

Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood

Zero to Three Critical Competencies: Implementation of Social-Emotional, Cognitive, and Language and Literacy Development in Delaware



By: Stephanie Kuntz, Deborah Fuller, Jason Hustedt, Kristy Sheffler, Kristy Smith, Jessica DeWese, Jessica Cheyney-Morgan, Jaquaya Thomas, Holly Griest, Aridania Rivera, Lynn Worden

Introduction

During the 2024 State Fiscal Year (FY 2024), the Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood began implementing the *ZERO TO THREE Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators*. Since the pilot of this program in FY 2024, it has been brought to scale statewide. This report outlines the Zero to Three Critical Competencies and DIEEC's experience implementing this program during FY 2025.

Background

Overview of the Zero to Three Critical Competencies

The Zero to Three Critical Competencies were developed to provide support for educators who provide care to infants and/or toddlers in group care settings (Dean et al., 2016, 2019). The competencies focus on a subset of essential and observable skills that teachers can implement when interacting with children. These skills support infant and toddler social-emotional, cognitive, and language and literacy development. Special considerations are offered to support the development of children from high-needs populations and dual-/multi-language learners. The Zero to Three Critical Competencies are divided into three areas. These are Area 1: Supporting Social-Emotional Development, Area 2: Supporting Cognitive Development, and Area 3: Supporting Language and Literacy Development (Dean et al., 2016, 2019).

Implementation of the Zero to Three Critical Competencies

The Zero to Three Critical Competencies for Infant-Toddler Educators were developed as a framework that can be used by individual educators, program administrators, and professional learning organizations to provide support for early childhood educators to build the knowledge and skills they need to successfully support very young children (Zero to Three, 2025). Professional development and support can be delivered in a variety of flexible, user-friendly formats, including webinars, online courses, communities of practice, coaching, technical assistance, and other formats (Zero to Three, 2025).

Research Base for the Zero to Three Critical Competencies

The Zero to Three Critical Competencies were developed utilizing the current evidence base of research and literature on teaching, child and adult development, and teacher-child interactions. Additionally, as a professional organization, Zero to Three utilized its expertise and partnerships during the development process, as well as knowledge of the early childhood education workforce.

The Zero to Three Critical Competencies build on the foundation established in the Zero to Three Competencies for Prenatal to Age 5 Professionals, which provide a universal set of competencies for all service providers across sectors working with children prenatal to age 5 and their families. The Competencies also integrate the Irving Harris Foundation’s Diversity-Informed Tenets for Work with Infants, Children, and Families, which help promote diversity, inclusion, and fairness in services and practices supporting infants and toddlers, as well as their families (Dean et al., 2016, 2019). The Critical Competencies are recognized as an evidence-based competency framework by the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE; Caronongan et al., 2019; Moiduddin et al., 2023).

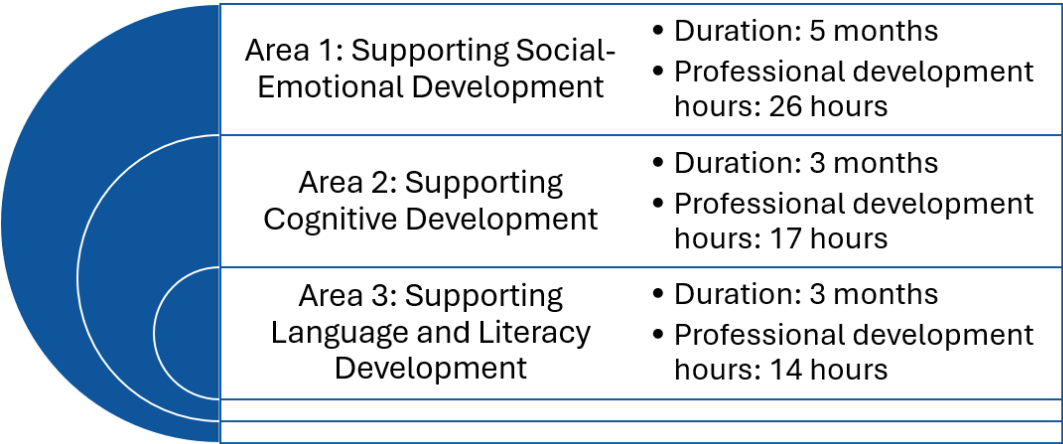
Zero to Three Critical Competencies at DIEEC

To enhance professional development training and support for infant and toddler care in early childhood education in Delaware, DIEEC integrated the Zero to Three Critical Competencies. We began with a pilot program in FY 2024, followed by the state-wide scale-up in FY 2025. This section will describe the implementation of the Zero to Three Critical Competencies at DIEEC in FY 2025.

Cohort Structure and Design

During FY 2025, DIEEC facilitated five cohorts statewide, two focused on Area 1 (social-emotional development), one focused on Area 2 (cognitive development), and two focused on Area 3 (language and literacy development). The cohorts varied in duration across each Area, as outlined in Figure 1.

Figure 1
Areas of Emphasis and Duration of Support



Participants in cohorts across all Areas receive pre- and post-experience observations using the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), workshops covering content from the specified area, reflection surveys, coaching sessions following the Practice-Based Coaching framework, group reflective experiences, and feedback from certified trainers and coaches. Program leaders actively participate as well to promote ongoing support and sustainability efforts. In addition to completing the workshops and group reflective experiences alongside the classroom educators from their program, program leaders also participate in sessions designed to address their specific leadership development needs. This includes individual coaching sessions and group reflective experiences with other program leaders supporting Zero to Three Critical Competency implementation.

Following the completion of their cohort, classroom educators transition through a “warm hand-off” from their DIEEC coach to a program leader, and program leaders transition from the DIEEC coach to a DIEEC Quality Improvement Specialist to assist with goal setting and ongoing support.

Zero to Three Cohort Participation

Targeted recruitment for Zero to Three prioritized state-funded programs. Interested programs completed an application, indicating the number of infant/toddler classrooms and educators they wanted to participate along with which cohorts they preferred. DIEEC staff contacted program leaders to confirm interest and availability and discuss the cohort requirements and expectations. Program leaders reviewed and signed letters of commitment, which outlined the timeframe and specific requirements for participating classroom educators and program leaders.



Table 1 outlines cohort participation. In FY 2025, DIEEC facilitated five cohorts. Cohorts included 13 programs, with a total of 30 classrooms. Cohorts ran across all three areas of the Zero to Three Critical Competencies.

Table 1

Cohort Participation

Area	Cohort	Number of Programs	Total Number of Classrooms	Infant Classrooms	Toddler Classrooms
Area 1: Supporting Social-Emotional Development	B	1	4	2	2
	C	1	4	3*	2*
Area 2: Supporting Cognitive Development	D	4	12	3	9
Area 3: Supporting Language and Literacy Development	A	6	6	1	5
	E	1	4	1	3
Total		13	30		

**One of the educators in Cohort C switched age groups between the pre- and post-assessment. Thus, this data is excluded from the analysis.*

Methods and Results

Measures

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS; La Paro et al., 2012) was used to assess educators' interactions with the infants and toddlers in their classroom. The CLASS has been used in large-scale research studies, including the Early Head Start Family and Child Experiences Study: Baby FACES 2018 (Shah et al., 2020), and is a recommended tool to assess the competencies of infant and toddler teachers and caregivers.

The CLASS provides data that educators can use to create meaningful improvements in their practices (Teachstone, 2024). Data from the CLASS were used to guide training and coaching during the cohort implementation and for the evaluation of the DIEEC Zero to Three program.

The CLASS is administered through multiple 20-minute observations over 2.5 hours. CLASS is scored across multiple domains, with scores ranging from a low of 1 to a high of 7. Scores of 1-2 reflect low-quality teacher-child interactions, scores of 3-5 reflect a mix of effective and ineffective interactions, and scores of 6-7 reflect consistently effective interactions (Shah et al., 2020).

The Infant CLASS includes one domain of Responsive Caregiving, with four dimensions: Relational Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, Facilitated Exploration, and Early Language Support. The Toddler CLASS includes two domains: Emotional and Behavioral Support and Engaged Support for Learning. Emotional and Behavioral Support includes five dimensions: Positive Climate, Negative Climate, Teacher Sensitivity, Regard for Child Perspectives, and Behavioral Guidance. Engaged Support for Learning includes three dimensions: Facilitation of Learning and Development, Quality of Feedback, and Language Modeling.

Typically, CLASS scores are not equivalent across domains and dimensions. Thus, a score of 6 may not carry the same meaning for different content areas. Domains and dimensions relating to social-emotional areas consistently score higher than domains relating to cognitive and language skills. For example, the infant classroom domains of Relational Climate and Teacher Sensitivity on average rank higher than the domains of Facilitated Exploration and Early Language Support.

Results by Area and by Classroom

Pre- and post-experience scores are presented for each Area. The CLASS is typically compared by domain (Responsive Caregiving for infant classrooms, Emotional and Behavioral Support and Engaged Support for Learning for toddler classrooms) which encompass several dimensions.

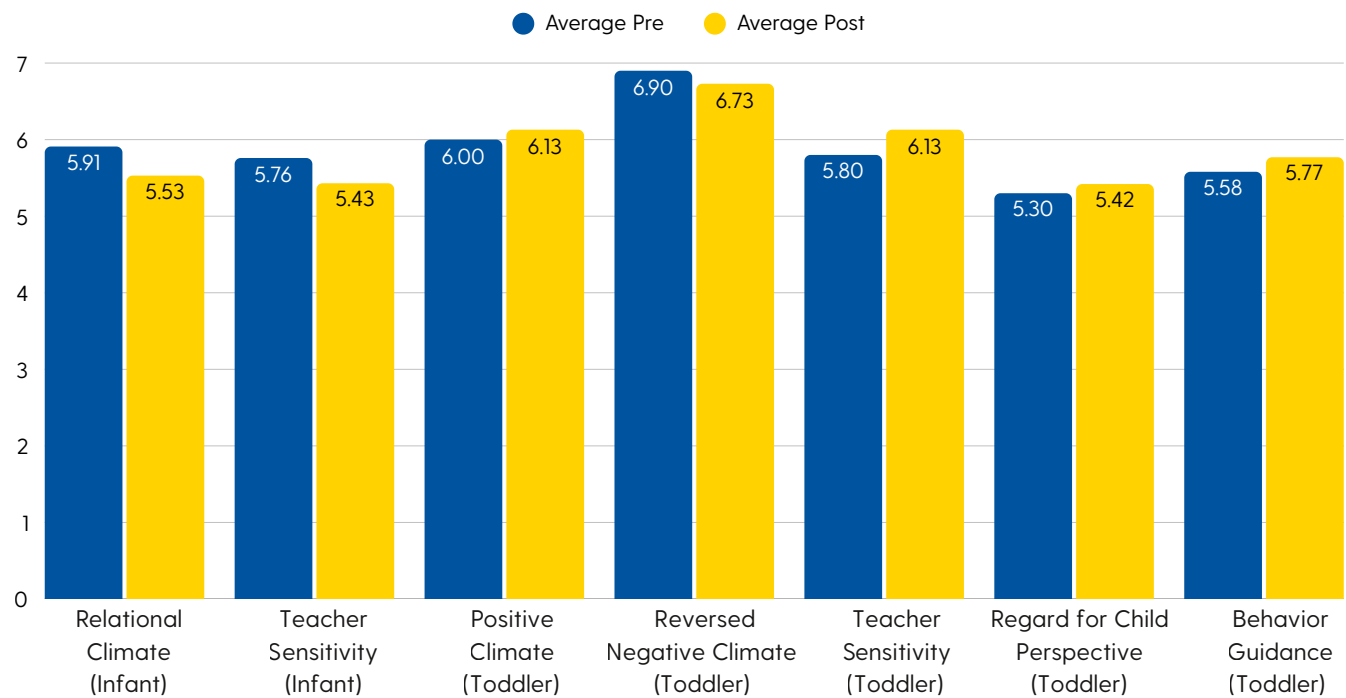
Our analyses, however, focused specifically on the CLASS dimensions that most closely correspond with developmental domains covered in each of the Zero to Three Areas. For example, Figure 2 displays the scores on CLASS dimensions relating to Social-Emotional Development for the cohorts participating in Area 1, which covers Social-Emotional Development.

Area 1 Results

Two cohorts encompassing five infant classrooms and four toddler classrooms across two programs participated in Area 1. All were new this year to the Zero to Three Critical Competencies.

Overall infant scores for relational climate and teacher sensitivity decreased very slightly (Figure 2). Overall toddler scores saw very slight increases for positive climate, regard for child perspective, behavior guidance, and teacher sensitivity. Negative climate was reverse-scored to facilitate comparisons with scores on other items. There was a score decrease for reversed negative climate.

Figure 2
FY 2025 Area 1: Social-Emotional Development Pre- and Post-Experience Scores



Area 1 Infant Classroom Results

As for individual classroom level changes, three classrooms had an increase for infant relational climate while two had decreases. Two classrooms had an increase for infant teacher sensitivity while three classrooms had decreases (see Table 2).

Table 2

FY 2025 Area 1 Infant Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, and Classroom

				Relational Climate	Teacher Sensitivity
Cohort B	Program 1	Classroom A	Pre	5.80	5.40
			Post	7.00	6.75
		Classroom B	Pre	5.80	5.80
			Post	6.40	5.40
Cohort C	Program 2	Classroom A	Pre	6.75	6.50
			Post	5.25	5.75
		Classroom B	Pre	5.25	5.25
			Post	5.75	6.75
		Classroom C	Pre	5.75	5.25
			Post	3.25	2.50

Area 1 Infant Classroom Results

As for individual classroom level changes, three classrooms had an increase for infant relational climate while two had decreases. Two classrooms had an increase for infant teacher sensitivity while three classrooms had decreases (see Table 2).

Table 2

FY 2025 Area 1 Infant Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, and Classroom

				Relational Climate	Teacher Sensitivity
Cohort B	Program 1	Classroom A	Pre	6.00	6.00
			Post	7.00	6.75
		Classroom B	Pre	5.80	5.80
			Post	6.40	5.40
Cohort C	Program 2	Classroom A	Pre	6.75	6.50
			Post	5.25	5.75
		Classroom B	Pre	5.25	5.25
			Post	5.75	6.75
		Classroom C	Pre	5.75	5.25
			Post	3.25	2.50

Area 1 Toddler Classroom Results

As for toddler classroom measures in Area 1, across positive climate, reversed negative climate, teacher sensitivity, regard for child perspective, and behavioral guidance, classrooms saw relatively small to negligible or no change (see Table 3). However, pre-experience scores were all above a score of 5 and approaching 6, with two programs maintaining scores of 7, which is the highest possible score on the CLASS. These initial high scores leave little room for additional improvement as measured by the Toddler CLASS assessment.

Table 3

FY 2025 Area 1 Toddler Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, and Classroom

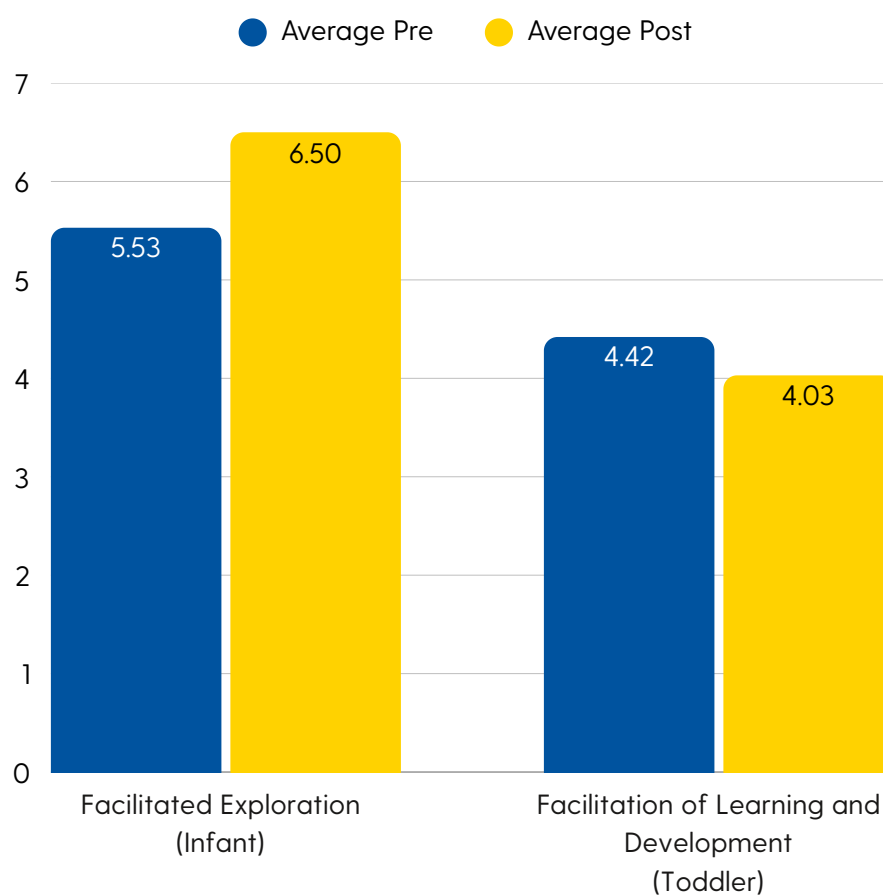
				Positive Climate	Reversed Negative Climate	Teacher Sensitivity	Regard for Child Perspective	Behavior Guidance	Overall Emotional and Behavioral Support
Cohort B	Program 1	Classroom A	Pre	5.60	7.00	5.40	5.40	6.00	5.88
			Post	5.25	6.25	5.75	5.50	4.50	5.45
		Classroom B	Pre	5.60	7.00	5.60	5.40	5.00	5.72
			Post	6.50	7.00	5.50	5.50	6.25	6.15
Cohort C	Program 2	Classroom A	Pre	5.80	6.60	5.20	4.40	4.80	5.36
			Post	5.75	6.67	6.75	4.67	5.33	5.83
		Classroom B	Pre	7.00	7.00	7.00	6.00	6.50	6.70
			Post	7.00	7.00	6.50	6.00	7.00	6.70

Area 2 Results

One cohort (Cohort D) comprising four programs with three infant and nine toddler classrooms participated in Area 2: Cognitive Development. For the infant classroom, the average CLASS score for facilitated exploration increased between the Area 2 pre- and post-experience observations (see Figure 3). For the toddler classrooms, the average CLASS score for facilitation of learning and development decreased.

Figure 3

FY 2025 Area 2: Cognitive Development Pre- and Post-Experience Scores



Area 2 Infant Classroom Results

This cohort had several classroom teachers who had previously participated in the FY 2024 Pilot in Area 1, which overall had increases for CLASS Scores in the social and emotional domains from the pilot program. Due to the relatively short turnaround in participation between Area 1 and Area 2, the post-experience observation for Area 1 in FY 2024 was used as the pre-experience observation for Area 2 in FY 2025. It was possible to reuse this data as pre-experience scores for FY 2025 because the prior CLASS observations had addressed Area 2 content as well as Area 1 content.

Scores for all three time periods are in Table 4 for infant classrooms and in Table 5 for toddler classrooms. For the one infant classroom that had participated in FY 2024, their original infant facilitated exploration score from FY 2024 to the FY 2024/FY 2025 midpoint remained level. Between the midpoint and the Area 2 post score for FY 2025 there was an increase. As for the two classrooms that were new to the Competencies (with two data points rather than three), one had an increase and one had a decrease in its infant facilitated exploration score.

Table 4
Area 2 Infant Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, Classroom, and Participation Year

				Facilitated Exploration
Cohort D	Program 1	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	4.60
			FY 2025 Post	6.50
	Program 2	Classroom A	FY 2024 Pre	5.00
			FY 2024 Post/FY 2025 Pre	5.00
			FY 2025 Post	6.75
		Classroom B	FY 2025 Pre	7.00
			FY 2025 Post	6.25

Area 2 Toddler Classroom Results

As for the toddler facilitation of learning and development, for classrooms previously observed, between the FY 2024 pre-experience score to the FY 2024/FY2025 midpoint there was an increase for all classrooms. Between the midpoint score and the FY 2025 post-experience score, one classroom had an increase, but the other two had a decrease. Among these two, one had a decrease below their original FY 2024 pre-experience score, and the other two showed increases.

As for toddler classrooms not previously observed (with two data points rather than three), there were three programs with score increases and three programs with score decreases for facilitation of learning and development.



Table 5

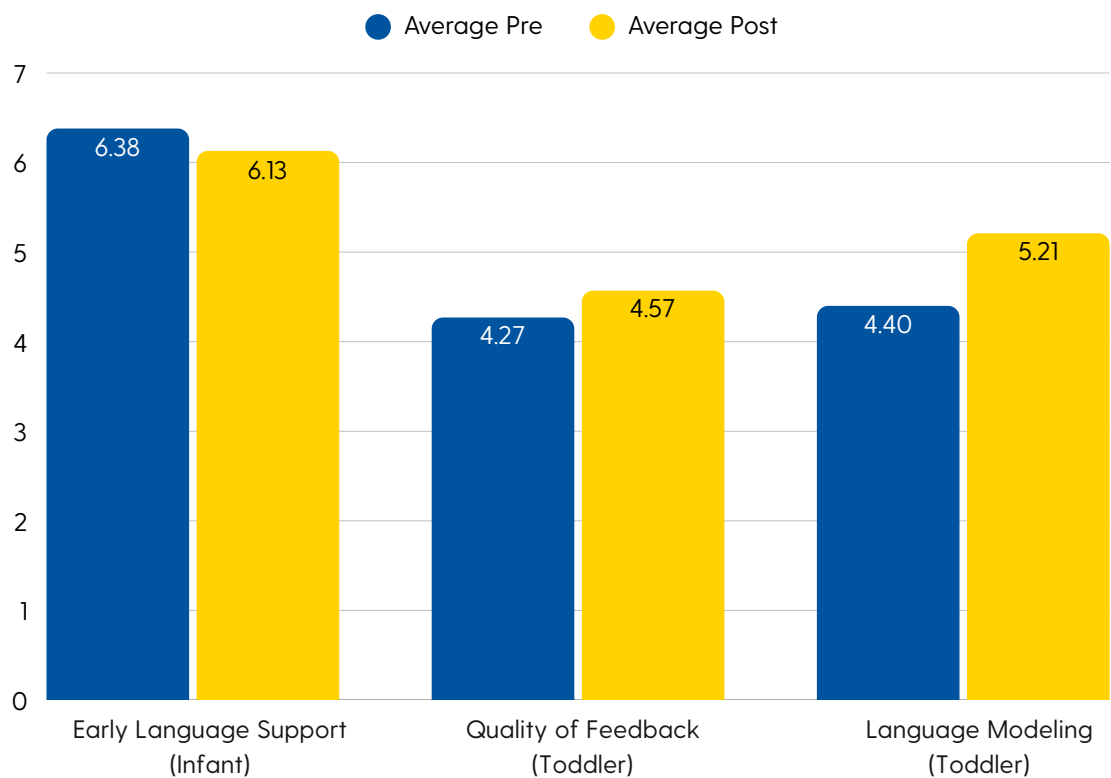
Area 2 Toddler Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, Classroom, and Participation Year

				Facilitation of Learning and Development
Cohort D	Program 1	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	4.25
			FY 2025 Post	4.00
		Classroom B	FY 2025 Pre	2.25
			FY 2025 Post	3.50
	Program 2	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	5.00
			FY 2025 Post	6.50
		Classroom B	FY 2025 Pre	4.25
			FY 2025 Post	4.50
		Classroom C	FY 2025 Pre	3.60
			FY 2024 Post/ FY 2025 Pre	5.00
			FY 2025 Post	6.00
		Classroom D	FY 2025 Pre	5.00
			FY 2025 Post	3.25
		Classroom E	FY 2025 Pre	2.80
			FY 2024 Post/ FY 2025 Pre	5.75
			FY 2025 Post	4.75
	Program 3	Classroom B	FY 2024 Pre	2.25
			FY 2024 Post/FY 2025 Pre	5.25
			FY 2025 Post	1.75
	Program 4	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	3.00
			FY 2025 Post	2.00

Area 3 Results

Two cohorts participated in Area 3, comprising two programs with two infant classrooms and eight toddler classrooms. For the overall Infant scores, from the pre- to post- Area 3 experience, there was a decrease in score for early language support (ee Figure 4). As for the toddler scores, overall, from the pre- to post- Area 3 experience, quality of feedback and language modeling both increased.

Figure 4
Area 3: Language and Literacy Development Pre- and Post-Experience Scores



There were three separate programs with three classrooms in Cohort A that had previously completed Area 2 (but not Area 1) in FY 2024. For this cohort, due to the relatively short turnaround in participation between Area 2 and Area 3, the post-experience observation for Area 2 was used as the pre-experience observation for Area 3. Scores for all three time periods are in Table 6 for infant classrooms and Table 7 for toddler classrooms.

Area 3 Infant Classroom Results

For the Cohort A program with an infant classroom, between the pre-experience infant early language support score in FY 2024 to the midpoint FY 2024/FY 2025 score, there was an increase. Between the midpoint score and Area 3 post-experience score for FY 2025, there was a decrease. However, the decrease was from a score of 7, the highest possible CLASS score, to a 6. As for the second cohort participating in Area 3 only during FY 2025 (Cohort E), their average score for infant early language support also increased.

Table 6

Area 3 Infant Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, Classroom, and Participation Year

				Early Language Support
Cohort A	Program 1	Classroom A	FY 2024 Pre	4.67
			FY 2024 Post/ FY 2025 Pre	7.00
			FY 2025 Post	6.00
Cohort E	Program 2	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	5.75
			FY 2025 Post	6.25

Area 3 Toddler Classroom Results

For the toddler teacher pre-experience scores in FY 2024 compared to the midpoint FY 2024/ FY 2025 scores, both had an increase. Between their midpoint and post-experience scores in FY 2025 in quality of feedback, one program's score stayed the same while the other experienced a decreased score. For language modeling, between the FY 2024 pre-experience score and the FY 2024/FY 2025 midpoint score, both programs had notable increases. Between the midpoint scores and the FY 2025 post-experience scores, one program maintained its score (at a 7—the highest score) while the other experienced a score decrease (Table 7).

As for those members of Cohort A new to the Critical Competencies, only one had a slight increase in quality of feedback while the other two had slight decreases. With language modeling, all three classrooms had score increases.

As for toddler teacher scores in classrooms found in Cohort E, two classrooms had quality of feedback score increases, with one program experiencing a decrease. The language modeling score increased for all three classrooms. Cohort E's score changes are also depicted in Table 7.



Table 7

Area 3 Toddler Pre- and Post-Experience Scores by Cohort, Program, Classroom, and Participation Year

				Quality of Feedback	Language Modeling
Cohort A	Program 2	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	3.00	3.00
			FY 2025 Post	3.33	4.67
	Program 3	Classroom A	FY 2024 Pre	4.25	4.25
			FY 2024 Post/ FY 2025 Pre	7.00	7.00
			FY 2025 Post	7.00	7.00
	Program 4	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	2.33	2.00
			FY 2025 Post	2.00	2.75
	Program 5	Classroom A	FY 2024 Pre	5.20	5.60
			FY 2024 Post/ FY 2025 Pre	7.00	7.00
			FY 2025 Post	5.20	5.80
	Program 6	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	3.50	3.75
			FY 2025 Post	3.25	4.00
Cohort E	Program 1	Classroom A	FY 2025 Pre	2.75	3.75
			FY 2025 Post	5.00	6.00
		Classroom B	FY 2025 Pre	5.60	5.20
			FY 2025 Post	4.00	5.25
		Classroom C	FY 2025 Pre	3.00	3.50
			FY 2025 Post	6.75	6.25

Note: Program numbering for Cohort A starts at Program 2 since programs serving infants and toddlers in this cohort do not overlap.

Discussion of Results

After participating in the Area 1 DIEEC Zero to Three Critical Competencies sessions, classrooms showed overall average increases in four CLASS dimensions of social-emotional development and decreases in three dimensions. Classrooms participating in the Area 2 sessions showed an overall average increase in one CLASS cognitive development dimension and a decrease in the other dimension. Finally, classrooms participating in Area 3 sessions showed an overall average increase in two CLASS language and literacy development dimensions and a decrease in one dimension.

While these findings should be viewed as somewhat mixed, the general pattern of results is one of increased CLASS scores. Also, although many of the observed changes were small, the changes that were of greatest magnitude were increases. As expected, dimensions relating to social-emotional areas consistently score higher on average than domains relating to cognitive and language skills.

Across many areas in both infant and toddler classrooms, classrooms were scoring above a five on the CLASS at the outset of our work. This approaches the threshold for high quality, with effective practice beginning at a score of 6. However, it should be noted that the CLASS threshold of 6 for infant and toddler assessments is conceptual and has not yet received the level of validation as pre-K CLASS score thresholds. Lower thresholds may be appropriate for some domains. In general, opportunities for further growth are somewhat limited when classrooms are already reaching thresholds. Additionally, some programs had previously participated in the 2024 cohorts, completing a different area. These programs entered their pre-assessment with prior knowledge about the Zero to Three Critical Competencies from completing a previous area, which may be related to their scores.

Further considerations when interpreting results would include staff turnover and staff shifting between classrooms. These program-level staffing challenges meant that pre- and post-assessments were not always conducted with the same staff in the same classroom. Thus, children in a given classroom may not have fully benefited from prior Zero to Three training by educators in that classroom. Overall, the pre- and post scores highlight the experiences of the children in the classroom with their teachers, regardless of staffing changes that may have taken place. It is important to think about continuity of supports for ongoing initiatives and training models that take several months to complete, in the context of high staff turnover rates in the early childhood workforce in Delaware and nationally.

Next Steps and Future Directions

To improve the assessment of DIEEC's implementation of the Zero to Three Critical Competencies and to provide a greater caliber of feedback to participants, DIEEC is exploring assessment tools to use in place of the CLASS. The CLASS does not fully assess language and literacy, which the Zero to Three Critical Competencies do address.

Future iterations of the Critical Competencies will use Zero to Three recruitment and informational materials and sessions to direct programs towards completing each area in sequential order, beginning with Area 1: Supporting Social Emotional Development.

DIEEC plans on adding additional practice-based coaching cycles for educators to improve this training experience. Additional support for program leaders will be provided to support them in practice-based coaching of their educators. This will help encourage sustainability of practice-based coaching in their programs after the completion of the Zero to Three experience.

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About the Authors

Stephanie Kuntz, MS: Stephanie is a DIEEC research assistant and has been with the Institute since 2024, with a prior assignment between 2021 and 2022. Stephanie also has prior experience as a teacher, early intervention home visitor, and research assistant across multiple projects focused on early childhood scholarship. She also serves as a course instructor for Families and Developmental Disabilities at the University of Delaware.

Deborah Fuller, PhD: Deborah is the assistant director of research and evaluation at DIEEC. She has been with the Institute since 2019, previously as a research assistant and a limited-term researcher. Deborah previously worked in several roles in Early Head Start and as state lead for the Idaho Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program.

Jason Hustedt, PhD: Jason is the chair of the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Delaware and the DIEEC research director. His research focuses on early childhood policies and practice, including the impact of state-funded pre-K programs on child outcomes, Head Start/Early Head Start, and child care subsidies.

Kristy Sheffler, PhD: Kristy is the deputy director of DIEEC. She has been with the Institute since 2014, and her interest areas include early childhood, workforce development, and promoting young children's mental health.

Kristy Smith, MS: Kristy is DIEEC's associate director for home-based child care. She joined DIEEC in 2014 as a family child care technical assistant and transitioned to FCC team leader in 2019. Kristy has over 20 years of early education experience.

Jessica Cheyney-Morgan, BS: Jessica is a DIEEC professional development coordinator who has been with the Institute since 2013. In her current role, she specializes in supporting family child care educators. In prior roles, Jessica was an ERS Assessor and had a variety of roles in early care and education programs.

Jessica DeWese, MEd: Jessica is a DIEEC professional development coordinator who has been with the Institute since 2020. Jessica brings more than 25 years of experience in the field of education, including roles as assistant center director, lead pre-K teacher, home visiting teacher, literacy coach, and grade school teacher.

Jaquaya Thomas MS: Jaquaya is an eEducation associate for the Delaware Department of Education. She previously worked as a professional development coordinator at the DIEEC and was with the Institute from 2022 to 2024. Jaquaya has more than 20 years of experience, including working as an assistant and teacher at large early childhood education programs and various roles working at Delaware Head Start.

Holly Greist, MEd ED: Holly is a professional development coordinator at DIEEC and has been with the Institute since 2020. Holly was previously a technical assistant at the Institute and at Children and Families First Delaware. Holly has 15 years of experience across multiple aspects of center-based care and education, as well as working as a stabilization fund specialist.

Aridania Rivera, BA: Aridania is an assessor at DIEEC and has been with the Institute since 2013. Aridania brings more than 18 years as a teacher working with children from toddlers to school age.

Lynn Worden, PhD: Lynn is an associate professor in the Department of Human Development and Family Sciences at the University of Delaware. Lynn is also a certified family life specialist and has spent much of her time advising teacher candidates majoring in early childhood education. Her research focuses on teacher education in the field of early childhood.



The Delaware Institute for Excellence in Early Childhood (DIEEC) is dedicated to improving early childhood experiences for young children and their families. The DIEEC is housed within the University of Delaware's College of Education and Human Development.