

December 17, 2018

Early Childhood Stakeholders Urge Texas Leaders to Improve Child Care Quality

Dear Texas leaders,

As experts in early childhood development and safety, we urge you to take action during the upcoming legislative session in response to the tragedies and lost opportunities highlighted in the recent Austin American-Statesman series on state oversight of child care.

Imagine answering a call at work to learn that something tragic happened to your child or grandchild at child care... and that your little one was unsupervised, or worse, abused. Too many Texas families have received that call. But you have the power to change this for many Texas families – and at the same time ensure that more kids have the positive early childhood experiences they need to be academically, socially, and behaviorally ready to start school when the time comes.

Last week, *The Austin American-Statesman* published “*Unwatched*”, an extensive 12-part investigative report on child care in Texas, spotlighting the failure of the system to keep children safe. It was heartbreaking, but unfortunately not all that surprising, to read of the preventable deaths of one-year-old Jaxson Partridge-Reed and 3 month old Shane Martinez, and the devastating injuries of children like 11 month Aiden McGivney.

Unfortunately, the reporters only needed to pull the threads on a few stories to begin to unravel a system of deficiencies in the care of children, as well as the ineffective management of those charged with overseeing the provision of child care. The situation is bleak: In the last 10 years, thousands of Texas children have suffered serious injuries and nearly 90 have tragically lost their lives as a result of abuse or neglect while in unlicensed or licensed care.

Employers rely on parents to fulfill their jobs. Parents with young children rely on access to local child care settings in order to work and provide for their families. Young children rely on the state of Texas to ensure that, when left in a licensed child care facility, they are not only safe and healthy, but also growing and learning in furtherance of success in school and life.

Regrettably, as evidenced by the ongoing news reports, although there are safe and wonderful programs sprinkled throughout the state, Texas’ lack of a coordinated child care system cannot currently ensure collective quality and safety.

In light of these troubling accounts, the upcoming 86th legislative session is a prime opportunity for state lawmakers to change this and ensure that taxpayer resources are directed to quality and safety enhancements of the Texas child care system.

Increase Access to Quality Child Care Facilities

Our most vulnerable children are at the highest risk of being placed in unsafe environments.

Quality care for infants and toddlers is expensive and widely inaccessible. Many parents of young children do not have access to pertinent information on the importance of the earliest years nor how to find quality care. Others, desperate for a care solution during the workday, find their only

options are low cost, unregulated and potentially unsafe settings. The state must prioritize improving access to quality care for this vulnerable age group.

Too many parents are unable to access high quality child care settings, or unable to recognize the quality of their child’s childcare provider. Less than 10% of the state’s child care providers participate in the state’s quality rating system, either because they are not required or not allowed to. To raise awareness of the importance of quality and protect parents and their children from low quality centers, the state should permit all providers to participate in this system and require all subsidized providers to receive a quality rating.

Children aren’t entering public school ready to learn, and school districts are struggling to solve the problem. However, state agencies have data that can help us better understand what early childhood programs are working. Connecting and understanding data is a common sense approach to helping children be school ready.

Improve the Safety of All Child Care Centers

Child-teacher ratios in Texas child care settings are among the worst in the country. Child care teachers are stretched too thin and are required to look after many children at one time, potentially increasing the likelihood of safety incidents. The state should work to reduce child care ratios in licensed facilities and at a minimum, should collect and report data on child care ratios and their contribution to unsafe care environments.

The state agencies responsible for overseeing child care are uncoordinated and poorly compensated. Last session, the legislature invested in CPS caseworkers to improve the consistency and quality of child protection cases. The state should consider doing the same for child care agency employees, particularly those responsible for licensing, to ensure consistent regulation and oversight of child care providers.

Thank you for your attention to this urgent matter, and we look forward to working with you to make sure our youngest, most vulnerable Texans are able to grow into healthy, productive adults.

Sincerely,

Alamo Colleges District, San Antonio College

Campfire Fort Worth

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Children’s Defense Fund

Dallas Early Education Alliance

Early Learning Alliance

Early Matters Dallas

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