



First 5 Kings County Elevating Early Care & Education (E3) Initiative

Highlights from the Fiscal Year 2014–15 Evaluation

Understanding the Need

Research has demonstrated the importance of early education in promoting children's learning and social development and laying the foundation for success at school and in later life. Children who have access to quality early learning experiences are more prepared to enter school, and enjoy higher rates of academic success, including fewer behavioral problems, higher rates of high school graduation, fewer special education placements, and lower grade retention. Moreover, the earlier children enroll in quality preschool programs and the more time they spend in the classroom, the greater the influence on future school outcomes.

Unfortunately, not all children have access to quality preschool opportunities. Recent data from the Early Childhood National Longitudinal Study found that in a national sample of four-year olds, only 35 percent of those enrolled in center-based programs, and 9 percent of those in family care settings, were engaged in high-quality early care and education (ECE) programming. While teacher effectiveness is known to be one of the most important factors influencing program quality, many programs have difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified providers who have the education and specialized training needed to work effectively with young children in the classroom. First 5 Kings County is working to address this need by funding workforce development and quality improvement efforts that support the goal of making quality early childcare and education services accessible to all Kings County children.

What is the E3 Initiative?

The First 5 Kings County Children and Families Commission promotes children's early learning and school readiness through its investment in the **Elevating Early Care & Education (E3) Initiative**. The E3 aims to develop the ECE workforce and enhance the quality of children's learning experiences by funding two complimentary components:

- The **Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Education Standards (CARES)** program aims to improve the quality of early care and education settings and improve skills among ECE providers by offering professional development and resource materials to ECE providers.
- The **Child Signature Program (CSP)** provides classroom-based observations, technical assistance, and training for ECE staff employed in Head Start, state-funded preschool, and migrant education classrooms to enhance the quality of classroom environments early learning experiences and for children age 0 to 5.

Evaluation Design

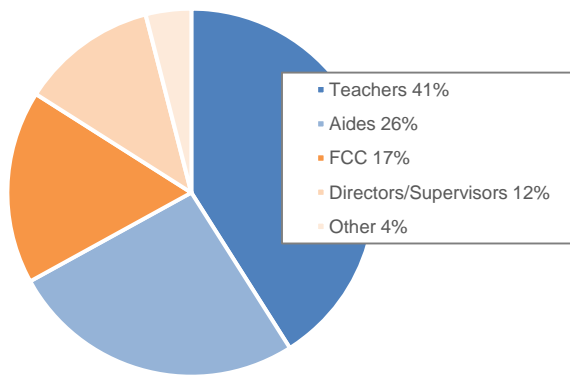
First 5 Kings County partnered with EMT Associates to evaluate programs and activities supported through the E3 initiative. The evaluation featured multiple components, including:

- **Interviews with program staff:** Brief telephone interviews were conducted with the CARES Program Director and CSP consulting staff to understand more about the program purpose, community needs, and program implementation.
- **ECE staff surveys:** Surveys were administered by mail to CARES participants and supervising and instructional staff employed in CSP classrooms.
- **Focus groups:** Focus group discussions were held in Lemoore and Hanford with CSP (n=10) and CARES (n=17) participants to discuss program impacts and needs for continuing professional development.
- **Review of preschool classroom assessments:** Results of classroom observational assessments were reviewed and analyzed to assess the quality of ECE program settings and to measure improvements in program quality over time.

Who was reached through CARES and CSP programs and services?

CARES CARES enrolled 127 licensed child care providers in 2014–15, who were employed across more than 50 Kings County state preschool programs, private preschools, and family child care programs. CARES participants included a mix of classroom teachers, teacher’s aides, family child care providers, program directors or supervisors, and other ECE program staff. About two-thirds of participants reside in Lemoore (34 percent) or Hanford (33 percent), and the remaining third live in Avenal (13 percent), Corcoran (7 percent), or other communities in Kings County and neighboring areas.

CARES Participant Positions (n=127)



CARES sponsored webinars and in-person workshops, in collaboration with local universities and other community-based agencies throughout the year on a range of topics, including, but not limited to: strategies to promote literacy and language development, ‘Make It & Take It’ classroom activities, managing classroom behavior, computer basics, and first aid training. Staff must participate in a minimum number of professional growth opportunities to remain enrolled in the program and may use professional development hours to meet certification requirements. CARES participants from state-funded programs also receive small stipends to use toward the purchase of classroom materials.

CSP The CSP program provides technical assistance and training to center-based Head Start, state-funded preschool, and migrant education programs. The 8 programs and 25 classrooms served through CSP are all administered by the Kings Community Action Organization (KCAO). The CSP model uses formal classroom observation to identify needs for preschool quality enhancements and provides custom coaching and mentoring to classrooms through an external early childhood education consultant. For the 2014–15 program year, CSP also co-sponsored 11 formal training activities on a variety of topics, including, but not limited to: lesson planning, nursery rhymes, teaching strategies, and classroom assessment. Attendance at training events ranged from 6 to 19 participants.

What are the major challenges facing ECE providers?

The E3 evaluation used voluntary, focus group discussions with early care and education providers as an approach to learn more about their professional experiences, and perceptions about the value added by CARES and CSP participation. Site supervisors, teachers, and other instructional staff who attended the CARES and CSP focus groups were first asked about challenges they face in their day-to-day work. Staff first brainstormed and then rank ordered different aspects of their work that presented the greatest challenges to providing quality early care and education to children and families. For both CARES and CSP participants, staff identified a common set of challenges that included:

- Low wages, staff turnover, and staffing shortages that reduce continuity, place excess burden on teachers in the classroom, and lead to burnout. Staff also noted challenges hiring and retaining trained and well-qualified staff to fill ECE roles.
- Insufficient supplies and materials, or stipends to purchase materials, that would enhance the quality of the classroom environments, particularly given that quality ratings are tied to the availability of supplies and materials in the classroom.
- Difficulty providing developmentally-appropriate instruction in classrooms enrolling children across different age groups.
- Behavioral challenges of children in the classroom that detract from teaching and learning.

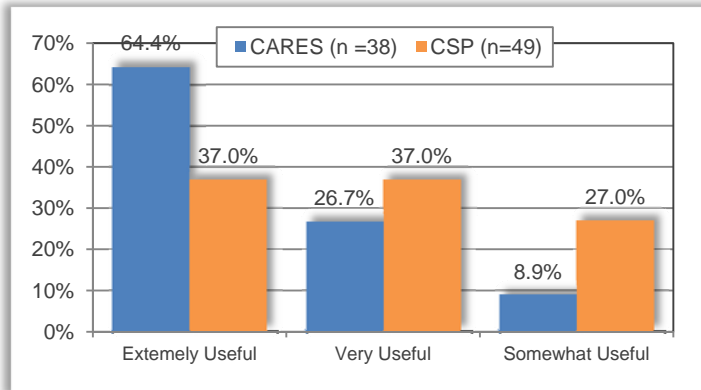
In addition, providers who attended the CSP focus group expressed frustration at constraints on time. Specifically, providers mentioned that paperwork demands, such as requirements for conducting child assessments, limited the amount of time available for planning the curriculum and instruction, or engaging with children in their care.

These themes reflect many of the struggles facing Kings County ECE providers in their day-to-day work and provide insight into potential areas of need for continuing training, coaching, or technical support.

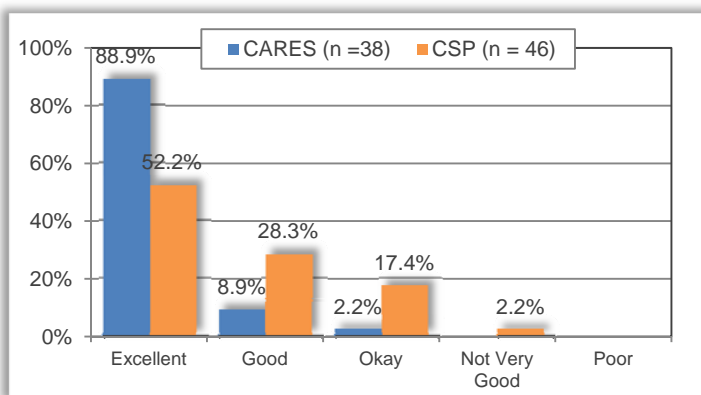
How did ECE professionals rate the quality of professional development?

CARES and CSP both use professional development for ECE staff as a strategy to enhance the quality of early learning experiences for children. Staff surveys were used to gather feedback from CARES and CSP participants on the training and professional development opportunities that were available to them through these programs. Surveys documented perceptions about the perceived usefulness of different program components, the selection of training topics, the quality of instruction, and the extent to which staff felt that these opportunities had helped to advance their professional careers.

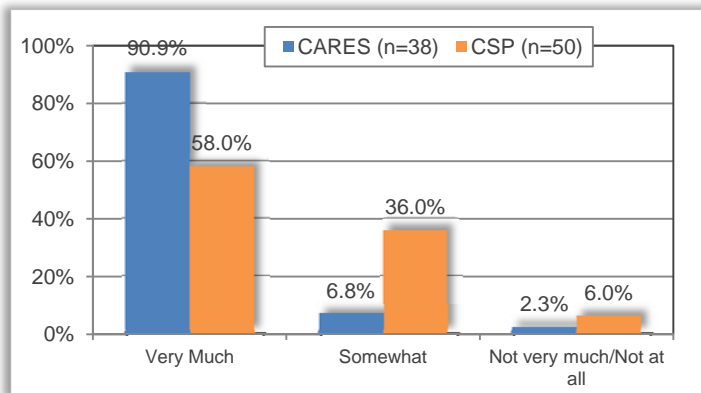
Selection of Training Topics



Quality of Instruction



Career Advancement



CARES

CARES participants responded extremely positively to survey items measuring the overall quality of the professional development opportunities and resources that were made available to them through the CARES program. Specifically:

- More than 90 percent of enrolled participants rated training content as either 'extremely useful' or 'very useful'.
- Nearly all staff (98%) rated the quality of instruction as either 'good (4)' or 'excellent (5)' in quality.

When staff rated the usefulness of different CARES program components in contributing to their professional skills, the most highly rated component was the ability to access web-based training activities (e.g., webinars). Staff also perceived value in the assistance they received developing implementation plans for their classrooms that addressed issues identified through classroom observations. Similarly, staff felt that feedback that was provided through these classroom assessments had meaningfully contributed to their professional development. For each of these program components, staff rated them as either 'very useful' or at least 'somewhat useful'. In all, more than 90 percent of CARES participants believed that their participation in the program had 'very much' helped to advance their professional careers.

CSP

CSP staff also responded positively to survey items related to the quality of training activities specifically:

- Nearly three-quarters rated training content as either 'extremely useful' or 'very useful'.
- More than 80 percent rated the quality of instruction as either 'good (4)' or 'excellent (5)' quality.

When staff rated the usefulness of different CSP program components, the most highly rated component was the provision of classroom materials, followed by the coaching and instruction they received to address students' developmental needs. Staff also perceived value in the in-class coaching they received on how to incorporate results of classroom assessments. More than half (58 percent) felt that the technical assistance they had received through the CSP program had helped to advance their careers in the ECE field either 'very much' or at least 'somewhat'.

"I truly believe they do a great job, always giving 100 percent to help teachers. They gave me useful tools and resources that I could incorporate into my classroom."

– CARES Participant

"All trainings they provided were useful and the ideas could be implemented immediately."

– CSP Participants

What were the perceived impacts of training and technical assistance?

To understand more about how ECE staff felt about the influence of professional development activities on their work, the staff survey included a series of statements about the potential impact of training and professional development on ECE quality, and asked respondents to rate how true each statement was for them.

CARES

Among CARES program participants:

- Eighty-eight percent felt that it was ‘very true’ that CARES helped them to acquire valuable resources and materials for their classrooms;
- Eight-five percent of staff felt it was ‘very true’ that they had become more confident in their teaching abilities; and,
- Eight-five percent of staff reported that it was ‘very true’ that they were able to apply new teaching strategies in their classrooms as the result of the coaching or training they had received.

CARES staff were also asked in focus groups about the most important benefits of their participation. The group consensus was that the most important impact on their professional life had been the opportunity that it provided for networking and sharing of information with other ECE providers. Staff also noted the importance of receiving additional classroom materials and supplies to support their curriculum.

CSP

CSP participants were also asked about the impacts of professional development:

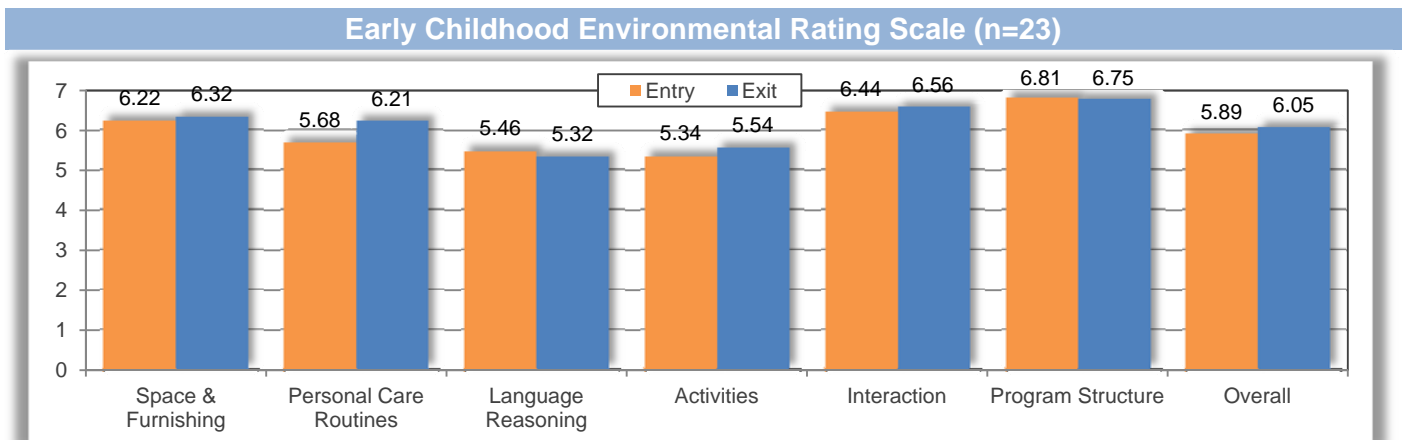
- Ninety-eight percent of teachers and staff in CSP classrooms felt that it was ‘very true’ that training and coaching had helped them to apply new teaching strategies in the classroom.
- Ninety-eight percent of staff felt it was ‘very true’ that they had strengthened the quality of interactions with their students.
- All staff felt it was ‘very true’ or at least ‘somewhat true’ that they had become a more effective early childhood teacher.

Among both CSP and CARES program participants, more than 90 percent said they ‘definitely’ expected to be working in the ECE field in the next five years.

Finally, CSP and CARES staff were asked to share examples of any changes they made to their classroom or home facility that they believe made an important difference in the quality of education and care they provided. Examples shared by staff included: adopting new teaching methods, integrating themes into the curriculum, reorganizing classrooms to improve transitions, working more effectively with children with special needs, and engaging in a more responsive and interactive way with the children in their care.

What did classroom observations tell us about the quality of ECE classrooms?

A key strategy within the Elevating Early Care & Education initiative was to build capacity within the Kings County early education system to conduct regular quality assessments of funded programs and to use information to guide program quality enhancements, including the development of implementation plans to address identified needs. The 2014–15 program year was the first year that ECE classrooms affiliated with both the CARES and CSP programs substantially expanded the use of two classroom observational tools – the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) – to provide reliable and valid assessment of the classroom environment and the quality of teaching and learning experiences.



Early Childhood Environmental Rating System (ECERS)

For the 2014–15 program year, 23 KCAO classrooms were observed and rated using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) at two points in time (pre and post). The average amount of time between the pre- and post-administrations was six months. The ECERS rates early education settings on seven domains of the classroom environment that research has shown to impact the overall quality of preschool experiences. These measurement domains include:

- **Space and Furnishings**
- **Personal Care Routines**
- **Language Reasoning**
- **Activities**
- **Interaction**
- **Program Structure**
- **Parents**

Items within each of the sub-domains were measured on a seven-point rating scale with the following range of values: 'inadequate (1)', 'minimal (3)', 'good (5)', and 'excellent (7)'. Pre and post ratings were recorded for six of seven domains and were averaged to calculate a total environmental scale for each classroom allowing for comparison over time. On global measures of classroom quality, all classrooms had average ratings of 'good' to 'excellent' quality, scoring within the five to seven point range. Preschool programs were rated highest in the sub-domain areas of program structure and interactions, and lowest on measures of activities and language reasoning. Between the pre- and post-observations the overall ECERS score increased from 5.89 to 6.05 representing a 3 percent gain in quality measurement between the beginning and end of the program year.

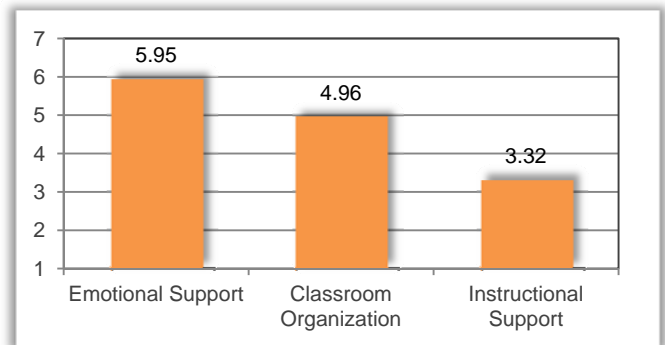
Classroom Assessment Scoring System

For the 2014–15 program year, nine KCAO classrooms were also assessed using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS). The CLASS is an observational assessment tool that describes three domains that support children's learning and development:

- **Emotional Support.**
- **Classroom Organization.**
- **Instructional Support.**

CLASS dimensions are rated on a seven-point scale measuring the frequency and quality of teacher-child interactions. Low ratings (1–2 pts) indicate that interactions are mostly ineffective, mid-range ratings (3–5) indicate a mix of effective and ineffective or absent interactions, and higher ratings (6–7) indicate that interactions are largely effective.

CLASS Results (n=9)



Studies have shown that children in classrooms with higher CLASS scores show more positive social and early academic development. Within Kings County, participating classrooms approached the high quality range on the emotional support dimension, and fell within the mid-quality range in the areas of classroom organization and instructional support. No classroom was rated in the low quality range on any of the three dimensions; however, scores do indicate opportunities for improvement in early learning classroom quality.

Summary and Conclusions

The evaluation of First 5 Kings County's Elevating Early Care & Education initiative has helped to further define and document challenges facing ECE providers and their continuing needs for training and workforce development. The evaluation has also highlighted accomplishments in several key areas. Most notably, both CARES and CSP participants perceived strong value in the training, coaching, and mentoring opportunities that have been made available to them, and believe that these resources have increased their effectiveness in the classroom and have advanced their ECE careers. Staff also rated the overall quality of training and professional development highly, and felt that the selection of training resources was relevant to their training needs.

The expansion in capacity to assess program quality using reliable and valid assessment tools, and the use of results to inform improvements in program delivery, also represents a critical accomplishment. These programs should continue to expand the use of these assessment tools across program settings to promote continuing growth in program quality, while attempting to balance additional demands on staff time. As more programs move to integrate quality assessment into their standard of practice, future evaluation efforts should focus on documenting the relationship between quality enhancements that are implemented in the classroom, and resulting changes in related program quality dimensions that can demonstrate the impact of program efforts.