



Support Texas Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities

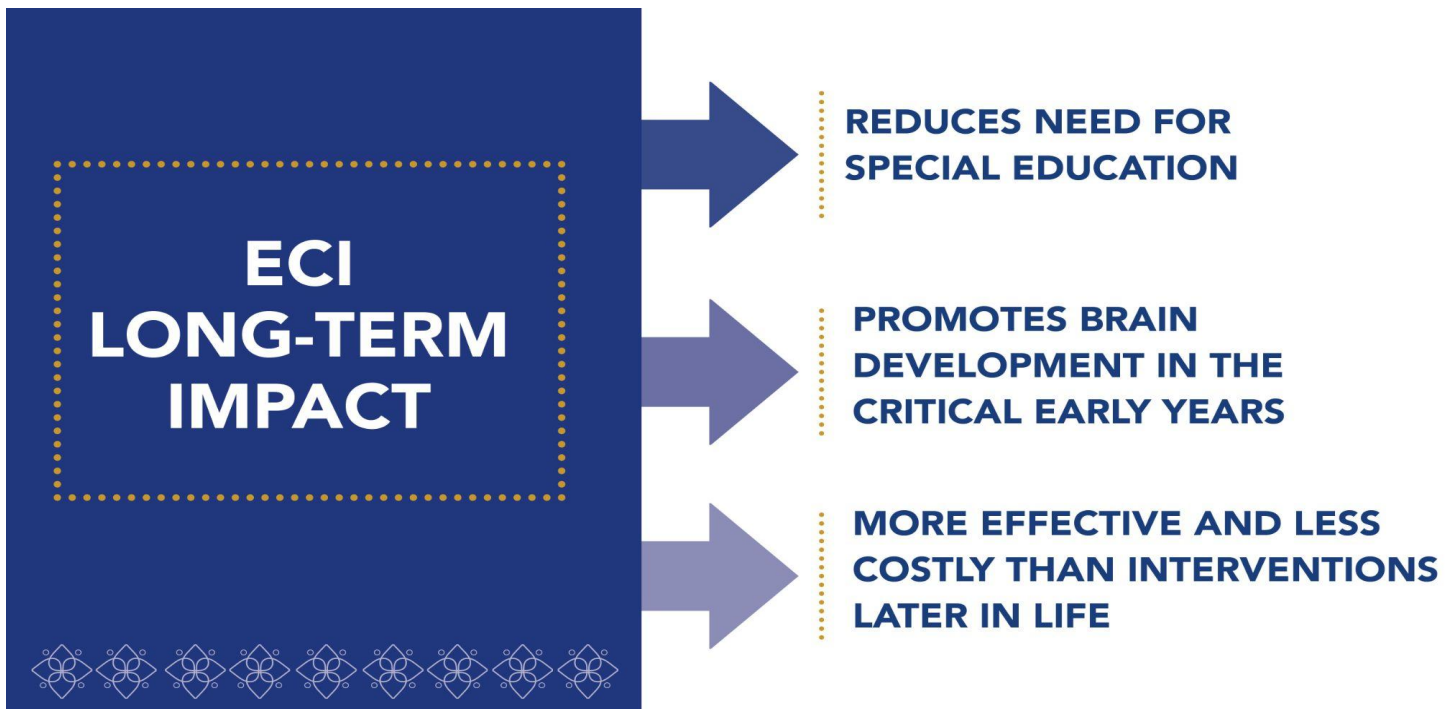
Continue Restoring Funding for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI)

Testimony to the Legislative Budget Board on September 29, 2022

Lawmakers Should Fully Fund Exceptional Item 11

Texas ECI Is Highly Effective for Kids With Disabilities

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) is a federal-state program that contracts with community organizations to provide life-changing therapies and services to babies and toddlers with autism, Down syndrome, and other disabilities and developmental delays. Working with caregivers, ECI helps children learn to walk, communicate with their families, and meet other developmental goals – reducing the need for costly special education services. During the COVID-19 pandemic, ECI successfully pivoted to providing effective telehealth services, extending a lifeline to Texas’ most vulnerable, isolated young children but since 2021, state investment has not kept pace with rising enrollment rates.



Past Funding Cuts Led To Program Closures

Over the last decade, state leaders cut ECI funding and Medicaid reimbursement rates for therapy providers, leaving some families without support during program transitions. Eligible babies and toddlers have gone without support. In response to public outcry, the 2019 Texas Legislature restored some ECI funding, but per child funding levels are still below previous levels.

The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) Legislative Appropriation Request (LAR) Takes a Good Step Forward but Additional Funding is Needed.

In its LAR, HHSC includes an exceptional item (Item Priority 11) for ECI services.¹ This exceptional item requests \$56.6 million in General Revenue and \$66.3 million in All Funds for the 2024-2025 biennium to fund increasing demand for ECI services that ECI providers are already experiencing across Texas. This step is necessary but not sufficient.

Demand for ECI services continues to grow, resulting in decreased funding per child. Increasing enrollment must be met with decisive state action and increased investments.

ECI Providers Across Texas are Being Asked to Serve More Kids with Less Funding.

Funding per child continues to drop. While the Legislature funded the ECI program at \$433.61 per child for the last biennium, this amount is actually lower given current enrollment numbers. The actual funding per child as of

¹ https://www.lbb.texas.gov/Agency_Docs.aspx

April 2022 was only \$410.² This continues a trend where the actual funding per child is lower than the target funding allocated by the state and lower than per child funding ten years ago. Like many programs and industries across Texas, ECI programs have been hit with rising costs to provide services due to inflation, including transportation costs. Based on the LAR, the numbers provided do not take into account cost growth for the current per child funding levels, only caseload growth.. Inadequate per-child funding has exacerbated staff shortages, and reduced outreach efforts, resulting in kids in ECI getting fewer services. In order to get per-child funding to an adequate level for ECI programs to provide services, it is critical that we take into account cost growth.

Recommendation

1. **To account for growing demand for ECI services among infants and toddlers as well as rising costs of services, Texas should increase ECI funding growth by, at a minimum, fully funding HHSC's Exceptional Item # 11.** In order to ensure sustainability and continued participation of ECI programs, per-child investments need to increase and keep up pace with increasing costs. Programs need this additional funding to remain sustainable and have the capacity to serve all eligible children in their communities.

² <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/aug-2022-eci-agenda-item-3.pdf>