

# children at Risk

## TESTIMONY IN SUPPORT OF HB 2607 (TALARICO | BUTTON)

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### **ENSURING PUBLICLY FUNDED CHILD CARE PROGRAMS ARE HIGH-QUALITY**

CHILDREN AT RISK supports HB 2607, which expands the Texas Rising Star, requires the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to report on Pre-Kindergarten Partnership agreements, and allows local flexibility for contracted slots. Under this bill, child care providers participating in the subsidized child care program will be required to participate in Texas Rising Star, the state's quality rating and improvement system. Additionally, TEA would collect data to inform strategies for increasing Pre-K Partnerships and child care providers would be able to recommend children in their communities to fill vacant subsidized slots with contract agreements.

### **SCOPE OF THE PROBLEM**

Texas Rising Star (TRS) is Texas' framework to measure, improve, and communicate the quality of Early Childhood Education (ECE) providers receiving public money. Participation in TRS is voluntary and only open to child care providers who accept families receiving child care subsidy assistance.

Quality child care is key to priming a child's brain for future learning. The current voluntary approach to participating in TRS is inadequate to meet the needs of working families and to ensure the effective expenditure of taxpayer dollars. The lack of participation from subsidy providers in TRS significantly limits the number of quality rated subsidy providers that low-income families can choose from. In 2019, roughly 23% of subsidy providers were enrolled in TRS, meaning only about 56,000 children were served daily by a TRS quality rated program in a system that statewide serves 136,000 children.<sup>i</sup> That is just 84 quality-rated subsidy seats per 1,000 children.

Currently, there is little to no data collected on Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) Partnerships, leading to a substantial dearth of knowledge on the number and locations of effective Pre-K Partnerships. Pre-K Partnerships are collaborative efforts in which public educational institutions contract with private child care providers to increase the number of available public Pre-K seats. They are an effective way of ensuring that eligible children can receive free full-day Pre-K and allow both public schools and child care centers to maximize funding that benefits both parties. Pre-K Partnerships are a critical

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innovative solution to improving the quality of ECE for low-income children because they focus on creating access to additional quality seats through the partnership with TRS providers.

Participation in TRS also allows providers to contract with Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDB) to guarantee availability of quality seats in areas of great need. Contract agreements are effective and proven strategy to ensure that providers reserve a certain number of available seats for subsidized children, thereby stabilizing the supply of child care seats available. Local flexibility for contracted slots would provide LWDBs more opportunities to collaborate with child care providers and ensures that low-income children most in need in a community can receive an available seat.

### **WHAT THIS BILL DOES**

High-quality early education is the foundation to future academic success, especially for children from low-income backgrounds. To ensure a smooth transition for providers, HB 2607 will first use a phase-in approach for the subsidy providers currently not participating in TRS by creating an entry-level rating. This will ensure the support systems are in place by the Texas Workforce Commission to assist providers. Under this model, providers will have access to a clear timeline and the professional support necessary to improve the quality of care provided to Texas children. Secondly, HB 2607 requires the Texas Education Agency to report Pre-K Partnership agreements. Data collection will help to inform efforts to enhance partnerships and identify barriers to making Pre-K Partnerships successful. Lastly, HB 2607 enables providers to recommend children in their community to LWDBs who could be eligible for subsidized child care. This flexibility allows provides greater stability and autonomy to child care providers.

### **IMPACT**

To ensure that low-income children in publicly funded programs are getting the quality supports that benefit them, requiring subsidy providers to become Texas Rising Star certified will create transparency and accountability of government dollars, while simultaneously prioritizing quality. Requiring participation of subsidy providers will significantly increase the number of children accessing quality care. Access to child care alone is not enough; the state must also work to improve the quality of child care programs available, especially those that are serving low-income children through the subsidy program. In doing so, we can better ensure that the funding allocated to support our most vulnerable children is being used effectively. Contracts and Pre-K Partnerships can also be used as an incentive to increase provider participation in TRS.

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<sup>i</sup> *Children at Risk*. (2020, June). *Child Care Deserts Across Texas*. <https://childrenatrisk.org/childcaredeserts/>