

## How did Texas Children Fare in the 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session?

As the dust settles on the 87th Texas Legislative Session, Children at Risk advocates are still processing recently passed legislation and evaluating their potential impact on the lives of Texas families. Over the last 140 days Children at Risk registered support for bills 93 times, provided impactful written testimony 21 times and provided oral testimony 20 times. Out of our many legislative priorities, 14 bills ultimately made it to the Governor's desk. Expect our full legislative report later this month. In the meantime, below are some bills that passed and what this session means for children.

It was a banner year for **early childhood education** policy. Several soon-to-be laws will raise the bar for quality in our state's child care system.

- **HB 2607 (Talarico et.al./Lucio)** will require subsidy providers to participate in the state's previously voluntary quality rating and improvement system, Texas Rising Star. With an appropriate phase-in period and increased access to supports and coaching, HB 2607 will improve the quality of care available to the more than 136,000 children currently enrolled in a subsidized program.
- **HB 1792 (Button et al./Zaffirini)** streamlines the evaluation of child care providers participating in the Texas Rising Star system.
- **HB 619 (S.Thompson et al./Alvarado)** requires TWC to collect additional data and develop a strategic plan to support a sustainable child care workforce.
- **SB 1555 (Zaffirini/Raney)**, already signed by Governor Abbott, brings much needed financial relief to providers and incentivizes high-quality care by increasing state reimbursement rates.

This session also contributed to ending **human trafficking and child-exploitation**.

- **HB 390 (S.Thompson et al./Huffman)** requires hotels and motels to train their employees on human trafficking prevention and reporting. The businesses must also post signs in areas visible to employees that provide reporting information.
- **HB 2803 (S.Thompson/Huffman)** allows tenants to void their lease if their landlord is also leasing to an illicit massage business within the same commercial vicinity.
- **HB 1540 (S.Thompson et al./Huffman)** is the Attorney General's human trafficking omnibus bill. This bill provides extra protections for children in residential treatment centers. It increases the penalty for soliciting sex from a Class A misdemeanor on the first offense to a state jail felony, among several other anti-human trafficking provisions.
- **HB 2633 (A. Johnson et al/Huffman)** establishes a human trafficking grant program that provides resources for youth and young adult victims of human trafficking, including housing and long-term support.
- **SB 315 (Huffman et al./Hunter et al.)** prohibits sexually oriented businesses from employing individuals under 21.
- **SB 1109 (West/Anchia)** requires schools to educate students on dating violence and other forms of abuse. This bill is an important step towards providing children with healthy relationship training to recognize grooming, coercion, and abuse.

One bill will increase the **well-being of families** and prevent child abuse through improved data practices and evidence-based prevention programs.

- **SB 452 (West/Rose)** revises state standards for evidence-based prevention programs to ensure Texas provides the best possible programming and services to prevent child abuse or neglect.

There were four legislative wins related to children's **health & nutrition**.

- **HB 133 (Rose et al./Kolkhorst)** extends the eligibility of mothers on Medicaid from two months to six months. While the original bill called for an extension up to 12 months, this is still an improvement.
- **HB 290 (Cortez et al./Kolkhorst)**, which prevents eligible children from mistakenly getting kicked-off of Medicaid, rose from the dead and was amended to **HB 2658 (Frank/Kolkhorst)**, which made its way to the Governor's desk.
- DSHS is required to provide a biannual immunization report. For years that include the declaration of a public health disaster, **SB 1353 (Miles/Guerra)** will require this report to include information regarding the accessibility of vaccinations based on age, race, and location to determine disparities in immunization. The report must also estimate the economic benefits of reducing these disparities and include legislative recommendations to minimize them, leading to more equitable distribution of vaccines in a public health disaster.
- **SB 224 (Perry et al./Walle et al.)** simplifies the process of renewing SNAP benefits for those who are ages 60 and older. This will benefit the large number of Texas children who live with and/or are cared for by grandparents or elder relatives.

**Pre-K-12 public education** garnered less attention this session than previous sessions, but there were four important wins.

- **SB 560 (Lucio/Guerra et al.)** requires the state to develop a strategic plan to improve access to high-quality bilingual education.
- **SB 179 (Lucio/Huberty et al.)** ensures school counselors spend most of their workday supporting and counselling students and protects them from getting overburdened with administrative and other non-counselling related tasks.
- **HB 3643 (King et al./Taylor)** establishes the Texas Commission on Virtual Education to develop and make recommendations on virtual education for public schools. The bill also provides for funding virtual education under the newly-established Foundation School Program.
- **SB 2081 (Menéndez/Talarico)** limits the size of public prekindergarten classes.

Texas missed opportunities to tackle systemic racism and address **childhood racial disparities**.

- **SB 399 (Lucio)** would have assessed state agencies' efforts to reduce racial disparities via the Sunset Advisory Commission if passed and **HB 710 (Coleman)/ SB 108 (West)** would have given legislators a tool to evaluate the impact of pending legislation on childhood racial disparities if passed.
- Numerous bills were filed to reinstate and provide appropriate funding for the Office of Minority Health Statistics and Engagement. None made it far in the legislative process.

We hope to see Texas leaders make racial equity a greater priority in future sessions and make the jump from promises to legislative action. Texas will never reach its full economic potential unless ALL Texas children are equipped with the tools and resources they need to thrive.