

Advancing Access to Early Learning and Child Care in San Antonio

MAYOR'S POLICY REPORT

MARCH 2026



Executive Summary

On February 10, 2026, Mayor Jones, in partnership with District 6 Councilmember Ric Galvan, hosted an **Early Learning and Child Care Roundtable** that brought together over 20 early learning experts to inform an agenda for investing in San Antonio’s youngest residents. Since launching Pre-K 4 SA in 2012, San Antonio has been a national model for city leadership and investment in early learning, setting up thousands of 3- and 4-year-olds for success. But more needs to be done.

San Antonio remains the third poorest major city in the country and fewer than half of our youngest residents enter kindergarten ready to succeed.¹ A 2025 Early Learning Landscape Report by Texas A&M University San Antonio² and additional analysis from the Mayor’s Office reveal critical gaps in the availability, quality, and affordability of early learning and child care options in the city.

Addressing these gaps and increasing access to early learning and child care is one of the strongest³ economic growth and mobility investments a community can make. For children, quality early education improves academic achievement and social development.⁴ For caregivers, affordable child care access empowers greater labor force participation and higher wages.⁵ For the city, these investments support a stronger, more skilled workforce. Failing to act deprives San Antonian families and businesses of these benefits and millions of dollars in revenue and income.⁶

This report renews city attention on **early learning and child care (ELCC)** challenges and outlines a list of immediate actionable steps that the Mayor’s Office will take this year to ensure every child under 5 years old in San Antonio can enroll in a high-quality, affordable program in their school district or neighborhood. Specifically, the Mayor’s Office will:

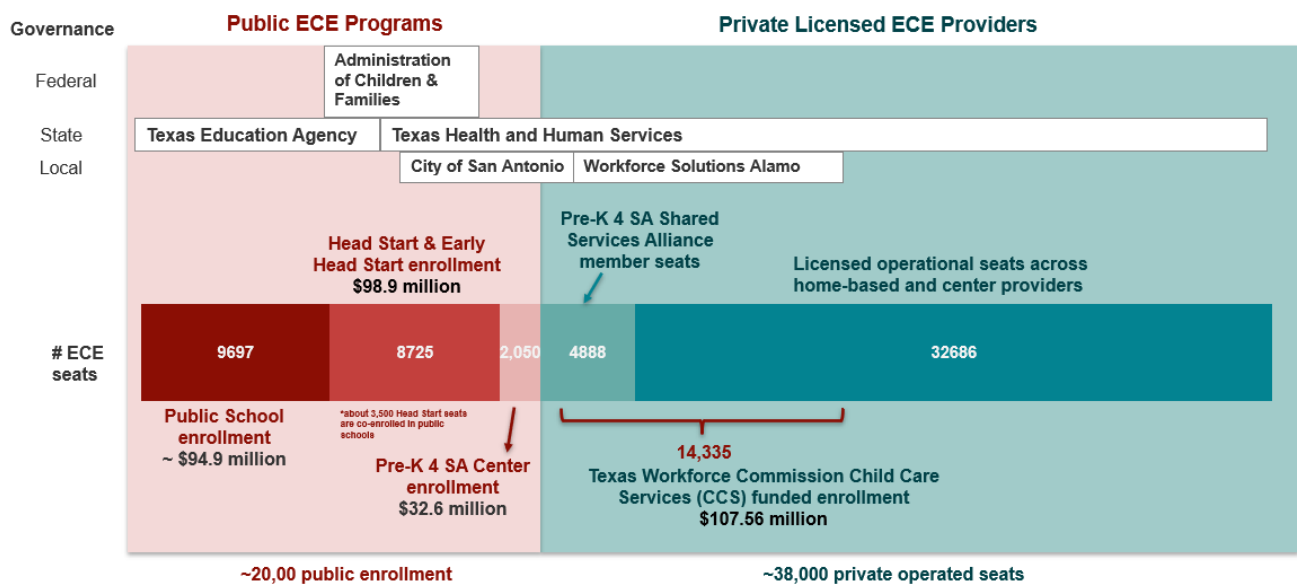
1. Convene an **early learning and child care task force** to increase coordination and accountability across local programs and capacity-building initiatives.
2. Launch an **outreach campaign** to increase enrollment in public school pre-K programs.
3. Facilitate **public-private partnerships** to unlock more child care funding for families and support high-quality private providers.
4. Work with City Council to establish ELCC workforce stabilization and compensation **pilot programs** to increase quality of care.
5. Advocate for increased ELCC **funding at the state and federal level** to increase affordability.

Early Childhood Learning & Child Care (ELCC) in San Antonio

Background

San Antonio provides quality, affordable early learning and child care options under a mixed-delivery system, encompassing a blend of public and private programs (see Figure 1). Public programs include state-funded public school pre-kindergarten and federally-funded Head Start and Early Head Start programs. State and federally-funded Child Care Services (CCS) subsidies administered locally by Workforce Solutions Alamo are also available to private providers, often small businesses, who operate the majority of child care seats available citywide.

Figure 1: The ELCC Ecosystem in San Antonio⁷



A unique component of San Antonio’s ELCC ecosystem is Pre-K 4 SA, a city-run program established by Mayor Julian Castro in 2012, which adds a layer of city sales tax funding to public program options. Pre-K 4 SA is a nationally recognized model for high-quality pre-K education and operates four early learning centers throughout the city. It was designed to capture more state pre-K funding and demonstrate what the gold standard of early learning looks like for the wider community. The program began with serving 4-year-olds in 2013 and transitioned to covering 3-year-olds in 2022.

Since 2020, initiatives like Pre-K 4 SA’s Shared Services Alliance, Early Matters San Antonio, and United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County’s Alamo Quality Pathway have made significant progress on strengthening the capacity and quality of private providers.

Defining ‘Access’

Despite progress made, gaps in access to early learning and child care remain a challenge for San Antonio. For this policy report, we define meaningful access as whether enough early learning and child care seats are **available** in the city for every child under 5 to enroll in a **high-quality, affordable**

program.⁸ We also consider whether available seats are located within a 5-miles radius of where a family lives (see Appendix A).

National guidelines recommend that seats be available for at least 70% of children under 5 to achieve “universal” access.⁹ For San Antonio, that’s around 65,000 seats for 92,386 infants, toddlers, and 4-year-olds.¹⁰ In Figure 2, we estimate the **gaps in access** across availability, quality, and affordability by subtracting current supply from our universal access point of 65,000.

Figure 2: Measuring gaps in access to ELCC¹¹

Component	Definition	Current Supply	Gap
Availability	Number of available seats (licensed, operational private provider supply and public program enrollment) citywide.	57,937 available seats	~ 6,500 seats to fill or create
by neighborhood	% of neighborhoods (census tracts) with seats within a 5-mile radius.	89% of neighborhoods with 5-mile availability	31 census tracts to target concentrated in south San Antonio
Quality	Number of seats nationally or state accredited through the highest tiers of Texas Rising Stars ratings.	32,714 high quality seats	~ 32,000 seats to improve
Affordability	Number of fully funded or subsidized seats.	34,932 affordable seats	~ 30,000 seats to fund or subsidize

The Mayor’s Roundtable on Early Learning and Child Care

To support the development of a renewed, coordinated city strategy on ELCC, Mayor Jones convened an Early Learning and Child Care Roundtable on February 10, 2026, in partnership with District 6 Councilmember Ric Galvan. The roundtable created an opportunity for local experts, practitioners, and caregivers to identify the most significant constraints to expanding access to early learning and child care in San Antonio, and to **prioritize near-term solutions for the city to consider**. This convening was organized as part of Mayor Jones’s policy priorities for the city. Councilmember Galvan’s partnership was integral through his role as Chair of the City Council’s Educational Opportunities Committee.

Participants included representatives from the Department of Human Services (DHS), Head Start Policy Council, AVANCE, Early Matters, Healy Murphy, Pre-K 4 SA, Lindsay’s Lilypads, Kids R Kids, St. Lutheran Child Development Center, Imagination Childcare Center, Books & Bibs, Texas A&M San Antonio, and the Barshop Jewish Community Center. Participants selected the following as priority focus areas for the city:

- Expanding high-quality infant and toddler care access.
- Improving compensation and benefits for early childhood educators to support staff retention.
- Advocating for increased local, state, and federal funding program for subsidy programs to meet demand.

Actions to Advance Access

Based on the critical insights from the Roundtable and supporting research, this section outlines five immediate actions the Mayor's Office can take to fill gaps in early learning and child care access in San Antonio. Recognizing local fiscal constraints and the necessity of more state and federal investment, these actions focus on impactful convening, communication, and advocacy strategies that are accomplishable within 90 days, 6 months, and 1 year.

#1. Convene an ELCC task force to increase coordination and accountability across local programs and capacity-building initiatives.

The Mayor will work with the City to authorize and convene a task force of key ELCC system players focused on increasing citywide coordination on ELCC access by aligning strategies, reducing duplication, and maximizing capture of available state funding and quality improvement resources. Specifically, the work group will:

- **Explore a citywide strategy to maximize public school pre-K program quality and coverage of eligible 3-year-olds** through direct enrollment or partnerships with private providers.
- **Amplify delivery of provider quality improvement technical assistance and resources** to increase the number of highest-quality accredited ELCC seats available in the city.
- Prioritize support to **neighborhoods with lower availability** of quality child care seats.
- Map and maintain **citywide early learning and child care resources** for families and providers.

Understanding the problem

The ecosystem of ELCC providers and programs in San Antonio is highly fragmented, which leads to suboptimal alignment and capture of available resources that could improve access. 12-plus Independent School Districts (ISDs), two city departments, the county workforce board, area non-profits, several state agencies, and over 700 private center and home-based providers fund, operate, and support the capacity and delivery of early education and care across the city. Both families and child care businesses struggle to navigate this web, leading to under-enrollment of kids and providers struggling to stay solvent and deliver quality care.

Increasing coordination would help San Antonio's ELCC system: 1) capture state pre-K funding for approximately 10,000 eligible 3-year-olds not currently enrolled in public programs (see Appendix B), 2) increase provider uptake of state quality improvement programs (46% of providers not enrolled in Texas Rising Stars accreditation program, see Appendix C), 3) ensure seats are equitably distributed across the city, so that families can access care within a 5-miles radius of where they live (lower availability of seats in southern San Antonio, see Appendix A), and 4) reduce administrative burden and information barriers for families while navigating their child care options.

#2. Launch an outreach campaign to increase enrollment in public school pre-K programs.

The Mayor's Office will collaborate with city departments to lead an outreach campaign designed to boost enrollment of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds in public school pre-K programs for the upcoming 2026-27 school year. Specifically, the campaign will:

- **Share multi-lingual content and media to encourage enrollment**, sharing program eligibility and enrollment instructions, highlighting the benefits of pre-K on child development and school readiness, and leveraging both data and storytelling to inform families.
- **Establish a "Pre-K Ambassadors" initiative** by recruiting trusted community leaders (faith leaders, nonprofit staff, pediatric clinics, elected officials, neighborhood associations) to conduct outreach and distribute enrollment resources.

Understanding the problem

The Texas Education Agency (TEA) provides school districts with funding to enroll eligible 3 and-4-year-olds in pre-K in public elementary schools or through partnered private providers. Eligibility encompasses children who are economically disadvantaged, military, experiencing homelessness, in foster care, and emergent bilingual. Approximately 75% of children who attend public school in San Antonio are eligible for this state funding. During the 2024-25 school year, 81% of eligible 4-year-olds but only 22% of eligible 3-year-olds were enrolled in public school pre-K (see Appendix B).

Outreach, in collaboration with ISDs and families, can maximize the number of children who benefit from the state pre-K funding they are entitled to, and the learning they deserve.

#3. Facilitate public-private partnerships to unlock more child care funding for families and support high-quality private providers.

The Mayor's Office will facilitate partnerships with large local employers to match high-quality private providers with stable enrollment pipelines and increase the number of affordable seats for families that meet their work schedules. Specifically, the partnerships will:

- **Encourage employers** to invest in subsidizing child care costs for their employees.
- **Match high-quality providers with employers** so they have stable, funded enrollment pipelines.
- Target employers/industries with high proportions of employees working **non-traditional hours**.

Understanding the problem

From fall 2023 to fall 2025, the proportion of high-quality early learning and care providers in the San Antonio area more than doubled from 18% to 42%. Yet, many providers still struggle to attain, maintain and increase the quality because the cost of quality often exceeds the revenue it yields and families cannot afford to absorb higher costs. At the same time, only 5.9%¹² of area providers report receiving funding from parents' employers, despite businesses losing an average of \$1,970¹³ per parent per year due to lack of child care access. Approximately 40% of parents of young children in

Texas work non-traditional hours¹⁴—on weekends or past 7pm—but less than 5% of area providers operate during these windows.

New and prospective San Antonio employers have a responsibility to secure and subsidize child care seats for their second shift workers. Encouraging businesses to cover child care costs at high-quality providers would unlock more funding for families, while empowering providers to maintain quality and operate during non-traditional hours.

#4. Work with City Council to establish ELCC workforce stabilization and compensation pilot programs to increase quality of care.

The Mayor will work with City Council to develop and fund pilot programs that reduce volatility in the ELCC workforce, so private providers are incentivized and empowered to maintain the highest quality accreditation. Specifically, the pilot program will explore:

- **Funding a substitute pool** of ELCC teachers to reduce negative impact of staff turnover.
- **Leveraging City of San Antonio’s benefits and tuition assistance programs** to increase compensation and benefits for ELCC workers at high-quality providers.

Understanding the problem

Private child care providers struggle to provide quality care and maximize their capacity due to workforce volatility, including low employee retention and high turnover. Much of this is driven by low wages for child care workers, which disincentivizes current and potential child care workers from staying in the industry and seeking advanced credentials. In Bexar County, the median wage for early childhood education workers is only 72% of the county living wage.¹⁵ A 2022 pilot study conducted by United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County found that wage increases (from \$9-\$11 to \$15-\$18) for early childhood workers in one local center correlated to a much lower turnover rate (116% to 30%) and higher morale for that center.¹⁶

Mayor and City Council action to scale this pilot will help stabilize the ELCC workforce and improve quality of care until more state and federal funding becomes available.

#5. Advocate for increased ELCC funding at the state and federal level to increase affordability.

The Mayor will prioritize early learning and child care as a top issue for state and federal advocacy and collaborate with regional stakeholders to elevate its importance. Advocacy will cover:

- **Increasing state funding allocations for ELCC**, including the Child Care Services subsidy (CCS) to match the cost of quality private care and family need, and the Early Education Allotment to cover full-day public pre-K for 3-year-olds.
- **Safeguarding and expanding federal ELCC programs** including Head Start, the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) and child care tax credits.

Understanding the problem

Current state, federal, and city funding covers and subsidizes enrollment for only 38% of children in San Antonio, yet market-rate child care is unaffordable for almost 80% of families in the city. The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) recommends that the cost of child care should not exceed 7% of a family's income to preserve other basic needs.¹⁷ The average cost of private, center-based child care in San Antonio is \$9,560, which amounts to over 14% of the median San Antonian family of four's income—double the recommended benchmark.¹⁸

With a broken market and limited city funds, more state and federal funding is imperative to increasing access.

Conclusion

Investing in smarter kids is one of the smartest investments we as a community can make. Supporting our youngest residents in their foundational years will strengthen the economic foundation of our city for years to come.

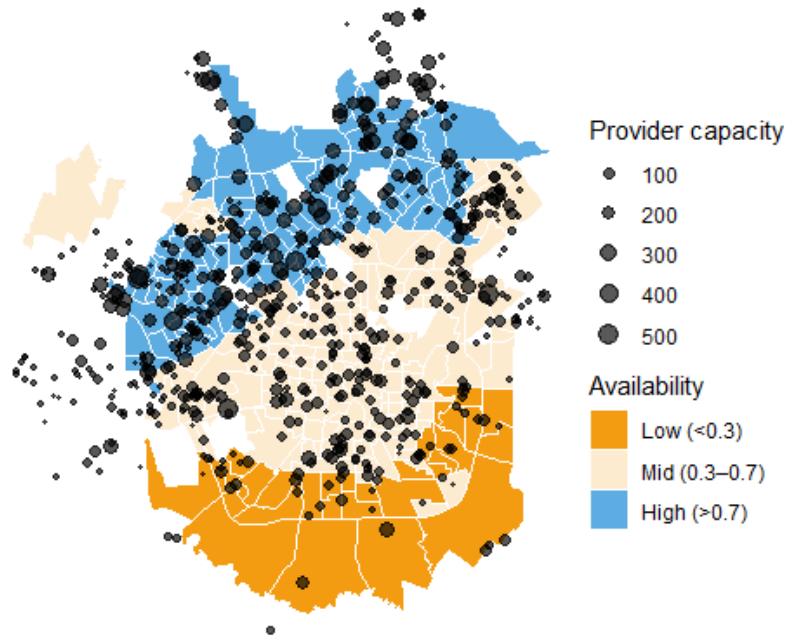
Over the next year, the Mayor's Office and partners will initiate the following to expand access to high-quality, affordable early learning and child care options across the city:

1. An early learning and child care **task force** to increase coordination across local programs and capacity-building initiatives.
2. An **outreach campaign** to increase awareness and enrollment in public pre-K programs.
3. **Public-private partnerships** with large employers that unlock more child care funding for families and support high-quality private providers.
4. A City Council established ELCC workforce stabilization and **compensation pilot program** to increase quality of care.
5. **Advocacy** for increased ELCC funding at the state and federal level to increase affordability for working families.

While challenges with early learning and child care markets extend well beyond San Antonio and City Hall, the immediate actions in this report establish the vision, leadership, and commitment our children deserve.

Appendix A: Availability of ELCC seats across neighborhoods.

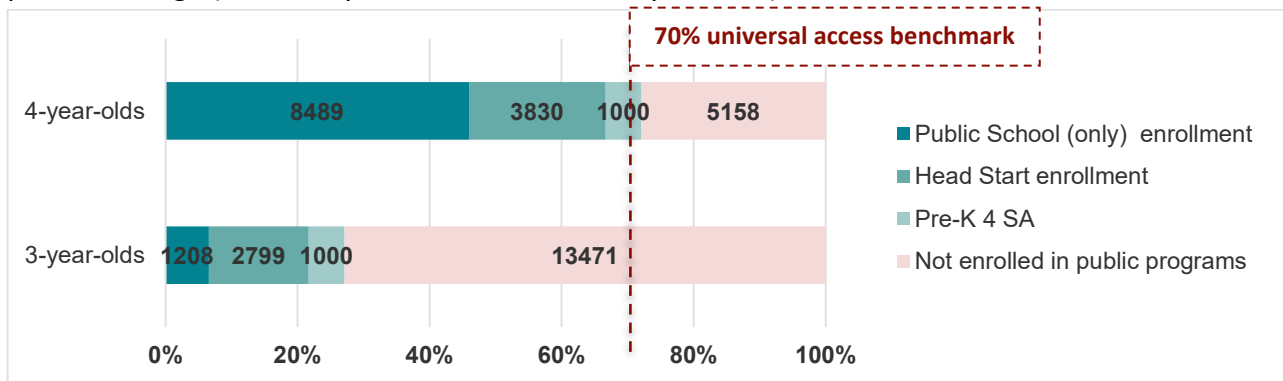
We categorized neighborhoods (defined as census tracts) by availability of ELCC seats (excluding public school enrollment) within a 5-mile radius from the center of that neighborhood, adjusting for overlapping demand across providers. A **low availability** neighborhood means less than 1 seat is available per 3 children under 5 living in that neighborhood. High availability means there is a surplus of options (>70% non-public pre-K capacity) within a 5-miles radius. **This analysis reveals that 31 low availability census tracts (11%) are concentrated on the southern edge of San Antonio, in City Council Districts 3 & 4.**



Appendix B: Enrollment across public ELCC programs (2024-2025).

By age group across all public programs

We looked enrollment of 3 and 4-year-olds across the three public ELCC programs in San Antonio: public school pre-K, Head Start, and Pre-K 4 SA centers. **72% of 4-year-olds but only 27% of 3-year-olds are enrolled in public programs in San Antonio.** This is significantly higher than statewide public pre-K coverage (52% of 4-year-olds and 11% of 3-year-olds).

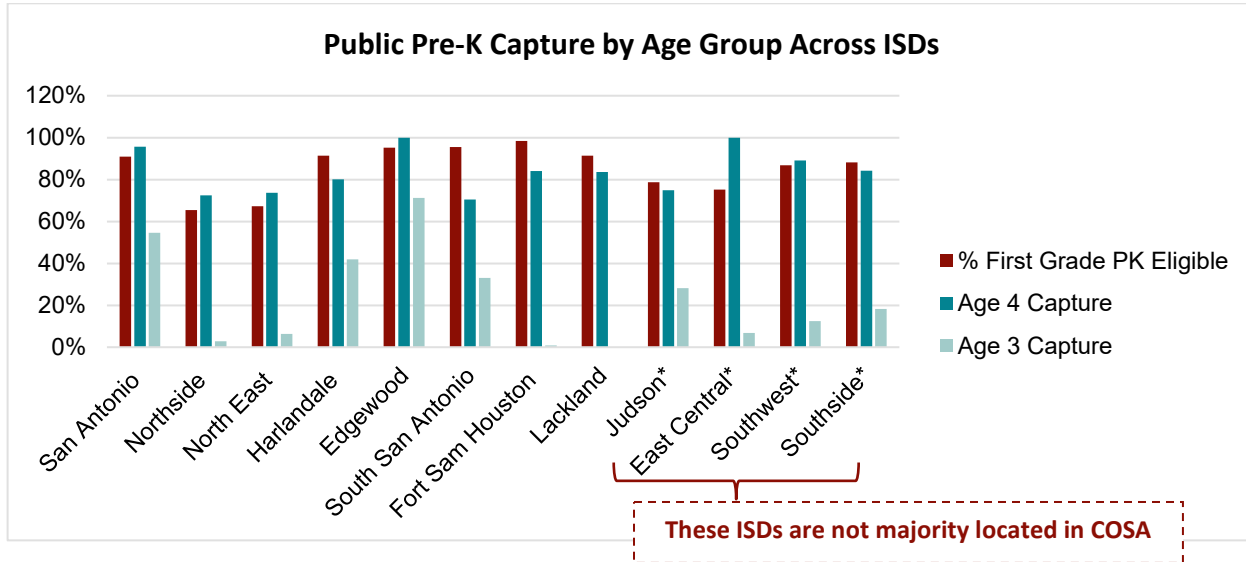


By area ISD for public school pre-K (serving 3 & 4-year-olds)

State of Texas offers free, targeted pre-K funding to ISDs for 3-and-4-year olds who meet eligibility criteria (economically disadvantaged (185% FPL), military, homeless, foster care, and emergent bilingual, children of teachers). We estimated capture of eligible 3-and-4-year-olds in public school

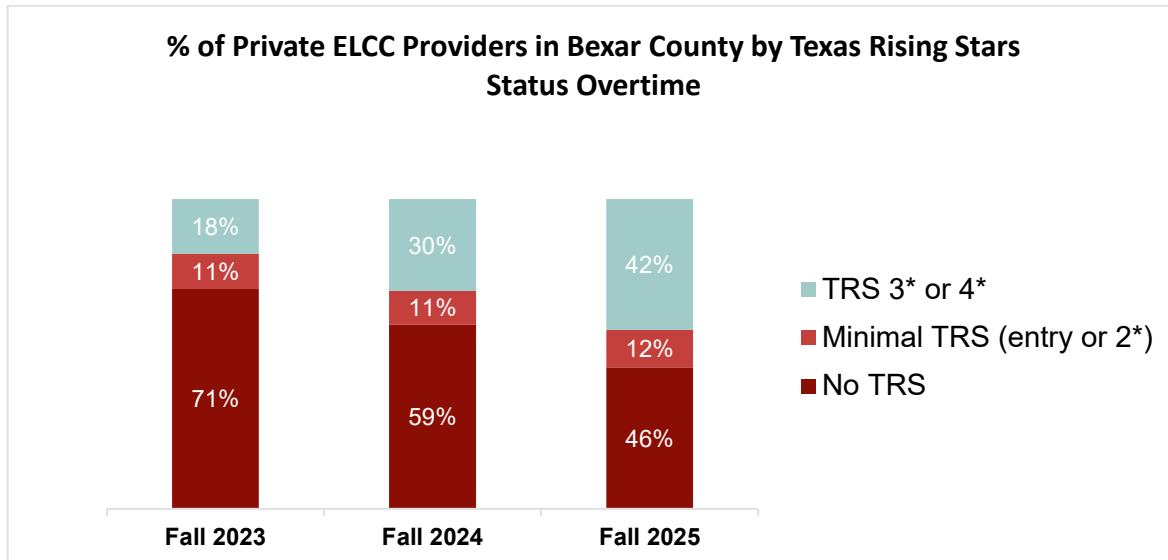
pre-K by dividing pre-K enrollment for each age group by the number of first-graders who meet eligibility criteria. Across area ISDs:

- 75% of first-graders are eligible for public school pre-K
- 81% of eligible 4-year-olds enroll in public pre-K
- 22% of eligible 3-year-olds enroll in public pre-K



Appendix C: Quality accreditation trends of private ELCC providers.

Texas Rising Stars (TRS) is a program established by the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to accredit, rate, and improve the quality of child care providers. It has four rating tiers: entry level, 2 star, 3 star, and 4 star. Data was collected from United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County’s Alamo Quality Pathway dashboard.



Endnotes

¹ Texas Public Education Information Resource (TPEIR).

² Jozwiak, M. M., & Inan, H. Z. (2025). City of San Antonio early learning landscape study: A comprehensive report on early learning and community voices (Report prepared for the City of San Antonio). Texas A&M University–San Antonio. <https://prek4sa.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/03/City-of-San-Antonio-Early-Learning-Landscape-Study-compressed.pdf>

³ Simon, C. (2019, July 24). *Social spending on kids yields biggest bang for the buck: Opportunity Insights study finds investing in disadvantaged children brings greater long-term results*. *Harvard Gazette*. <https://news.harvard.edu/gazette/story/2019/07/opportunity-insights-study-finds-investing-in-disadvantaged-children-brings-greater-long-term-results/>

⁴ County Health Rankings & Roadmaps. (2025, September 11). Preschool education programs (What Works for Health). <https://www.countyhealthrankings.org/strategies-and-solutions/what-works-for-health/strategies/preschool-education-programs>

⁵ Weixler, L. (2025, May 19). *The labor market case for early childhood education*. The Brookings Institution. <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/the-labor-market-case-for-early-childhood-education/>

⁶ Institute for Child Success. (2026). *ReadyNation: The child care crisis costs the U.S. economy \$172 billion each year (Cost of Child Care Crisis Report)*. <https://www.instituteforchildsuccess.org/resources/resource/cost-child-care-crisis-report/>

⁷ The Mayor's Office conducted independent analysis to map the number of ELCC seats in San Antonio. Sources include the Texas Public Education Information Resource (2024–2025 school year), Head Start agency service profiles (2025), Pre-K 4 SA (2024–2025 school year), and the Texas HHSC CCL Daycare and Residential Operations dataset (as of January 2026) accessed via the Texas Open Data Portal. The sample was limited to seats within the City of San Antonio and licensed operations serving children under 5 (not school age). Dual enrollment and double counting across these sources were accounted for where possible to produce more accurate estimates and isolate counts for public and private seats. Enrollment numbers for four school districts (Judson, East Central, Southwest, and Southwest) were reduced by 50% to account for their significant service areas that fall outside city limits. Private licensed capacity from CCL data was reduced by 30% to account for research from Jozwiak & Inan (2025), which found that private providers in San Antonio offer and enroll at 70% of their licensed capacity.

⁸ Definition is adapted from Friese, S., Lin, V.-K., Forry, N., & Tout, K. (2017). *Defining and measuring access to high-quality early care and education (ECE): A guidebook for policymakers and researchers* (OPRE Report No. 2017-08). Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/ccepra_access_guidebook_final_213_b508.pdf.

⁹ National Institute for Early Education Research. (2021, July 15). Universal Pre-K (5 FAQs <https://nieer.org/research-library/universal-pre-k>).

¹⁰ American Community Survey (ACS) 2024 5-year estimates.

¹¹ The Mayor's Office conducted independent analysis to compute gaps in available, quality, and affordable seats. Available supply of seats was estimated via methods outlined in Endnote #7. Low availability neighborhoods were calculated by computing child care availability scores at the census tract level by dividing the number of private, licensed child care seats within a 5-mile radius of each tract centroid by the number of children under 5 residing in the tract. Tracts were then categorized into low (<1 seat per 3 children within 5 miles), mid (30%-50% coverage), and high (70% coverage) availability groups. Quality supply covers seats at providers where state or national accreditation information was apparent: Texas Rising Starts 4 star private providers (accessed via United Way's Alamo Quality pathway dashboard), Pre-K 4 SA, Head Start, and Northside ISD (state-accredited under High Quality Public Pre-K). Affordable supply includes all public seats plus the number of Child Care Services (CCS) subsidies disbursed in 2025, as reported by the City's DHS.

¹² Jozwiak, M. M., & Inan, H. Z.

¹³ Institute for Child Success.

¹⁴ Doromal, J. B., Dow, D., Schilder, D., Lou, C., Mefferd, E., Willenborg, P., Norwitt, J., & Wagner, L. (2023). *What policymakers need to know about nontraditional-hour child care in Austin-Travis County, Texas: Challenges and recommendations* (Urban Institute). <https://www.urban.org/sites/default/files/2023-03/What%20Policymakers%20Need%20to%20Know%20about%20Nontraditional%20Hour%20Child%20Care%20in%20Austin%20Travis%20County%20Texas.pdf>.

¹⁵ <https://earlymatterssa.org/data-dashboard/>

¹⁶ Brewer, C., & Duarte, B. (2023). *Early Childhood Education Wage Increase Pilot Project 2022: Final report* (United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County). https://www.uwsatx.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/05/ECE-Wage-Increase-Pilot-Project-Published-Final-Report_.pdf

¹⁷ Department of Health and Human Services. (2024, March 1). *Improving child care access, affordability, and stability in the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)* (Final rule). *Federal Register*, 89 FR 15366–15417. <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/03/01/2024-04139/improving-child-care-access-affordability-and-stability-in-the-child-care-and-development-fund-ccdf>.

¹⁸ Massachusetts Institute of Technology. (2026). *Living Wage Calculator: Metro area living wage estimates [Data set]*. MIT Living Wage Calculator. <https://livingwage.mit.edu/metros/41700>.