

March 20, 2021

To: Governor Greg Abbott
Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick
Members of the Texas State Legislature

Childcare is the small, silent engine that drives Texas businesses. It is as simple as this; if our young can't access quality childcare, much of our Texas workforce can't return to work. The COVID-19 pandemic has revealed the essential role early learning and childcare plays in our economy - it is the overlooked sector that makes all other work possible.

With a multi-billion-dollar infusion by the Federal government dedicated to childcare, Texas has a unique opportunity. First, to ensure that necessary childcare locations are open so families can return to work, and second, to enhance and ensure the quality of that early learning and care.

Winston Churchill famously said as World War II came to an end that no crisis should ever go to waste. The arrival of billions of dollars in federal aid to support the childcare industry has the potential to transform the crisis created by COVID-19 into an opportunity. Investing these federal dollars to expand access to quality, affordable childcare will positively impact our workforce, businesses, and Texas families for years to come.

Practically all industries – especially small businesses - have faced setbacks due to COVID-19 in the form of closures, layoffs, and tremendous economic disruption. No small-business industry has suffered more than licensed childcare. 25% of all childcare centers in Texas closed at least temporarily during the pandemic. And within the first five months of the pandemic, 184 Texas communities became new childcare deserts – meaning demand for childcare far outweighed supply.

We are grateful that Governor Abbott and the Texas Workforce Commission have created a plan for the thoughtful use of this new incoming federal money. The priority is immediate support for struggling providers with a clear eye on increasing quality childcare. Funds spent on childcare and quality early learning should be spent with accountability and defined outcomes. And because these dollars are a one-shot stimulus, Texas must spend them without creating an ongoing expense to the state after the federal money is gone.

The Legislature also has an important role to play. If taxpayers are going to pay for quality early learning and childcare, it should be quality. Three bipartisan bills have been filed this session, which deserve attention and support from legislators, the public, and the business community to ensure just that.

Together these three bills will enhance Texas' ability to:

- Increase the quality of early education,
- ensure accountability for how state dollars are spent on child care, and
- provide support to enhance the childcare workforce.

Focus on Early Education Quality – Senate Bill 694/House Bill 1792: Half of childcare providers in Texas participate in the childcare subsidy program but only 20 percent of these providers qualify as “quality” childcare, as defined by Texas law. Senator Judith Zaffirini (D-Laredo) and Chairwoman Angie Chen Button (R-Richardson) have filed SB 694/HB 1792 to expand the state's capacity to verify the quality of childcare providers and therefore expand families' access to quality childcare.

Texas Workforce Commission and the subsidized child care program – Senate Bill 2087/ House Bill 2607: Filed by Senator Eddie Lucio (D-Brownsville), Representative James Talarico (D-Round Rock) and Chairwoman Angie Chen Button (R-Richardson) ensures all subsidized child care programs will participate in the Texas Rising Star quality rating system which will provide accountability for public funds allocated to the child care sector.

Support the Workforce - House Bill 619: Childcare is all about the people who directly provide care to kids, and childcare educators are among the lowest paid people in the Texas workforce. Chairwoman Senfronia Thompson (D-Houston) has filed House Bill 619 designed to support the childcare workforce and raise compensation and education of childcare workers; thereby ensuring that a more talented and better trained staff are teaching our young.

Texas has a tremendous opportunity we cannot afford to get wrong. Prudent investment of federal dollars along with passage of key legislation will:

- Support small businesses,
- save taxpayer money, and
- serve more kids and improve their academic outcomes.

All building a strong economic future for our great state.

The bipartisan emergency investment and bipartisan legislation demonstrates a shared understanding that without quality early learning and childcare Texans cannot work and the economy cannot recover.

We have a history of bipartisan support for quality early childhood education in Texas. Let's again come together, with a long-term view, to maximize this opportunity for the benefit of all our children and families. Let's use the billions of dollars in relief funds and the 87th Legislative session to protect our childcare providers, increase access to quality childcare and early learning for young children in Texas, and put our workforce back to work.

Sincerely,

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