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# Building a New Future for Early Childhood in Texas

From the Ground Up: Stakeholder Insights  
for Stronger Early Childhood System

**MARCH 2026**

**earlymatters**



# About this Report

Texas is at a turning point for early childhood. The science of early brain development is unambiguous. The economic case for investment is well-documented. And across the state, providers, families, advocates, businesses, and policymakers are increasingly aligned on the urgency of the moment. What has been missing is a shared, grounded understanding of what the system actually looks like from the inside and details about what must change. This report is an attempt to provide both. It synthesizes findings from two complementary research efforts conducted by Early Matters Texas in fall and winter 2025-2026: a statewide survey of 717 licensed child care providers and a series of regional focus groups held across six Texas regions.

**Together, they offer both the quantitative scale of provider experience and the qualitative texture of what that experience looks and feels like on the ground. Together, they point unmistakably toward what a better system could be.**

Together, these voices have been captured to inform and provide insight to the Quad Agency Child Care Initiative, the Governor's Task Force on Governance of Early Care and Learning, and Early Matters' legislative efforts. The findings and recommendations contained here are grounded directly in provider voice and in the conviction that meaningful reform is not only necessary, but achievable.

## STATEWIDE SURVEY

The Quad Agency Child Care Survey was conducted in fall 2025 to understand how Texas child care providers experience the multi-agency regulatory environment. It was designed with input from two state agencies and tested with providers for clarity. A total of 730 providers completed the survey; 13 responses were removed for data quality, yielding a final sample of 717. The analysis used a mixed-methods approach, combining quantitative frequencies, cross-tabulations, and segment comparisons with qualitative thematic coding of open-ended responses.

Respondents spanned all regions of the state, representing a wide range of provider types, sizes, and program participation levels.



## REGIONAL FOCUS GROUPS

Early Matters Texas conducted governance-focused focus groups in six regions throughout winter 2025-2026 engaging approximately ~70 participants across diverse stakeholder types. Groups were facilitated using a consistent protocol covering vision for success, current pain points, and desired governance changes.

### AUSTIN December 2025 | 10 participants

*Stakeholders: School districts, CCR&R, ECI/health, parents, nonprofits, higher education, city government, advocates*

- Common eligibility & enrollment system across all agencies
- Align timelines and age cutoffs to eliminate service gaps
- Unified early childhood governance with clear authority

### DALLAS 2 sessions | March 2026 | 12 participants

*Stakeholders: Child care providers, nonprofits, higher education, ECI/health providers*

- Improve wages for the workforce and bring coherence to fragmented funding streams for child care providers
- Improve parent education on available programs and how to access care that is most appropriate for their child
- Ensure public Pre-K programs provide developmentally appropriate care that meets the same quality standards as high-performing private providers

### EL PASO 3 sessions | December 2025 | ~20+ participants

*Stakeholders: Child care providers, ISDs, community partners, nonprofits, rural/mental health services*

- Consolidate fragmented governance across six agencies into a unified structure
- Professionalize and stabilize ECE workforce through wages and reclassification
- Guarantee sustainable funding and access for infants/toddlers (0-3) and children with special needs

### PERMIAN BASIN March 2026 | 6 participants

*Stakeholders: Child care providers, school districts, nonprofits, higher education*

- Increase investment in early childhood educator wages
- Streamline systems and reduce administrative burden
- Strengthen workforce development and professional support

### SAN ANTONIO 2 sessions | December 2025 | 15 participants

*Stakeholders: Workforce board, nonprofits, higher education, Chamber of Commerce, and school districts*

- Increase sustained public investment aligned to true cost of quality and address the market failure
- Accountable state governance structure with defined outcomes
- Independent, objective evaluation of system changes
- Coordinated, outcomes-driven governance and regulatory reform
- Center early childhood as a core workforce and economic development strategy

### WACO December 2025 | 5 participants

*Stakeholders: Child care providers, school districts, nonprofits, higher education*

- Increase investment in early childhood educator wages
- Streamline systems and reduce administrative burden
- Strengthen workforce development and professional support

# Part I: Statewide Survey Findings

The survey findings paint a consistent picture: Texas child care providers are operating within a fragmented, multi-agency regulatory system that consumes substantial time and energy, creates conflicting obligations, and ultimately limits their capacity to focus on children. Six themes emerged with particular force.

## **FINDING 1: THE SYSTEM FEELS FRAGMENTED, NOT COORDINATED**

Providers consistently describe a disconnected regulatory environment with no single source of truth. Nearly one-third (32%) report inconsistent expectations across agencies, and 30% have received conflicting rules or guidance from different agencies. A further 61% report that conflicting or overlapping regulations 'very frequently' or 'sometimes' cause confusion, extra administrative work, or added costs.

Twenty-four percent of providers have been asked to submit the same forms or information to multiple agencies including W-9s, staff training records, attendance and enrollment data, and background checks. This duplication is not incidental; it reflects the absence of shared data infrastructure across agencies.

### Survey Respondent:

*"In this field, regulations often overlap, creating confusion and unnecessary complications for providers. Different agencies may require similar things in slightly different ways, which makes compliance harder and more time-consuming than it needs to be. It sometimes feels like we're trying to satisfy multiple sets of rules that don't fully align. Streamlining and better communication between agencies would make a huge difference for childcare centers and allow us to focus more on the children instead of constant paperwork."*



## FINDING 2: THE TRS / LICENSING CONFLICT IS THE SHARPEST REGULATORY FAULT LINE

Among all sources of regulatory conflict identified in open-ended survey responses, the tension between Child Care Licensing standards (administered by HHSC) and Texas Rising Star (TRS) standards (administered by TWC) generated the most provider comments. These two frameworks — one establishing baseline health and safety requirements for licensure, the other promoting higher-level quality improvement — frequently point in opposite directions, leaving providers without clear guidance on which to follow.

### Providers identified specific areas of direct conflict between the two systems, including:

- **Real-world learning materials:** TRS encourages “real-life items” in classroom environments (e.g., plants, pets, nuts and bolts) to support authentic learning experiences. Licensing flags many of these same items as safety hazards.
- **Shelving and nightlines:** TRS requires accessible shelving to support child-led learning. Licensing flags the same shelving as unsafe because it obstructs staff sightlines to children.
- **Naptime requirements:** The two frameworks impose different expectations, creating compliance confusion for providers trying to satisfy both.
- **Approved materials and gifts:** Items purchased by local workforce boards as TRS conference gifts have been flagged as non-compliant with licensing standards when brought into classrooms.
- **Parent access:** One notable example of conflict also came up between the Education Agency and HHSC standards. TEA requires all doors locked and parents admitted only via ID. HHSC licensing requires classrooms to be accessible and parents to be able to visit their child at any time. Providers caught between both frameworks have no clear answer.

#### Survey Respondent:

*"TRS requires shelves but licensing says they are not safe because you can't see children. Which do we choose?"*

These conflicts place providers in genuine compliance stalemates — situations where satisfying one agency's requirements means violating another's. Unlike general frustration with bureaucratic complexity, these are structural contradictions that cannot be resolved at the provider level. They require interagency resolution.



### FINDING 3: COMPLIANCE BURDEN IS CROWDING OUT QUALITY CARE

Providers spend an average of 52 hours per month on compliance activities across TWC, HHSC, DFPS, and TEA. TRS-participating providers average more than 10 additional hours per month on top of that. For most programs, this is equivalent to dedicating 0.05–0.25 FTE entirely to regulatory compliance. This means less time directed toward children.

Forty-four percent of all providers report that multi-agency requirements interfere with their ability to focus on quality child care. Among large programs serving 150 or more children, that figure rises to 81%. The burden is not evenly distributed: providers serving more children and participating in more programs carry the heaviest load.

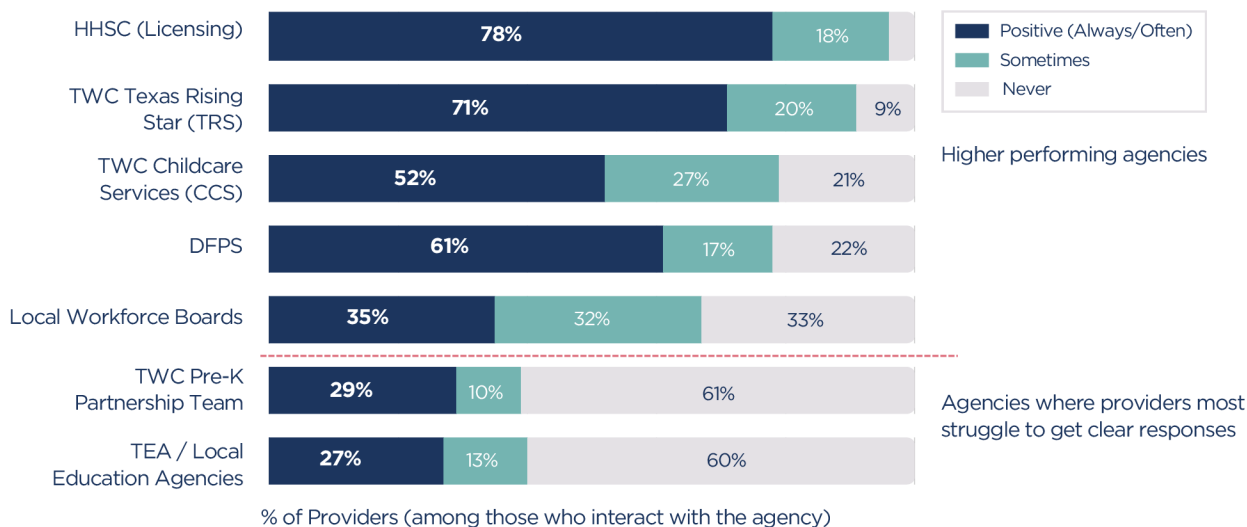
### FINDING 4: COMMUNICATION QUALITY VARIES DRAMATICALLY BY AGENCY

Survey respondents rated each agency on whether they receive clear and timely responses. The results show a wide range of performance and identify specific agencies where communication failures are most acute.

- **HHSC performs best:** 78% of providers report clear and timely responses ('Always' or 'Often').
- **TRS is strong but slow:** 71% rate communication positively, but assessment wait times are long — 49% of providers waited over six months for a TRS reassessment.
- **CCS has significant gaps:** 52% rate communication positively, but 21% say CCS never responds clearly or in a timely manner. Providers flag KinderConnect app frustrations and delayed subsidy payments as recurring operational problems.
- **DFPS lags:** Only 61% of providers who interact with DFPS rate responsiveness positively; 22% say DFPS never responds clearly.
- **TEA/LEAs score worst of all agencies:** Among providers who interact with TEA, 60% say it never responds clearly or in a timely manner. Only 27% rate communication positively.
- **Pre-K Partnership teams:** 61% of providers who interact with TWC's Pre-K team report it never responds clearly or in time.
- **Local Workforce Boards are highly uneven:** Some boards score 100% on clear responsiveness; others fall below 25%.

#### Agency Communication Responsiveness

“How often do you receive a clear and timely response from each agency?”



Source: Early Matters Texas Quad Agency Child Care Survey, 2024–2025 (n=348–526 per agency)

## FINDING 5: PROVIDERS CONFUSE WHICH AGENCY MANAGES WHICH PROGRAMS

In debriefs following the survey, analysis of open-ended responses revealed a significant pattern: many providers were unsure which agency oversees and manages which programs. This confusion was most pronounced around the relationship between TWC, Texas Rising Star, local workforce development boards, and the Child Care Services (CCS) subsidy program, and then separately between TEA and Pre-K partnerships.

**This is not simply a communication problem. It reflects the genuine complexity of a system where multiple entities share overlapping responsibilities for child care quality, funding, and oversight without a clear public-facing map of who does what.**

Providers attempting to navigate the system cannot identify who to contact, who has authority over their questions, or where accountability sits. Addressing this confusion is a low-cost, high-impact opportunity for the Quad Agency.



## FINDING 6: PROVIDERS ASKING FOR PARTNERSHIP, NOT JUST SIMPLIFICATION

When asked what they would most like to see changed, providers' top priorities were: making rules easier to understand, reducing duplicative paperwork, aligning agency requirements, and streamlining processes into a single unified system.

**But the qualitative responses go further: providers want to be treated as professionals and partners in quality improvement, not as compliance subjects.**

Many expressed a desire to be included in rule-making and in the design of the systems they are being asked to navigate.

# Part II: Regional Focus Group Findings

The regional focus groups conducted in Austin, Dallas, El Paso, Permian Basin, San Antonio, and Waco provided qualitative depth to the survey's quantitative picture. Across all sessions, core survey themes were strongly confirmed but the focus groups also surfaced dimensions of the problem that the survey could not fully capture.

## WHAT THE FOCUS GROUPS CONFIRM

Governance fragmentation was named as the foundational barrier in every session, regardless of region or stakeholder type. El Paso providers articulated what many others implied: "Childcare, licensing, certifications, funding is spread over six agencies at the state level... There are direct conflicts between agencies where one agency says this and the other agency says that. That is an impossibility for a childcare center to meet both if they're in conflict with each other."

Participants also confirmed the survey's finding that regulatory burden crowds out quality, but connected it to a deeper challenge: the state is demanding higher quality standards without providing the financial infrastructure to achieve or sustain them.

**As San Antonio Participants put it plainly: "We continue to view [early childhood] as a public good but we don't treat it or fund it as one."**

## WHAT THE FOCUS GROUPS ADD

### 1. Workforce Devaluation is Structural, Not Just Financial

Providers raised something the survey did not measure directly: early childhood educators are classified by the state at the same occupational level as janitors and pet groomers. "Not even are they recognized by the state as teachers." This reframes the workforce crisis: it is not simply that wages are low, but that the state's own systems encode the devaluation. Waco providers echoed this from the ISD perspective, describing principals who reassign struggling upper-grade teachers to Pre-K classrooms under the assumption it will be "easier," which is a direct symptom of campus leadership with no ECE training or background.

The competition is concrete and quantifiable. El Paso in particular presented concrete wage competition data: neighboring New Mexico offers \$15/hour minimum for entry-level ECE workers and up to \$24.85/hour for lead teachers in Las Cruces compared to a \$9.18/hour median in El Paso. But the pattern is not unique to the border. Other participants described the same dynamic playing out against restaurants, retail, military, and other industries in rural, urban, and suburban regions.

**Texas is losing qualified educators to neighboring states and to adjacent sectors not because of individual employer decisions, but because of a structural failure to recognize and invest in the profession**



## 2. The 0–3 Gap is a Funding Model Failure, Not an Oversight

Multiple focus groups identified infant and toddler care as the segment where the funding model is most clearly broken with some focus group members rating ages 0–3 as the highest priority (4.91 out of 5.0). The problem is not that the state is unaware of the importance of early years, it is that the reimbursement structure does not reflect the actual cost of providing quality infant and toddler care, making it financially irrational to serve this population well.

Childcare Center Director

*"The amount that we get reimbursed [for infants and toddlers] doesn't make financial sense to be able to pay a childcare worker to take care of four babies."*

The focus groups also identified children with special needs as facing a parallel gap, with current ratios and funding insufficient to provide appropriate inclusive care. Providers described having nowhere to send children with significant behavioral or developmental needs, with Head Start equally stretched. El Paso participants called for automatic identification and streamlined funding pathways for special needs during the CCS application process.

## 3. Family Navigation Burden Is a Parallel (and Often Invisible) Crisis

Focus groups that included parents, advocates, and city government staff, introduced a perspective largely absent from the provider survey: families are navigating the same fragmented system and experiencing it as "reapplication fatigue." Multiple eligibility processes across HHSC, TWC, TEA, and Head Start have different income thresholds, age cutoffs, and enrollment timelines. Long child care subsidy waitlists also impact families, with no coordinated way to know when eligible slots will open in nearby Head Start or Pre-K programs. Parents enrolled in postsecondary education expressed particular difficulty accessing stable childcare, with waitlists disrupting their ability to complete credentials and enter the workforce.

Even highly educated families with institutional knowledge described navigation struggles between programs. Focus groups named a specific, concrete failure: children aging out of Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) at age three face a summer service cliff, with no smooth transition pathway to Pre-K or other services. Added to that, data systems across agencies do not communicate, meaning children and families disappear from view when they cross program boundaries.

## 4. Inspector Quality and Consistency Are a Trust Problem

Childcare providers went beyond describing contradictory regulations to describing inspectors who have openly disparaged TRS to providers and threatened to "find something to write up" regardless of actual compliance. One provider's staff recorded such an incident and filed a formal complaint with no resulting action from the agency. This raises a concern the survey data cannot fully capture: when inspection inconsistency combines with an unresponsive complaint process, providers lose trust not just in a regulatory framework, but in the system's willingness to be accountable to them.

## 5. Business Engagement Is Ready but Lacks State Infrastructure

In focus group sessions that included voices from the business community, participants expressed genuine and growing readiness to invest in early childhood as a workforce strategy, citing tri-share models (employer/employee/state cost-sharing) as a near-term lever. But they noted that without clear state pathways, guidance, and leadership, business engagement stalls. The cross-sector momentum already building in Texas is an asset that coordinated state action could accelerate.

## 6. Unique Regional Contexts

Some focus groups highlighted regional dynamics that add nuance to problem framing:

1. Immigration enforcement fears that discourage families from accessing services,
2. Significant military populations with high mobility and specific needs,
3. Rural communities that lack libraries, public transportation, and recreation centers, and
4. Bilingual populations with high numbers of English learners.

These characteristics point to the need for state solutions that are flexible enough to accommodate regional realities.



# Part III: What the Data Tell us Together

Taken together, the survey and focus group findings point toward a consistent diagnosis: Texas child care providers are not experiencing isolated bureaucratic friction. They are navigating a system that was never designed to function as a whole. And the consequences are borne primarily by providers, families, and ultimately children. But the same data also point toward something more hopeful: the scale of consensus, across regions, across stakeholder types, and across the divide between providers and policymakers, **suggests that Texas has a genuine and rare alignment of will.** The question is no longer whether reform is needed. It is whether the state will seize this moment to lead it.

Five cross-cutting themes emerge from both research streams combined:

- **Fragmentation is the root cause, not a symptom.** Every major challenge providers face: duplicative paperwork, conflicting standards, unresponsive agencies, inadequate funding, traces back to a system designed around individual agencies rather than around the children and families those agencies are meant to serve.
- **Compliance burden is a proxy for fragmentation.** The 52 hours per month providers spend on compliance is not the cost of high standards, it is the cost of a fragmented system that requires providers to interface with multiple agencies that do not share information, align requirements, or coordinate guidance.
- **The system is not decipherable to the people who use it.** Families cannot navigate it. Providers cannot always identify who is responsible for what. And conflicting rules from different agencies leave providers in genuine impasses with no resolution pathway. Clarity is a precondition for everything else.
- **The moment for change is now.** Across regions, participants expressed urgency, but also genuine hope. Business communities are mobilizing. Philanthropy is engaged. Providers are asking to be partners. The Governor's Task Force and the Quad Agency Initiative represent the most significant governance alignment Texas has seen in decades. That alignment is an asset. The recommendations in this report are designed to help translate it into action.
- **Quality expectations are decoupled from investment.** The state asks providers to meet rising quality standards (through TRS) while providing funding structures that make quality care financially unsustainable especially for infants, toddlers, and children with special needs.



# Recommendations for Texas Early Childhood Governance Reform

The following nine recommendations are grounded directly in provider survey responses and focus group findings. Together, they meet the current moment, representing an agenda for state leaders to improve early childhood governance, beginning with quick wins that would provide immediate impact and moving to more complex, multi-faceted solutions.

## SIMPLIFY THE SYSTEM FOR PROVIDERS

1

### **Publish a Clear Organizational Chart Mapping All Agencies, Programs, and Roles**

*Survey analysis and post-survey agency debriefs revealed confusion about which agency manages which programs, particularly between TWC, Texas Rising Star, Local Workforce Development Boards, the Child Care Services subsidy program, and between TEA and Pre-K partnerships. This confusion is not simply a communication gap; it reflects genuine confusion of a system where authority and accountability are distributed across overlapping entities without a public map. The Quad Agency should develop and publish a clear, plain-language organizational chart that identifies each state agency, the programs that fall under it, the relationship between agencies and local entities (including local workforce boards and their contractors), and the appropriate contact or escalation pathway for provider questions.*

2

### **Provide Explicit Guidance on TRS vs. Licensing Conflicts and What to Do When They Collide**

*The most cited source of regulatory conflict in open-ended survey responses was the tension between HHSC Child Care Licensing (minimum health and safety standards) and TWC Texas Rising Star (higher-level quality standards). Providers described specific impasses with no guidance on how to resolve them. The Quad Agency should develop and distribute authoritative, co-branded guidance that (a) clearly explains the purpose and scope of each framework; (b) identifies known areas of conflict; (c) provides explicit direction on what providers should do when the two are in direct conflict; and (d) establishes a clear process for providers to flag new conflicts as they emerge. This guidance should be developed jointly by HHSC and TWC and reviewed periodically to remain current.*

3

### **Set and Enforce Communication Standards Across All Agencies**

*Survey data identified significant variation in communication quality across agencies. The Quad Agency should establish mandatory response-time benchmarks for all agencies and local entities (e.g., five business days), publish compliance data publicly, and deploy a shared provider intake channel or single-point-of-contact model so providers always know where to turn, and where to escalate if responses fail to come.*

## ALIGN & STRENGTHEN SYSTEM OPERATIONS

4

### Establish Consistent Standards and Accountability for Licensing Inspectors

Survey respondents identified improving inspector consistency as a top-three ask and focus group participants gave it some of the most pointed testimony. Providers described inspectors who openly disparaged TRS to providers, threatened to “find something to write up” regardless of actual compliance, and whose conduct, even when formally reported, produced no agency response. The core problem is not individual bad actors but the absence of structural safeguards: there are no minimum ECE experience requirements for licensing inspector positions, no standardized interpretation training, and no functioning complaint pathway that providers can trust. The Quad Agency should require that licensing inspector positions carry minimum qualifications including demonstrated early childhood experience; establish and publish standardized interpretation guidance so inspectors apply rules consistently across regions and programs; create an accessible, tracked complaint process with published response timelines and outcomes; and commission periodic inter-rater reliability assessments to identify and address interpretation drift. Inspection should function as a support to quality, not as an unpredictable or adversarial encounter.

5

### Consolidate Reporting, Documentation, and Eligibility Systems

Providers should not have to submit the same information (background checks, staff training records, attendance data, enrollment information) to multiple agencies. Families should not have to complete separate applications with different eligibility criteria across HHSC, TWC, TEA, and Head Start. The Quad Agency should:

- Audit current provider reporting requirements across all four agencies and identify duplicative submissions for immediate elimination.
- Build or integrate shared data infrastructure so information submitted once is accessible to all authorized agencies.
- Develop a common eligibility and application system for families across early childhood programs, with aligned income thresholds, age cutoffs, and enrollment timelines.

Establish a unique child identifier usable across agencies to support longitudinal data and proactive service transitions, particularly for children moving from ECI to Pre-K.

6

### Move Toward a Unified Early Childhood Governance Structure with Clear Leadership

Every region and every stakeholder group that participated in focus groups called for a more coherent governance structure for early childhood in Texas. Whether described as a single lead entity, a consolidated agency, or a governance model with cross-agency authority, the core ask is consistent: there must be a defined home for early childhood with clear authority, accountability, and the ability to resolve conflicts across agencies rather than passing them down to providers and families. The Quad Agency should work in tandem with the Governor’s Task Force on Early Childhood Education and Care to establish or designate a lead entity with cross-agency authority to coordinate regulation, funding alignment, quality, and workforce development.

## BUILD FOR LONG-TERM IMPACT

7

### **Invest in Workforce Professionalization and Sustainable Funding, Starting with Infants, Toddlers, and Special Needs**

*Both the survey and every focus group identified the mismatch between quality expectations and investment as a defining structural problem in Texas early childhood. Participants report a disconnect between the current funding model and the true cost of quality care, especially for infants, toddlers (where staff-to-child ratios are highest and reimbursement is lowest), and children with special needs. Workforce wages are insufficient to attract or retain qualified educators, particularly in border communities competing directly with higher-paying neighboring states. The Quad Agency should consider:*

- *Reclassification of early childhood educator occupational codes to reflect professional status equivalent to K-12 teachers.*
- *Streamlined, automatic funding pathways for children with special needs through the CCS application process.*
- *Investment in local, in-person coaching and professional development to support providers in achieving and sustaining quality.*
- *Consider reimbursement rates that reflect the true cost of quality care, with priority attention to infants and toddlers.*

8

### **Establish Independent, Outcomes-Focused Evaluation of System Changes**

*Multiple focus groups raised a concern that governance and system changes can become symbolic or ineffective if they are not evaluated against clear, defined outcomes. Participants called for evaluation to be conducted by an entity without a vested interest in the results, such as a university or third-party evaluator. The Quad Agency should define measurable success metrics at the outset of any major reform and commission independent evaluation to assess whether changes are producing meaningful improvement over time. Examples include: provider compliance burden, family access rates, workforce stability, and child developmental outcomes.*


9

### **Monitor TRS Assessment Timelines**

*The convergence of a new assessor contract and the expansion of TRS participation requirements for CCS-receiving providers created a documented bottleneck: 49% of providers waited more than six months for a reassessment. The Quad Agency should monitor wait times going forward to determine if this was a one-time problem or something more systemic. To assist in that effort, the Quad Agency should establish a public-facing dashboard tracking TRS assessment wait times by region and set up a review for the assessor contract to determine whether assessor staffing is sufficient for the expanded CCS-participation requirement going forward.*

## **TEXAS CAN BUILD SOMETHING BETTER STARTING NOW!**

The hundreds of providers who completed this survey, and the dozens more who gave their time in regional focus groups, are not asking for sympathy, they are asking for a system worthy of the work they do every day. A system designed around children and families, not around agency boundaries. A system that treats early childhood educators as the skilled professionals they are, invests in quality as a public good, and gives providers clear, consistent rules they can actually follow. That system is within reach. The Quad Agency Child Care Initiative, the Governor's Task Force on Governance of Early Care and Learning, and the legislative session ahead represent a convergence of opportunity that Texas has rarely seen. Early Matters Texas stands ready to support that work and are grateful to providers who shared their voices to make this report possible.



Early Matters is a statewide collaborative of business, civic, education, nonprofit and philanthropic leaders dedicated to economic mobility and prosperity for all Texas families through strategic investments in both policies and practices that support children birth - age 8.

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