



Testimony Prepared for the Texas Early Learning Council
February 22, 2013
Collaborative for Children

Good morning. My name is Leslie Gerber, and I am representing Collaborative for Children on behalf of our president and CEO, Carol Shattuck, who couldn't be here today. Collaborative for Children (CC), is a nonprofit organization serving a 13-county region in the Texas Gulf Coast area. In our 25-year- history CC has built a stronger educational foundation for nearly one million children. Each year we serve more than 130,000 children, families and educators in the region.

First, I would like to thank the Texas Early Learning Council for its work to support the education of young children in our state. We appreciate the opportunity to offer testimony today on questions that arise in the creation of a QRIS for early education in Texas. Creating such a system is an important step forward in raising standards across the diverse entities that provide early care and education.

As the Early Learning Council completes its work on QRIS recommendations, it will be important to look toward resources that could be tapped in building the state's system. Texas does have a resource in the federal funding that supports the state's child care subsidy program, and advocates need to respond to calls from legislators and others around the state to ensure that the \$528 million a year in block grant funds bear some relationship to quality care. Currently, the demand for access to the subsidy predominates and quality of care issues take a backseat.

CC supports HB 376, the Strama bill, that could perhaps breathe new life into the Texas Rising Star program. The program was created by the Texas Workforce Commission to encourage quality improvement in child care centers above the state's minimum standards. CC provides technical support to Rising Star providers and has tracked the participation in our region. In 2003 there were 355 providers who participated from this region. At the end of 2012, there were 154, fewer than half.

The reason? Low reimbursement rates that provide no incentive to participate in the program and don't cover the cost of providing the improved standards. In fact, subsidy reimbursement generally fails to cover even the basic cost of providing care. A 2007 survey of 402 child care providers across the state sponsored by CC and Texas Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies revealed that providers participated in the subsidy did so by increasing fees, reducing enrollment of subsidized children or reducing activities and services for their children. Each of these strategies for coping with low rates has unfortunate consequences for low-income families and children.

Unless we take a stand for quality improvement despite flat-lined budgets, we will continue to see lack of provider participation, regardless of how well a QRIS is designed. By restructuring the subsidy program to link reimbursement rates with quality standards, some



children may lose services but at least there is some incentive for providers to participate. We have heard from one provider who stated that the 9 percent incentive bump for quality provided in HB 376 would come close to paying for the cost of providing the standards improvement required. That is a place to start.

Whereas Texas Rising Star standards exceed State minimum standards, the TRS standards are well below national accreditation requirements. It is appropriate to recognize that centers that have achieved national accreditation have devoted long hours and considerable expense to do so. Centers accredited by the National Association for the Education of Young Children should definitely be recognized in the Rising Star program and the QRIS by the highest increment of available reimbursement and their national certification should suffice as a qualification for this level. Standards established by other national accrediting bodies should be assessed for comparability to Texas Rising Star and be recognized accordingly.

These issues are specific to the system of state-regulated child care. It is important to recognize that the public pre-K system for Texas and the federal Head Start program are two other major components of the early childhood system. These two systems have much higher standards for teacher training than the minimum standards for child care and they incorporate learning guidelines which are not part of the focus of the licensed child care system.

As important as the early years are to educational success, it is important to recognize the differences in quality standards among the three major systems that serve young children outside the home. Parents need to know what the options are and this is why CC includes all three in its QualiFind rating system that provides a Minimal, Good or Excellent rating on six important indicators of early care and education quality.

A multi-sector QRIS offers a complete look at the range of options and through this comparison can encourage parents to select child care options with the best educational programs. In addition, such a system will assist in providing information needed to policymakers to continue to improve coordination of the three systems. Resources for quality improvement available through a QRIS system should be targeted to child care since it is the most under-resourced system.

It will be important for early care and education advocates to mobilize support for the QRIS initiative and to find it an adequately funded permanent home. This effort will help move Texas further along the path to coordinated governance and funding for the major systems that provide early care and education to the rapidly growing population of children under five. Collaborative for Children supports this effort and the work of the Early Learning Council as it moves toward creating final recommendations for the QRIS.

Texas Early Learning Council Meeting

Friday, February 22, 2013

Good Morning to all of the council member and stakeholders present. Thank you for the opportunity to give comments on some of the most important issues child care providers face today. I am Alma Langrum from Dallas, I operate 2 accredited child care programs, sponsor the USDA food program for Family Day Homes and Child Care Center, an advocate for quality care for over 30 years.

The relationship between child care reimbursement rates and quality improvement:

NAEYC says that the number one indicator of quality care is the interaction between child and caregiver. With low reimbursement rates you get low quality caregivers. When you get caregivers that have been with you gone though the CDA process they often leave and go to Head Start or Public schools where that can receive higher pay and benefits that child care centers that heavily depend on subsidized care are not able to offer.

With higher rates also come accountability in which haven't been happening in the pass.

There is no doubt and I'm sure you know that quality improvements cost more than the rates that are currently being paid. Reimbursement rates and quality improvement go hand in hand.

The Role of National Accreditation in a future Texas Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). I personally feel that we should first strengthen the Texas Rising Star requirements that are currently in place before we go to National Accreditation. Both are voluntary efforts and many providers don't do the Rising Star requirements because of the cost. Also there will have to be a parent education piece to make either work. Parents that receive subsidized care are not as aware as they should be on selecting quality programs and what it means for their child long term.

The Pros and Cons of a multi-sector (pre-k, Head Start, and child care) QRIS:

I feel that a multi-sector QRIS would be great for children and families if all programs are on equal footing. EX: able to offer the same services to families who prefer one type of program over another. We talk about parent choice, but parents don't really have a choice. They have to go where their lifestyle leads them.

Thanks for the opportunity to share some of my views with you today and look forward to hearing your initiatives.



United Way for Greater Austin

February 22, 2013

Testimony for Texas Early Learning Council

Hello. I'm Kaley Horton. I am a Project Coordinator in the Success By 6 department of United Way for Greater Austin. I am here today speaking on behalf of Success By 6 and the Leadership Team of the School Readiness Action Plan for Austin/Travis County.

Over the past several years, a strong coalition of early childhood advocates, experts, parents, service providers, and business leaders has worked collaboratively to transform the early childhood system in Travis County through a strategic, 3-year action plan. The plan was informed by the science of early childhood development and by the emergence of strong programs with demonstrated long-term and meaningful impact on children and families. The plan includes measures of progress, accountability systems, and continuous evaluation so that improvements are made in a timely way and successes are recognized and celebrated.

The Travis County plan is built on a clear framework. Ready Families + Ready Early Education Services + Ready Health and Mental Health Services + Ready Communities = Children Ready for School Success. As this equation suggests, the success and future of our community's children depend on a strong system of adult supports during their earliest years. No part of the equation can stand alone – nor can we experience success if one element of the equation is missing.

One of our arenas of action is the early care and education system in Travis County – and improving our preschool and child care programs – especially for our most vulnerable children – is a top priority. Over the past decade, our community has embraced the Texas Rising Star system and built a strong program of mentoring and professional development that has significantly improved the quality of care for low-income families. We recognize, however, that the existing rating system needs to be updated to reflect our profession's growing knowledge base. We also recognize that our CCS reimbursement system, with the current low rates, is inadequate to support and maintain high-quality programs for children in our community.

The Leadership Team of the School Readiness Action Plan applauds The Texas Early Learning Council for exercising leadership around the

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development of a strong QRIS system. We urge you to create a system that has strong standards in ALL of these three areas:

First, Structural Indicators of quality—including teacher and director professional qualifications, reasonable group size and ratios, and health and safety standards.

Second, Process Indicators of quality -- including teacher interactions, sensitivity, and strong curriculum standards

Third –There should be standards outlining the appropriate use of on-going, authentic, developmental assessments of children. Nationally validated assessment tools and/or techniques should inform individualized instruction as well as ascertain the effectiveness of services. Child outcomes should not be determined only upon kindergarten entry, but rather, authentic assessment should be used throughout the time the child is enrolled so that individual needs in *all* developmental domains can be nurtured and met.

Finally, in order for our most vulnerable children to receive the type of care that results in life-long benefits, we urge the Council to recommend graduated CCS reimbursement rates to match higher levels of care as measured by the QRIS system. Provision of high-quality care costs more money than provision of low-quality care. Therefore, we believe the rate difference between the lowest level of quality and the highest level of quality in the QRIS system should be significant and meaningful.

Thank you for your service on behalf of the young children in our great state.

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**EDUCATIONAL
FIRST STEPS**

2800 Swiss Avenue
Dallas, TX 75204
214.824.7940
Fax: 214.824.7428
www.educationfirststeps.org

February 21, 2013

Members of the Texas Early Learning Council,

I am happy to address you on behalf of Educational First Steps (EFS). EFS works with 90 non-profit and privately owned child care centers in North Texas, which serve over 5,000 children from low-income families. By transforming child care workers into qualified teachers, EFS improves the early education of these at-risk children so that they succeed in kindergarten and beyond. National accreditation gives an independent stamp of quality on these facilities after having gone through our rigorous mentoring and training program.

National accreditation by agencies such as the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the National Accreditation Commission (NAC) should be recognized at the highest level by the QRIS system in Texas. The standards of these measurement tools have already passed rigorous review by educational experts, but more importantly have been proven to help children succeed in future years through evidence-based research by EFS and others. In fact, the University of Texas at Dallas has just released their latest findings from a six-year longitudinal study tracking 3,600 at-risk children who attended child care facilities served by Educational First Steps and have continued on into the Dallas Independent School District. The study found, with a high level of statistical significance, that children from accredited facilities showed persistent benefits in later grades, including outperforming their peers on third grade reading assessments by nearly 6 percentile points, having greater math skills in first and second grades, and experiencing lower grade-level retention frequency.

Clearly, accreditation produces the results that the QRIS wishes to support and incentivize. Accepting national accreditation as a qualifier for the highest level within QRIS would simplify the program administration. We are happy to provide additional information to support this recommendation and welcome follow-up questions from the council.

Kindest regards,

Shannon Hendricks

Director of Early Learning Programs

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- The relationship between child care reimbursement rates and quality improvement

While working as an administrator and teacher for a not-for-profit center in Kansas, 4 of my staff members made the decision to further their education and training in Early Childhood Education after learning that their wages could be supplemented based on their educational level. They also seemed very motivated to increase their rating level as a way to prove the quality of their work. Attending courses helped raise the score for the center and gave them the tools they needed to make informed decisions about teaching practices. I'm proud to say we went from at two to a five star rating in the first year!

Half the families served at our center were working with the state to pay for childcare because they would not have been able to afford early education for their child on their own. Fortunately my center was able to offer their own scholarships to help families in need because we were able to purchase the supplies necessary for quality improvement through Kansas QRIS grants and we were able to supplement wages through the program as well. The families we served noticed and commented on the changes; in fact we went from having a low enrollment to having a wait list within a year of investing in quality improvement.

- The role of national accreditation in a future Texas Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

Combined with the financial support provided to parents by the state and by the center, the staff also learned to work cooperatively with diverse families and with different programs such as The Teen Parent Program at the local high schools, Parents as Teachers, and NAEYC. One staff member, now working towards her Bachelor's Degree in ECE commented that it was a very natural step towards NAEYC accreditation that helped her make the transition from her previous work in a low-quality center to one seeking national accreditation

In my experience the firm boundaries set by QRIS help raise low-quality centers to a higher level. Many teachers making this transition need to be assisted with specific explanations of what is expected of them. NAEYC seems to allow for even higher quality and more diverse methods of meeting standards. More advanced teachers find ways to meet these standards and document them in ways that make their process clear. Because national accreditation is expensive and offers little in the way of financial incentives, some centers may never choose to do pursue it.

- The pros and cons of a multi-sector (pre-k, Head Start, and child care) QRIS

Pros: Increased quality across the board that will expand the recognition of early childhood as a crucial time for development and the individuals teaching children as professionals.

Con: training expectation recognition

The different sectors will need to recognize one another's expectations for training and quality to prevent additional burdens on already under-paid and over-worked teachers and administrators. One of the major drawbacks I've experienced in working with multi-sector QRIS was the amount of training hours required by multiple bodies. In many cases I was receiving repeated information that didn't improve my work and detracted from time spent in the classroom. My staff also grew tired of attending so many classes for their education and for additional training.

Con: differences in definitions of health and safety

Differences in expectations for quality and safety were also an issue. Some administrators may feel that time spent resolving conflicting expectations is not worth the effort and may choose not to participate. For example, I had purchased swings for my play addressing safety concerns by KQRIS but my licensing inspector did not agree the changes were safe. After lengthy discussion with both my coach and inspector, the state agreed to accept the KQRIS recommendation. In Colorado, one center I worked at refused to participate with QRIS for this reason as the state refused to recognize some practices as safe and the quality rating of the centers were limited by these expectations.

Con: allowing for individualize instruction

Insuring that teachers and administrators have the flexibility to meet the needs and expectations of the families served should be carefully considered when working with multiple sectors. The values of one school are not the values of another; therefore curriculum and learning environments need to vary from center to center.