

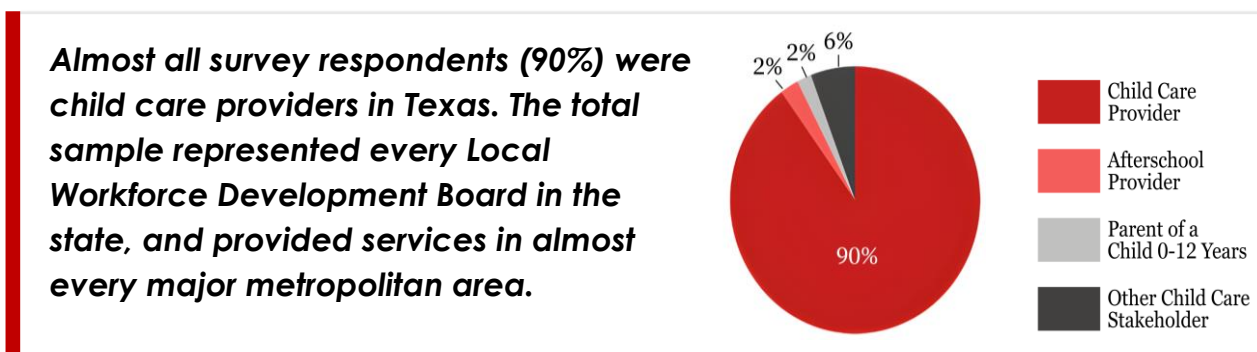
# THINKING BIGGER FOR A BETTER TEXAS

## ANALYSIS OF TEXAS CHILD CARE PROVIDER EXPERIENCES & POLICY IMPLICATIONS ACROSS EARLY CHILDHOOD SYSTEMS

### Introduction

In the fall of 2025, CHILDREN AT RISK (C@R) distributed a statewide survey to Texas child care providers, gathering input from more than 1,300 respondents representing all 28 Local Workforce Development Boards to better understand the realities shaping the provider experience. These findings help inform our recommendations for the ongoing Texas Sunset Commission process, as well as the Quad-Agency Child Care Initiative and the Governor's Taskforce on Governance of Early Care and Learning and the 90th Texas Legislature, supporting efforts to strengthen public policy and the early childhood workforce. By integrating local perspectives and grassroots needs, this survey deepens and reinforces C@R's broader priorities for improving systems that serve young children and their caregivers.

This report brings together insights from child care providers across Texas to better understand how regulatory processes, workforce and operational challenges, communication barriers, and system inconsistencies shape their daily work and the experiences of the families they serve.



#### Provider feedback was organized into five key areas:

1. Governance & Systemwide Coordination
2. Regulatory Alignment, Oversight Modernization & Workforce Capacity
3. Contracting Accountability & Performance Management
4. Technology, Data Systems & Transparency
5. Application & Access Streamlining for Families & Providers

Across all responses, providers expressed a deep commitment to children's safety and high quality care. They also shared significant frustration with **fragmented systems, heavy administrative burdens, and unclear or contradictory expectations** that make it harder to operate stable, responsive child care programs.

# Summary of Key Themes Across Responses

## 1. Governance & Systemwide Coordination

Providers described a fragmented oversight structure, with responsibilities divided among Health and Human Services Commission's (HHSC) Child Care Regulations (CCR), Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) Child Care Services (CCS), and Texas Education Agency's Pre-K programs. This lack of alignment results in conflicting guidance, unclear decision making, and uneven expectations for programs serving the same ages of children.

### What Providers Say

- Rules “change constantly” with inconsistent rollout and no central communication hub. One provider said she would like to be, “updated on changes in legislation in a timely, and easy to understand format.” One provider reflected the comments of many when she stated, “communication could be improved by providing dedicated contact channels, scheduling regular check-ins, enhancing the online portal for tracking inspections, and creating a feedback system.”
- With so many minimum standards (Child Care Regulations) to know and understand, Child Care Regulations representatives “interpret the rules differently,” leading to unpredictable enforcement. One provider noted, “At times, minimum standards can be difficult to understand, like action plans taken for a child with an epi-pen or who is lactose intolerant—documents on file aren't good enough, even after taking measures with doctors and parents.” Another provider said they had no issues with their playground equipment and then got a new CCR representative who cited them for a swing that had not been a problem before.
- Public school Pre K operates under standards through Texas Education Agency and private child care operate under Health and Human Services Commission Minimum standards even though they serve the same ages, which providers say creates inequity and competitive disadvantage. For example, a child falls and requires stitches. In both settings, proper first aid and notification to parents is required. However, a child care provider has to call in the injury to HHSC, which will prompt an investigation and possibly a citation. Public School Pre-K programs don't have any additional oversight.

### Providers Are Asking For

- A more coordinated regulatory structure that removes conflicting guidance.
- Universal, statewide rules for programs serving the same ages of children, with clear protocols and accountability to ensure consistent guidance and enforcement across agencies.

**This theme appeared across all survey respondents, highlighting a statewide need for cross agency governance reform that brings greater clarity, consistency, and fairness to early childhood systems in Texas.**

## 2. Regulatory Alignment, Oversight Modernization & Workforce Capacity

This was the strongest and most consistent theme across all survey responses. Providers described Child Care Minimum Standard regulations (Child Care Regulations) that feel heavy, confusing, and unpredictable, making it harder to focus on children and daily operations.

### Overly Burdensome or Unclear Regulations

The mix of inconsistent expectations and heavy administrative burden makes it hard for providers to plan, operate smoothly, or feel confident they are meeting requirements. These conditions ultimately cost providers time, staff, and overall stability.

#### Across the state, providers are experiencing:

- Excessive paperwork & duplicative documentation.
- Rules that shift without warning.
- Inspectors who apply rules unevenly — some are supportive, some are punitive, all are inconsistent.

### Voices from the Field

Comments from survey participants clearly illustrate how challenges and workforce shortages reinforce one another, creating a cycle that makes it harder for programs to recruit, hire, and retain the staff they need to remain compliant or operational.

#### Texas child care providers shared that:

- “We need help finding and keeping staff... we train people only to lose them to the school district.”
- “The paperwork is out of control.”
- “Different inspectors tell us different things—how are we supposed to get it right? The turnover rate in CCR staff is a barrier to consistent application of standards.”
- “The sheer number of regulations is overwhelming.”
- “When emails are sent out, they are very WORDY.”
- Several providers mentioned frustrations when they self-report, or reach out to ask a question, and inadvertently raise a red flag—stating that this results in providers not wanting to reach out. A regular open virtual meeting where providers can ask clarification questions on the standards was suggested.

Providers ranked Minimum Standards as the most challenging component in maintaining their child care program's compliance with Child Care Regulations.

*Sample included 486 licensed child care and afterschool providers, and all home-based providers.*

**Minimum Standards** most challenging

**Licensing staff**

**Ease of use of the Child Care Regulation website**

**Background Checks**

**Administrative Review Process to correct deficiencies**

**Child Care Provider User Account**

**Waiver and variances requests** least challenging

## Workforce Crisis as a Regulatory Issue

Providers overwhelmingly described staffing shortages that are made worse by regulatory barriers. They noted that wages remain noncompetitive with K–12 and retail sectors but also pointed to system delays and administrative requirements that slow down hiring and stretch already thin teams. Many shared that fingerprinting and background check delays and uncertainty about how much time is left to wait for a result can leave positions unfilled for weeks or even months. Recognizing the importance of training requirements, child care providers reported struggling to complete these and remain operational when staffing levels are already too low.

### Providers Are Asking For

- Implement uniform training and robust statewide calibration for all regulatory and quality staff to reduce the inconsistency in Minimum Standard interpretation.
- Oversight practices that are modernized and grounded in support, not punishment.
- A background check process that responds to workforce needs and reduces onboarding delays.

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## 3. Contracting Accountability & Performance Management

This theme surfaced strongly across the survey, especially in connection with CCS reimbursement delays, and inconsistent contracting requirements. Providers described financial and administrative systems that feel unreliable, unpredictable, and difficult to navigate, adding strain to programs that already operate on thin margins.

### Key Pain Points

- Chronic underpayment or late payment from CCS system.
- Unclear performance expectations and shifting documentation requirements for CCS.
- Long delays for families seeking subsidies, with some waiting years for assistance.
- Accountability structures that fall heavily on providers, while state and local systems face few consequences for delayed payments or poor communication.

### Voices from the Field

- “The reimbursement payment system is a disaster—late, wrong, or missing.”
- “Families have been waiting for over two years to get help.”
- “If we are held accountable, so should the agencies who pay us on time.”

**These voices reflect a broader frustration that the systems intended to support child care programs often create uncertainty and financial instability instead.**

## Providers Are Asking For

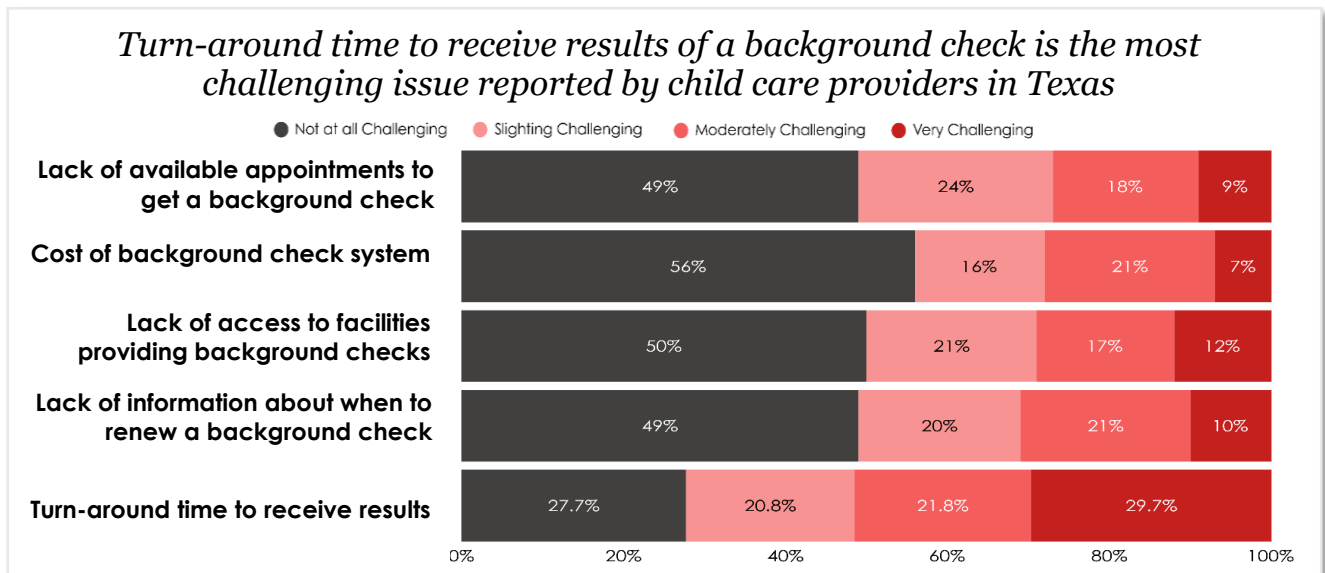
- Streamlined contracting and performance accountability measures, particularly related to KinderSystems and TX3C implementation.
- Payment and attendance systems that work consistently and accurately.
- Predictable timelines and quality assurance applied to state and local systems.
- A public-facing, centralized information hub that consolidates all rules, forms, contacts, and grant opportunities across HHSC specific to Child Care Regulations and TWC specific to Child Care Services and Texas Rising Star.

## 4. Technology, Data Systems & Transparency

Across all datasets, providers consistently described technology systems that are confusing, unreliable, and difficult to use. Many shared that broken portals, outdated interfaces, and limited visibility into regulatory processes create daily challenges and slow down essential tasks. Instead of supporting programs, these systems often add frustration and uncertainty.

### Providers Said

- HHSC systems are described as “confusing,” “not user-friendly,” and often not working.
- Providers report difficulty accessing accurate information about Child Care Regulations rule changes.
- Background check portals have little transparency, preventing providers from seeing where an application is in the process.
- Many providers commented on difficulty downloading forms from the CCR website, one noting, “without a subscription to Adobe...they are almost impossible to obtain.”



## Voices from the Field

- “The website is challenging and not built for people who don't have hours to dig.”
- “We never know where the background check is—there's no real-time status.”
- “Background checks take forever. People give up and go somewhere else.”
- “Too many platforms, none of them work well.”

**These frustrations reflect a deeper concern that technology systems are not designed with providers in mind, creating barriers that slow operations and reduce confidence in regulatory processes.**

## Providers Are Asking For

- Real-time visibility into compliance and background checks.
- Communicated updates tied to rule changes, not reactive or after-the-fact notifications.
- Shared, user-centered system that allows families and providers to easily access information, forms and regular communications.

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## 5. Application & Access Streamlining for Families & Providers

This theme emerges in connection with CCS eligibility and general administrative burden. Providers consistently described challenges related to accessing and maintaining services, both for their programs and for the families they serve. Many shared that eligibility processes, onboarding requirements, and confusing or duplicative systems create delays that strain operations and limit access to care.

### Access Barriers for Providers

- Providers feel they spend more time on compliance than serving children.
- They find CCR forms difficult to download.

### Access Barriers for Families

- “Families waiting 2+ years” on subsidy waitlists.
- “Make information more readily available and clear as to who it serves and services.
- “Many families are experiencing severe communication barriers with their assigned case workers. Reaching someone by phone often requires waiting for hours—if calls are answered at all.”
- Conflicting eligibility information between agencies.
- Lack of clear communication on how families can access services or maintain eligibility.

**These barriers create uncertainty for families and add administrative pressure for programs already operating with limited staff.**

### **Providers Are Asking For**

- A single, integrated system for families and providers for applications and renewals.
  - A shared eligibility system that allows families to **apply once** to qualify for multiple supports.
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## **Key Recommendations**

CHILDREN AT RISK's analysis of responses defined actionable and cost-effective steps that state agencies and policymakers can take to strengthen early childhood systems. Providers consistently emphasized **five areas where targeted improvements would make the most meaningful difference** for program stability, workforce capacity, and family access.

### **I. Governance and Systemwide Coordination**

*Design a purposeful unified governance with systemwide coordination to improve efficiency and quality*

Providers want clearer structures and aligned expectations across agencies. They recommended the following improvements to support clarity and alignment:

- Design a unified early childhood governance structure with a lead agency or position that has decision-making authority across HHSC Child Care Regulation and TWC Child Care Services and Texas Rising Star to reduce fragmentation.
- Standardized rule interpretation of Texas Rising Star and Child Care Regulations standards across Local Workforce Development Board and HHSC regions.
- Ensure parity in expectations for public school Pre K and private child care programs.

### **II. Regulatory Alignment, Oversight Modernization and Workforce Capacity**

*Synthesize key regulations to reduce confusion and improve regulatory alignment*

Providers shared a desire for oversight that supports quality rather than adding unnecessary burden. They suggested the following practices to strengthen quality and oversight:

- Implement uniform training and robust statewide calibration for all regulatory and quality staff once regulations are synthesized.
- Develop an “interpretation” manual for regulations with examples of met and not met.
- Oversight practices that are modernized and grounded in support, not punishment. Create consistent culture partnership to improve quality and ensure safety, moving away from the, “I have to find something to cite or I’m not doing my job, or a ‘gotcha’” mentality.

### **III. Contracting Accountability and Performance Management**

#### *Improve oversight of contracted services to ensure quality performance*

Providers expressed the need for contracting systems that are reliable, timely, and transparent. They called for the following actions to bolster the effectiveness of these systems:

- Hold state agencies and Local Workforce Development Boards accountable for accurate and timely CCS payments.
- Provide families clear timelines for waitlists and application processing.
- Develop a public-facing, centralized information hub that consolidates all rules, forms, contacts, and grant opportunities across HHSC and TWC agencies for families and providers.

### **IV. Technology, Data Systems and Transparency**

#### *Update technology and data systems to aid in transparency and reliability*

Providers want technology systems that are functional, streamlined, and designed with users in mind. They recommended:

- Create a shared eligibility system that allows families to apply once to qualify for multiple supports in child-and-family-serving programs such as HHSC Child Care Regulation and TWC Child Care Services and Texas Rising Star.
- A background check process that responds to workforce needs by reducing delays, reflecting where a background check is in the overall process, and coordinates with other background systems.
- Create proactive, statewide communication for rule changes in a common portal, designating a consistent, clear process for rule change announcements.

## V. Application and Access Streamlining for Families and Providers

*Simplify and streamline application and onboarding process for providers and families into the child care services system to improve efficiency and serve more families*

Providers see clear opportunities to make access smoother for both families and programs. They urged the state to:

- Integrate family eligibility, provider applications, and compliance tasks into one coordinated system with the end-user in mind.
- Provide family-facing navigation support through local navigators or technology tools.
- Review required paperwork to simplify or consolidate duplicative administrative tasks.

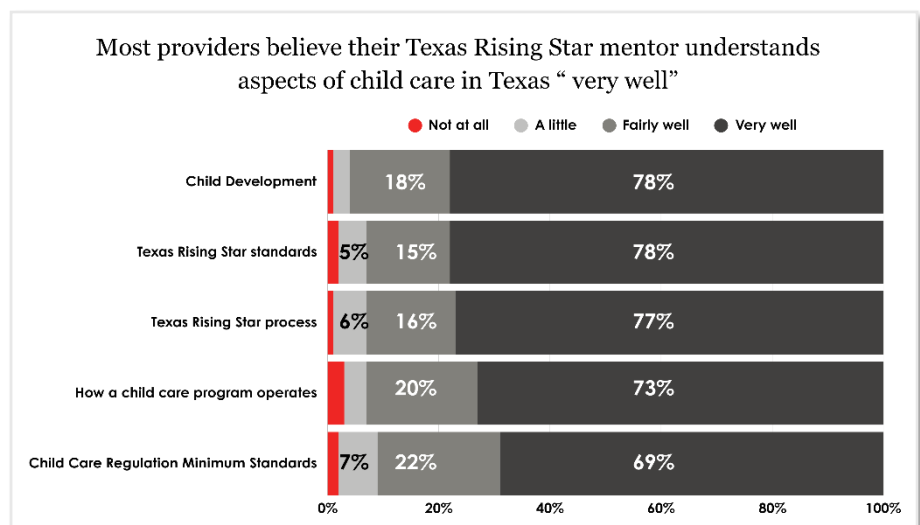
## Conclusion

In the past decade, Texas leaders have intentionally passed legislation and supported programs to uplift the early childhood education ecosystem. Those actions do not go unnoticed or unappreciated. Thanks to additional focus and intentionality, child care providers have reported being able to provide higher quality education, create safer and more enriching learning environments, and support families better than ever before.

Building on this progress, providers also highlighted specific supports and system improvements that are working well and offer a strong foundation for continued refinement. Participants in this survey agreed that the collegiality and helpfulness of Texas Rising Star (TRS) Mentors was beneficial to their work, with 81% of respondents noting that communication with their TRS Mentor was good or excellent. Child care providers have also observed a significant improvement in the TRS assessors' system. While steps forward have been made are resoundingly appreciated, continued improvements can be made to better support the viability of Texas' child care sector.

**As Texas looks to the next chapter of supporting the child care sector, there is a critical opportunity not only to continue investing in quality, but to reimagine how early childhood systems can work in coordination.**

Greater alignment across agencies can reduce administrative burden, improve efficiency, and create a more navigable system for both providers and families, without compromising accountability or quality standards.



The results of this survey paint a clear picture: providers are not opposed to accountability. They are opposed to systems that are poorly designed, inconsistently applied, or so burdensome that they distract from what matters most, delivering high-quality early learning experiences that support children's development and enable families to go to work.

Addressing these challenges presents a meaningful opportunity for Texas to build early childhood systems that truly work for child care providers and the families who rely on them. When systems are intentionally aligned and designed with providers in mind, children thrive, families succeed, and Texas strengthens the essential infrastructure needed to support a strong workforce and vibrant communities across the state.