Reframing Early Education:
THE CRITICAL CASE FOR CHANGE

earlymatters
A Historic Coalition on Early Education
To Our Readers
TO OUR READERS

The Early Matters effort is a new early childhood initiative developed by a broad and deep collaboration of public and nonprofit organizations, business leaders, and elected officials in the greater Houston area (whose logos are displayed on the cover and whose representatives are listed in the Appendix). Currently, we are investing too little in early education and it is most severely impacting our children from low income families who are not succeeding in school. The members of this coalition are persuaded that a quality investment in the very early years of a child’s life will set that child on a path of success. Thus, our name, Early Matters. Early Matters is dedicated to finding solutions for enhancing the quality of experiences and environments that support young children’s learning and development. This report includes important information about the challenges we face in the Texas Gulf Coast region that need to be overcome if the region is to be viable and successful in the future. This information is part of a previous report funded by the Houston Endowment (“We Can Achieve School Readiness”, Texas Gulf Coast Readiness Committee) and adopted in a revised form by Early Matters in order to provide a background and rationale for the need for this initiative.

This document summarizes the compelling case for high-quality early learning and development systems; establishes goals that would improve our region’s ability to serve more children in high-quality learning environments; and lays out critical steps that, if achieved, would dramatically enhance Kindergarten readiness. The plan takes into consideration the important roles that the federal and state governments and local school districts play in providing critical resources for Head Start, public Pre-Kindergarten, and childcare subsidies. However, this plan looks at the specific ways our region can employ proven strategies that both build on the strength of families—the first and most important support system for children—and generate a better coordinated and better-resourced early childhood education system. This enhanced system will lead to increased Kindergarten readiness and positively influence later learning and life-long success.

It’s important to point out that Early Matters is in no way connected to an earlier organization known as “Early to Rise”. In 2013, that group funded and organized a petition drive to force a county wide election to increase the county equalization tax levied by the Harris County Department of Education. Harris County Judge Ed Emmett ruled that the petitions were not valid and that the election requested would not be legal. His decision was upheld by the Texas 14th Court of Appeals and affirmed by the Texas Attorney General’s Office.

We hope readers will find this plan a necessary precursor to the larger effort of improving elementary, secondary and post-secondary educational outcomes for all children and youth in our region. We call on our community carefully to consider and support these improvements so that we strengthen families and have a strong future workforce, supporting the continued growth and development of the vibrant Texas Gulf Coast Region.

James J. Postl
Chair, Early Matters Committee

JAMES J. POSTL
CHAIR, EARLY MATTERS COMMITTEE
WHAT IS EARLY MATTERS?
We are a broad-based coalition of business, civic, education, philanthropic and nonprofit organizations and volunteers, working together to raise awareness about the importance of high quality early education and to make a strong case for increased investment in this critical, high return on investment area.

CASE STATEMENT
The scientific evidence is abundantly clear – an investment in our young children through engaged parenting and high quality early education programs makes a lifelong difference in school outcomes and workforce readiness. We need to put this knowledge to work, as we are at a critical time in our community’s evolution with many more jobs requiring post high school education. Only 1 of 5 children in our region are graduating from high school and completing some form of post high school credential. However, Houston’s rapidly growing employers in the petrochemical, medical and manufacturing fields desperately need employees with the post high school education. Early education receives limited public funding, and the state standards for quality early education programs are far too low. As a result, few families are able to access high quality early education. We must invest more heavily in the early stages of our children’s learning and development, a time in which we see the highest financial return on investment and the greatest impact on preparing children for a bright and successful future.

THE VISION
We envision a Greater Houston Region where young children are a part of supportive and nurturing families and are able to participate in high quality early education, knowing that intentional early investments significantly improve Kindergarten readiness, 3rd grade reading mastery, high school graduation rates, post high school education/credentialing and workforce readiness.

www.earlymattershouston.org
**STEPS TO ACHIEVE THE VISION**

**Parents** are accessing a range of resources to become the best parents they can be
- Receiving information or participating in group classes on child development and effective parenting approaches
- Learning about the ways they can interact with children to build vocabulary and increase reading readiness
- Achieving new skills and accessing critical community resources through home visitation programs
- Gaining information/resources from pediatricians on the importance of early reading, talking with young children

**Child care programs** are high quality and accessible to working families
- Making information readily available for parents to make good choices on early education options
- Incentivizing program leaders and teachers to participate in training and professional development beyond the state’s current minimum standards
- Supporting teachers in the implementation of research-based curricula and providing access to instructional resources that promote language-rich learning environments
- Revising state child care standards over time to reflect best practices for young children

**Pre-K Programs** are equitable with respect to access and high quality
- Limiting teacher-to-student ratios to 1:10 (e.g. one teacher and one aide per 20 students in a classroom)
- Offering full day Pre-K programs with access to quality extended day or after-school enrichment
- Implementing programs by school districts in partnership with child care and Head Start
- Expanding access through the use of a sliding scale fee for families over income eligibility limit
- Evaluating program on an on-going basis, tracking progress and recommending improvements
- Prioritizing serving 4 year-olds first, then expanding access to more 3 year-olds based on results of evaluation

**K-3rd Grade programs** continuing trajectory to literacy
- Districts bring their best and brightest to identify roadblocks and develop initiatives to achieve 3rd grade literacy
- Regional Literacy Summit
- Coordinating school and non-profit reading initiatives across Region 4
- Ongoing versus one time commitment to literacy training and initiatives implementation

**SUGGESTED OPTIONS FOR FINANCIAL SUPPORT**
- **State support for expanded Pre-K** (improve teacher/child ratios and quality instruction, expand to full day)
- **Local public/private funding** for improved or expanded child care, parenting support initiatives
- **Use Collective Impact Model** to improve/coordinate existing parenting and early education programs
- **Coordinate Head Start, Pre-K and child care subsidy funding** to maximize impact and cost effectiveness.
Recently, the Early Matters committee has developed a long-range plan to improve the quality of and access to early childhood education in the 13-county Texas Gulf Coast region. Early Matters looks at the specific ways our region can employ proven strategies that both build on the strength of families — the first and most important support system for children — and generate a better-coordinated and better-resourced early learning and development system. This report aims to identify and bring together the multiple key players, from public and private sectors, who help shape early learning experiences and environments, and whose collaboration is profoundly needed. We believe that a well-coordinated early learning and development system will result in high levels of Kindergarten readiness that positively influences continued learning and life success.

Three key areas of partnership targeted in this report include: primary caregivers (e.g. parents), early childhood professionals (e.g. preschool teachers), and early healthcare providers (e.g. pediatricians). Within these three areas there is substantial diversity in the level of knowledge, skill, and utilization of quality practices that promote healthy development in young children. The goal of a regionally coordinated early learning and development system is to share resources and information across partnerships, promote professional dialogue, ensure quality of practice, and effectively disseminate critical information to the public.

**CHALLENGES FACING THE TEXAS GULF COAST REGION**

Houston and the Gulf Coast regions overall are known for their “can do” attitude, individual self-reliance and enthusiasm to take on major projects that have long-lasting impact. But in the last 30 years, the Houston and the Gulf Coast regions have experienced dramatic changes that, if left unaddressed, could put the children of these regions and our community overall at risk:

- **The job market has changed.** People with a high school education who used to be able to easily find
well-paying jobs now need some form of post-high school training or education to secure a job that pays a living wage.\(^1\) In fact, trends suggest that the 2016 market will demand a workforce in which nearly 55% of jobs will require an Associate or higher degree.\(^2\)

- **Not enough children are making it through the educational pipeline.** Only one of five students in Texas completes a degree or certificate within six years of high school graduation.

- **A growing number of children, in particular children from lower-income families, are arriving at Kindergarten unprepared for school.** For example, as many as 60% of Houston-area Kindergartners entered the 2012-13 school year lacking requisite reading-readiness skills.\(^3\) A majority of young children now have working parents who need to involve other adults in the care of their young children, and many children are in the care of adults who do not have the background or training needed to support their learning and development.

**Importance of Early Learning & Development**

A growing body of research over the last 20 years has established the critical importance of the early years in a child’s life. The architecture of the brain, or the brain’s neural connections, is formed rapidly during these early years. The experiences of a child, especially those shared by a child and significant adults in his or her life, stimulate these neural connections. Early health, nutrition, and emotional well-being also have significant impacts on cognitive development. And research has shown that higher-quality early learning and development environments lead to better language, cognitive and social skills through early elementary school. Primary caregivers, early healthcare providers, and early childhood professionals all contribute to the quality of these developmental influences.

On the other hand, failing to make the most of these early years means that far too many of our young children do not receive what they need early on and arrive the first day of school already behind. If they are not reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school. A lower graduation rate means fewer qualified candidates for the jobs that pay a living wage and help continue to grow and build our economy.

**Different Systems of Early Learning & Development**

**Parent & Informal Care**

Forty-three percent of young children in the Texas Gulf Coast region are cared for at home by a parent. Approximately another quarter (22%) are cared for in “informal care” environments by a family member, friend or neighbor who is not the child’s primary caregiver.

**Regulated Care**

The remaining 35% of children in our region are enrolled in one of the three systems of early care and education: state-regulated childcare, federally-regulated Head Start, and state-regulated Pre-Kindergarten.

Each of these vastly different service-delivery models will be discussed in depth in this report, as well as the challenge they present: an especially fragmented early learning and development system. This fragmentation results in concerning ranges in quality, conflicting approaches in instruction, inconsistent funding and regulating mechanisms, and limited collaboration among professionals from different early childhood settings.

**Taking a Regional Approach**

To ensure that children from all early learning systems are ready for school, early childhood settings need to offer activities and interactions that adequately stimulate social, emotional, physical and cognitive development.
Unfortunately, Texas ranks low on many indicators of quality early care and education and has been slow to address these shortcomings at the state level. In addition, there is no state-wide system of governance and funding for early childhood education.

In 2009, Governor Rick Perry created the Texas Early Learning Council, housed at the Children’s Learning Institute (CLI) at the University of Texas Health Science Center. A three-year federal grant provided funding for the Council to develop early learning standards for infants and toddlers, a framework for a quality rating and improvement system to rate early childhood programs, a career ladder, and definitions of core competencies for the early childhood education workforce. While CLI continues to implement most of the Council’s programs and services, no state agency has the responsibility to implement its larger recommendations as laid out in the Council’s Texas Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment: Final Report. These recommendations include a consistent method of data collection across agencies, developing a quality rating scale for early childhood programs, and expanding services for children under age four.

Rather than wait for the state to restructure and fund the implementation of these recommendations, community leaders in the Texas Gulf Coast region have opted to take a regional approach to improving the early learning and development system. This approach will build on the recommendations of the Council and help ensure that:

• All children in our region are developmentally ready to enter Kindergarten and better positioned to succeed in school;
• The Texas Gulf Coast region is better positioned to have a talented workforce to support economic growth and a high quality of life; and
• Taxpayers are investing where it can make the most difference in educational outcomes and reduce costs for remediation, specialized services, juvenile detention, and incarceration.

Overview of the Early Matters Plan
To improve the quality of and access to early childhood education — and ultimately improve school readiness — in the region, the Early Matters Committee has developed a plan with a series of goals and strategies. The Committee adopted five guiding principles during the planning process:

1. Recommendations should reflect the critical role of parents and families in child development.
2. Efforts should focus on improving the quality of the early learning and development system first and then on expanding access.
3. Initial program improvements should serve children most at risk and then expand to include all children.
4. Funding should be prioritized based on need and the potential return on investment.
5. New funding should be invested in programs that have demonstrated results and are modeled after proven research-based strategies.

Goal 1: Community Support for Quality and Access. Strengthen community support for high-quality, accessible early childhood education among families, elected officials, educators, and business and civic leaders.

Goal 2: Quality Standards. Apply research- and evidence-based standards in guiding family and educator interactions with young children and in measuring the quality and impact of early learning and development programs and services.

Goal 3: Family Support. Ensure that parents and other caregivers have access to evidence-based and culturally appropriate parent support programs and resources.

Goal 4: Healthcare Engagement. Utilize healthcare providers and settings for medical care as access points for providing families with resources and support to enhance their children’s early development.

Goal 5: Professional Development. Ensure that early childhood education program staff have access to evidence-based instructional resources and opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and support systems to help children reach their full potential.

Goal 6: Financing and Governance. Develop a financing and governance structure that provides a sustainable community investment in an early learning and development system and measures the impact of the system on school readiness.

Goal 7: State-Wide System. Build partnerships across Texas to strengthen state infrastructure and financial resources for early learning and development.
Background & Rationale

Houston and the Gulf Coast regions overall are known for their “can do” attitude, individual self-reliance and enthusiasm to invest in major projects that have long-lasting impact. Three examples include:

- Building the Houston Ship Channel, the largest port in the country, the sixth largest in the world and the main stimulus for our burgeoning international commerce;
- Developing the Texas Medical Center, the largest medical complex in the world with 7.1 million patient visits a year, which is renowned for its breakthroughs in heart transplants and cancer care; and
- Supporting NASA’s move to Houston in the early 1960s, creating the Manned Spacecraft Center (later Johnson Space Center) for the purpose of sending a man to the moon.

While the Houston and Gulf Coast regions have had ups and downs during economic recession and recovery, the area’s drive and grit to come together to solve problems is rarely questioned.

Meeting the Challenges Facing the Region

In the last 30 years, the Texas Gulf Coast community has experienced dramatic changes that, if left unaddressed, could put our region’s children and our community overall at risk. First, the job market has changed. People with a high school education who used to be able to easily find well-paying jobs now need some form of post-high school training or education to secure a job that pays a living wage. “The traditional ‘blue collar path’ to financial security has largely disappeared... the ‘resource economy’ of the industrial era, for which this region was so favorably positioned, has been replaced by a new high-technology, knowledge-based, fully worldwide marketplace,” says Dr. Stephen Klineberg of Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research.
Second, too few children are making it through the K–12 educational pipeline, finishing high school and going on to complete some form of post-secondary education. According to a recent Houston Endowment study, A New Measure of Educational Success in Texas — Tracking the Success of 8th Graders into and through College, only one in five students in Texas makes it through the education system with any form of post-high school credential. This is according to a recent Houston Endowment study, A New Measure of Educational Success in Texas — Tracking the Success of 8th Graders into and through College, only one in five students in Texas makes it through the education system with any form of post-high school credential.4

Third, there has been a sea-change in the way our youngest citizens are cared for, driven by the need for two incomes to support a household and an increase in single-parent households. A minority of children have the traditional family structure of one parent in the workplace and one parent at home to care for them. In our region, 57% of young children have working parents who need to involve other adults in their care. While some early care and education settings can be high quality, many children are in the care of staff who do not have the background needed to support their learning and development. The result is a growing number of children, in particular children from lower-income families, who arrive at Kindergarten unprepared for school. The result is a growing number of children, in particular children from lower-income families, who arrive at Kindergarten unprepared for school.6

Only one in five students in Texas makes it through the education system with any form of post-high school credential. That is According to Dr. Stephen Murdock, well-known state demographer and director of the Hobby Center for the Study of Texas at Rice University, “If differentials in the socioeconomic characteristics of the labor force do not change, the future labor force of Texas will be less well educated, less skilled, earn lower salaries and wages, and thus be in greater need of labor force training (with substantial associated costs).” 9

Lastly, our region and state are undergoing a rapid demographic transformation, making Houston the most diverse city in the country, now surpassing Los Angeles and New York. This shift has been documented over the last 30 years by the Houston Area Survey, conducted by Dr. Stephen Klineberg of Rice University’s Kinder Institute for Urban Research.7 The fastest growth is in the Latino community, followed by the Asian and African American communities. While the Houston community values its diversity, the challenge will be to make sure that families and children are assimilated into the community and that children coming from different cultures have similar access to family support services and high-quality early learning and development programs so that they get off to a strong start.

Whether one is dredging a port, constructing a hospital or building a rocket to the moon, we all know it is vital to have the highest-quality inputs. Failing to get it right at the beginning of the process means paying for it on the back end with much higher costs for repairs and renovation.

Far too many of our young children do not receive what they need early in life and therefore arrive at school the first day already behind. If they are not reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school. A lower graduation rate means fewer qualified candidates for the jobs that pay a living wage and help continue to grow and build our economy.

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Dr. Klineberg compares this challenge to the decision made by our city’s leaders 100 years ago to invest the money to dredge the Houston Ship Channel. That
decision led to a dramatic increase in the Houston economy, transforming Houston into the largest national and international port in the world.

Responding to the need to give our very young children a good start on their education is our generation’s Houston Ship Channel decision.

Responding to this challenge will generate a top-flight workforce for the future, paving the way for Houston to become a magnet for new businesses in the 21st century. Should we choose to ignore the stumbling blocks to quality early education, we will see our youth continue to struggle later in their school and work life while the best jobs are filled by candidates from outside our region. Meanwhile, we will struggle to support those unable to find work with their limited skills and education.

The community leaders of the Early Matters Committee have accepted the challenge to improve the quality of early learning, build a strong foundation for young children to support their growth and development, and better prepare them for Kindergarten.

With that solid foundation, our region’s children will have the best possible options for completing their education and becoming wage-earning, tax-contributing citizens in the future. The committee’s work which aims for a reasonable, cost-effective proposal to achieve this goal merits serious discussion.

—ZERO TO THREE

—INSTITUTE FOR EDUCATION SCIENCES

**RETURN ON INVESTMENT**

**LIFETIME EFFECTS: THE HIGHSCOPE PERRY PRESCHOOL STUDY THROUGH AGE 40**

90% of brain development occurs by age 5.

5% of public education dollars are spent on early childhood education.

Importance of Early Childhood Development

A growing body of research over the last 20 years has established the critical importance of the early years in a child’s life. The architecture of the brain, or the brain’s neural connections, is formed rapidly during these early years. A child’s experiences, especially those shared between the child and significant adults in his or her life, stimulate these neural connections. According to research compiled by the Center for the Developing Child, “Early experiences determine whether a child’s brain architecture will provide a strong or weak foundation for all future learning, behavior, and health.”

A stimulating early environment includes activities like reading, singing, playing, and talking with young children. Conversations are particularly important for a child’s language development. Adults that actively use words and sentences that carry information, such as “This is a grocery bag, and it’s used to carry our...
food,” are stimulating brain connections that advance language and vocabulary skills—skills that are known to be essential for school readiness. Moreover, nurturance and responsiveness in caregivers are critical to healthy social-emotional development.

Research also shows that learning one skill provides a necessary stepping stone to learning the next skill. Thus, the best time to build a strong foundation for higher-level functioning is early in life. According to Dr. James Heckman, Nobel Laureate in Economics, “The most efficient strategy for strengthening the future workforce, both economically and neurobiologically, and improving its quality of life is to invest in the environments of disadvantaged children during the early childhood years.”

Making the most of these early years depends on the quality of young children’s early interactions with parents, caregivers and teachers. Profound inequalities in the potential for learning can arise during this unique period because families may lack information on how they can promote positive development, as well as how to recognize a quality early childhood program, especially in the childcare system. With a targeted awareness effort, primary caregivers can become familiar with developmentally powerful concepts such as responsive parenting, strategies for engaging in meaningful conversation with young children, how to identify learning and developmental delays, and what to look for in a quality early childhood education setting. Research has shown that higher-quality early learning and development environments lead to better language, cognitive and social skills through early elementary school.

When cared for by adults with limited resources or training in early childhood concepts, children with specialized needs can become lost in the shuffle. English language learners (ELL) represent a significant proportion of Texas children (approximately 35% of homes in Texas speak a language other than English). With the challenge of learning a new language, ELL students frequently score lower on pre-Kindergarten assessments than their non-ELL counterparts. Fortunately, research has shown that with early quality instruction, these gaps can be narrowed or closed altogether.

Learning delays that result from autism, attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), dyslexia, and other learning disabilities can be mitigated by trained parents and professionals. Key to their success is early identification, through understanding developmental milestones in an average child’s life. As such, no early learning and development system is complete without quality special needs instruction and early detection guidelines for parents, healthcare providers, and early childhood professionals.

Similarly, emotional and mental health issues that result from abuse, neglect, exposure to violence, or economic hardship can interfere with optimal brain development, a condition known as “toxic stress.” According to the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, a prolonged activation of the stress response systems can disrupt brain development and increase the risk of cognitive impairment. Early childhood professionals should have access to resources that help identify, prevent, and mitigate toxic stress situations.

Finally, physical activity and nutrition also play a vital role in healthy brain development, and these should be found in all quality early childhood settings.

Young Children in the Texas Gulf Coast Region

There are 553,400 children under age five in the 13 Texas Gulf Coast counties (Austin, Brazoria, Chambers, Colorado, Fort Bend, Galveston, Harris, Liberty, Matagorda, Montgomery, Walker, Waller and Wharton). More than 74% of these children live in Harris County, which includes the city of Houston. Combined, Harris and the four other larger counties in the area (Brazoria,
Fort Bend, Galveston and Montgomery) are home to 95% of the young children in the region. The other eight counties have smaller populations and are more rural.

Harris County, the largest county in the Texas Gulf Coast region, has experienced a dramatic shift in ethnic diversity over the last 30 years. The majority of young children (54%) are Hispanic, with much smaller populations of white (22%), black (18%) and Asian (6%) children. According to the Texas Education Agency, the number of English language learners (ELL) or students participating in bilingual instructional programs has increased 47% between 2003 and 2013 across the state of Texas—and this population is expected to continue to grow, particularly in urban centers such as Houston.

Today, more children ages 0–17 in the Texas Gulf Coast region are living in poverty — defined as an annual income of less than $23,550 for a family of four — leading to insecurity around basic needs such as food, housing, clothing and safety and the stress that may go along with such challenges. Harris County has the highest poverty rate of the large counties (27.1% in 2010, up from 23.1% in 2006). The other large Texas Gulf Coast counties have much lower poverty rates, with Fort Bend at 12.5%, Brazoria at 15.3%, Montgomery at 16% and Galveston at 19.5%. The more rural counties in our region have even higher poverty rates than Harris County, as high as 28% in Waller and Matagorda.

Early Care & Education Systems

Forty-three percent of young children in the Texas Gulf Coast region are cared for at home by a parent or parental family member. Almost a quarter (22%) are cared for in “informal care” environments by a family member, friend or neighbor who is not the child’s primary caregiver. No state entity has the authority to provide oversight, training or resources for these typically home-based childcare environments. The remaining 35% of children are enrolled in one of the three systems of early care and education: state-regulated childcare, federally regulated Head Start or state-regulated Pre-Kindergarten.

Parent & Family Care

While we do not usually think of parent and family care as a “system” of early development, families have the most influence by far in preparing a child for school and life. Parents, families or the primary care providers for young children are frequently referred to as the first and most important teachers in the lives of children. Parents and family members support a child throughout their lives, from birth until they are on their own. The love, care, nurturing and support received from these critical individuals are the most important predictors of a child’s outcome. That said, parents raise their children in vastly different ways, influenced by culture, their access to information about approaches to parenting, and/or the time they have to devote to parenting given work and other responsibilities.

In one study, researchers Betty Hart and Todd Risley recorded conversations between children and their parents during the first three years of the child’s life. They found that children of professionals had vocabularies three times larger than children whose parents were on public assistance. Parents and family members regularly reading, talking, singing and playing with their children contributed to vocabulary gains. In addition, when parents used more encouraging tones and spoke in complete, descriptive sentences, they had closer relationships with their children — resulting in higher vocabulary scores. These findings were consistent for parents on public assistance whose children had large vocabularies — they engaged in similar practices, such as speaking in encouraging, warm tones; talking consistently; and reading with their children.

Given that 43% of young children are at home with a parent or other family member in the early years, it is very important that these caregivers — regardless...
of income and education — have ready access to information on the significant benefits of regular verbal stimulation through reading, talking, singing and playing and the impact of a positive, encouraging environment. These parent resources should strive to include practical examples of language-rich strategies that can be incorporated into everyday interactions such as dinner conversations and bedtime stories. Resources should also provide developmental indicators for parents so that they are able to identify learning delays earlier. For parents and families with the greatest need, access to home visitation programs with individualized assistance can strengthen the use of language-building activities.

INFORMAL CARE OR FAMILY, FRIEND & NEIGHBOR (FFN) CARE
Informal care is a type of childcare that most frequently occurs in the home of a family member, friend or neighbor. In the Greater Houston region, it is estimated that one out of five young children (22%) are cared for in an informal environment. FFN care can represent a wide range of quality as this type of care is unregulated and caregivers are not required to be trained. Caregivers typically have a relationship with the family and meet the parents’ desire for a caregiver who shares their values, child rearing practices, culture, language and/or religion. According to a survey of families by the National League of Cities, children of immigrants and non-English speaking families are more likely to be cared for by FFN caregivers. The cost of informal care is typically lower than regulated care. In Texas, low income families are able to apply for a childcare subsidy to help cover the cost of informal care if the childcare provider is a family member. FFN care is more flexible, which is helpful to parents who have non-traditional work schedules such as night shift or variable hours. Typically, the number of children in a FFN setting is lower than in a regulated setting. This lower caregiver-to-child ratio may contribute to FFN care being the most frequent choice of care setting for parents with infants and toddlers across socio-economic groups.

REGULATED SETTINGS
Regulated early childhood education takes place in a variety of settings, and standards are established and monitored by a combination of federal and state entities. The three main systems of early learning and development were created to meet different needs and, as a result, have varying performance standards.
# THREE MAIN SYSTEMS OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN TEXAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROGRAM CHARACTERISTICS</th>
<th>STATE-LICENSED CHILD CARE</th>
<th>FEDERALLY-REGULATED HEAD START &amp; EARLY HEAD START</th>
<th>STATE-REGULATED PRE-KINDERGARTEN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TEACHER EDUCATION</td>
<td>High school degree/GED, 24 hours of pre-service training.</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree for 50% of lead teachers (as of September 2013).</td>
<td>Bachelor’s degree in education for the teacher.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACHER SALARIES</td>
<td>Minimum wage to $20,000/year for more experienced teachers; typically no benefits.</td>
<td>Average salary of $30,000/year plus benefits.</td>
<td>Starting salary of $45,000/year plus benefits.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TEACHER-TO-CHILD RATIOS</td>
<td>Ratios meet national accreditation standards for infants but are far out of line for toddlers and children of preschool age.</td>
<td>Standards reflect national accreditation standards.</td>
<td>The state has never established a standard for teacher-to-child ratios in the Texas Pre-Kindergarten program.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>AGES SERVED</td>
<td>Birth to 5 years</td>
<td>Head Start: 3 to 5 years Early Head Start: Birth to 3 years</td>
<td>4 years, and if space is available; some 3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>FUNDING SOURCE</td>
<td>Families pay tuition; low-income families may be eligible to receive a federal subsidy toward the cost of care. Not all eligible families are served.</td>
<td>Funded by the federal government in the form of a grant to local contractors; not all eligible families are served. The program is free to eligible families.</td>
<td>State and local school districts fund the program so eligible children attend free of charge. A few districts allow non-eligible children to participate by paying tuition.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CALENDAR</td>
<td>Full 12 months of year.</td>
<td>Traditional school year, nine months (some flexibility by contractor).</td>
<td>Traditional school year, nine months.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HOURS OF PROGRAM</td>
<td>Accommodates working families, 10–12 hours/day, Monday–Friday. A small number of programs offer extended hours.</td>
<td>Varies, but typically five-six hours/day, Monday–Friday.</td>
<td>Half-day program, three-four hours/day. Some school districts have expanded the program to the full school day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CURRICULUM</td>
<td>Types of activities suggested in licensing regulations; no curriculum required.</td>
<td>Curriculum required; must meet Head Start performance guidelines.</td>
<td>Curriculum required; must select one approved by the state of Texas.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>REGULATORY BODY</td>
<td>Childcare programs are licensed by the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services. Programs are a combination of for-profit businesses and non-profit organizations (some faith based).</td>
<td>Head Start programs report to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. Office of Head Start. There is a regional office in Dallas.</td>
<td>Pre-Kindergarten programs are run by the local independent school district (ISD). ISDs report to the Texas Education Agency.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Every $1 invested in early childhood education can save $8 in long-term costs associated with remedial education, criminal justice and welfare payments.

The childcare system was developed primarily to support working families. Regulated by the state, childcare represents a combination of nonprofit organizations and businesses, funded primarily by tuition paid for by the families. Quality varies considerably, depending on whether childcare centers meet just the minimum standards that are required by the state, or whether they voluntarily go beyond this regulatory floor to meet higher standards for teacher education, teacher-to-child ratios, etc. As more and more families fall into the category of “all parents working,” whether they are two-parent or single-parent households, the standards of childcare have received more scrutiny, but they still lag far behind those in publicly-funded programs. In our region, only 4% of childcare centers are nationally accredited by the primary accrediting bodies.

Head Start was launched in 1965 by President Lyndon B. Johnson to reduce the impact of poverty on young children and their families. It is a federally-funded program that provides comprehensive child development for children ages 3 to 5 with quality early childhood education and support services that include physical health, mental wellness, and family development. Subsequently, Early Head Start was added to provide similar services for families with children birth to three years. The primary goal of these programs is school readiness for very low income children, and the programs recognize the importance of the family in reaching this goal. Thus, a big part of Head Start programs includes a framework for the engagement of parents and families—building relationships with families that support family well-being, strong relationships between parents and their children, and ongoing learning and development for both parents and children. This is the only one of the three main early education systems that has put forth such a framework.

Pre-Kindergarten, established in Texas in 1985, focuses on academic and social-emotional development in an attempt to close the achievement gap of low-income children as well as other children at risk of low school achievement. Pre-Kindergarten classrooms have a state-approved curriculum focusing on such areas as literacy, math and science, as well as how to interact and get along with other children.

While these three types of early education are described as separate systems, there are many examples of how school districts, Head Start programs and childcare combine resources to improve the quality of early education and better accommodate the hours of working parents.

A more detailed description of these three systems is provided in the table on page 18.

Need for a Comprehensive Early Learning & Development System: Taking a Regional Approach

To achieve the goal of all children from all three early learning systems being ready for school, service providers must offer activities and interactions that adequately stimulate social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Unfortunately, Texas ranks low on many indicators of quality early care and education and has been slow to address these shortcomings at the state level. The minimal state childcare standards for director and teacher education, inadequate teacher-to-child ratios, and lack of curricular requirements create wide variability in the quality across these systems. However, absence of a standard on teacher-to-child ratios in the state Pre-Kindergarten program sets Texas apart from all other state Pre-Kindergarten programs, which for the most part have ratios of 8–12 students per teacher in a classroom. Given the different systems of childcare, Head Start and public Pre-Kindergarten, the lack of a statewide system of governance and funding for early childhood education hampers our region’s ability to respond to the need for change.
In 2009, Governor Rick Perry created the Texas Early Learning Council, housed at the Children’s Learning Institute (CLI) at the University of Texas Health Science Center. Over the course of three years, the Council spent $11.4 million in American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) funds to improve key aspects of early care and education in Texas. The Council’s initiatives included:

- Launching a statewide public awareness campaign on the importance of responsive parenting entitled “Little Texans, Big Futures.”
- Establishing a new career development system for early childhood professionals in Texas, the Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System (TECPDS)
- Publishing new Infant, Toddler, and Three-Year-Old Early Learning Guidelines for Texas and distributing more than 40,000 copies to early childhood professionals
- Funding a pioneering research study on home-based childcare known as Beginning Education: Early Childcare at Home (BEECH and BEECH en Español)
- Conducting the first statewide early childhood needs assessment in Texas in over 40 years

While CLI continues to implement most of these programs and services statewide, no state agency has the responsibility to implement the Council’s larger recommendations as laid out in the Council’s Texas Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment: Final Report. These recommendations included a consistent method of data collection across agencies, developing a quality rating scale for early childhood programs, and expanding services for children under age 4.

Rather than wait for the state to take the next step to restructure and fund the implementation of these recommendations, *community leaders in the Texas Gulf Coast region have opted to take a regional approach to improving the early childhood education system.* The recommendations by the Council are similar to and mutually supportive of the recommendations made by the Early Matters Committee, which is focused on significantly improving the *quality of and access to* early childhood education resources for young children, their families and the programs that serve them. Taking regional action will help *ensure that all children in our region are developmentally ready to enter Kindergarten.* It may be possible to coordinate efforts and pilot some of the systems recommended by the Council as part of a regional early childhood education quality improvement effort.

The quality improvement effort in the Texas Gulf Coast region is not the only regional initiative to address the issue of school readiness. San Antonio voters recently approved a small increase in sales tax dedicated to improving early childhood education. School readiness is an important component of the E3 Alliance (Education Equals Economics) in Austin and the Zero to Five Funders Collaborative in Dallas. In fact, efforts to share information across the state have begun laying the groundwork for possible state-wide collaboration on opportunities to strengthen state policies, resources and infrastructure for early childhood education services in the future.
Overview of the Early Matters Plan
To improve the quality of and access to early childhood education — and ultimately improve school readiness — in the region, the Early Matters committee has developed a plan with a series of goals and strategies to accomplish them. Recognizing that resources are limited, the Committee also adopted five guiding principles in the planning process:

1. Recommendations should reflect the critical role of parents and families in child development.
2. Efforts should focus on improving the quality of the early childhood education system first and then on expanding access.
3. Initial program improvements should serve children most at risk and then expand to include all children.
4. Funding should be prioritized based on need and the potential return on investment.
5. New funding should be invested in programs that have demonstrated results and are modeled after proven, research-based strategies.

GOAL 1: COMMUNITY SUPPORT FOR QUALITY & ACCESS

Strengthen community support for high-quality, accessible early childhood education among families, elected officials, educators, and business and civic leaders.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:

1. Lead a public awareness campaign about the importance of high-quality development and early learning.
2. Advocate for increased state/national funding and stronger regulations to improve the quality of early childhood education programs paid for by public dollars.
3. Lead a campaign to create a regional funding stream to support high-quality early learning and development systems.

GOAL 2: QUALITY STANDARDS

Apply research- and evidence-based standards in guiding family and educator interactions with young children and in measuring the quality and impact of early learning and development programs and services.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:

1. Adopt Texas’ new Infant, Toddler and Pre-Kindergarten Early Learning Guidelines as a framework for guiding high quality programs.
2. Adopt the new Texas quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) for early learning and development programs at the state level.
3. Strengthen the region’s QRIS, either by adopting a newly developed state system or incorporate State recommendations into Collaborative for Children’s regional QualiFind system.
4. Stay abreast of the Texas Education Agency recommendations and systems to measure Kindergarten readiness.
5. Develop regional consensus on a valid measure of Kindergarten readiness.
GOAL 3: FAMILY AND CAREGIVER SUPPORT
Ensure that parents and other caregivers have access to evidence-based and culturally appropriate parent support programs and resources.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:
1. Expand the availability of evidence-based parent support programs through the training of professionals in evidence-based parent support programs.
2. Increase accessibility of evidence-based parent support programs by eliminating common barriers (e.g., cultural, language, location, financial, etc.) that may prevent caregivers' attendance and participation.
3. Implement a social marketing campaign to increase awareness of available programs and decrease stigma associated with attending classes including a website where parenting support programs, academic enrichment services/activities, quality childcare, and other early childhood resources can be easily accessed.
4. Expand the availability of resources that include information on academic enrichment services for caregivers of children with special needs, early learning guidelines, and the early learning and development system.
5. Ensure that resources are translated and tailored to the needs of families and caregivers of English language learners.

GOAL 4: HEALTHCARE ENGAGEMENT
Utilize healthcare providers and settings for medical care as access points for providing families with resources and support to enhance their children's early development.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:
1. Create and deliver brief, action-oriented trainings for the range of child healthcare professionals (e.g., physicians, nurse practitioners, physician's assistants, nurses, clinical social workers, therapists, etc.) around resources and supports for early childhood education and school readiness.
2. Disseminate user-friendly fact sheets and resource links on early childhood education topics to child health care provider sites for distribution to families of young children.
3. Encourage participation of front-line child healthcare professionals in community initiatives directed at utilizing healthcare encounters for information sharing and support of families in promoting their children's early development.
4. Continue dialogue with child healthcare organizations and provider stakeholder groups around how best to continuously optimize the information, resource links, and other supports shared with families in the healthcare setting around early childhood education and school readiness.

GOAL 5: PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT
Ensure that early childhood education program staff have access to evidence-based instructional resources and opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and support systems to help children reach their full potential.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:
1. Utilize Texas Core Competencies for early childhood education directors and teachers to support the positive growth and development of young children.
2. Link levels of teacher education to different levels of program quality from “minimal” to “excellent” in the regional quality rating system.
3. Design and coordinate a training and credentialing system for individuals who want to enter the early education field.
4. Design and coordinate a continuing education system that will provide teachers with the core knowledge needed to be effective in supporting the optimal development of young children.
5. Ensure that evidence-based special needs instruction is a core component to the continuing education system for early childhood educators.
6. Develop and prioritize continuing education components that address specialized instruction needs for English language learners.
GOAL 6: FINANCING AND GOVERNANCE

Develop a financing and governance structure that provides a sustainable community investment in an early learning and development system and measures the impact of the system on school readiness.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:

1. Leverage existing funds to achieve higher quality programs by breaking down current silos so that all delivery systems work together. This could include expanding blended Head Start and public school Pre-K programs to improve teacher to child ratios and enhance classroom resources, and using blended models for settings serving infants and toddlers by developing collaborations between Early Head Start and childcare facilities as funding is identified for this purpose.

2. Develop an estimate of what it would cost to significantly improve the quality of and expand access to early childhood education in the Texas Gulf Coast region.

3. Increase state funding to improve the quality of public Pre-K programs.

4. Develop an early childhood education fund to improve the quality of early childhood programs through foundation, corporate and individual support.

5. Develop a sustained, local public funding stream to improve the quality of the Texas Gulf Coast region early childhood education system from birth to five, starting with Harris County.


GOAL 7: STATE-WIDE SYSTEM

Build partnerships across Texas to strengthen state infrastructure and financial resources for early learning and development.

Strategies to accomplish this goal include:

1. Develop a coalition with other Texas cities involved in systems change for early childhood education at the regional and state levels.

2. Work toward having a state registry that tracks the professional development and credentials of early education teachers and directors.

3. Work toward creating a single state entity to coordinate/govern all early learning and development programs and services.

AVERAGE FAMILY EXPENSES

HIGH QUALITY CHILD CARE COSTS AS MUCH OR MORE THAN COLLEGE TUITION

While parents are encouraged to save early, and for their children to apply for scholarships and grants for college, there are few resources available to help parents pay for quality child care.

—COLLABORATIVE FOR CHILDREN’S QUALIFY DATABASE

AVERAGE COST OF CHILD CARE: $7,960/year
AVERAGE COST FOR CHILD CARE AT ACCREDITED CENTER: $11,770/year
TUITION AT UNIVERSITY OF HOUSTON: $9,500/year

For two children in child care with 2 working parents, a typical family needs to earn $61,188/year
Critical Factors for Success

As the initiative moves forward from the planning phase, the following work will be key:

**Communication:** Develop a comprehensive, strategic communication plan that emphasizes goals, priorities, use of funding, desired outcomes, problems, and the vision for the effort.

**Collaboration:** Establish broad-based support for the initiative among all sectors of community leadership — business, education, public officials, health, early childhood, and nonprofit—as well as families, and the general public.

**Leadership:** Seek out exceptional community leaders to take the recommendations public, ensuring that the leaders represent a diverse cross-section of the community — politically and ethnically — and are from multiple sectors.

**Funding:** Research the options for funding and governance streams and seek voter approval if a public funding stream is ultimately supported for this initiative.

**Quality Standards & Accountability:** Implement the quality standards developed by the Texas Early Learning Council for early childhood education providers and create a system of accountability to ensure the quality standards are upheld.
The Time is Now:

INDICATORS THAT ENHANCE THE PROBABILITY FOR SUCCESS

The Early Matters committee has set forth a bold initiative to significantly raise both the quality of and the access to early childhood education in the region, beginning with Harris County. Such a plan requires vision and risk at the outset as well as careful planning regarding its feasibility. Several indicators increase the probability of success:

- The Houston area’s successful recovery from the 2008 recession and solid indicators for local employment and prosperity in the years ahead;
- Resounding passage of several bond initiatives in November 2012 to build new schools, expand community college campuses and expand City of Houston parks;
- The success of the November 2012 ballot initiative in San Antonio to create a fund to expand access for high-quality Pre-Kindergarten;
- The Rice University Kinder Institute for Urban Research’s well-respected Houston Education Survey showing overwhelming public support for early education investment;
- A growing number of business associations such as the Greater Houston Partnership taking public stands on the importance of high-quality early education; and
- Newly announced federal priorities, even given federal budgetary constraints, about building strong partnerships between federal and state governments to expand access to high-quality early education.  

Conclusion

Through this plan, thousands of Texas Gulf Coast region children will be better positioned to succeed in school and life, thus better positioning the region to develop a talented workforce that can continue to support economic growth and a high-quality of life for its residents. The future success of our youngest children in graduating from high school ready for college or career will depend greatly on the quality and accessibility of a comprehensive and coherent early childhood education and development system in our region. As taxpayers, we must invest earlier in a child’s life and leverage our investment where it can make the most difference to educational outcomes. This, in essence, will also reduce the costs of retention (repeating grades), interventions, special education services, and the juvenile and adult criminal justice system. Changing the regional outlook for our young children from their earliest years is a system change that will make a difference for generations to come.
Developing the Blueprint

Texas Gulf Coast School Readiness Committee. The initial idea for undertaking a planning process to design a pathway toward a higher-quality early education system arose in conversations between the Houston Endowment and Collaborative for Children (CC), the region’s childcare and referral resource and provider of early childhood education quality improvement services. The Houston Endowment provided a one-year planning grant to CC to facilitate the planning process. CC recruited Texas Gulf Coast School Readiness Committee Chair Stephen M. Kaufman, who then worked with CC to recruit other Committee members. CC and the Greater Houston Partnership (GHP), the primary advocate for the business community in the region, decided to combine the efforts of the GHP Early Education Sub-Committee with the Texas Gulf Coast School Readiness Committee since both were working toward the same goals. The newly combined Committee was charged with developing a set of recommendations that would lead to improvement in the quality of and access to early childhood education in the region. The Committee began its work in March 2012 and concluded this phase in April 2013.

Members of the Committee are recognized leaders in the community representing a wide cross-section of business, philanthropy, non-profit and educational arenas. They were selected for their ability to successfully guide the planning process, bringing expertise in a variety of areas.

Members met five times in 2012–13 to develop an understanding of the current state of early childhood education in the region, review research in the field, explore public/private funding sources for early childhood education and determine where those gaps combined with low standards limit access to quality care. Additionally, the committee reviewed successful efforts in other regions and states to incorporate ideas into a plan to improve the quality of the region’s early education system.
Dr. Sharon Lynn Kagan, an international expert in building and strengthening early childhood systems, served as a consultant, providing invaluable insights and expertise on the key elements of quality early education systems. Through her research, she has identified eight key components to a successful early education system: regulation; workforce and professional development; informed families, informed public; quality programs; early childhood education and K-12 linkages; standards and assessments; governance and coordination; and financing.

Four Subcommittees were formed based on Dr. Kagan’s eight components to further research the status of Texas standards on early learning for infants, toddlers and preschoolers; the existing workforce and professional development system for the early education workforce; and the financing and governance options for developing a new regional approach to early education quality improvement.

Goals and strategies were developed in each area to guide steps needed to improve quality and access to early childhood education in the Texas Gulf Coast region. The work of the committee ended in April 2013 with the final approval of the plan.

In late 2013, a broad coalition of community leaders concerned with the state of early childhood education in our region began to form, now the Early Matters committee. The goal was to “widen the tent” to include all parties interested in working together to improve early childhood education and wellness in our region. Under the leadership of James Postl, the Committee has met regularly and continues to do so. This revised report is but one portion of its efforts.

Acknowledgments

The Early Matters report subcommittee, co-chaired by Dr. Susan Landry and Stephen M. Kaufman, included Elaine Barber, Pam Brasseux, Dr. Julie Baker Finck, Dr. Angelo P. Giardino, Ann Hillbig, and Carol Shattuck. We wish to give our sincere thanks to Dr. Susan Landry and her staff at the Children’s Learning Institute for leading the re-drafting effort.
Appendix I

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United Way of Greater Houston

Mr. Lan Bentsen
President
Shape Tomorrow

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PROJECT CONSULTANT

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Nory Angel
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