

Policy Recommendations to Support Texas Children During the 2023 Legislative Session



The 2023 legislative session presents a rare opportunity. Legislators on both sides of the aisle have vowed that children, moms, and families will be a priority this session, and fortunately the state is flush with extra revenue to invest.

There are also major challenges that urgently require policymakers' attention. Before children even start school in Texas, they face gaps across multiple issue areas – from limited access to high-quality child care and pre-k, to a high rate of child abuse and neglect, and the nation's highest rate of Medicaid-eligible young children without health insurance – that undermine school readiness. Similarly, too many school-age children in Texas aren't getting the support they need to succeed inside and outside the classroom and stay healthy. Now more than ever, Texas children are also missing out on vital support due to workforce challenges at state agencies, schools, child care centers, and organizations providing mental health, foster care, and Early Childhood Intervention services.

In our focus areas – maternal and child health, mental health, child protection, and early learning – there are important steps that state lawmakers should take to address these and other challenges and opportunities.

Maternal and Child Health Overview

Legislative leaders, including the Speaker of the House, have called for ensuring currently **eligible children are able to enroll in health coverage**. Fixing the delays, staffing shortages, and unintended barriers in the enrollment system will not only help meet that goal, but also help avoid knocking eligible children off Medicaid insurance when the **pandemic Public Health Emergency ends**. Meanwhile, momentum is also growing to extend **maternal health coverage for a full year after pregnancy** — a policy Texas should quickly implement by passing a “State Plan Amendment” rather than seeking a Medicaid waiver. Additionally, the Legislature must address the fact that state funding has not kept pace with rising enrollment in **Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services for infants and toddlers with disabilities**.

Children’s Mental Health Overview

Over the last decade, mental health challenges have grown more common and more intense among children in Texas and nationwide. State leaders have recognized the crisis, called for action, and passed important student mental health legislation in 2019 — but they have not provided the funding needed. Two critical next steps should be providing **dedicated mental health funding to school districts** and **closing gaps in community-based mental health services**.

Child Protection Overview

When children enter **foster care**, they should be able to heal from the trauma of past abuse and neglect, but too often they suffer further instability, trauma, and abuse and neglect. Legislators can better support children in foster care by placing more of them with relatives instead of strangers and by pursuing the foster care facilities reform package outlined in a new report commissioned by the Legislature in 2021 through SB 1575. State leaders should also aim to **keep more children safe with their families and out of foster care** by investing in family preservation services and drawing down federal Family First Act funding.

Early Learning Overview

Passing the 2019 school finance bill (HB 3) and taking other steps, state leaders have increasingly recognized that the first few years of life are a critical time for brain development and school readiness. Yet, there are still significant challenges for state leaders to address. **High-quality, affordable child care** — so important to children’s success and parents’ ability to work — is harder to find than ever before, partly due to high educator vacancies and low financial reimbursement rates for child care providers accepting subsidies. Furthermore, to achieve the goals of HB 3 and ensure children are strong readers by third grade, the Legislature needs to bolster **pre-k partnerships** and ensure children can access effective pre-k and early learning programs that meet their needs.



Children's Mental Health

Ensuring parents are able to find mental health support for their children at school and in their community.

- Begin to dedicate funding to school districts to support strategies that contribute to a positive school climate; prevent and address social, emotional and behavioral concerns among students; and connect the families of students with identified mental health concerns to services when needed.
- Increase children's mental health funding to Local Mental Health Authorities and Local Behavioral Health Authorities to maintain staffing levels and meet the growing demand for youth mental health services.



Maternal and Child Health

Ensuring access to health coverage, Early Childhood Intervention, and other support for healthy mothers and children.

- Improve enrollment of eligible children in health coverage, such as Medicaid or Children’s Health Insurance Program (CHIP):
 - Remove unintended barriers by investing in Texas 2-1-1 call centers, modernizing the YourTexasBenefits website and app, and investing in the HHSC (Health and Human Services Commission) eligibility workforce;
 - Adopt Express Lane Eligibility so the state can use already-verified information through SNAP to streamline a child’s health coverage enrollment; and
 - Clarify and streamline enrollment for eligible newborn babies of a parent covered by Medicaid or CHIP perinate.
- Increase state investments in Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) to address falling per-child funding levels and serve all eligible infants and toddlers with disabilities.
- Fully fund critical health programs for women and children, including Medicaid, CHIP, Healthy Texas Women, and the Family Planning Program, and fund the Department of State Health Services (DSHS) maternal and child health division, including the TexasAIM initiative.
- Extend maternal Medicaid coverage for 12 months after pregnancy — using a fast-track “State Plan Amendment” rather than seeking a slow and uncertain Medicaid waiver — to support healthy mothers and babies.
- Establish Medicaid reimbursement for doulas and lactation consultants so new mothers have options to support healthy pregnancies and postpartum recovery.
- Adopt health insurance options for adults under the poverty line.



Early Learning

Ensuring parents have high-quality, affordable early childhood education options for their young kids, including child care and pre-k, so parents can go to work and their children receive the enriching early learning opportunities they need.

- Address the shortage of quality child care in communities by providing bedrock state funding to help offset child care programs' fixed costs, such as educator wages and property taxes; and enact recommendations from the state's Child Care Workforce Strategic Plan (created by HB 619 from 2021) to address the worsening child care staff turnover and vacancy crisis.
- Ensure Local Workforce Development Boards, which are charged with overseeing and implementing regional child care strategies, have the standards and supports needed to maximize funding, improve transparency, and enroll as many families as possible in high-quality child care.
- Ensure high-quality child care providers that serve children receiving financial assistance, known as subsidies, are reimbursed at the highest-available state rate, rather than what families in different neighborhoods can afford to pay.
- Incentivize partnerships between public schools and high-quality child care providers to increase enrollment in effective early learning programs and offer parents more options.
- Establish dedicated full-day pre-k funding, improving upon the existing model in which school districts only receive half-day funding and supplement through the Early Education Allotment (created by HB 3 from 2019), while maintaining the Allotment to strengthen other early literacy strategies in pre-k through 3rd grade.
- Enact recommendations of the state's Bilingual Strategic Plan (created by SB 560 from 2021) to better serve emergent bilingual students and address the longstanding shortage of bilingual certified educators.
- Ensure children with disabilities have access to inclusive early education environments, including in pre-k.



Child Protection

Ensuring more children can stay safely with their families and out of foster care and supporting and protecting children who do enter foster care.

- Ensure more children and their caregivers have access to mental health, substance use, and parent skill-building services proven to keep children safely with their families and out of foster care:
 - Support the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) funding request for Prevention and Child Wellbeing (PCW);
 - Extend the HB 3041 pilot projects and invest general revenue in evidence-based services offered through those pilots;
 - Require DFPS to submit a Title IV-E Prevention Plan that expands eligibility for children and families, so the state may begin drawing down federal matching funds for family preservation services;
 - Establish a stakeholder workgroup to explore expanding FFPSA implementation through a “Community Pathways” approach.
- Ensure more children in foster care are placed with families, not in facilities, by increasing support for grandparents and other “kinship” caregivers and supporting “Foster Care Rate Modernization.”
- Support the foster care facilities reform package recommended in the report commissioned by the Legislature (SB 1575 from 2021) to strengthen the quality of behavioral health services for children in foster care, ensure children only remain in Residential Treatment Centers when necessary, and ensure children understand why they may benefit from specific interventions.
- Direct local juvenile boards to develop policies that divert youth in foster care from the juvenile justice system when safe and appropriate.
- Implement a pilot program to assist youth transitioning out of foster care with achieving financial independence by establishing bank accounts.



About Texans Care for Children

We drive policy change to improve the lives of Texas children today for a stronger Texas tomorrow.

We envision a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise. We are a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization.

We develop policy solutions, produce research, and engage Texas community leaders to educate policymakers, the media, and the public about what works to improve the well-being of Texas children and families.

Funded by a variety of foundations and individual donations, our work covers child protection, mental well-being, child and maternal health, early childhood, and the ways that each of those policy areas work together to shape children's lives and the future of Texas.

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