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**TEXAS EARLY CHILDHOOD  
EDUCATION NEWSLETTER**



**DECEMBER 2020**

**COVID-19 COMMUNITY INITIATIVES SUPPORTING**

**CHILDREN 0-5 AND THEIR FAMILIES**



# TEXAS EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION NEWSLETTER

## COVID-19 COMMUNITY INITIATIVES SUPPORTING CHILDREN 0-5 AND THEIR FAMILIES

Texas' child care industry was on fragile footing well before the pandemic. In 2019, nearly 1-in-12 Texas children lived in a child care desert. Since the pandemic, and its resulting shut-downs, child care providers have faced challenge after challenge. From securing necessary cleaning supplies and personal protective equipment, to increased operating costs and lower enrollment numbers, it is no surprise many child care providers have closed their doors.

Permanent and temporary closures have made it difficult for many parents to access child care, putting Texas' economy at risk. The child care industry has a direct revenue of \$3.64 billion in Texas, with an estimated \$8.7 billion indirect impact on the state economy overall. Access to affordable child care increases workforce participation and supports economic growth. As Texas aims to have a flourishing economy after the pandemic, an adequately funded and sustainable child care sector is critical.

This spring, Texas received \$371,663,374 in supplemental Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The Texas Workforce Commission immediately released \$200 million of the CARES Act funding to be allocated based on Local Workforce Development Board's (LWDB) estimated need. This federal emergency funding was used to stabilize income, subsidize payments, and fund investment in essential sanitary supplies or other COVID-19 related business expenses.

In addition to federal support, the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) authorized waivers and emergency

responses to maintain providers' income based on previous enrollment numbers and offered grants, guidance, and support for struggling providers and families alike. Additionally, Texas Health and Human Services (HHS) increased the number of available child care slots for emergency first responders. They also established new rules for the emergency child care waivers and guidance to providers on how to continue to serve families safely.

Child care providers across Texas stepped up and kept their doors open while schools shut down to provide care for the first responders and essential workers. To address the need for emergency child care and help connect workers to open providers, TWC and Governor Greg Abbott announced a Frontline Child Care Essential Worker Stakeholder Task Force and launched the Frontline Child Care Portal. This online portal helped frontline workers navigate their current care options and connect with open quality providers, certified through the Texas Rising Star.

Throughout the pandemic, child care leaders and advocates across the state have taken action to protect and support the child care industry. CHILDREN AT RISK and its Early Childhood Education team appreciate the many essential workers, educators, providers, and partners who've held the early education community together over this unprecedented year.

In this newsletter, we aim to highlight what local communities have done to help child care providers and families with young children through this pandemic. While we could never fully encompass the breadth and depth of efforts made this year, we are grateful for the opportunity to shine a light on a few bright spots throughout the Lone Star state.





## LOCAL RESPONSES TO COVID-19

### **AMARILLO** | UNITED WAY OF AMARILLO & CANYON COVID-19 EMERGENCY RELIEF FUND

The United Way of Amarillo & Canyon launched a COVID-19 Emergency Relief Fund to provide funding to nonprofits whose work positively impacted children from low-income communities. Specifically, they distributed funding to nonprofits focused on providing basic needs such as food, shelter, utilities and child care. Thanks to generous donations from corporations and individual donors, they were able to provide over \$180,000 to 14 separate nonprofits.

### **AMARILLO** | PANHANDLE DISASTER RELIEF FUND

The Amarillo Area Foundation and The Don and Sybil Harrington Foundation initially launched the Panhandle Disaster Relief Fund in 2006 to provide emergency funding for natural disasters such as tornadoes or wildfires impacting the panhandle region of Texas. In March, they recognized the novel threat that the coronavirus pandemic posed to their community and the collaboration set aside \$200,000 from their initial disaster relief fund to provide grants and monetary support specifically for the Panhandle's COVID-19 response.

Within a matter of weeks, they distributed grants to rural hospitals, local nonprofits, food security programs, and child care providers. With the help of individual community donors and businesses, the fund rose to over \$794,000. As of July 19, over \$564,000 has been dispersed, and they are continuing to raise money and distribute grants as the Panhandle communities continue to weather the impacts of the pandemic.

## **AUSTIN** | AUSTIN CITY COUNCIL PRIORITIZES CHILD CARE IN EMERGENCY FUNDING

Austin City Council provided \$900 thousand in grants to 72 child care providers economically impacted by COVID-19. Initially, the funds were disbursed to providers serving families in the subsidy program and providers enrolled in Texas Rising Star (TRS) program. Recognizing that many of their low-income children of color were enrolled in non-TRS centers, they expanded the requirements to allow non-TRS certified providers to receive emergency grant funding if they began the process to become TRS certified. As a result, Austin now has 31 providers scheduled for follow-up with Workforce Solutions to continue the TRS certification process. At the time of distribution, funded providers demonstrated over \$6 million in eligible expenses. As another way to help stabilize the child care industry, the Austin City Council approved the SAVES (Save Austin's Vital Economic Sectors) Resolution in October which included child care as a vital economic sector and will deploy \$5M in child care relief funds in early 2021.

## **AUSTIN** | CITY OF AUSTIN COVID-19 RESPONSE & CHILD CARE TASK FORCE

On March 13th, when the City of Austin established the local government Emergency Operations Command center for COVID-19 Response, the Austin Public Health Department established a Child Care Task Force primarily comprised of key stakeholders from the Austin/Travis County Success By 6 Strategic Plan Leadership team with a purpose to guide important decisions that could have lasting impacts on the Austin-Travis County child care ecosystem. This group later evolved to develop a subgroup of representing program leaders from licensed home and center-based programs to help inform the task force in their initiatives. Through each step of its evolution, the task force has sought to protect the Austin-Travis County child care ecosystem by connecting providers and their



*Bright Beginnings Child Care Center,*

*Photo Credit: United Way for Greater Austin.*

needs with elected officials and community members. As a first step, they have created and maintained guides to be used by those planning and executing decisions that would impact the local child care ecosystem.

Recognizing that the most beneficial action would be informed by local data, the task force also established a robust supply needs survey and response where Austin Public Health has been able to provide essential supplies to the child care programs open and operating. Most notably, the task force became the catalyst for the \$1M Child Care Relief Fund distributed to licensed and registered providers in July, and they have been involved in securing an additional \$5M in relief funding for providers through the City of Austin SAVE(S) Resolution. This task force continues to meet and will continue as long as needed, providing essential information for City and County government as well as informing the efforts of the Austin/Travis County Success By 6 Coalition in advocacy.



Bright Beginnings Child Care Center,

Photo Credit: United Way for Greater Austin.

### **AUSTIN | ATX SUCCESS BY 6 FAMILY CHILD CARE EMERGENCY EFFORTS**

Prior to COVID-19, the United Way for Greater Austin and ATX Success By 6 Coalition had a strong desire to launch more strategic work to support local home-based child care programs. The onset of the pandemic shifted this initiative from strategic planning to emergency response in recognition of the unique strengths and challenges faced by home-based providers. In response to increased community need, many providers shifted enrollment to serve more school-aged children. However, providers have still suffered dramatic drops in enrollment (these providers dropped from 538 to 170 children served).

To support this vital economic sector, the United Way for Greater Austin successfully applied for grant funding from the national HomeGrown initiative. They also received matching funds from the City of Austin Public Health Department and St. David's Foundation to launch an emergency relief fund for local home-based providers facing an economic crisis. To launch this fund, United Way ATX partnered with local organization Go Austin! Vamos Austin!, which serves home-based child care programs in several Austin zip codes, and AVANCE, which was awarded a grant from the Texas Workforce Commission to create family child care networks in Travis County.

The emergency relief fund supported home-based providers that were licensed, registered, listed or informal (that cared for at least 2 unrelated children for more than 12 hours per week) by providing up to \$1500 in direct assistance in the form of prepaid visa cards and H-E-B gift cards to offset

increased expenses or loss of income as a result of the crisis. This funding was able to support 114 home-based providers, the majority of whom were informal programs.

In addition, all recipients were eligible to receive a supply kit with key health & safety supplies that were assembled by United Way for Greater Austin corporate partner JE Dunn. Fourteen of the recipients expressed interest in support becoming licensed and 14 programs indicated interest in support to accept child care subsidies.

### **AUSTIN | SUCCESS BY 6 PRE-K PARTNERSHIPS**

During the 2019-2020 school year, the United Way for Greater Austin launched an innovative Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Partnership Hub in collaboration with the Austin Independent School District (AISD). This leveraged an 1882 in-district partnership model to create a Shared Services Hub for administering Pre-K Partnerships between the public school district and high quality child care centers that increased access to quality Pre-K for families in the Austin area. In its first year, the Hub co-enrolled more than 470 three and four-year olds in public Pre-K as AISD students, while leveraging more than \$1.8M in public Pre-K funding into high quality child care and Head Start programs. When the COVID-19 crisis hit Texas early this spring, the Hub proved to be critical in providing emergency support for Austin’s child care sector and greater community.



When the Governor closed child care with the exception of those serving essential workers, almost all of the Texas Rising Star rated child care centers participating in the partnership opened to serve essential workers. These programs simultaneously provided the children of non-essential workers continued virtual Pre-K instruction. The staff of the administrative Hub at the United Way continued to support these partnership sites with tools for virtual instruction as well as resources and support for service to children of essential workers including masks and other health and safety essentials, weekly administrator support calls, free at-home book delivery in partnership with BookSpring, etc. As the 2020-2021 school year launched, all of the Pre-K Partnership child care center sites had re-opened for in-person instruction (typically reopening as their respective school district re-opened), and the Hub added three new partner organizations.

### **AUSTIN | LOCAL VOLUNTEERS LEND A HAND IN RENOVATIONS**

In this time of economic uncertainty, some providers have foregone needed renovations due to limited funds, staff capacity, or alternative priorities in the wake of COVID-19. Local volunteers stepped in to lend their skills at two local child care centers in Austin by updating and repairing the infrastructure of the buildings. JE Dunn Construction recently completed skills-based volunteer projects at Sweet Briar Child Development Center and Reggio Emilia in Oak Hill. JE Dunn is a long-time corporate partner of United Way for Greater Austin and both child care centers are part of Pre-K Partnerships (the previously mentioned collaboration between United Way for Greater Austin and Austin ISD).



*The JE Dunn team volunteers at Reggio Emilia.  
Photo Credit: United Way for Greater Austin.*



The JE Dunn team volunteers at Sweet Briar and Reggio Emilia.

Photo Credits: United Way for Greater Austin, Bret Brookshire



**CENTRAL TEXAS | CENTRAL TEXAS COMMUNITY LAUNCHES FUNDS TO STABILIZE CHILD CARE, LOCAL ECONOMY**

To further support the Central Texas community, the St. David’s Foundation created a COVID-19 Response fund, in addition to the \$250,000 they pledged to the All Together ATX Fund that was created in partnership by the Austin Community Foundation and the United Way for Greater Austin. The St. David’s Foundation grants were dispersed in two phases throughout the year. In total, the COVID-19 Response Fund was able to distribute \$3.5 million in Phase 1, and nearly \$6.5 million in phase two. Each of these emergency funds have disbursed grants to local nonprofits to support recovery efforts, frontline workers, and their most at-risk populations and children with a specific aim to promote equity through grant disbursements. The St. David’s foundation distributed its final round of funding earlier this year, and the COVID-19 Response Fund and the All Together ATX fund is scheduled to disperse its third, and final, round of funding this December.

**DALLAS-FORT WORTH | EDUCATIONAL FIRST STEPS DALLAS-FORT WORTH COVID-19 CHILD CARE RELIEF FUND**

The Educational First Steps Dallas-Fort Worth COVID-19 Child Care Relief Fund sought to protect essential, and economically at-risk businesses. The relief fund was used to provide immediate relief and gap funding to high-quality early child care centers and educators that were experiencing economic hardship during the Coronavirus pandemic. In distribution, the fund prioritized supporting women owned child care centers in high-poverty communities.

## **EDINBURG** | UNIVERSITY DISTRIBUTES EMERGENCY FUNDS COVERING NECESSITIES

To support their students through the pandemic, University of Texas Rio Grande Valley created the UTRGV Student Emergency Fund to provide last resort funding for students currently enrolled. The dispersed fund is intended to be used to afford child care, housing, medical expenses, and other needs that may have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 Pandemic.

## **EL PASO** | YWCA EMERGENCY CHILD CARE RESPONSE

As part of their initial crisis response, YWCA El Paso del Norte offered free child care to low-income families for a limited time on a first-come first-served basis. Families who qualified receive at least 3 days of free child care as YWCA employees helped them access subsidy benefits. This program was created not only to support working parents but was also intended to lower the risk and rate of child abuse during the pandemic. In addition to providing free child care and assisting families trying to access subsidy care, YWCA El Paso del Norte also collaborated with the City of El Paso, County of El Paso, and local hospitals to ensure uninterrupted health care for essential workers. Additionally, YWCA El Paso del Norte became an emergency child care location to provide additional support for these essential workers.



## **FORT WORTH | TARRANT COUNTY COMMISSIONERS APPROVE FEDERAL FUNDING FOR CHILD CARE**

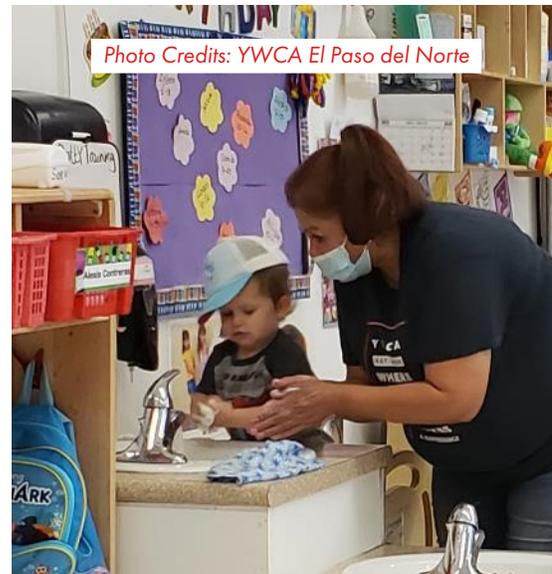
In early August, the Tarrant County Commissioners approved a portion of the CARES act funding to support working families by providing reduced cost child care while students are enrolled virtually in school. The funding will cover \$155 per week of child care, leaving the parents share of cost at only \$30 per week. Additional waivers will reduce the parents share of cost to \$0 if they cannot afford the \$30 share of cost. Funding was also allocated to local nonprofits to distribute formula and diapers for families in the area.

## **HOUSTON | HOUSTON-AREA PARTNERSHIP HELPS PARENTS FINDCHILDCARENOW**

In response to the need to find emergency child care for essential workers, a partnership arose between Collaborative for Children, the City of Houston, Harris County and the Gulf Coast Workforce Board to rework a previous child care locator tool serving Harris County, [FindChildCareNow.org](https://www.findchildcarenow.org). The new edition was launched April 6th, 2020. It both guided families to available seats and provided a simple and integrated way to apply for financial assistance.

## **LUBBOCK | SOUTH PLAINS COVID-19 RESPONSE FUND**

In addition to utilizing federal dollars to provide housing, utility, and child care assistance grants to members of the Lubbock community, the Community Foundation of West Texas & Lubbock Area United Way created the South Plains COVID-19 Response Fund. The fund grew to more than \$1.6 million and was used to support local nonprofits providing emergency services during the pandemic. 20% of these funds were used to support children, youth, and early childhood education services throughout the community.



## **LUBBOCK** | CHILD CARE PROVIDERS SUPPORT LOCAL FAMILIES

To provide emergency child care for essential personnel, YWCA of Lubbock and the Early Learning Centers remained open throughout the pandemic related closures. The Early Learning Centers also expanded their usual age range to meet the increased demand for care of infants, toddlers, and school-age children.

## **SAN ANTONIO** | COVID-19 EMERGENCY CHILD CARE ASSISTANCE

To provide child care for children of essential workers during the economic shut down, the United Way of San Antonio and Bexar County and the City of San Antonio's Department of Human Services joined forces to create the COVID-19 Emergency Child Care Assistance program. Launched in March 2020, the program provided three weeks of emergency financial assistance to help essential workers more easily afford the costs associated with child care.

To further strengthen this response and care for even more families, YWCA San Antonio increased their capacity to care for 50 additional children of healthcare workers and with priority on assisting mothers. The YMCA of Greater San Antonio also offered scholarships to first responders and essential workers to help alleviate the financial strain associated with enrolling their children in child care during the pandemic.

## **SAN ANTONIO** | PRE-K 4 SA CAPITALIZES ON TECHNOLOGY TO CONNECT

As the stay-home order led to statewide economic closures, Pre-K 4 SA utilized online video platforms to continue delivering age-appropriate educational material and parental support to families in their region. Pre-K 4 SA staff provided video activities for families to do together, at-home learning guides, and resources on their website to help parents fully engage with their child's early education. Pre-K 4 SA staff and behavioral specialists made home visits to provide direct support to parents. They also leveraged an on-campus food pantry and helped parents access technology.

## **WEST FORT BEND COUNTY** | WEST FORT BEND CHILD CARE CENTERS UNITE

In early March, Tim Kaminski, Owner and Director of the Gingerbread Kids Academy in Richmond, reached out to the fellow sixteen early childhood education centers in the West part of Fort Bend County to develop a collective strategy to preserve the local child care ecosystem. Through the Unite informational email group, West Fort Bend center owners and directors shared information and worked together to advocate at the local level. Since the group was created, they've added ten additional members and successfully pushed local county officials to create a new grant program that would subsidize up to \$8,000 of parents share-of-cost (per location).





## STATEWIDE RESPONSES TO COVID-19

### **AVANCE** | AVANCE ADAPTS TO MEET STATE AND LOCAL NEED

In response to school closures and shelter in place orders across the state of Texas, AVANCE educators transformed their Parent-Child Education Program into a mobile, and virtual friendly early childhood and parent education program. Initially, AVANCE educators utilized WhatsApp to continue to provide support and educational resources for parents with infants and toddlers. However, with no end to the pandemic in sight, over the summer AVANCE moved their entire Parent-Child Education Program onto a virtual platform that allowed for asynchronous and synchronous learning opportunities for both parents and children. In a time of overwhelming isolation and need, this program helped connect families with others who may be in a similar situation and to additional resources like cash assistance, all while continuing to provide educational programming and support. Meeting their community where they were, AVANCE staff are continuing to stay connected and provide high quality early childhood education and parenting education to Latinx communities across Texas.

### **FIRST3YEARS** | FIRST3YEARS' SUPPORT DURING COVID-19

First3Years has launched multiple initiatives to support children and families throughout Texas. Not only have they opened their library of virtual educational courses to over 4,000 providers and early childhood professionals (resulting in 18,000 course completions), but they've also invested heavily in creating more informational and social supports for families and providers. Initiatives range from virtual roundtable discussions to a virtual visitation and community guide for families with children under the care of Child Protective Services, to implementing a free texting service that promotes early learning and connects parents with specific community resources, to even distributing 182 gift cards to struggling families that may be experiencing unexpected expenses or pandemic-related job losses.



### **TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY | SCHOOL DISTRICTS ACROSS THE STATE ADDRESS CONNECTIVITY**

Connectivity has been a top priority since the Texas-wide school closures went into effect. Finding an innovative solution to the device and internet access disparity, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) & Public Broadcasting Station (PBS) came together to offer grade appropriate learning programming each weekday. An estimated 96% of school-age children in Texas had access to this programming. Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) aligned supplemental material was also provided online, including interactive lessons and media galleries.

Further addressing the disparity in connectivity during distance learning measures, Governor Greg Abbott, the TEA, and Dallas Independent School District (DISD) launched Operation Connectivity. While Operation Connectivity originated with DISD, the initiative was later adopted statewide to deliver internet and device solutions to school districts and students across Texas.

While school districts across Texas were forced to rapidly innovate and transition to unfamiliar platforms, a few school districts were already prepared for the switch to distance learning. South Texas Independent School District, for example, had already established online modules for their curriculum prior to the pandemic. In addition, they have provided every student with electronic devices and the capability of accessing the internet from home. To accomplish this, they surveyed their district to understand the scope of student needs, and even drove across counties to deliver devices to students without transportation, or who were unable to travel due to the stay home, stay safe order.

Southside Independent School District (SSISD) sought to care for their students' mental health and mitigate the 'pandemic fatigue' that many were struggling with. Counselors provided curbside 'calm-kit's' for all students of SSISD to help them cope and give them simple, tactile objects to mitigate the effects of social distancing and isolation. These kits consisted of the students' choice of 3 tactile and creative objects. Objects available included playdough, bubble wrap, art materials, pinwheels, bubbles, stress balls and more. The kits were funded by a grant from Southside Education Foundation and the District's Student Services Department.



## CHILDREN AT RISK EFFORTS IN 2020

### **COLLABORATION** | BUILDING A STATEWIDE EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION AGENDA

In May 2020, CHILDREN AT RISK relaunched the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, bringing together advocates, policymakers, and early education providers to share information and develop strategies to strengthen early childhood education around the state. The Coalition's overarching goals include increasing access to high-quality child care for infants and toddlers of low-income working parents and strengthening the early childhood education workforce through additional professional development, wage supports, or other efforts. The Coalition maintains five active advocacy workgroups to develop collective policy priorities. Current workgroup topics include increasing reimbursement rates, understanding the cost of quality, improvements of Texas Rising Star, workforce development, and public-private partnerships.

Looking to get involved? Contact Kaeleigh Hernandez at [khernandez@childrenatrisk.org](mailto:khernandez@childrenatrisk.org) to join one of our working groups or to receive coalition updates and meeting invitations.

### **RESEARCH** | CCDBG & CARES ACT INVESTMENT & INNOVATION

The COVID-19 pandemic exposed a long-standing truth that the child care industry is essential to our economy's viability. Additionally, the effects of COVID-19 exacerbate existing inequalities in our system related to access to high-quality, affordable child care and access to equitable wages for educators. Thus, understanding how our government invests in our youngest learners, the workforce, and the innovative strategies that address systemic challenges is more critical than ever.

Released in August of 2020, CHILDREN AT RISK's latest report, [\*Investment & Innovation\*](#), examines the utilization of the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG) before and during COVID-19, specifically by focusing on the disbursement of the 2018 funding and the \$371,663,374 in supplemental CCDBG funding through the Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act. The report also describes how CCDBG funding was used to increase reimbursement rates and access to quality child care. In addition, the report explores investment in initiatives such as: shared services, public-private partnerships, contract agreements, an infant toddler network, and the workforce as innovative solutions to stabilize the child care industry. Visit [childrenatrisk.org/invest-innovate](https://childrenatrisk.org/invest-innovate) to view the full report.

## **ADVOCACY | INCREASE ACCESS TO QUALITY, AFFORDABLE CHILD CARE & DEVELOP A SUSTAINABLE WORKFORCE**

Throughout 2020, the CHILDREN AT RISK early childhood education team informed state and federal policymakers and advocated for relief and reform on behalf of Texas infants, toddlers, and their families.

- We hosted [roundtables](#) to discuss the impact of COVID-19 on the Texas early education sector and [urged Congress](#) to prioritize child care in their relief negotiations.
- We collaborated with national leaders to develop [policy recommendations](#) for reopening and sustaining the child care sector with the Alliance for Early Success.
- We held briefings for legislative staff and presented on [Child Care as Economic Development](#) before the Texas House Committee on International Relations & Economic Development at a townhall hosted by Committee Chair Rep. Rafael Anchía.
- We worked with media outlets ([Dallas Morning News](#), [Texas Observer](#), [Austin American Statesman](#)) to highlight the needs of Texas families and child care providers and the impact of COVID-19 on the early childhood sector.
- In preparation for the upcoming 87th Texas Legislative Session, we developed a robust [policy agenda](#) to increase access to quality, affordable child care and help our state support and sustain its early education workforce.

Learn more about our policy priorities and advocacy efforts at [childrenatrisk.org/advocacy](https://childrenatrisk.org/advocacy)

## THANK YOU

CHILDREN AT RISK is grateful to the many Texas organizations and individuals who shared information, provided regional insights, and assisted in the production of this newsletter.

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# children at Risk

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](https://childrenatrisk.org/ece).