

# Evaluating the NAEYC Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation System: Pilot Study Summary

NAEYC's Applied Research Team in collaboration with the Institute for Child Success

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## Overview

NAEYC partnered with the Institute for Child Success to test its newly updated [Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation System](#). This system is used to evaluate and recognize high-quality early learning programs across the country. The new version was created because the legacy system was seen as too expensive, time-consuming, confusing, and not always equitable to programs with fewer resources. The goal of the revision is to create a clearer, more equitable, and more accessible path for programs to demonstrate quality. This pilot study examined whether the revised system is reliable, fair, easy to understand, and accurately measures quality across diverse early childhood settings.

## Study Design

The pilot took place from April 2024 to June 2025 and included a diverse set of 27 early childhood programs and six NAEYC staff assessors. Programs submitted Recognition and Accreditation applications, completed surveys, and hosted site visits from trained assessors. ICS analyzed these materials alongside staff and assessor feedback and compared the new tools to NAEYC's former accreditation system.

## Key Findings

1. **The revised system is reliable and consistent** - Assessors scored programs consistently and accurately. Most parts of the system showed strong internal consistency, meaning items measure quality in a unified and meaningful way.

2. **The system accurately measures quality** - Most items and standards clearly reflect meaningful aspects of program quality. Programs participating in the pilot reported significantly stronger workplace climates than national averages, a sign that high scores align with healthier, more supportive environments for educators. Scores from the revised system aligned with results from the legacy NAEYC observation tool, which has been shown to predict real differences in program quality.
3. **The new system is clearer, easier to use, and more accessible** - Materials met readability targets and were easier to follow than those in the older system. The new tiered approach helped programs enter the process through a more manageable starting point. Participants said the system reduced redundancy and made expectations more transparent.
4. **Equity and accessibility have improved, but challenges remain** - Programs felt the revisions made accreditation more accessible and equitable overall. However, some participants worried that higher tiers (such as Accreditation+) may still favor larger or better-resourced programs. In addition, cost, staffing shortages, and administrative responsibilities remain barriers for many early childhood programs.

### Barriers and Limitations

Attrition (29% of initially enrolled programs did not complete the pilot) largely reflected challenges common across the ECE workforce—staffing instability, funding shortages, competing state initiatives, and even program closures. Scheduling site visits across many states and coordinating assessor availability also proved difficult within the study timeframe.

### Recommendations for Improvement

ICS identified several ways NAEYC can continue strengthening the revised system:

**Refine and streamline items** - Some items should be combined, moved to a different tier, or separated into smaller parts to improve clarity and measurement.

**Continue monitoring reliability and equity over time** - As more programs enter the system, NAEYC should regularly analyze results to ensure items work consistently across program types and demographic groups.

**Further improve clarity and accessibility** - NAEYC should continue reviewing all materials for readability and user-friendliness and expand resources that help programs and assessors navigate the process.

**Expand supports for programs** - ICS recommends a stronger emphasis on shared services and resource hubs, partnerships that increase access and reduce administrative burden, and communications efforts that raise awareness of the new system

## Conclusion

The pilot study shows that NAEYC's revised Early Childhood Program Quality Assessment and Accreditation System represents a major advancement for the measurement of quality in early childhood programs. It is more equitable, clearer, easier to use, and supported by strong evidence of reliability and validity. With continued refinement and expanded supports for programs, the revised system has the potential to strengthen early learning quality nationwide—and to help educators, families, and communities work toward a shared vision of high-quality early childhood education for each and every child.

If you have additional questions about the pilot study, please contact [research@naeyc.org](mailto:research@naeyc.org).