

Building a New Future for Early Childhood in Texas

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

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In the fall and winter of 2025–2026, Early Matters heard from hundreds of early childhood stakeholders across Texas: 717 child care providers through a statewide survey and more than 70 participants in regional focus groups spanning six regions. Together they offer the quantitative scale of provider experience and the qualitative texture of what that experience looks and feels like on the ground. And more importantly, they point toward what a better system could look like in Texas.

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These findings speak directly to consequential work currently underway in Texas through the Quad Agency Child Care Initiative, the Governor's Task Force on Governance of Early Care and Learning, and Early Matters' legislative efforts. Every recommendation in this report is grounded in provider voice and in a shared conviction that meaningful reform is not only necessary, but achievable.

WHAT WE FOUND

SURVEY FINDINGS

The system feels fragmented

1/3 of providers report inconsistent expectations across agencies and have received conflicting guidance.

TRS vs. Licensing conflicts are sharpest fault line

Providers face unresolvable standoffs between different expectations and miscommunication between the two agencies overseeing each process.

Compliance burden crowds out quality

44% say multi-agency requirements interfere with care; among large programs (150+ children), that rises to 81%.

Providers reported that communication quality varies by agency

Agency roles are widely misunderstood

Many providers cannot identify which agency manages which programs, especially TWC, TRS, Local Workforce Boards, and CCS.

Providers want partnership, not just simplification

They want to be treated as professionals and included in rulemaking.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Governance fragmentation is the root cause

It was named as the foundational barrier in every region, regardless of stakeholder type.

Workforce devaluation is structural

ECE educators are classified at the same occupational level as janitors and pet groomers; El Paso data shows wages up to \$24.85/hr in neighboring NM vs. \$9.18 median in Texas.

The 0–3 gap is a funding model failure

Reimbursement rates don't reflect the true cost of infant/toddler care; rated highest priority (4.91/5.0) by focus group participants.

Family navigation is an invisible crisis

"Reapplication fatigue" across HHSC, TWC, TEA, and Head Start; ECI-to-Pre-K transition cliff at age 3 leaves children without services.

Inspector inconsistency is a trust problem

Providers described inspectors who threatened to "find something to write up" regardless of compliance, with no responsive complaint process.

Business engagement is ready but needs state infrastructure

Businesses are ready. Employers want to invest in innovative models and are interested in state pathways and incentives.

FIVE CROSS-CUTTING THEMES

- Fragmentation is the root cause, not a symptom.
- Compliance burden is a proxy for fragmentation; 52 hours/month is the cost of a broken system, not high standards.
- The system is not decipherable to the people who use it. Families, providers, and even agencies cannot always identify who is responsible for what.
- The moment for change is now. Business, philanthropy, providers, and policymakers are aligned and the Quad Agency Initiative and Governor's Task Force represent a rare convergence to make lasting change.
- Quality expectations are decoupled from investment. The state demands high standards but does not align funding to sustain quality efforts.

NINE RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE QUAD AGENCY

SIMPLIFY THE SYSTEM FOR PROVIDERS

1

Publish a Clear Org Chart

Map all agencies, programs, and roles so providers always know who to contact.

2

Provide explicit TRS vs. Licensing Guidance

Identify known conflicts between the two oversight processes and establish a clear resolution pathway.

3

Create Communication Standards

Set mandatory response benchmarks across agencies and create a single point of contact for all child care questions.

ALIGN AND STRENGTHEN SYSTEM OPERATIONS

4

Establish Licensing Inspector Standards

Require minimum ECE qualifications, standardized training, and inter-rater reliability assessments.

5

Consolidate Reporting and Eligibility Systems

Build one portal with a shared data infrastructure and a common family application.

6

Monitor TRS Assessment Timelines

Review assessor contract to determine sufficient staffing and establish a public dashboard tracking wait times by region.

BUILD FOR LONG-TERM IMPACT

7

Move Toward Unified Governance

Designate a lead entity with clear decision-making authority over early childhood systems.

8

Invest in Workforce & Sustainable Funding

Prioritize infants, toddlers, and children with special needs; consider educator reclassification.

9

Commission Independent Evaluation

Conduct outcomes-focused evaluation of all system changes with defined success metrics from the outset.

TEXAS CAN BUILD SOMETHING BETTER, STARTING NOW!

Providers are not asking for sympathy, they are asking for a system worthy of the work they do every day. We envision a system designed around children and families, not agency boundaries. The Quad Agency Initiative, the Governor's Task Force, and the legislative session ahead represent a convergence of opportunity Texas has rarely seen. Early Matters Texas stands ready to support that work.

