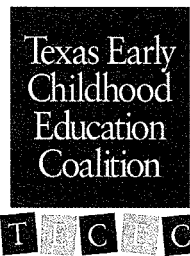


Testimony of:

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(TECEC)



Before the:

Senate Education Committee

Senate Bill 21

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Good morning. My name is Kara Johnson and I am the Executive Director of the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition (TECEC). TECEC represents more than 275 organizations and thousands of members from across the great state of Texas. Our partners include representatives from public schools, Head Start, child care, the business community, higher education, foundations, community based organizations, and more. I would like to begin my remarks by thanking Chair Shapiro and the entire Senate Education Committee for hearing my testimony. In addition, I would like to thank Senator Zaffirini, Senator Van de Putte, Senator West, and Senator Davis for serving as authors or co-authors of Senate Bill 21, TECEC's number one priority this session. Finally, I would like to acknowledge the incredible work of the entire legislature, in particular the Senate Education Committee for your efforts in building a high quality early childhood education system for the state of Texas.

The purpose of my remarks today is to acknowledge the journey of the early education movement over the past few years and speak in support of Senate Bill 21, which would voluntarily expand the current pre-k program from a half day to a full day for currently eligible children in high quality settings.

For years, members of the Texas Legislature have been asking the early childhood sectors in Texas, including child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k to come to the legislature as a united front. Well, after 9 months of discussion, debate, and compromise, I want you to know that we come to you as a collective group in support of Senate Bill 21. For those of you that have witnessed the infighting between the various sectors over the years, you know

that this is a historic occasion. I think that the committee will be pleasantly surprised by the overwhelming support you will hear for Senate Bill 21 today.

I will give you every reason to join the thousands of providers, teachers, community leaders, policymakers, and business leaders from across Texas that are eager to see this legislation implemented.

#1: Senate Bill 21 is building upon existing good public policy. Senate Bill 21 was developed over a nine-month period with the expertise from all the major early childhood education child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k groups, as well as business leaders, and community leaders who have a vested interest in ensuring at risk children in their communities have access to full-day high quality pre-k programs. However, this journey started more than six years ago with the passage of Senate Bill 76 during the 78th Legislative Session. Senate Bill 76 created the Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) as a pilot project in 11 Texas communities.

As a result of the work of Dr. Susan Landry and her team in Houston, this model has continued to grow and provide communities with school readiness integration pre-k partnerships that ensure children are school ready. This journey of high quality early education continued with the implementation of the School Readiness Certification System through Senate Bill 23 in 2005, and the attempted passage of Senate Bill 50 during the last legislative session.

The past six years of work on the ground level has paved the way for high quality school readiness integration partnerships that include child care, Head Start, and public school pre-k. Therefore, the state of Texas is now in a position

to fold in the early education efforts that have been piloted and implemented in various Texas communities, into the larger overall pre-k system in the state.

TEEM and the School Readiness Certification System will be a large part of the new structure, with room for school districts to choose which proven, high-quality efforts work best for them.

#2: Senate Bill 21 has bipartisan support. Not only does the state of Texas have the history of implementing high quality pre-k initiatives, but this session Senate Bill 21 has bipartisan support. Senate Bill 21 and its companion bill House Bill 130 have 78 authors and co-authors, approximately 30% of which are Republicans. And the list of supporters continues to grow each day.

#3: Senate Bill 21 includes high quality, research-based components. Senate Bill 21 would implement high quality standards that are research-based and nationally recognized, including: staff to child ratios of 1:11; class size limits of no more than 22 students; a teacher with a BA degree and 9 credit hours of college education courses in early childhood; and a curriculum approved by the Commissioner of the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

In addition, partnering organizations, including child care and Head Start centers would have to demonstrate that they are highly qualified to partner. As a result, they would be one of the following: a Texas Early Education Model (TEEM) participant; certified through the School Readiness Certification System; Texas Rising Star (three star or higher); or accredited by a research-based, nationally recognized accreditation system.

Finally, Senate Bill 21 would require reporting and evaluation of individual programs, as well as a separate third-party evaluation of pre-k programs across the state. This would ensure transparency and quality.

#4: Senate Bill 21 includes local control. Texans value local control. Senate Bill 21 would maintain local control through district selected partnerships. Therefore, districts will not be forced to partners with community-based organizations that are not high quality. In addition, community partners also maintain local control because they would have four options on how to prove they prepare children to be “school ready.”

#5: Senate Bill 21 compliments the Early Start Grant Program. Senate Bill 21 and the Early Start Grant Program complement each other in the scope of their purpose which is to prepare young children for the start of school. The Early Start Grant Program, which is undergoing significant changes, was designed primarily to improve the quality of struggling programs, while providing resources for expansion of other programs. This program now includes a 2-5 year limit on participation by local ISD’s. Programs seeking to improve may continue to make beneficial adjustments to their programs supported for a limited time by the Early Start Grant Program.

Existing pre-kindergarten programs, with proven records of success and quality care, have either lost their eligibility for additional Early Start funding or will roll off the grant program in the next 3 years. These programs would be supported by SB21 long-term and would have access to resources that could be

used to promote expansion and improve on programs that currently enjoy recognition for their high quality services to children and families.

The state of Texas is at a crossroads. The question isn't whether or not pre-k works. The research is clear. High quality pre-k will lead to increased graduation rates, reduced special education referrals, increased college entrance rates, and decreased numbers of Texas children entering the juvenile and adult justice systems. Our own Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University confirms it. The question before us today is whether or not Texas will make the investment.

As of today, we have 78 Republicans and Democrats signed on as authors or co-authors; scores of organizations dropping cards in support; and TECEC has the backing of its 275 member organizations, and thousands of individuals. The public and political will is overwhelming. Let's work together to make the next great step forward for Texas.

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