

Governor's Task Force on Early Childhood Education and Care

Quality Early Learning: The Case for Centering Adult-Child Interactions

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The Problem

Texas has fragmented ECEC quality systems — built separately, measured differently, and defined without a common understanding of what quality actually means for children.

Texas ECEC Quality Is a Patchwork

**Child Care
Licensing**

**Texas Rising
Star (TRS)**

**High-Quality
PreK (HQPK)**

**Head Start
Requirements**

**CCDF Quality
Dollars**

**Program-
Specific
Initiatives**

Result: Conflicting standards, duplicated effort, confused families, and a system that doesn't focus on what matters most.

Two Systems Side by Side

Texas Rising Star (TRS) vs. High Quality Pre-K (HQPK): What each measures, what each rewards, and what both miss.

TRS vs. HQPK: At a Glance

| DIMENSION | Texas Rising Star (TRS) | High-Quality PreK (HQPK) |
|-----------------------------|--|--|
| Administering Agency | Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) | Texas Education Agency (TEA) |
| Method | External assessment by TRS-certified assessor | District self-reporting via ECDS system |
| Output | Graduated star rating (Entry-Level, 2, 3, 4-Star) | Compliance report — not a quality rating |
| Focus of Measurement | Staff credentials, ratios, interactions, environment, administration | Curriculum, monitoring, teacher cert, ratio, family engagement, evaluation |

TRS Quality: Same Star, Different Classroom

Provider A

Minimum Adult-Child Interactions
Strong credentials & administration

Director & Staff
Qualifications (20%) 3.00 ★★★★★

Teacher-Child Interactions
(40%) **2.40** ★★★★★
(minimum)

Program Administration
(20%) 3.00 ★★★★★

Learning Environments
(20%) **2.40** ★★★★★
(minimum)

Overall: 2.64 → Four-Star

Provider B

High adult-child interactions
Minimum credentials & administration

Director & Staff
Qualifications (20%) 1.80 ★★★

Teacher-Child Interactions
(40%) **3.00** ★★★★★

Program Administration
(20%) 2.00 ★★★

Learning Environments
(20%) **3.00** ★★★★★

Overall: 2.56 → Four-Star

Why Adult-Child Interactions Matter

The strongest predictor of children's outcomes isn't credentials or ratios; it's what happens in the daily back-and-forth between adults and children.

Research Is Clear: Interactions Drive Outcomes

#1

Strongest predictor of
short- and long-term
child outcomes

Ulferts, H. et al. (2024)

Early Literacy & Math

Children in high-interaction classrooms show significantly stronger language and pre-math gains

Hamre, B., Hatfield, B., Pianta, R., & Jamil, F. (2014)

Self-Regulation

Rich back-and-forth exchanges build executive function, the foundation of school readiness

Sankalaite, S. et al. (2021)

National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. (2011)

School Readiness

Interaction quality predicts kindergarten readiness trajectories more than teacher credentials alone

Ansari, A. & Pianta, R. (2023)

Sabol, T.J., Hong, S.S., Pianta, R.C., & Burchinal, M.R. (2013)

Long-Term Outcomes

Attendance, special education placement, and academic growth all linked to early interaction quality

Villarreal, M. (2019)

Hamre, B.K. & Pianta, R.C. (2001) 8

Compliance v Quality

Compliance-Centered

- ✗ Measure what is easy to count: credentials, ratios, paperwork
- ✗ Limited evidence of improved child outcomes
- ✗ Create administrative burden without clear child-level impact
- ✗ Providers compliant but not necessarily better at teaching

Interaction-Centered

- ✓ Measure what happens between teachers and children
- ✓ Linked to gains in literacy, math, and self-regulation
- ✓ Enable targeted coaching and meaningful professional growth
- ✓ Comparable across settings: child care, Head Start, public PreK

Proof Point: Pre-K 4 SA

*Pre-K 4 SA was built with quality at the core,
and that has made all the difference*

Pre-K 4 SA Independent Research

Annual Program Evaluation

Westat / NIEER (2014–2022)

Strong

Adult-child interactions;
consistently above research
threshold

High

Kinder readiness; significant
gains from fall to spring,
every year

Community Impact Study

Villarreal, M. (2019)

31%

decline in need for special
education services

+13.4

more school attendance days

+3.8 / +4.5

percentage points higher 3rd
grade STAAR reading and
math

The Ask

Texas has the evidence, the proof points, and the opportunity to build a unified, interaction-centered quality system

Recommendations

1

Adopt a Unified, Interaction-Centered Definition of Quality

2

Separate Quality from Licensing

3

Align Funding, Coaching & Professional Development

4

Build on What Texas Has Already Done

Every child in Texas deserves a classroom where a caring adult is talking with them, asking them questions, and nurturing their development, every single day.

Texas can build that system.