providers (Pre-K–3)

- ISD-operated pre-K programs
- Elementary schools (K–3 classrooms)
- Charter schools offering pre-K and early grades
- District-partnered pre-K providers (only when delivering public pre-K)

Educators & the Pre-K–3 Workforce

- Pre-K teachers
- K–3 teachers
- Instructional aides & para-professionals
- Literacy specialists
- Early intervention & special education staff
- Supporting systems:
- Educator preparation programs (ECE & elementary)
- Professional learning providers
- ESC networks
- Certification & credentialing bodies
- Professional associations

Operational Systems:
What makes the instructional core function—or fragment

Regional & Local Education Systems

- ISDs
- District curriculum & instruction departments
- Elementary schools
- Campus leadership (principals, APs)
- ESCs

Curriculum, Instruction, & Assessment Infrastructure

- Curriculum & instructional
- Early literacy initiatives
- Kindergarten readiness assessments
- Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) & early intervention frameworks
- Instructional coaching models

Policy Influences: What sets the conditions for the system

Data, Research, & Continuous Improvement Actors

- Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS) governance and contributors
- TEA and district data systems
- Early grade assessment systems
- University research centers
- RPPs
- Evaluation partners

Intermediaries, Advocacy, & Backbone Organizations

- Organizations focused on pre-K–3 alignment
- Policy intermediaries working in education
- Advocacy organizations focused on early learning & literacy
- Regional backbone organizations supporting districts

State Government & Statewide Systems

- TEA
- Public pre-K policy and funding
- Early literacy initiatives
- Curriculum standards
- Assessment & accountability
- SBOE
- Standards and instructional materials
- Texas Legislature & Governor's Office
- Statute, funding, eligibility
- TWC
- HHSC (adjacent via Head Start administration)
- Quad Agency

Federal Actors (Indirect)

- U.S. Department of Education
- Early literacy
- IDEA (early grades)
- Title I (early grades)
- Federal Head Start Office (Administration for Children and Families)
- Head Start standards and funding for children ages 3–5
- Federal oversight affecting pre-K access, quality, and kindergarten transitions
- Federal civil rights and special education enforcement

Philanthropy & Funders

- Funders supporting pre-K access
- Funders investing in early literacy & alignment
- Funders backing district-based improvement and data work

LOOKING AHEAD

Texas's early childhood education system is in a period of active, layered change. New legislation, cross-agency governance structures, a first-of-its-kind integrated data system, and significant funding adjustments are all moving simultaneously—each with its own implementation timeline and stakeholder configuration. Across the preceding sections, this landscape analysis has surfaced not a single dominant challenge, but a set of interacting tensions between what the system is designed to do and what it is currently able to deliver, between policy ambition and program infrastructure, and between investment at the state level and reach at the family level.

This section is not a summary of the landscape analysis. Instead, it surfaces cross-cutting patterns that recur across topic areas, key actors, and policy arenas. The goal is to shift from describing the early childhood education landscape to identifying points of convergence and divergence that merit deeper examination. The questions posed here are intentionally open-ended and are designed to support future inquiry rather than immediate conclusions.

Why Tensions, Not Takeaways?

Rather than organizing this section around recommendations or predefined opportunities, we frame it around tensions—recurring tradeoffs embedded in Texas's early childhood education system. These tensions highlight places where values, incentives, and constraints pull in different directions across policy, practice, and systems. This framing is intentional: it preserves multiple plausible paths forward and creates space for dialogue, disagreement, and collective sensemaking. Readers are encouraged to interpret these tensions differently based on their roles, priorities, and local conditions.

Tension 1 | Cost, Compensation, and Program Quality

Texas's early childhood education system is caught in a structural bind that no single policy lever can resolve in isolation. Child care providers cannot raise wages without raising costs; costs cannot rise without making care unaffordable for families; and public funding through subsidies and additional financial support does not yet cover the true cost of delivering quality care. Each element of this triangle affects the others, yet policy responses have largely addressed them separately.

Recent legislative action reflects growing awareness of this dynamic. The investment in child care scholarships, adjustments to the Early Education Allotment under HB 2, and local tax relief for providers are meaningful steps. Still, these investments have prevented losses more than they have expanded access, and subsidy reimbursement rates paid to providers continue to fall short of what quality care actually costs. Meanwhile, educator wages remain below a living wage in most regions, and the staffing shortages that result directly constrain both program access and quality. Research has a role to play in clarifying where investment is most likely to produce durable change—and in making visible the tradeoffs when it does not.

Framing Questions

- ★ Under what conditions do state investments in child care subsidies, pre-K funding, and workforce compensation translate into durable improvements in program stability and quality—rather than temporary relief?
- ★ How do districts, providers, and local workforce boards braid funding streams in practice, and where do gaps, eligibility cliffs, or reimbursement shortfalls create systemic fragility?
- ★ What does the true cost of quality care look like across different program types and regions in Texas, and how does the current funding architecture compare?

Tension 2 | A Governance Window and the Race Against Implementation

Texas is experiencing a rare and time-limited convergence of governance structures in early childhood education. The Early Childhood Integrated Data System (ECIDS), mandated by HB 3963, is in its foundational design phase. The Quad Agency Child Care Initiative is newly operational. The Governor's Early Childhood Education and Care Taskforce launched in January 2026. HB 2 is reshaping pre-K funding formulas. These are not incremental adjustments—they represent a window to shape the architecture of the system before it hardens into routine.

Decisions made now about what data to collect, how agencies coordinate, and which programs receive priority will shape what Texas can know and do for years to come. The challenge is that governance design and policy implementation typically happen faster than research can inform them. This creates an urgent question for a research-practice-policy partnership: how does research enter the conversation early enough to matter?

Framing Questions

- ★ What design decisions in the ECIDS—about data elements, governance structure, access protocols, and linkage logic—are most consequential for the quality of future research and evaluation, and who is positioned to shape them?
- ★ How are the four agencies in the Quad Agency Initiative navigating overlapping jurisdictions, different funding streams, and distinct accountability systems in practice? Where is coordination holding, and where are the fault lines?
- ★ Which aspects of the current governance window are most time-sensitive—and what would it mean for the system if these decisions were made without sustained research engagement?

Tension 3 | Program Availability vs. Family Reach

Texas has invested significantly in early childhood program infrastructure: expanding pre-K seats, building the Texas Rising Star quality improvement system, establishing child care subsidy pathways, and funding outreach campaigns to increase enrollment. Yet the families who could benefit most from these programs are also the least likely to participate.

In 2024, 88% of low-income working families lived in child care deserts and nearly 282,000 eligible children remained unenrolled in public pre-K. For Hispanic families in particular, word-of-mouth outreach, documentation requirements, and language barriers shape whether the system is actually within reach. These patterns are not incidental. They reflect structural gaps between how programs are designed and how families actually navigate the system—across geography, language, documentation, and awareness. The question is not whether programs exist, but whether programs as designed and delivered are reaching the children and families they were built to serve—and what it would take to close that gap.

Framing Questions

- ★ Where do the largest gaps exist between program eligibility and actual enrollment—and what do administrative data, subsidy records, and outreach program experience reveal about why?
- ★ How do geographic isolation, documentation barriers, language access, and awareness interact to shape which families successfully enroll in and sustain participation in early childhood programs?
- ★ What outreach and navigation models have demonstrated the strongest track record of increasing enrollment among families with the lowest prior participation rates—and under what conditions are they replicable across Texas's diverse regional contexts?

Linking Issues, Actors, and Pathways

These three tensions do not operate independently. Decisions in one part of the system reverberate across others. Research opportunities emerge where assumptions about these linkages remain untested.

Table 3. Tensions in early childhood education across issues, actors, and pathways

	ISSUES	ACTORS	PATHWAYS	OUTCOMES
Tension	*What the system is grappling with*	*Who holds authority or influence*	*How influence flows*	*What is at stake*
Tension 1 *Cost, Compensation & Quality*	Funding gaps & true cost of quality care	State agencies, providers & local workforce boards	Subsidy rates, FFA formula & local tax relief	Stable programs & compensated educators
Tension 2 *Governance Window & Implementation*	Cross-agency coordination & ECIDS design gaps	The Quad (TEA, TWC, HHSC, DFPS), Governor's Taskforce	ECIDS linkages, Quad Initiative & federal grant timelines	Coordinated, data-informed governance
Tension 3 *Program Availability vs. Family Reach*	Enrollment gaps, deserts & navigation barriers	Families, providers, intermediaries & local districts	Outreach campaigns, subsidy enrollment & navigator programs	Children & families within reach of the system

Across all three tensions, feedback flows continuously—through accountability signals, research, advocacy, and family experience—shaping how issues are understood, actors respond, and pathways evolve over time.

Closing Reflection

Texas's early childhood education is a system in motion, shaped by accumulated decisions, competing demands, and real momentum for change. The tensions identified here reflect layered policy choices, evolving institutional configurations, and competing expectations about what early learning should deliver—and for whom. The LONESTA**RP3** network is well-positioned to do more than observe this moment. The questions ahead are not only about how to expand access or improve quality in the abstract, but about how the design of programs, data systems, governance structures, and funding flows shapes what becomes possible—and what remains just out of reach — for children and families across Texas.

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