

Two Different Early Learning Settings

What They Reveal About Learning Quality

Early learning today is delivered through many models, from licensed childcare centers to community-based organizations, but two remain the most common: a classroom inside a K–12 school, and a standalone center down the street. Most conversations about early learning quality either treat these settings as interchangeable or debate which one is better.

Because Cognia accredits both standalone and school-based early learning programs, we have rare comparative access to both, and can offer an objective, data-driven look at their relative strengths. Drawing on classroom observations and accreditation reviews across hundreds of programs, our data point to a more useful question than which setting is superior: what does each setting do well, and what can each learn from the other? Neither setting outperforms the other outright. Instead, standalone and school-based programs show two distinct, complementary profiles, including one gap worth acting on now and one gap that shows up across settings. This provides a summary of three key findings.

3,872
CLASSROOM OBSERVATIONS
2024–25

440
EARLY LEARNING
PROGRAMS

233
STANDALONE PROGRAMS

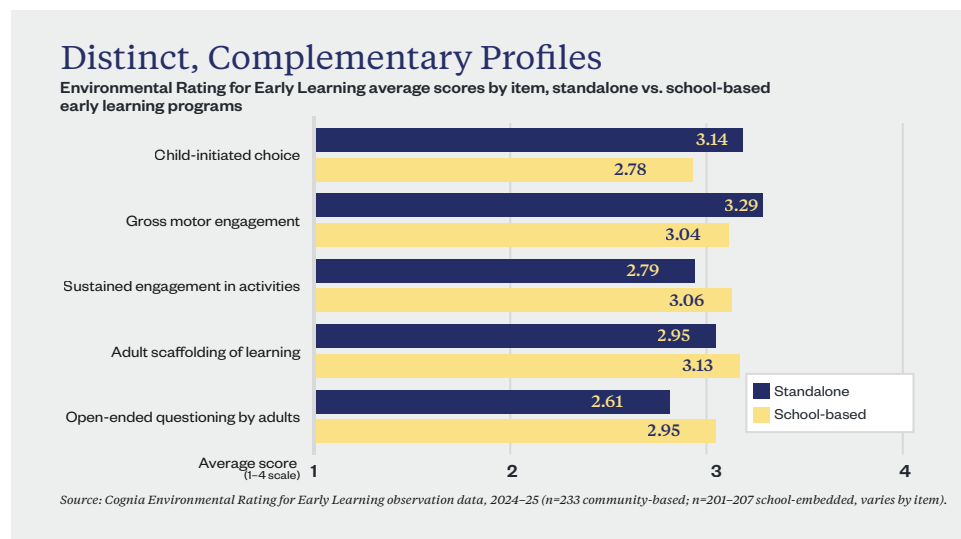
207
SCHOOL-BASED PROGRAMS

Finding 1

Distinct, Complementary Strengths

Standalone and school-based programs are good at different things, not simply better or worse than one another. Standalone settings give children more chances to choose their own activities and move freely. School-based settings show more scaffolding, more open-ended questioning, and longer sustained engagement.

Research points to one likely reason: school-based programs have historically had greater access to resources that support staff stability, credentialing, and curriculum-aligned coaching infrastructure. This is a structural advantage separate from the skill of any individual teacher. Standalone programs, meanwhile, earn more Noteworthy Practices on accreditation standards covering culture, community, and respect, in part because they are reviewed solely as early learning environments rather than through a schoolwide lens.



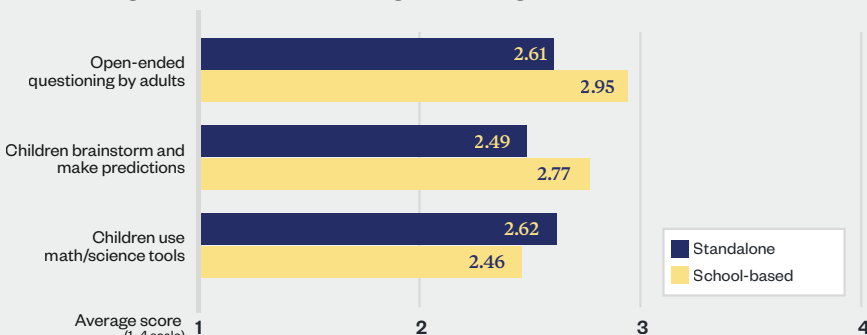
Finding 2

A Family Connection Gap at the Door

The largest gap between settings in Cognia's data shows up at student arrival and departure. School-based programs benefit from a fixed school-day schedule that naturally supports greeting and handoff routines. Standalone programs offer families more scheduling flexibility, but that flexibility makes a predictable caregiver/teacher connection moment harder to build in.

A Shared Inquiry Gap

Lowest-scoring instructional items, both settings score low regardless of structure



Source: Cognia Environmental Rating for Early Learning observation data, 2024–25 (n=232–233 community-based; n=206–207 school-embedded).

Finding 3

A Shared Inquiry Gap

Of everything measured, three practices score the lowest in both settings: adults asking open-ended questions; children brainstorming and predicting; and children using math/science tools. This gap emerges consistently across both structurally distinct delivery models, making it a shared opportunity rather than a setting-specific one.

The pattern echoes research from outside the Cognia network. Studies of preschool classrooms similarly find teachers asking mostly closed-ended questions overall, with open-ended questions surfacing more often during science activities specifically. A separate national study of publicly funded pre-K classrooms found teachers were warm and responsive, but less effective at supporting higher-order thinking through day-to-day interactions. Together, these findings point to one persistent, field-wide opportunity rather than a gap tied to any single program type.

What This Means

- Evaluate settings on fit, not rank. Standalone and school-based programs bring different strengths. Policy and program guidance should ask what each setting is built to do well, rather than treating one model as categorically stronger.
- Protect the arrival and departure moment. Standalone programs can strengthen this touchpoint by designating a staff member to greet and update families during busy handoff windows. School-based programs should protect this built-in strength as other demands compete for early childhood staff time.
- Prioritize inquiry-focused professional learning. Because the inquiry gap holds regardless of setting, training on open-ended questioning and hands-on exploration is likely to benefit every program type, making it a sound investment for early learning institutions.
- Design policy and support around what each setting does well. State pre-K policy, funding, and system-level guidance should account for the structural differences between standalone and school-based programs, building on each one's strengths rather than applying a single uniform standard across both.

For More Information

This brief summarizes key findings from a larger Cognia Research & Insights piece. For the full analysis, including methodology and research citations, see “Two Different Early Learning Settings.”

