



To the Mayor and Members of the City Council

June 4, 2024

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SUBJECT: CHILD CARE SERVICES AND ACADEMIC PROGRESS

Southern Methodist University, under contract with Child Care Associates (CCA), has produced a study about the academic progress of Fort Worth children receiving child care services from Texas Rising Star (TRS) programs during the fall of 2023. In response to a recent request by the City Council, this Informal Report summarizes the findings of that study and includes the full eleven-page report as Exhibit A.

As the SMU study explains, measuring the academic progress of infants, toddlers, and preschoolers is difficult because child care programs vary considerably in their curriculum and in their approach to academic assessment. Nevertheless, the study uses an industry assessment tool -- the Classroom Assessment Scoring System or CLASS -- to assess the quality of teacher-child interactions, which extensive research correlates with social and academic outcomes. Another research limitation involves the lack of available data by which to compare the performance of TRS and non-TRS programs. Numerous studies have found, however, that children who attend higher-quality early learning programs are better prepared for school entry than are children who do not attend high-quality programs. Consumers can be confident, therefore, that programs achieving TRS certification are generally well-positioned to advance the physical, socio-emotional, and cognitive development of children receiving their services.

The following are some of the study's major findings:

- Preschoolers: More than 90 percent of Fort Worth preschool (three- and four-year-old) classrooms attain the high-quality thresholds for emotional support (93%) and classroom organization (91%), but only slightly more than half (53%) reach the high-quality threshold for instructional support.
- Toddlers: Almost nine in ten Fort Worth toddler classrooms (88%) attain the high-quality threshold for emotional and behavioral support, but fewer than one in ten (9%) meet the high-quality threshold for engaged support for learning. With respect to emotional and behavioral support, the percentage of Child Care Associates toddler classrooms meeting the high-quality threshold (95%) is appreciably greater than the percentage of standard Texas Rising Star toddler classrooms doing so (84%).
- Infants: Fewer than half of Fort Worth infant classrooms (46%) attain the high-quality threshold for responsive caregiving. The percentage of Child Care Associates infant classrooms meeting the high-quality threshold (71%), however, is almost twice as great as the percentage of standard Texas Rising Star infant classrooms meeting that threshold (37%).

Many of the CLASS scores for Fort Worth classrooms indicate strong child outcomes, but the study underscores certain needs for improvement in preschooler instructional support, toddler engaged support, and infant responsive caregiving. CCA attributes these needs mainly to the post-COVID workforce crisis and a tendency of child care programs to move teachers in and out of classrooms in order to comply with maximum student/teacher ratios. These issues are compounded by low wages and high turnover rates in the child care industry. Average wages for Fort Worth child care educators range from \$12 to \$14 per hour, and annual turnover exceeds 40 percent.

If you have any questions about this information, please contact Assistant City Manager Fernando Costa at 817-392-6122.

David Cooke
City Manager

Assessing the Quality of Teacher-Child Interactions:

CCA Reviews the Assessment Data on Child Care in the City of Fort Worth

Fall 2023

About CORE

A nationally ranked private university with seven degree-granting schools, Southern Methodist University (SMU) is a distinguished center for teaching and research. Housed within SMU's Simmons School of Education and Human Development, the Center on Research and Evaluation (CORE) provides a range of research, evaluation, and consultation services. CORE's overall aim is to use evaluation science to improve educational outcomes for youth.

About Child Care Associates

Child Care Associates (CCA) is one of the largest child development non-profit in Texas, serving over 16,000 vulnerable young children annually. CCA works to deliver a wide range of programs and services to boost early childhood development for children in lower-income families. Child Care Associates partners with Workforce Solutions for Tarrant County to manage the child care scholarship program to help offset the high cost of child care for income-eligible families in Tarrant County, and to improve the quality of child care via Texas Rising Star program.

About Texas Rising Star

The Texas Rising Star program is a quality rating and improvement system for child care programs participating in the Texas Workforce Commission's Child Care Services program. Numerous research studies have shown that children who attend higher-quality early learning programs are more prepared for school entry than children who do not attend high-quality programs. Child care and early learning programs that achieve Texas Rising Star certification are in a better position to positively affect the physical, social-emotional, and cognitive development of children.

About the Evaluation

In Fall 2023, 176 classrooms across licensed child care programs were assessed using the CLASS assessment in the city of Fort Worth. Categories of classrooms include community-based licensed child care programs participating in the Texas Rising Star program as well as CCA classrooms and Pre-K Today partnership classrooms

OVERVIEW:

External university assessors from SMU's Center on Research and Evaluation assessed infant, toddler and preschool classrooms across Texas Rising Star-rated child care centers in the City of Fort Worth (and across Tarrant County). They assessed the quality of teacher-child interactions using a gold-standard tool in early education – the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS).

- Child care does not have a universal curriculum utilized by all programs nor any universal approach to child assessment. Individual child assessment at younger ages (0-5) is very different than school-aged assessment.
- Child care measures quality along a number of characteristics:
 - Structural or process measures of quality
 - Classroom and caregiver background measures
 - Quality of teacher-child interactions
 - Environmental rating scales
 - Measures of literacy and numeracy (preschool) – individual assessments

What is the academic progress of children in child care in the City of Fort Worth?

The academic progress of infants, toddlers and preschoolers is often referred to as “developmentally appropriate practices.” Observing, documenting, and assessing each child’s development and learning are essential processes for early educators and programs to plan, implement, and evaluate the effectiveness of the experiences they provide to children.

However, child care programs are very diverse in form and do not follow any shared curriculum nor do they follow any one approach to assessment. Montessori programs assess children differently than public PreK. Child care classrooms supporting infants and toddlers would support and record developmentally appropriate practices very differently than they would among preschoolers. Therefore, the question of “how are children doing in Fort Worth child care classrooms” is a bit harder to answer than one might assume.

While quality rating and improvement systems like Texas Rising Star work to assess program quality, child progress is best understood at the classroom level. Therefore, back in 2016, Child Care Associates in partnership with the Early Learning Alliance, Camp Fire and other community organizations introduced the CLASS

assessment tool as a mechanism to help understand the quality of child care at the classroom which is also a way to systematically improve child care quality (and more significantly improve child outcomes). As many as 700 classrooms have been assessed annually (pre-Covid), and mentors and nonprofit programs work together to use CLASS scores to guide continuous improvement.

- Assessments are conducted 2x annually, and classrooms receive individual reports showing progress between fall to spring and individual programs receive site reports of quality.
- The assessments measure the quality of teacher-child interactions which research correlates with strong child outcomes. As a community, if we're able to move more classrooms across the quality thresholds, we're more assured of the likelihood of strong child outcomes.
- CLASS assessments also put the focus of continuous improvement on the adults in the young child classroom to understand improvements that can be made – versus "high stakes" testing of very young children.
- CLASS assessments help us collectively understand areas that need improvement, guiding county-wide public investments and training as well as coaching efforts.

How are CLASS Scores in 23-24 Program Year?

The child care workforce crisis has impacted the quality of teacher-child interactions and quality in child care. Average wages for child care educators remain in the \$12-\$14/hr. range and annual turnover is estimated at over 40%. The Texas Rising Star mentors were able to reintroduce CLASS assessments more widely again in Fall 2022 after taking a pause due to Covid.

Despite workforce challenges, the recent **CLASS scores for child care are on the rise indicating strong child outcomes**. Some highlights:

- 93% of preschool classrooms exceeded the high-quality threshold for emotional support, with 91% exceeding the high quality threshold for classroom organization.
- 88% of toddler classrooms met the high-quality threshold for emotional and behavioral supports.

However, the workforce turnover showed its impact in the lower scores for responsive caregiving for infants and engaged support for learning for toddlers.

The CLASS Framework

How CLASS Defines Quality

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System® (CLASS®) (Pianta, LaParo, & Hamre, 2008) is the most researched and validated measure of early childhood teaching and classroom quality. Over 200 published studies show that students who attend classrooms with higher CLASS scores have better social and academic outcomes than their peers in classrooms with less effective interactions. The majority of the early childhood studies on CLASS have been conducted in diverse settings serving at-risk populations of children.

- Studies consistently demonstrate that students make greater gains in key areas of school readiness, including literacy, math, social-emotional development, and self-regulation, when they are in classrooms with more effective teacher-child interactions, as measured by CLASS scores.
- All children, including dual language learners (DLLs), benefit socially and academically from being in classrooms with high quality teacher-child interactions as measured by CLASS.

A wealth of research indicates that the provision of higher quality child care during the pre-kindergarten years is associated with multiple positive outcomes for children, including improved cognitive and language development, pre-academic skills, and decreased behavior problems (Burchinal et al., 2010; NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2002). Although some measures have defined classroom quality in terms of the instructional components of teaching and the physical environment of the classroom, LaParo et al. (2004) note that there is often little variability among early childhood classrooms in these areas. As LaParo et al. (2004) note, it is not whether materials are present or being utilized but rather it is **what teachers do with the materials they have and within their interactions with students that may determine the difference in quality among early childhood classrooms**. Measuring these interactions focuses less on factors such as curricula components or the presence of classroom resources and emphasizes the interactive and interpersonal processes that facilitate positive learning experiences. CLASS (LaParo et al., 2004) is an observational tool developed to identify high versus low quality classroom environments by measuring the quality of teacher-student interactions.

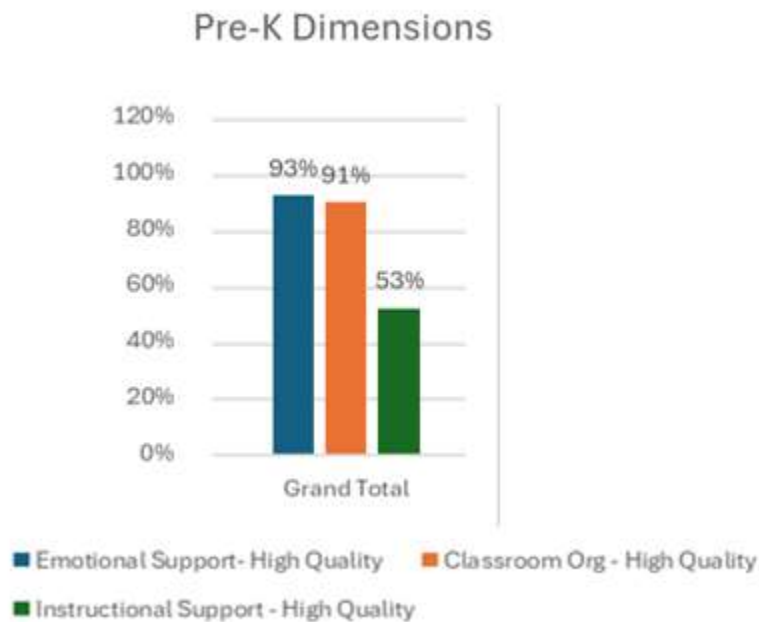
CLASS measures broad domains of effective teacher-child interactions. Each domain is comprised of multiple dimensions that focus on different aspects of that domain. The domains and dimensions are:

| | | | |
|---------|---|--|---|
| Infant | Responsive Caregiving <i>relational climate, teacher sensitivity, facilitated exploration, early language support</i> | | |
| Toddler | Emotional and Behavioral Support <i>positive/negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for child perspectives, behavior guidance</i> | Engaged Support for Learning <i>facilitation of learning and development, feedback, language modeling</i> | |
| | Emotional Support <i>positive/negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for student perspectives</i> | Classroom Organization <i>behavior management, productivity, instructional learning formats</i> | Instructional Support <i>concept development, quality of feedback, language modeling</i> |
| Pre-K | | | |

During each observation, classrooms are given a score for each of the CLASS dimensions between 1 and 7, with 1 being the lowest possible and 7 being the highest possible. In addition to the scoring scale, research evidence has established the *level of quality* of teacher-child interaction that is related to consistently positive student achievement outcomes (Burchinal et al., 2010). These levels of quality within CLASS, or **thresholds**, define the minimum level as which a positive associates between quality and child outcomes is consistently observed; **thresholds provide a clear goal or “target” score classrooms and administrators may strive toward.** After that minimum, student gains increase as quality increases. This threshold effect suggests it is especially important to ensure children experience at least minimum levels of quality care so that early learning experiences may lead to positive impact.

Preschoolers (3- and 4-year old classrooms)

For the Pre-K age range, 74 classrooms were assessed. The Pre-K assessment includes three domains - Emotional Support, Classroom Organization, and Instructional Support. Research has set forth high quality thresholds that are indicative of improved student outcomes. The chart below shows the percentage of classrooms that have reached high quality thresholds in the city of Fort Worth.

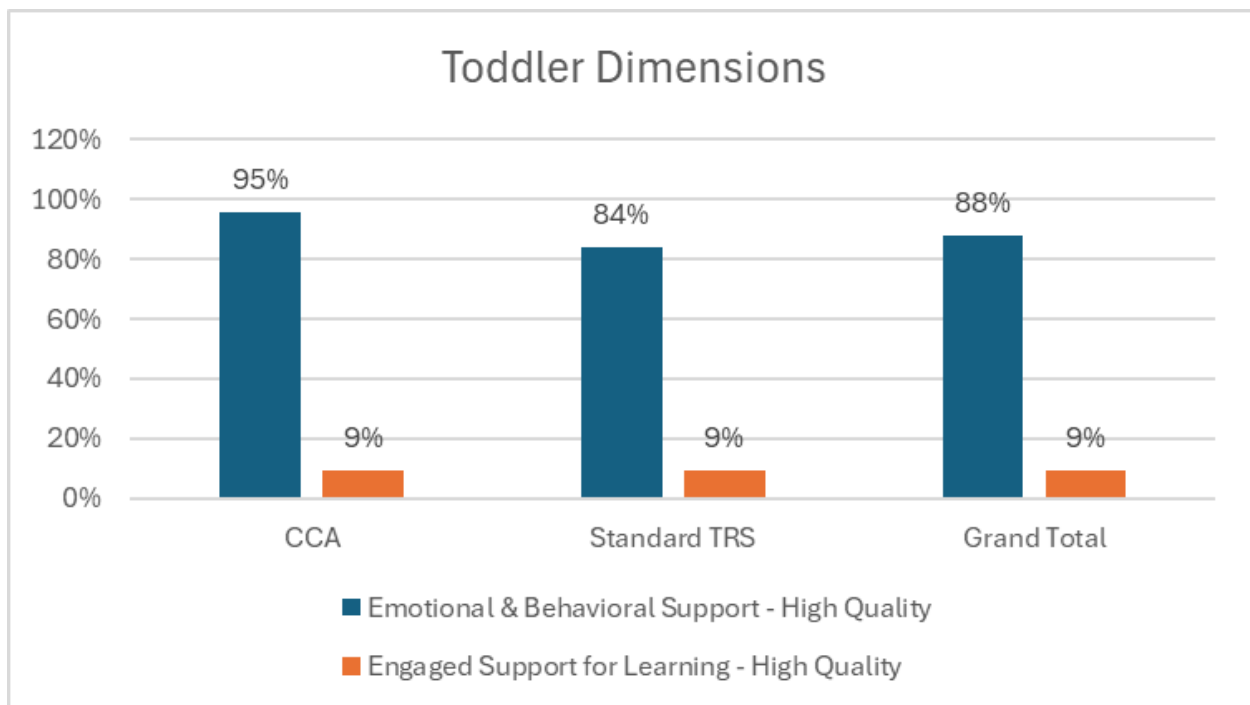


The threshold for the **Emotional Support domain** is 5.00. The average of all classrooms assessed is 5.95. Out of all classrooms assessed, **93% are reaching high quality thresholds in this domain**. The threshold for the **Classroom Organization domain** is 5.00. The average of all classrooms assessed is 5.61. Out of all classrooms assessed, **91% are reaching high quality thresholds in this domain**. The threshold for the **Instructional Support domain** is 3.25. The average of all classrooms assessed is 3.33. Out of all classrooms assessed, **53% are reaching quality thresholds in this domain**.

Toddlers

A total of 66 classrooms were assessed using the Toddler dimensions. The Toddler assessment looks at two domains - Emotional & Behavioral Support and Engaged Support for Learning. While these CLASS dimensions do not have a research-backed threshold, SMU used a criterion-informed threshold to emulate that used in the Pre-K standards.

The chart below shows the percentage of classrooms that met high quality thresholds during this assessment period.



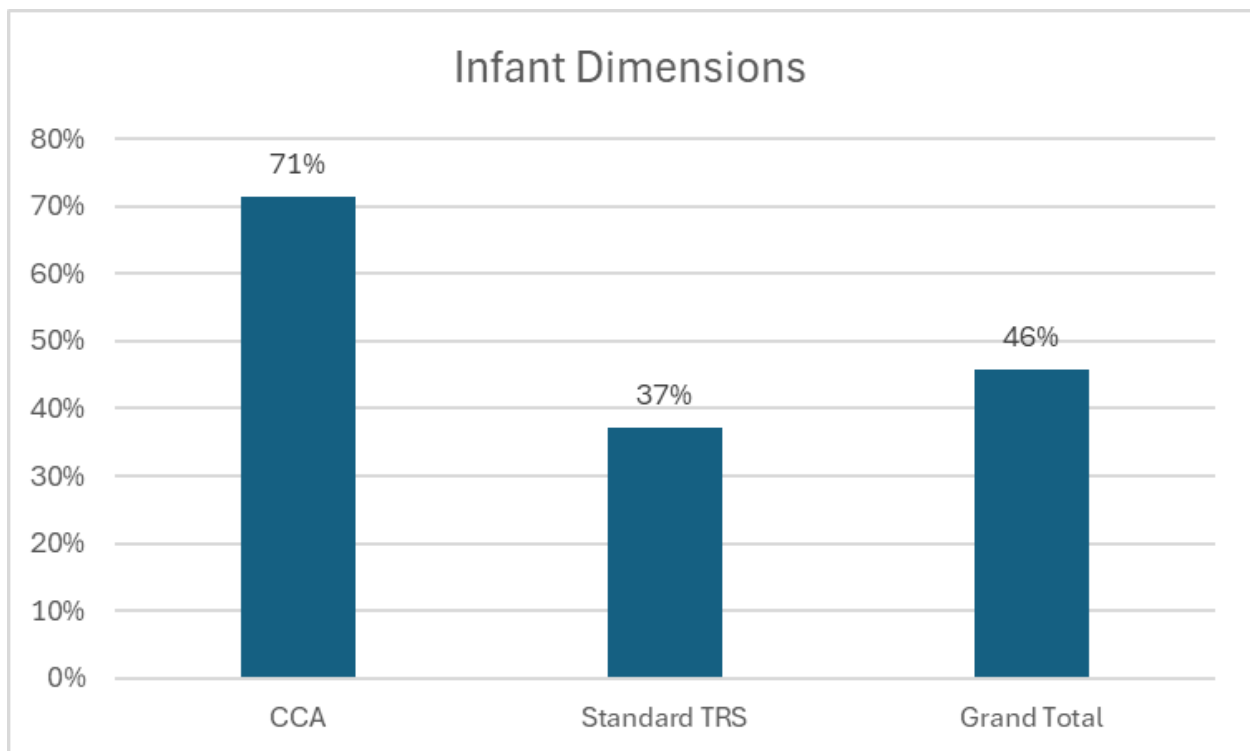
In the **Emotional & Behavioral Support domain**, the high-quality threshold is 5.5. The average score for all classrooms was 5.96. **88% of all classrooms met high quality thresholds.**

In the **Engaged Support for Learning domain**, the high-quality threshold is 5.5. The average score for all classrooms was 4.01. **9% of all classrooms met high quality thresholds.**

Infants

A total of 35 classrooms that serve infants were assessed during this time period. The infant assessment only includes one domain - Responsive Caregiving. While this CLASS dimension does not have a research-backed threshold, SMU established a criterion-based threshold to emulate the threshold used in the Pre-K standards.

The chart below shows the percentage of classrooms that met the high-quality threshold in the infant classrooms.



For the **Responsive Caregiving domain**, a score of 5.5 is considered high quality. The average score across campuses was 5.4. **46% of all classrooms were considered high quality in this domain.**