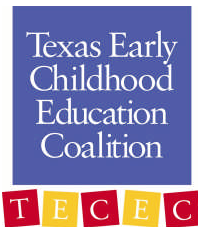


Testimony of:

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(TECEC)



Before the:

House Committee on Appropriations-S/C on Education

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Good morning. My name is Kara Johnson and I am the Executive Director of the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition (TECEC). TECEC represents more than 275 organizations and thousands of members from across the great state of Texas. Our partners include representatives from public schools, Head Start, child care, the business community, higher education, foundations, community based organizations, and more. I would like to begin my remarks by thanking Chair Hochberg and the entire House Committee on Appropriations- Subcommittee on Education for your leadership and hearing my testimony. On behalf of TECEC's members and partners, I would also like to thank Representative Aycock and Representative Villarreal for signing on as Co-Authors of House Bill 130, TECEC's number one priority this session. This legislation would create a voluntary, enhanced quality, full-day prekindergarten program provided by public school districts in conjunction with community providers.

The purpose of my remarks today is to address the importance of investing in a high quality early education system for children and families in the state of Texas. For years, you have been asking the early childhood sectors in Texas, including child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k to come to the legislature as a united front. Well, after 9 months of discussion, debate, and compromise, I want you to know that we come to you as a united front in support of House Bill 130. For those of you that have witnessed the infighting between the various sectors over the years, you know that this is a historic occasion.

House Bill 130 would create a high quality early education system for four-year olds in Texas that would nicely compliment the Early Start Grant Program already in existence. As you know, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) recently overhauled this program to ensure that additional school districts could access the dollars to improve and/or expand their programs. As a result of the overhaul, districts must now demonstrate accountability and their ability to ensure children leave pre-k and enter kindergarten school ready.

Well, this is exactly what House Bill 130 would do for the hundreds of school districts that either do not qualify for the Early Start Grants, or have met the maximum time allowed on the program, which is anywhere from 2 to 5 years. House Bill 130 ensures school districts offering high quality pre-k programs must have class size limits of no more than 22 children in a classroom; a class size ratio of no more than 1:11; a certified teacher with 9 college education courses emphasizing early childhood; and a curriculum approved by the TEA Commissioner.

And it's not just school districts that have to prove they are providing quality programs. The child care and Head Start centers partnering with the school districts to offer pre-k must prove they are high quality in at least one of the following ways: must be certified through the School Ready Certification System in Texas, a Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) participant, a Texas Rising Star Provider with a three-star certification or higher, be accredited by a research-based, nationally recognized accreditation system, or meet quality criteria adopted by the district that is based on peer-reviewed research.

Because of its regional diversity, Texas is a state that values local control and does not believe in a one size fits all model. As a result, House Bill 130 provides multiple high quality options to choose from in order to qualify to enter into a partnership with a school district. Not only does this ensure quality, but it also makes certain high quality programs such as the 79 small business owners in Dallas serving more than 4,500 children are not required to spend additional dollars to meet one quality certification or accreditation system over another.

In addition to the quality measures already mentioned, every two years, the school district must evaluate its enhanced quality program to demonstrate children are growing in their cognitive, social, and emotional development; and to examine emerging literacy and early reading performance results. I do not know of any other grade level in the Texas public school system that is held more accountable than school districts would be for their enhanced quality pre-k programs as a result of House Bill 130.

Why does enhanced quality matter? Based on decades of research and observation we know that high quality pre-k programs have a solid return on investment. Texas' own Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University found that every dollar we invest in high quality pre-k programs returns at least \$3.50. These savings are realized through fewer special education referrals, decreased high school drop out rates, increased college entrance rates, fewer children entering the juvenile justice system, and increased lifetime earnings for participants.

As each of you makes the difficult considerations on how to spend Texas' limited resources this session, we ask you to invest dollars in programs such as House Bill 130 and the Early Start Grant Program that we know will give us a solid return for our investment and prepares the workforce of tomorrow.

Advocates are asking for \$300 million dollars a year; with a planning year build in to ensure dollars are spent wisely. This method is akin to how kindergarten was expanded from a half day to a full day, which is at the speed of Texas Legislature's choosing.

On behalf of the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition, thank you, and I am happy to answer any questions.