

INVESTMENT & INNOVATION

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF EARLY
CHILDHOOD EDUCATION FOR
LOW-INCOME CHILDREN



children
at Risk
Speaking Out + Driving Change for Children

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Exposure to high-quality early childhood education (ECE) is the foundation to future academic success, especially for children from low-income backgrounds. Increasing access to subsidized child care and public pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) opportunities are some of the pathways that Texas is utilizing to provide affordable early educational supports for children from low-income families. However, increasing access alone, is not enough. The quality of these programs is the key to building a child's brain that is primed for future learning.

Governor Greg Abbott and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) recognize that focusing on quality early care and education provides a promising path forward for our children's educational and economic success and our state's economic competitiveness. The utilization of the 2018 Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) increase of \$230 million—a 45% increase in funding—accelerated this work by:

1. **Increasing access to quality child care** – enrolling over 30,000 more low-income children in child care
2. **Raising reimbursement rates for child care providers** – raising reimbursement rates for child care providers serving low-income children and providing higher rates for those committed to quality through the state's Quality Rating Improvement System, known as the Texas Rising Star (TRS)
3. **Expanding access to Texas Rising Star mentors** – supporting quality by expanding the number of TRS mentors and improving their wages
4. **Investing in innovative quality solutions** – improving efficiency through Shared Services software, growing TWC's Pre-K Partnership Program, developing an Infant Toddler Specialist Network, and investing in the ECE workforce

In this executive summary, we examine the investment of CCDBG funding on quality improvement, offer policy recommendations to help further the state's goals, and discuss innovative evidence-based practices that are essential to improving the quality of child care for low-income children. We applaud Governor Greg Abbott and TWC for their attention to quality and we look forward to seeing how the additional CCDBG funding for the 2021 fiscal year will continue these efforts. This is an opportune time to capitalize on their excellent work and to make further progress towards ensuring that some of the most vulnerable children in the state are given an equitable chance to succeed and contribute to the economic well-being of Texas. Regardless of a child's economic background, every child is owed the opportunity to have access to high-quality education starting at birth. The moment is now, and we as a state are well positioned to take this charge.



INCREASING ACCESS TO QUALITY CHILD CARE

A portion of the \$189 million allocated to improve direct care, helped to increase the number of children served from 100,000 to over 130,000.

Recommendation for Next Steps: Mandate participation of subsidy providers in TRS with a clear timeline for phase-in of the requirements and supports. Requiring participation increases access to quality programs and provides greater accountability for government dollars.



RAISING RATES FOR CHILD CARE PROVIDERS

A portion of the \$189 million allocated to improve direct care, helped to raise reimbursement rates. TRS 4-Star providers' maximum reimbursement rate now equals the 75th percentile of the 2019 Market Rate Survey. TRS 3-Star providers moved to the 90 percent of 4-Star and TRS 2-Star providers increased to the 90 percent of the 3-Star rate.

Recommendation for Next Steps: Reimburse at higher rates than providers' published prices and increase reimbursement rates for infant and toddler providers. Many providers publish their rates based on what they think families can afford rather than the cost of quality. Higher reimbursements would allow more providers to expand access to high-quality child care and encourage more child care providers to become TRS-4 certified. Additionally, providing high-quality care for infants and toddlers is expensive and the current rates do not adequately compensate the additional resources, training, and teacher-to-child ratios needed to provide quality care for infants and toddlers.



EXPANDING ACCESS TO TEXAS RISING STAR MENTORS

TWC allocated over \$10 million of the \$41 million set aside for quality improvement to support the hiring and/or increase of salaries for mentors.

Recommendation for Next Steps: Provide additional funding to hire more mentors to adequately meet the needs of subsidy providers and local workforce boards. In conjunction with the recommendation to mandate all subsidy providers participate in TRS, the phase-in process should include an increase in mentors to match the support that will be needed to help providers move towards quality.



INVESTING IN INNOVATIVE QUALITY SOLUTIONS

TWC allocated a portion of the \$41 million set aside for quality improvement to invest in Shared Services (\$750,000), a Regional Early Childhood Support Specialist Initiative which includes Pre-K Partnerships (\$563,000), an Infant and Toddler Specialist Network (\$3 million), and for child care staff retention strategies (\$1 million).

Recommendation for Next Steps:

Evaluate the impact of Shared Services funding and adjust future allocations to enhance and expand efforts. Shared Services is an operational approach that allows small child care providers to share resources in order to operate more efficiently, reduce costs and thus have more financial resources available to invest in quality.

Continue to invest in Pre-K partnerships, align the requirements and alleviate the barriers that prevent public-private partnerships. Pre-K Partnerships are an opportunity to maximize government dollars and expand access to quality early education.

Increase the number of infants and toddlers served by subsidy providers, raise reimbursement rates for infants and toddlers and ensure that quality funds are strategically used to meet these goals. Many providers across Texas struggle to acquire the appropriate staff and financial resources needed to offer high-quality care for infants and toddlers, which limits the availability of high-quality affordable slots for infants and toddlers.

Develop statewide goals for helping teachers achieve credentials and degrees, meet living wages and utilize the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System and Workforce Registry to assist teachers with professional growth. When teachers are prepared to teach, compensated adequately, and supported professionally they are better prepared to contribute to a thriving early childhood workforce by providing high-quality interactions with the children they serve.

To download the full report, please visit <https://childrenatrisk.org/ece/>



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The research included in this report was generously supported by the W. K. Kellogg Foundation (WKKF). WKKF, founded in 1930 as an independent, private foundation by breakfast cereal pioneer, Will Keith Kellogg, is among the largest philanthropic foundations in the United States. Guided by the belief that all children should have an equal opportunity to thrive, WKKF works with communities to create conditions for vulnerable children so they can realize their full potential in school, work, and life. WKKF is based in Battle Creek, Michigan, and works throughout the United States and internationally, as well as with sovereign tribes. Special emphasis is paid to priority places where there are high concentrations of poverty and where children face significant barriers to success. WKKF priority places in the U.S. are in Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, and New Orleans, and internationally in Mexico and Haiti.

For more information, visit
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For 30 years, CHILDREN AT RISK has worked to serve as a catalyst for change to improve the quality of life for children through strategic research, public policy analysis, education, collaboration, and advocacy. CHILDREN AT RISK's early childhood education team works to expand access to quality, affordable early learning opportunities for all Texans.

For more on our early childhood education work, please see our recent research at childrenatrisk.org/ECE/

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