



Two Different Early Learning Settings

What They Reveal About Learning Quality



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Every morning, young children arrive at a variety of early learning settings, but two predominate: a classroom inside a K–12 school or a standalone center down the street. Most conversations about early learning quality either treat these settings as interchangeable, or debate which one is “better.” Cognia’s data, drawn from classroom observations and accreditation reviews across hundreds of programs, points to a more useful question: what does each setting do well, and what can each learn from the other? Neither outperforms the other outright. Instead, standalone and school-based programs show two distinct, complementary profiles—one gap worth acting on now, and one gap that shows up everywhere, no matter where a program sits.

Background

Early learning is one of the few corners of education policy that draws attention from both sides of the aisle. Several states are building dedicated early childhood governance structures, and state-funded preschool enrollment reached a new high of nearly 1.8 million children in 2025. Growth is partly driven by the rise of “mixed delivery,” where publicly funded seats are spread across licensed childcare centers, public schools, and community-based organizations (National Institute for Early Education Research, 2026). This brief focuses on two of the most common models within that landscape (standalone and school-based programs), though early learning is delivered through several other structures as well. We describe school-based programs as preschool classrooms operated within public or private K–12 schools, and standalone programs as center-based early learning delivered elsewhere, by

nonprofits or licensed childcare providers. Quality across these settings remains one of the least consistent corners of the research base. A recent review called explicitly for work on how quality plays out differently across mixed-delivery settings (Eadie et al., 2024).

Cognia is well positioned to help answer that call. Our Environmental Rating for Early Learning observation tool was built specifically for early learners rather than adapted from a K–12 tool. During the 2024–2025 school year, the tool was used to generate 3,872 observations across 440 schools. It can be paired with accreditation review data pinpointing each program’s strengths and growth areas. The two groups are similar in size—233 standalone programs versus 201–207 school-based programs depending on the item—so what we found likely reflects real program differences, not differences in scale.

STANDALONE EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

refer to center-based preschool settings that operate outside a public school building or district school structure, including child care centers, community-based organizations, private nonprofit programs, and similar non-school sites.

SCHOOL-BASED EARLY LEARNING PROGRAMS

refer to preschool programs located in, or operated through, public school settings, including public school pre-K and programs housed in a school building.

Distinct and Complementary Profiles

Standalone and school-based programs don't simply score higher or lower than one another. They're good at different things. In standalone settings, children get more chances to choose their own activities and move their bodies freely. In school-based settings, teachers scaffold learning more, ask more open-ended questions, and children stay engaged in an activity longer before moving on. The pattern holds closely enough across the data that it looks less like noise and more like two different ways of doing this work well.

The same split shows up in Cognia's formal accreditation reviews. Standalone programs earn more Noteworthy Practices on standards covering culture, community, and respect. Part of this is how each is evaluated: standalone programs are reviewed solely as early learning environments, while school-based programs are considered through a schoolwide lens, so their reviews carry weight from far beyond the early learning classroom.

Historically, publicly operated pre-K programs have had greater access to resources that support staff stability and credentialing (Bellm et al., 2002), a structural advantage separate from the skill or dedication of any individual teacher. Many K–12 systems have also spent

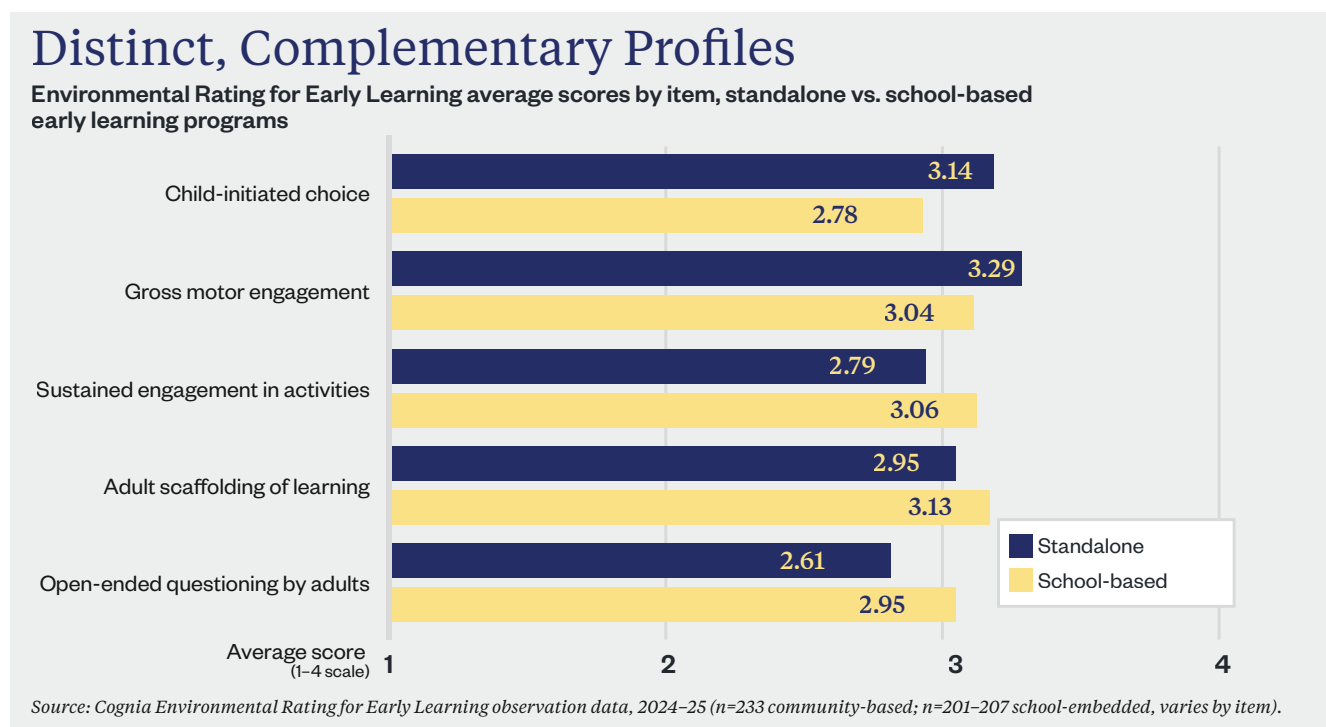
the past decade building curriculum-aligned coaching and professional learning infrastructure that programs outside a school system typically can't access (McCormick, 2026). The better question, then, isn't which setting is superior. It's which setting is built to do what well, and what each could borrow from the other.

Accreditation data adds one more layer. Among standalone programs, areas for improvement cluster around a handful of operational and leadership standards: stakeholder engagement, continuous improvement, learning progress measurement, and program evaluation. That's likely because standalone programs each run their own human resources, data systems, and communication channels, so the same growth areas tend to surface across nearly all of them. School-based programs' growth areas look different from program to program, shaped less by the early learning classroom itself and more by whatever is happening in the school or system around it.

KEY TAKEAWAY

In a mixed-delivery landscape, comparison between settings tells only part of the story. Standalone programs have something to teach about relational, child-directed practice; school-based programs have expertise to share on scaffolding and questioning.

Figure 1. Item-level differences by program structure



A Crucial Moment for Family Connection

Not every part of the family relationship differs by setting. But one moment does, and the gap is a large one.

Picture two drop-offs, each shaped by a different rhythm. In one, the school day starts and ends at a set time, so a teacher can step to the door, greet a family by name, and trade a quick update before the day picks up. In the other, families come and go on a rolling schedule built around their own routines, so a teacher may already be mid-activity when a child arrives, or still guiding one child while another is leaving. Across our data, this specific moment, arrival and departure family connection, shows the largest between-settings gap we found, in either direction. It isn't that one setting cares less about families. It's that one schedule builds the moment in, and the other has to work harder to create it deliberately.

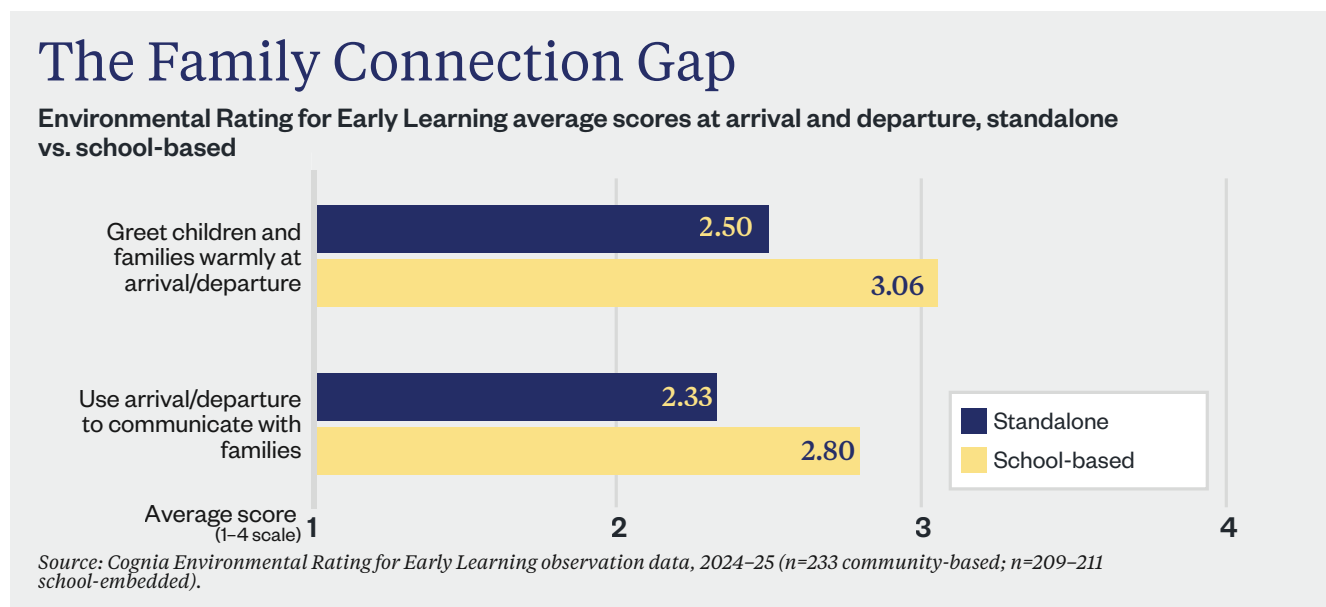
This kind of divergence in family engagement isn't unique to Cognia-accredited early learning programs. Research on Early Head Start has found that family engagement isn't one uniform thing: programs combine home involvement, program involvement, and parent-staff relationships differently depending on structure, with real consequences for outcomes (Jeon et al., 2020). Ours is a different distinction (standalone versus school-based rather than home-based versus center-based care), but the underlying lesson holds: how a program is built shapes how families experience it—not how much a program values them.

The likely driver is scheduling itself. School-based programs run on a fixed school-day clock, which builds a greeting and handoff routine into the day almost automatically. Standalone programs instead offer rolling drop-off and pickup to accommodate families' varied schedules. That flexibility is a real benefit to families, but it complicates building in a predictable window for connection. Arrival and departure are worth attention regardless of setting: they're families' most frequent, lowest-effort touchpoints with a program, and research suggests the communication infrastructure around them has to be built on purpose rather than assumed (Leenders et al., 2018).

KEY TAKEAWAY

In standalone settings, designating even one staff member to greet and update families during busy handoff windows—even on a rolling schedule—could strengthen this moment without new curriculum or funding. In school-based settings, this built-in strength is worth protecting deliberately as broader demands compete for early childhood staff time.

Figure 2. Differences in arrival and departure items



A Shared Inquiry Gap

Despite real differences by setting, one gap shows up in both. Adults across settings ask fewer open-ended questions than anything else they do well. Children in both settings get fewer chances to brainstorm, predict, or use tools for hands-on math and science exploration, and neither setting has an edge here. This finding isn't isolated to programs in the Cognia network. Observational research on preschool lessons shows teachers asking mostly closed-ended questions overall, though open-ended questions come out more often during science activities specifically (Hamel et al., 2020), which hints that science may be a promising place to expand this practice. A large multi-state study of publicly funded pre-K classrooms found something similar: teachers were warm and responsive, but less effective at supporting higher-order thinking through their day-to-day interactions (Burchinal et al., 2008). Taken together, this points to one persistent opportunity across early childhood settings, regardless of how they're structured.

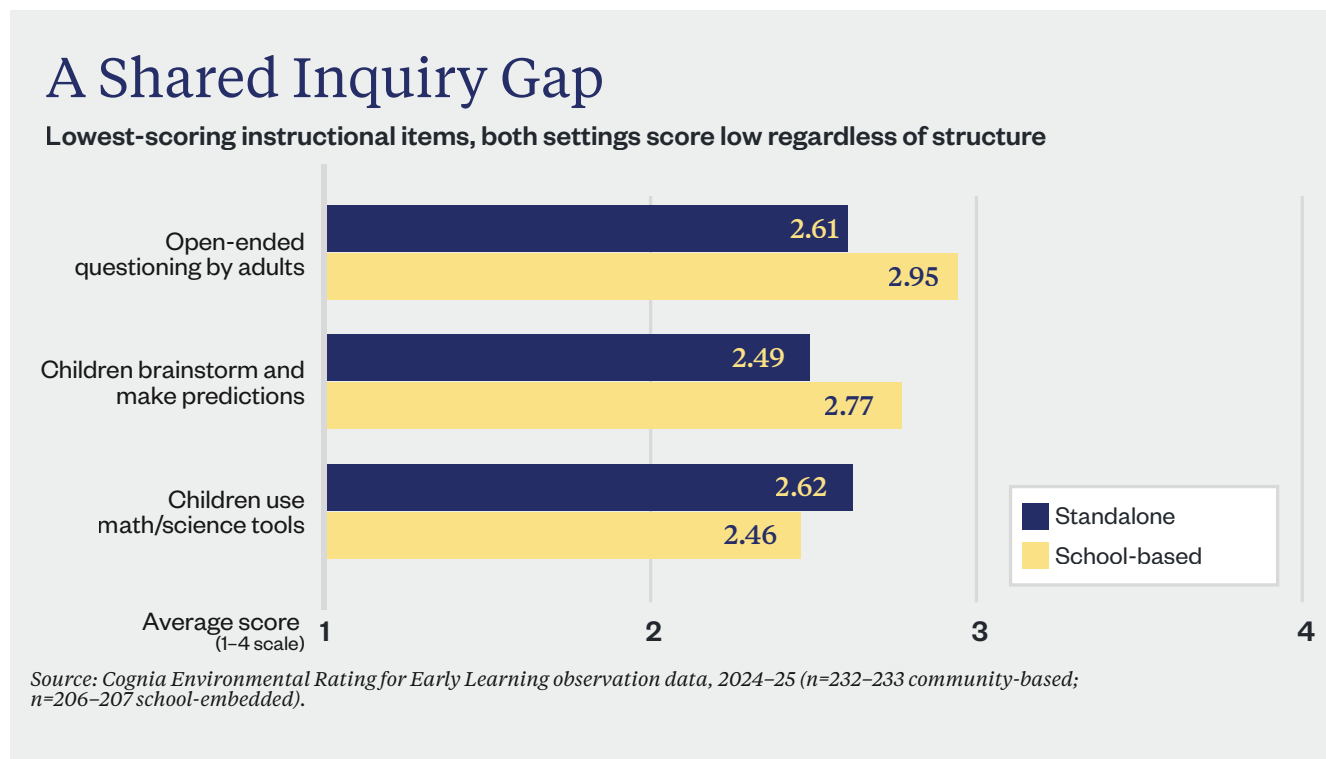
Standalone programs name this gap out loud more often in their accreditation reviews. That's likely a visibility effect, rather than a performance gap. In short, standalone programs are reviewed solely on early learning, so a growth

area here surfaces clearly, while school-based reviews carry weight from the whole school and may not isolate this specific practice as sharply. Even so, strengthening inquiry is a shared opportunity, not a standalone-only one. It also echoes a broader critique in the field: research on preschool inquiry tends to study short, specific interventions rather than the sustained, everyday practices that build a real culture of inquiry (Ramanathan et al., 2022). That's exactly why this particular gap matters: it shows up across two structurally distinct delivery models, not just one classroom or curriculum.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Because the inquiry gap holds regardless of setting, professional learning focused on open-ended questioning and hands-on inquiry tools is likely to benefit every program—not just one type. That makes it a strong candidate for a shared, field-wide priority.

Figure 3. Inquiry-related items by program structure



Conclusion

Setting shapes early learning quality, but it doesn't rank one model above the other. Standalone programs bring a relational, child-directed strength that runs from the classroom to formal recognition. School-based programs bring a built-in rhythm for family contact and access to broader instructional infrastructure. Both are real advantages. Neither setting needs to become the other to serve children well. Two things are worth acting on now. Strengthening or protecting family-connection moments—that moment at the door—is a critical, low-cost step for early learning programs. But the inquiry gap is the more urgent lever: it's a single improvement with benefits for every program, wherever it sits.

KEY TAKEAWAYS, TAKEN TOGETHER

The setting where a child learns shapes their day in real ways, but quality isn't a contest between models. It's a matter of knowing what each is built to do well, and strengthening the one gap they share.

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