

Expanding Access to Quality Child Care Is Critical for Texas Families

Testimony to the International Relations and Economic Development Committee
in support of six child care bills

State Child Care Policies are Critical for School Readiness and Economic Growth

In 2019, the Legislature recognized that growing strong third grade readers required support for three- and four-year-olds in pre-k. Similarly, the decisions the Legislature makes about the infants, toddlers, and preschoolers enrolled in child care programs will have a significant impact on their reading ability, health, behavior, and overall success when they reach school.

A child's experiences during the rapid brain development of the first few years of life strongly influence that child's trajectory for years and decades to come. Parents play the most important role in shaping those early childhood experiences, but they want and need the help of supportive policies to succeed. Access to quality child care ensures that infants, toddlers, and other young children with working parents have access to nurturing, attentive, effective, and safe care during this critical period of early childhood

Furthermore, lawmakers' support for quality child care infrastructure is critical for ensuring parents can return to work and strengthen the Texas economy. As the U.S. Chamber of Commerce recently wrote, "Without this industry's survival and ability to safely care for the children of working parents, every other American industry will struggle to return to work."¹ Before COVID-19, the industry was responsible for the employment of nearly 130,000 Texans and served over 1.3 million children under the age of five.² During the early stages of the pandemic, child care workers were deemed essential by the Texas Workforce Commission because of their critical role in educating children and serving as the backbone for the rest of the workforce.

¹ Letter from U.S. Chamber of Commerce to Congress (2020). Retrieved from:
<https://childcarerelief.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Chamber-Child-Care-Letter-to-Congress.pdf>

² Child Care in State Economies (2019). Retrieved from:
https://www.ced.org/assets/reports/childcareimpact/talking_points/revised/Texas%20Talking%20Points%20CED%201312019.pdf

The Quality of Child Care Varies Significantly, Shapes Each Child's Future Success, and Depends on State Policy

Imagine two children, both with hard-working parents who want the best for their children. The first child ends up in high-quality child care, where a trained teacher has a small class, reads the children books, gives them a hug when they need it, provides fun and enriching activities, and, when the time comes, teaches the kids their letters and numbers. The second child ends up in low-quality child care, where an overwhelmed, untrained educator is stuck with a big class, spends most of her day simply cleaning up messes and changing diapers, can't find the time to read the kids a book, and relies on TV shows to get the kids through the day. The more that Texas policymakers can address the quality of child care – cultivating child care that looks like the first option, rather than the second – the more our children and economy will thrive.

Texas Rising Star (TRS) is one of the primary tools Texas has for addressing the quality of child care. TRS measures, improves, and assesses the quality of child care programs that accept families who receive TWC child care subsidies. It measures and establishes standards addressing teacher training, curriculum, nutrition, safety, and more. However, participation in TRS is voluntary.

Unfortunately, even before COVID-19 hit, access to quality care was insufficient for working families:

- Nearly 71 percent of the state's licensed child care providers did **not** participate in Texas Rising Star.³
- Only about seven percent of the state's licensed providers are rated at the highest level of quality on Texas Rising Star or accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), considered the gold standard of quality child care standards.⁴
- Texas, through Child Care Regulation (CCR), allows some of the worst teacher-child ratios in the country, with minimum standards allowing 1 adult per 11 two-year-olds and 1 adult per 15 three-year-olds.⁵

Still, despite the many challenges facing early care providers and the families who rely on them, Texas lawmakers have an opportunity to rebuild the state's child care infrastructure stronger than ever before.

³ Texas Workforce Commission (2020) *Child Care by the Numbers*. Retrieved from:

https://www.twc.texas.gov/childcarenumbers/Texas_Statewide_System_monthly.html

⁴ Children at Risk (2020). *Child Care Desert & Affordability Map*. Retrieved from: <https://childrenatrisk.org/childcaredeserts/>

⁵ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (2013). *Child-Staff Ratios and Maximum Group Size Requirements in 2011*. Retrieved from: https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/547_1305_ratiosgroupsize_2011.pdf

We Support the Following Bills Designed to Strengthen Texas Child Care

HB 619 by Rep. Senfronia Thompson, developing a strategic plan to support the child care workforce.

- As the COVID-19 crisis has demonstrated, child care educators are essential workers for the Texas economy and Texas families. Unfortunately, child care programs struggle to recruit and retain a quality workforce, as educators leave programs due to poverty-level salaries, lack of benefits, insufficient training and support, and unmanageable classroom environments and class sizes.
- To strengthen this workforce, HB 619 would create a state strategic plan for the child care workforce, addressing the number of educators acquiring credentials and degrees, increasing apprenticeships that provide a career pathway for higher education, and exploring compensation strategies to raise pay.

HB 1364 by Rep. Ramon Romero/Rep. Ina Minjarez, increasing the supply of child care through contracts.

- Texas has the opportunity to help stabilize our highest quality child care programs by supporting and cultivating more child care contracts between Local Workforce Development Boards and TWC. Under these contracts, the Boards are able to continue paying for reserved slots during times of transition between the time that one child leaves and another child is placed in that slot. These contracts are an efficient way to target supportive resources to the highest quality child care programs serving lower-income children (or to achieve other critical priorities of the state, such as infant-toddler care and public-private partnerships with school districts). Contracts can help programs build stable, quality supply by ensuring the availability of seats in areas with the greatest need.
- This legislation authorizes child care contracts between local workforce development boards and the Texas Workforce Commission to identify and address gaps in services.

HB 1695 by Rep. John Raney, setting equitable reimbursement rates for child-care providers serving infants and toddlers.

- Low child-caregiver ratios are critically important for ensuring the youngest children receive sufficient attention and stay safe. However, TWC reimbursement rates do not align with the required ratios to equitably compensate classrooms with younger children.
- Currently, for example, a classroom with two teachers and the maximum number of allowed 11-month-olds receives a lower total reimbursement from TWC than a classroom with two teachers and the maximum number of permitted 13-month-olds. HB 1695 would ensure that the classroom of 11-month-olds is adequately reimbursed to accommodate the lower ratios mandated by HHS and adjust other rates to resolve similar shortfalls.

HB 1792 by Rep. Angie Chen Button/Rep. James Talarico, standardizing Texas Rising Star assessments.

- Currently, entry into Texas Rising Star is subject to local assessments from the Local Workforce Development Boards. The TRS workgroup raised concerns that the rigor of these assessments may not be consistent across the state.
- This legislation strengthens TRS by consolidating the certification process, ensuring the monitoring of these programs is fair, consistent, and reliable across the state.

HB 1964 by Rep. Ray Lopez, studying the cost of providing quality child care in comparison to family income.

- TWC conducts routine statewide market rate surveys of child care providers to measure prices for care across the state. However, market-rate surveys do not distinguish between low-quality child care and high-quality care
- This legislation would direct TWC to conduct a robust study that would inform state leaders, including TWC, how to establish reimbursement rates that align with the actual cost of providing a quality child care program consistent with the Texas Rising Star program.

HB 2607 by Rep. James Talarico/Rep. Angie Chen Button, improving the accountability and quality of subsidized child care.

- Unfortunately, even for providers who receive taxpayer funding through TWC's subsidy program, participation in the Texas Rising Star quality improvement program is optional.
- This legislation requires that child care providers that participate in the subsidy program also take part in Texas Rising Star through a phased approach. It ensures that public funds go to programs that demonstrate a commitment to providing safe and quality care and establishes improved oversight of the state's early learning sector.