

10A NCAC 09 .3203 PROGRAM ASSESSMENT PATHWAY FOR CHILD CARE CENTERS

(a) This Rule shall apply to child care centers, including centers located in a residence, that choose to earn a two through five-star rated license using the program assessment licensure pathway.

(b) As used in this Rule, "educators" shall mean teachers, group leaders, and administrative staff, including directors, assistant directors, program coordinators, education coordinators, curriculum specialists, and other staff that have responsibility for planning, caregiving, mentoring or training on-site in a child care center. Educators shall meet the education standards of a position as set forth in Rules .3211, .3213, .3214, .3215, .3216 and .3218 of this Section and work full-time. If a program operates less than 40 hours per week, full-time shall mean the hours the program is in operation.

(c) As used in this Rule, "structured self-study" shall mean the process used to reflect on current teaching practices and educational environments, and identify areas of strength, needs, and action steps required to achieve the standards of the applicable program assessment tool(s) as set forth in Paragraph (d) of this Rule, based on the age of the children served. A structured self-study shall be completed over a minimum of three consecutive months and include a self-assessment using the appropriate program assessment tool and additional resources located at <https://ncrlap.org/Resources/>, a written reflection of the self-assessment, including identification of goals for continuous quality improvement, and documentation of the structured self-study. Sample self-study forms may be found on the Division's website at <http://ncchildcare.ncdhhs.gov/Provider/Provider-Documents-and-Forms>.

(d) Child care centers shall be evaluated using "Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition" (ITERS-3), "Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition" (ECERS-3), and "School-Age Care Environment Rating Scale, Updated Edition" (SACERS-U), based on the ages of children served. Centers located in a residence, as described in Rule .0102 of this Chapter, shall be evaluated using "Family Child Care Environment Rating Scale, Third Edition" (FCCERS-3). Alternatively, the Commission may approve additional program assessment tools that meet the following criteria:

- (1) the program assessment tool is research-based;
- (2) the program assessment tool has demonstrated reliability and validity;
- (3) the program assessment tool has been developed and validated for the intended population;
- (4) the standards being evaluated by the program assessment tool are measurable;
- (5) the program assessment tool is published or otherwise publicly available;
- (6) the program assessment tool assesses and supports early childhood environments in a way that is sensitive and responsive to the needs of all children and families from culturally, linguistically, economically, and ability diverse backgrounds; and
- (7) the program assessment tool and training for its use has a process to reduce bias.

Upon approval of additional program assessment tools, a child care center may choose which assessment tool they utilize to earn a star rating in this licensure pathway, as long as their choice is applicable to the ages of children served, the type of facility in operation, or other criteria specified by the Commission in its approval.

(e) For a child care center to earn a two-star rated license, the following requirements shall be met:

- (1) The child care center shall meet either the enhanced ratio requirements set forth in Rule .3208 of this Section or the enhanced space requirements set forth in Rule .3210 of this Section.
- (2) At least fifty percent of lead teachers and at least fifty percent of educators shall meet the individual education standards at the two-star level, as set forth in Rules .3211, .3212, .3213, .3214, .3215, .3216 and .3218 of this Section, or higher.

- (3) The child care center shall implement family and community engagement foundational practices set forth in Rule .3219 of this Section.
- (4) The child care center shall implement the continuous quality improvement standards set forth in Rule .3221 of this Section.
- (5) All administrators and lead teachers shall complete a structured self-study.

(f) For a child care center to earn a three-star rated license, the following requirements shall be met:

- (1) The child care center shall meet either the enhanced ratio requirements set forth in Rule .3208 of this Section or the enhanced space requirements set forth in Rule .3210 of this Section.
- (2) At least fifty percent of lead teachers and at least fifty percent of educators shall meet the individual education standards at the three-star level, as set forth in Rules .3211, .3212, .3213, .3214, .3215, .3216 and .3218 of this Section, or higher.
- (3) The child care center shall implement the family and community engagement standards set forth in Rule .3219 of this Section for a three-star rated license.

- (4) The child care center shall implement the continuous quality improvement standards set forth in Rule .3221 of this Section.
 - (5) All administrators and lead teachers shall complete a structured self-study.
 - (6) The child care center shall request and complete an external program assessment and use the results of the assessment in the continuous quality improvement plan set forth in Rule .3221 of this Section.
- (g) For a child care center to earn a four-star rated license, the following requirements shall be met:
- (1) The child care center shall meet either the enhanced ratio requirements set forth in Rule .3208 of this Section or the enhanced space requirements set forth in Rule .3210 of this Section.
 - (2) At least fifty percent of lead teachers and at least fifty percent of educators shall meet the individual education standards at the four-star level, as set forth in Rules .3211, .3212, .3213, .3214, .3215, .3216 and .3218 of this Section, or higher.
 - (3) The child care center shall implement the family and community engagement standards set forth in Rule .3219 of this Section for a four-star rated license.
 - (4) The child care center shall implement the continuous quality improvement standards set forth in Rule .3221 of this Section.
 - (5) All administrators and lead teachers shall complete a structured self-study.
 - (6) The child care center shall request and complete an external program assessment:
 - (A) For any assessment that occurs prior to January 1, 2028, the child care center must earn an average score of 3.5 or higher for its ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 classrooms and an average score of 4.0 or higher for its SACERS-U classrooms. When calculating an average score for ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 or SACERS-U, the child care center may drop one classroom's assessment score, so long as there is at least one additional classroom serving the same age children and that classroom's score is included in the average score. A child care center using an alternative approved program assessment tool shall earn a comparable assessment score based on the tool's scoring scale, as determined by the Commission.
 - (B) For any assessment that occurs on or after January 1, 2028, a child care center using the ITERS-3, ECERS-3, or SACERS-U assessments must earn an average score of 4.0 or higher by averaging all classroom scores. The child care center may drop one classroom's assessment score, so long as there is at least one additional classroom serving the same age children and that classroom's score is included in the average score. A child care center using an alternative approved program assessment tool shall earn a comparable score based on the tool's scoring scale, as determined by the Commission.
 - (7) Child care centers that are licensed to serve four-year-old children shall implement a curriculum as defined in Rule .0102(11) of this Chapter in any classroom serving four-year-old children and older.
- (h) For a child care center to earn a five-star rated license, the following requirements shall be met:
- (1) The child care center shall meet the enhanced ratio requirements set forth in Rule .3208 of this Section. Meeting the enhanced space requirements set forth in Rule .3210 of this Section is optional.
 - (2) At least fifty percent of all lead teachers and at least fifty percent of educators shall meet the individual education standards at the five-star level, as set forth in Rules .3211, .3212, .3213, .3214, .3215, .3216 and .3218 of this Section, or higher.
 - (3) The child care center shall implement the family and community engagement standards set forth in Rule .3219 of this Section for a five-star rated license.
 - (4) The child care center shall implement the continuous quality improvement standards set forth in Rule .3221 of this Section.
 - (5) All administrators and lead teachers shall complete a structured self-study.
 - (6) The child care center shall request and complete an external program assessment:
 - (A) For any assessment that occurs prior to January 1, 2028, the child care center must earn an average score of 4.0 or higher for its ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 classrooms and an average score of 5.0 or higher for its SACERS-U classrooms. When calculating an average score for the ITERS-3 and ECERS-3 or SACERS-U, the child center may drop one classroom's assessment score, so long as there is at least one additional classroom serving the same age children and that classroom's score is included in the average score.

A child care center using an alternative approved program assessment tool shall earn a comparable assessment score based on the tool's scoring scale, as determined by the Commission.

- (B) For any assessment that occurs on or after January 1, 2028, a child care center using the ITERS-3, ECERS-3, or SACERS-U assessments must earn an average score of 5.0 or higher by averaging all classroom scores. The child care center may drop one classroom's assessment score, so long as there is at least one additional classroom serving the same age children and that classroom's score is included in the average score. A child care center using an alternative approved program assessment tool shall earn a comparable score based on the tool's scoring scale, as determined by the Commission.
- (7) Child care centers that are licensed to serve four-year-old children shall implement a curriculum as defined in Rule .0102(11) of this Chapter in any classroom serving four-year-old children and older.
- (i) For any child care center serving pre-school age children, the following shall also apply:
 - (1) Each child care center shall comply with the requirements set forth in Rule .0508 of this Chapter for written activity schedules and plans and Rule .0509 of this Chapter for general activity requirements;
 - (2) Each child care center shall comply with the requirements for activity areas for preschool-age children as set forth in Rule .0510 of this Chapter, except that all five of the activity areas listed in G.S. 110-91(12) shall be available each day and the activities listed in Rule .0510 of this Chapter shall be offered for each group of children at least once per week; and
 - (3) The requirements for activities for infants and toddlers set forth in Rule .0511 of this Chapter shall apply for children under three years of age.
- (j) For child care centers with a licensed capacity of 200 or more, there shall be a second administrator on-site for a minimum of 20 hours per week who shall have the Level I North Carolina Early Childhood Administration Credential or its approved equivalent.
- (k) For child care centers providing school-age care with 200 or more school-aged children enrolled, there shall be two program coordinators on-site, one of whom shall not have concurrent group leader responsibilities. The additional program coordinator shall have completed all the applicable staff requirements in Rule .2510(b) of this Chapter.
- (l) The above requirements shall apply to centers located in a residence, as described in Rule .0102 of this Chapter, except that the following shall apply when determining individual staff education standards;
 - (1) If the operator is the only lead teacher, the operator shall meet the individual education standards at the desired star level, as set forth in Rule .3212 of this Section, or higher.
 - (2) If additional lead teachers are employed by the operator, at least fifty percent of all lead teachers, including the operator, shall meet the individual education standards at the desired star level, as set forth in Rule .3212, or higher.

History Note: Authority G.S. 110-85(3); 110-88(7); 110-90(4); 143B-168.3; S.L 2011-145, s.10.7(b) and (d); 42 USCS 9858e; 45 CFR 98.45; Eff. July 1, 2025.