TRAUMA INFORMED CARE

TEACHER CERTIFICATE PROGRAM

Program Overview

The FIRST:ECE Teacher Certificate Program prepares educators to implement trauma-informed strategies that promote a sense of safety, emotional regulation, and positive relationships for young children affected by trauma. The program is designed for cohorts of early childhood education (ECE) teachers recruited from ECE programs across the state who have completed foundational- to intermediate-level training in social and emotional supports and can demonstrate, through an application process, that they are ready for more advanced training. FIRST:ECE offers teachers a series of 6 trainings, with on-site or virtual coaching visits between each training (one training and coaching session per month). Trainings are focused on increasing teachers' trauma knowledge and implementation of trauma-informed strategies.

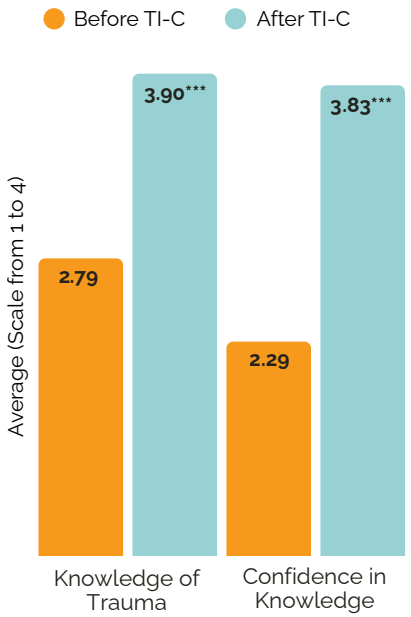
Participants

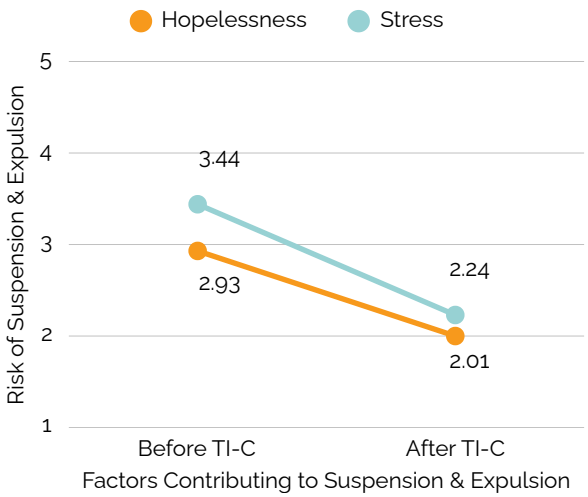
A total of 54 participants joined the Trauma-Informed Teacher Certificate (TI-C) program from 2024-2026. Training was delivered to three cohorts. Most educators reported their role as a lead teacher (75%). The majority also said they had 10 or more years of experience in the field (71%), and all (100%) worked with preschool-aged children. Forty-four teachers completed post-tests, and results in this report include the 42 matching pre- to post-tests, unless stated otherwise.

Teacher-Reported Improvements in Trauma Knowledge & Classroom Practices

Before and after training, participants were asked to consider several statements related to their knowledge of trauma and the trauma-related concepts clustered in two scales: the Knowledge Scale and the Confidence in Knowledge Scale.

- The **trauma knowledge scale** includes items such as "I know the difference between behaviors that are symptoms of trauma and 'bad' behaviors" and "I understand what it means to have a trauma-informed school." **This scale showed a statistically significant increase** after completion of the certificate program.
- An additional scale was derived from the School Implementation Leadership Scale (SILS)[1] that further measures educators' confidence in their knowledge of trauma-informed care in early care and education, such as "I am knowledgeable about trauma-informed care in early care and education." The **SILS confidence in knowledge scale scores also revealed statistically significant increases.**





Risk of Expulsion & Child Behavior

Participants were asked to consider factors related to the behaviors of children in their care, especially those related to possible expulsion, at the end of the program. Two scales were developed from 6 items derived from the Preschool Expulsion Risk Measure[2] to determine participant perception of child behavior and educator personal stress. These scales include items such as "There is little that I or anyone else can do to significantly improve this child's classroom behavior" and "My job is more stressful because of this child's behaviors." Both scales, **hopelessness and teacher stress, showed statistically significant positive changes** after participating in the program.

Implementation of Trauma-Informed Strategies

Participants were asked how often they performed certain trauma-informed strategies with children in their classroom. Three scales were developed to assess their self-reported levels of implementation of practices related to relationship building, self-regulation, and response to serious emotional or behavioral crises. **Statistically significant results were identified across all three scales.** More detailed results can be seen in the table below, highlighting growth in all categories after completing the certificate program.

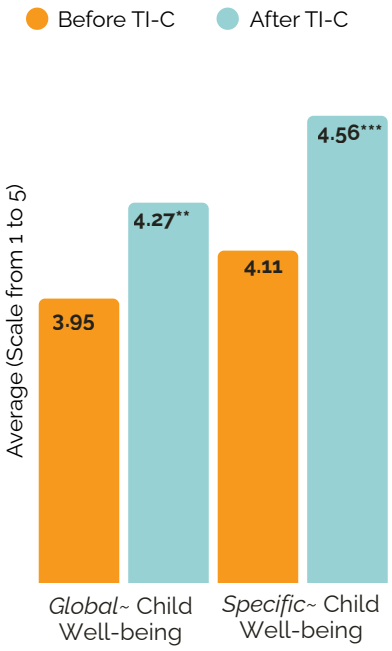


Furthermore, at the conclusion of the program, participants were asked what changes they had made in their classroom as a result of the training. All educators (100%) agreed or strongly agreed:

- *The changes they made because of the training improved the way things work in their classroom*
- *Their classroom became more positive*
- *Their relationship with the children in their care improved*
- *They know how to prevent and respond to challenging behaviors*
- *They better understand the reasons why challenging behaviors occur*
- *They understand steps they can take to support children's development*

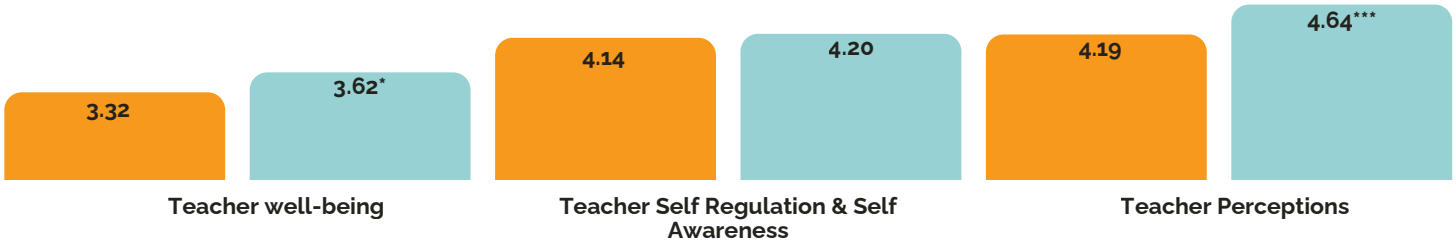
Child Well-Being

Two scales measuring changes in child well-being were developed using items from the Preschool Mental Health Climate Scale[3] (5 items) and the Student Teacher Relationships Scale[4] (8 items). Teachers responded to items related to 'global' child well-being by considering their class as a whole. For example, they considered to what extent children in their care appeared happy, well-adjusted, and interacted well with staff and peers. Additionally, they were asked to think of the specific children in their class with behavioral concerns. They assessed items like whether the child shares openly with them, values their relationship, or seeks comfort from them in times of need. **The global and specific child well-being scales showed statistically significant positive growth** after the teacher completed the certificate.



Teacher Well-being, Self-Regulation, and Changes in Perceptions

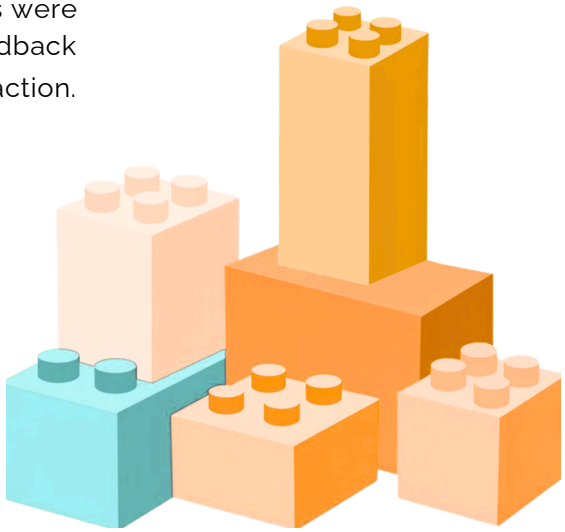
There were additional scales developed to assess teacher changes over time. The teacher well-being scale included items from the Self-Compassion Scale--Short Form[5], such as whether or not teachers considered themselves to be caring, patient, understanding, or tender with themselves, especially when making a mistake or going through a hard time. The self-regulation and awareness scale included items from the Regulating Emotions in Parenting Scale[6] (adapted here for teachers), like whether teachers believed they could set their emotions aside to respond to children in need or put the situation into perspective before reacting. Finally, the teacher perception scale consisted of items from several measures, including the Teacher Strategies Questionnaire[7], Wellbeing Measurement for Early Years Settings[8], Early Childhood Job Attitude Survey[9], and Teacher Opinion Survey-Revised[10]. These questions measured beliefs such as whether the teacher felt confident in their ability to manage behavioral challenges in the classroom, teach children social and emotional skills, and assist a dysregulated child. **Statistically significant positive changes were observed across teacher well-being and perception scales, suggesting that teachers felt better equipped to appropriately support the children in their care while maintaining their own well-being.** Pre-test scores were high (mean of 4.14 out of 5) on the teacher self-regulation and self-awareness scale, but they did not increase significantly at the post-test (mean of 4.2).



Training Satisfaction

The FIRST:ECE team also sought to explore teacher's satisfaction with various elements of the training series. Individualized coaching was an integral component of the certificate program and included in-person classroom visits, virtual one-on-one sessions, and text message video reminders of strategies for implementation. Educators reported that the virtual one-on-one visits were the most helpful (100%), followed by in-person classroom visits (93%), and video reminders (86%).

Additional items to measure participant satisfaction with the certificate training were derived from the Acceptability of Intervention Measure (AIM), Intervention Appropriateness Measure (IAM), and Feasibility of Intervention Measure (FIM).[11] Participants reported that the training content and strategies were appealing (93%), believed the strategies seemed like a good match (93%), and believed that the trauma-informed strategies learned seemed doable (93%). Furthermore, participants were asked to consider a series of questions designed to elicit feedback about the certificate program itself and assess their overall satisfaction. Responses showed that all participants (100%) agreed or strongly agreed that:



- *Trainings were clear and easy to understand*
- *The trainer was knowledgeable and responded well to questions and concerns*
- *The training was interesting and kept their attention*
- *They plan to use the strategies they learned*
- *The got what they hoped to get out of the training process*
- *They would recommend the training to colleagues*

Classroom Observations

A random sample of 25 educators was invited to participate in classroom observations before and after completing the teacher certificate. Trained observers utilized the Climate of Healthy Interaction for Learning & Development (CHILD)[12] tool to assess overall classroom quality. The CHILD measures nine dimensions of interactions in early care and education settings, including directions and rules, teacher-child interactions, and child behavior. These measures are scored from "undermining" to "promoting" as they relate to children's positive mental health and development and classroom quality. The CHILD observation tool indicated that the majority of **CHILD domains increased significantly** after training completion (see details below).

Area that was statistically significant with a large effect size (>.7)

- Social and Emotional Learning

Areas that were statistically significant with a moderate to large effect size (.5-.7)

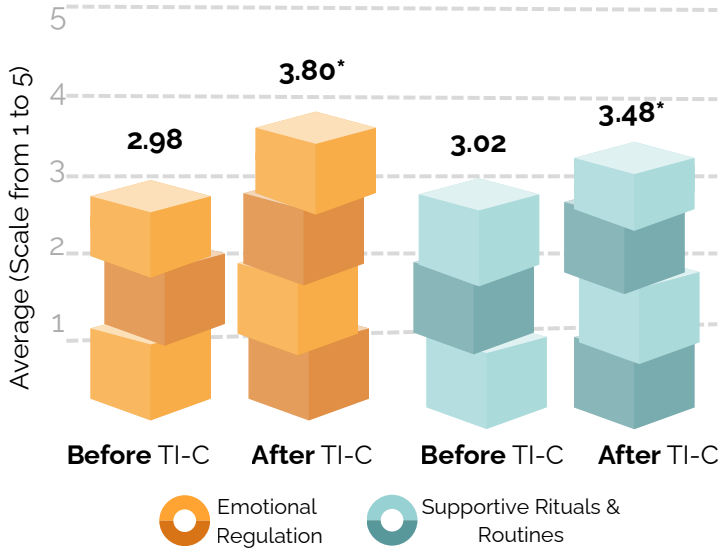
- Transitions
- Attunement
- Adult-Child Interactions
- Directions & Rules

Areas that were not statistically significant

- Adult Awareness
- Adult Affect
- Child Behaviors
- Warmth

To examine implementation of training specific trauma-informed practices, a supplemental set of observational items was developed by the evaluation team. Two scales were then created utilizing these scores. The "Emotional Regulation" scale is comprised of teacher composure and presence of a classroom "safe space," while the "Supportive Rituals and Routines" scale includes the use of "I Love You" rituals, visual daily schedules, and visual daily routines.

Each item asked observers to consider its prevalence within the classroom and rate it on a scale of 0 (Never or not true) to 5 (Consistently or completely true). Analysis of our supplemental observation items showed positive changes in the classroom after program completion, with use of both **"Emotional Regulation" and "Supportive Rituals and Routines" strategies significantly increasing** after completion of the training series.



Focus Groups

Four teacher focus groups were conducted in 2025-2026, following completion of the FIRST:ECE teacher certificate cohorts, with a total of 20 participants. Rapid coding and thematic analysis highlighted multiple themes across responses. Seven distinct themes emerged from the analysis:

- Teacher Perception of Value and Impact of FIRST:ECE
- Trauma-Informed Mindset Shift
- Teacher Self-Regulation and Capacity
- Structural and Administrative Constraints
- Coaching as the Active Ingredient
- Instructional Design and Learning Format
- Vicarious Trauma and Emotional Labor

Perceived value and impact of FIRST:ECE, trauma-informed mindset shift, and teacher self-regulation were mentioned the most. These themes were not limited to isolated comments but emerged across multiple speakers within each focus group, suggesting shared experiences rather than idiosyncratic perspectives.

Teacher Perception of Value and Impact of FIRST:ECE. Across focus groups, participants described FIRST:ECE as highly valuable and impactful, with strong endorsement of the program across sites and time points. Teachers consistently reported that the training changed how they understand children's behavior, increased their professional confidence, and influenced both classroom and personal practice.

> "[This was] the best training we've ever had."
> "I wish everyone could take this."
> "This should be mandatory, like math."

Trauma-Informed Mindset Shift. Participants characterized the program as transformative in helping them adopt a trauma-informed lens, including viewing behavior as communication, understanding the effects of trauma on brain development, and shifting away from punitive interpretations of children's actions.

Teacher Self-Regulation and Capacity. This impact extended to teachers' own well-being and professional capacity. Participants frequently emphasized the importance of self-regulation, recognized burnout more clearly, and described feeling validated in prioritizing self-care as part of effective teaching.

Structural and Administrative Constraints. Within focus groups, teachers identified barriers such as limited staffing, competing classroom demands, and insufficient time. In the later follow-up group, participants also more directly named administrative misalignment and the devaluation of trauma-informed work as barriers.

Coaching as the Active Ingredient. Findings also suggest that individualized coaching was a central mechanism of impact, particularly when participants experienced coaching relationships as safe, responsive, and tailored to their classroom realities. While coaching was positively referenced in the early May 2025 focus groups, the later May 2025 and the March 2026 focus groups included more detailed discussion of coaching processes ("She met me where I was;" "She helped me choose one thing [to focus on in my work]"), relational qualities of coaches ("I could tell her anything"), and the emotional support function of coaching ("It was kind of like having a counselor").

Instructional Design and Learning Format. Additionally, participants reported mixed reactions regarding the instructional design and learning format. Some respondents noted that activities and games during lectures helped reinforce concepts, while others noted that specific training structures, such as didactic lecturing and time allotments, acted as barriers.

Vicarious Trauma and Emotional Labor. Participants from the final focus group further deepened understanding of the emotional demands of this work by highlighting vicarious or secondary trauma and cumulative emotional burden, with participants explaining that "You absorb their stories" and that "Just hearing the term [trauma] helped." They also emphasized the value of language provided by FIRST:ECE to understand these experiences ("Just hearing the term [vicarious trauma[helped" and "I didn't have the words for it").

> "Year after year, day after day, we're exposed to what has happened to this child, what has happened in their family"

Several strategies were used to enhance analytic rigor and credibility. First, triangulation across focus groups enabled assessment of consistency and variation in themes across time and group participation. Additionally, thematic saturation was assessed and determined to be achieved. Taken together, these findings suggest that FIRST:ECE was experienced as both professionally meaningful and personally sustaining, while also indicating that program effectiveness depends on strong coaching relationships and supportive implementation conditions.



Conclusion

The FIRST:ECE Teacher Certificate Program is designed to increase educators' knowledge and use of trauma-informed practices, including adult/child emotional regulation, positive teacher-child relationships, understanding child behavior, and strategies to reduce teacher stress. Results from our mixed-methods evaluation showed significant improvements in teachers' trauma knowledge and confidence in that knowledge, as well as classroom practices, including the use of routines, rituals, and emotional regulation strategies. Teachers also reported lower levels of stress and hopelessness and stronger relationships with the children in their care. Participants also expressed high satisfaction with the program and consistently described the training as valuable and impactful. They reported gains in recognizing burnout and practicing self-regulation. Teachers also emphasized the importance of coaching throughout the program, describing coaches as safe, responsive, and attentive to the unique needs of their classrooms. In response to participant feedback, the training team may wish to explore the balance of didactics compared to more active learning approaches in the trainings themselves. Overall, these findings suggest that FIRST:ECE is a promising approach for strengthening educators' trauma-informed practices while supporting teacher well-being and improving classroom environments.

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ChatGPT was used to assist with grammar, sentence structure, and wording. All ideas, analyses, and conclusions are original, and all content was reviewed and verified by the authors.

$p = 0.05^{*}$, $p = 0.01^{**}$, and $p < 0.001^{***}$