

To Improve Early Literacy and Numeracy, Lawmakers Must Address Pre-k, Emergent Bilingual Students, Child Care, and More

Testimony to the House Public Education Committee

For policymakers to ensure that more Texas students perform at grade level or higher in reading, writing, and math, the Legislature should prioritize strategies that 1) strengthen the state's pre-k program, 2) improve educational environments for the state's emergent bilingual students, and 3) increase access to high-quality child care. This testimony outlines the opportunities in these three areas and closes with recommendations for the Legislature.

High-Quality Pre-k Improves Early Literacy and Math

Decades of research show that effective pre-k programs for three- and four-year-olds help children start kindergarten with strong early literacy, pre-math, and social skills and, over time, reduce both grade retention and the need for special education services.¹ Across the country, improvements in literacy and numeracy are the most commonly found academic benefits of pre-k.² **Here in Texas, the data show students are much more likely to be kindergarten-ready and demonstrate early literacy skills if they attend pre-k.** Only 49 percent of Texas kindergartners are considered kindergarten-ready, based on their language skills. Although early language skills are determined by many factors, that number increases to 61 percent among those who attended pre-k.³

For families served by high-quality pre-k, their child spends the day with a trained teacher who helps them learn letters, numbers, vocabulary, art, and scientific inquiry through play. Other families may have to settle for lower-quality settings, where a child spends the day on a tablet or in front of a television. These contrasting experiences during the critical brain development years make a big difference in their educational trajectory.

Texas has made significant progress on pre-k, but more work remains

Since 2019, Texas leaders have recognized the importance of pre-k and taken critical steps to strengthen pre-k, including:

- Requiring school districts to offer six hours of full-day pre-k for eligible four-year-olds
- Creating the Early Education Allotment to help support the costs of early literacy strategies
- Requiring more rigorous pre-k quality standards, including employing certified teachers, creating plans to engage with families, utilizing research-based student progress monitoring tools, and more

¹ High-quality pre-k pays off (2019). Texans Care for Children. Retrieved at: <https://txchildren.org/the-research-is-clear-high-quality-pre-k-pays-off/>

² Puzzling It Out: The Current State of Scientific Knowledge on Pre-Kindergarten Effects A Consensus Statement. (2017). Brookings. Retrieved at: https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2017/04/consensus-statement_final.pdf

³ Kindergarten Programs & Readiness (2024). Texas Public Education Information Resource. Retrieved at: <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/>

- Encouraging “pre-k partnerships” by requiring districts to formally solicit and consider a public-private partnership with high-quality child care or Head Start providers before requesting a waiver or issuing bonds to meet the full-day pre-k requirement. TEA and TWC have also worked to solicit more partnerships through technical assistance.
- Creating a pre-k class size limit of 22 students, which supports Texas teachers' ability to address each of their students' needs, manage behavioral challenges, and prepare young students for kindergarten

However, despite this progress, Texas is missing opportunities to help more children get the high-quality pre-k experiences that would put them on track to succeed in math and reading by third grade.

- 1. Despite the increase in districts moving to full-day programs, about 1 in 4 eligible four-year-olds and 4 in 5 eligible three-year-olds are not enrolled.**⁴ Because pre-k is voluntary, some families will always prefer to keep their children at home or enroll them in a private early learning program that better fits their needs. However, given the clear benefits of pre-k, it is also important for state leaders to consider barriers that may depress pre-k enrollment among families who may be interested and whose children would benefit. For example, some families simply may not be aware of the option. Others may enroll their children in a child care program or Head Start because the limited hours for pre-k (six hours for a full day) are incompatible with their work schedules. Hundreds of thousands of families also fall outside the narrow eligibility criteria that predominantly encompasses very low-income students and designated emergent bilingual students. For three-year-olds, there are far fewer school-based options available to even those eligible, particularly for a full school day.
- 2. Despite the pre-k class size limit, classes are still too crowded, and many districts are receiving waivers.** The average pre-k class size in Texas is 20 students, consistent with pre-COVID figures, with an average student-teacher ratio of 15-1 if instructional aides are included.⁵ This is much higher than what is encouraged by state law, as districts must attempt to maintain a student-teacher of 11-1 or better.⁶ Furthermore, 155 campuses across 44 districts received waivers in the 2023-24 school year to exceed the 22-student maximum. Improving class sizes and student-teacher ratios should be a priority in making pre-k even more effective.
- 3. Despite the Legislature’s support for pre-k partnerships with community-based child care providers, they remain exceedingly rare and difficult to sustain.** Well-implemented pre-k partnerships have many documented benefits for families, child care programs, and school districts. For families, partnerships can provide better hours for parents who require a full workday of care, enable families to keep children at programs where they have existing, trusted relationships, and support their children’s transition to kindergarten.⁷ But despite the state’s support, fewer than 2 percent of pre-k students are currently enrolled in a partnership program with a high-quality child care program.⁸ Sustaining additional partnerships requires better financial support for participating child care providers, improved technical assistance in securing partnership agreements, and supporting policies that help communities expand access to high-quality pre-k in partnership settings.
- 4. Despite the Early Education Allotment being intended to support the half of the pre-k day that is not funded by WADA, it is spent across multiple grades and strategies.** The state’s current school funding formulas only provide daily per-student pre-k funding to cover half of the day, even though the Legislature

⁴ Texas Public Education Information Resource Reports, District Data Download, 2023. Retrieved at: https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/PickList_Data.aspx?Page=New%20Reports&ReportName=tpeir_pk_enroll_funds_data_download&PickList=School%20Year&SubList=No&Title=Texas%20Public%20Prekindergarten%20Programs%20-%20Data%20Download&Graph=N&from=Home/Index

⁵ Prekindergarten Programs (2024). Texas Public Education Information Resource. Retrieved at: <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/>

⁶ HQPK Student-Teacher Ratio (2024). Texas Education Agency. Retrieved at: <https://tea.texas.gov/academics/early-childhood-education/high-quality-prekindergarten/hqpk-student-teacher-ratio>

⁷ TWC Prekindergarten Partnerships (2024). Texas Workforce Commission. Retrieved at: <https://www.twc.texas.gov/programs/child-care-prekindergarten-partnerships>

⁸ Prekindergarten Programs (2024). Texas Public Education Information Resource. Retrieved at: <https://www.texaseducationinfo.org/>

requires districts to offer full-day pre-k for eligible four-year-olds. School districts are partly able to offset the costs of the second half of the pre-k day by using the Early Education Allotment. The statutory purpose of the Allotment, passed in 2019 as part of the school finance bill, is to fund programs and services designed to improve student performance in reading and mathematics in prekindergarten through third grade. However, because of the numerous important literacy and math initiatives districts are taking on in the early grades, such as reading academies, the allotment is stretched thin. Additional funding could support districts' ability to recruit and retain effective teachers, lower class sizes, partner with more child care programs to expand enrollment, support transportation of students, and more.

The State's Early Literacy and Math Strategy Must Include Emergent Bilingual Students

Emergent Bilingual students (formerly known as English Learners), whose home language is a language other than English, have always made up a significant portion of the Texas public school population. Currently, 20 percent of Texas students are Emergent Bilingual. However, the educational outcomes of these students require greater focus. **In the 2022-23 school year, just 36 percent of Emergent Bilingual students met grade level in third-grade reading (compared to 48 percent of students statewide).**⁹

School districts should use the most effective strategies for ensuring that Emergent Bilingual students are strong readers, speakers, and writers in English and their home language. Data from TEA show that **Emergent Bilingual students served through well-implemented dual language immersion programs achieved, on average, higher academic outcomes than their peers served through any other language program.**¹⁰ These dual language immersion programs educate children in both English and another language. In 2019, the Legislature recognized that dual language was the most effective model and passed legislation encouraging its implementation. However, only 21 percent of the nearly 1.2 million Emergent Bilingual students are participating in dual language programs, in part due to the longstanding shortage of certified bilingual teachers in Texas pre-k through 12th grade.¹¹ Lawmakers should continue efforts to support the implementation of more dual language programs across the state.

Lawmakers have taken positive steps but have not yet acted on the state's Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan

Since 2019, lawmakers have passed several bills to help Emergent Bilingual students thrive. In 2019, through HB 3, lawmakers created the Dual Language Allotment to better incentivize the ramp-up of one-way and two-way Dual Language Immersion programs. In 2021, lawmakers took further steps, supporting several important policies that will impact these students. HB 2256 began the development of a Bilingual Special Education teaching certification to build a pipeline of school leaders to effectively serve the educational needs of Emergent Bilingual children with disabilities and developmental delays. Lawmakers also passed SB 560 in 2021, directing TEA to develop a state strategic plan to strengthen bilingual education, particularly for the state's youngest learners.

In January 2023, TEA released the state's Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan, as directed by the Legislature. This effort provides a roadmap and direction on how policymakers can support Emergent Bilingual students

⁹ STAAR Results Dashboard (2024). Commit Partnership. Retrieved at:

<https://commitpartnership.org/dashboard/visualizations/staar-results-dashboard>

¹⁰ Texas Education Agency (2016). Effective Practices in Bilingual Education Program Model Implementation: A Review of the Literature. Retrieved at

<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/special-student-populations/english-learner-support/bilingual-education-programs-literature-review-ian-2019.pdf>

¹¹ Senate Bill 560 Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan (2024). Texas Education Agency. Retrieved at:

<https://tea.texas.gov/academics/special-student-populations/special-education/sb-560-emergent-bilingual-strategic-plan.pdf>

across the state. The Plan includes useful new data, an excellent summary of stakeholder suggestions, and several different planned agency strategies and legislative recommendations for lawmakers. Lawmakers filed nearly 20 bills in 2023 that aligned with the goals of the Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan, including requiring TEA to create rules for a robust support system for bilingual education and helping teachers offset the costs of receiving Bilingual Education Certifications. Unfortunately, none of these bills passed during the 2023 legislative sessions.

Lawmakers Must Also Address Young Families' Access to High-quality Child Care and Other Basic Needs

Early childhood experiences of children while they are not in formal education settings are equally important in the state's approach to school readiness and success. Children's brains and bodies develop rapidly in the first few years of life, but when needs are not met, development can be disrupted, and kids start falling behind before they even start school. Unfortunately, Texas is falling short in a number of early childhood measures — such as children's health coverage, child hunger, and the number of children who are read to daily.¹² These factors also play a key role in determining whether Texas children are starting kindergarten ready to learn and succeed in school. Additional information is available on the Texas School Readiness Dashboard at [TXreadykids.org](https://txreadykids.org).

In particular, the early learning that infants, toddlers, and preschoolers experience — engaging in conversations, listening to stories, looking at picture books, playing counting games, and so on — plays a significant role in determining whether they start elementary school on a path to success. For some young children, those experiences can happen at home. Other young children, particularly those with working parents, may rely on high-quality child care for those experiences. Unfortunately, Texas is experiencing a child care crisis, and many working families are unable to find affordable, high-quality care. One of the main tools the state has for addressing this crisis is the child care subsidy program managed by the Texas Workforce Commission. However, there are typically 60,000 to 97,000 families on the waitlist for the program due to a lack of state funding.¹³

Recommendations to the Legislature

After years of bipartisan progress, Texas policymakers should consider the following areas of focus in 2025:

- **Pre-k funding:** Ensure districts have the dedicated resources to strengthen and expand pre-k offerings to Texas families. Strategies could include establishing dedicated full-day pre-k funding and/or boosting funding through the Early Education Allotment.
- **Pre-k partnerships:** Provide more children access to effective pre-k partnerships between pre-k and child care providers. Address bureaucratic barriers that are unnecessary to ensure quality, consider how to provide better technical assistance and administrative support, and support policies and funding that ensures there is a sufficient supply of high-quality child care providers for districts to partner with.
- **Emergent bilingual students:** Leverage the recommendations from the state's Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan that will help recruit more certified bilingual educators, increase the number of dual language programs, and strengthen early learning outcomes for emergent bilingual students.
- **Child care:** Make sustainable investments to improve access to high-quality child care programs for infants, toddlers, and preschoolers, especially for those who qualify for the state's Child Care Services Program, which provides scholarships to working families with low incomes.
- **School readiness:** Address children's basic needs and development holistically, including alleviating childhood poverty, reducing the children's uninsured rate, improving access to mental health care for parents and children, improving support for young children with disabilities, and more.

¹² Texas School Readiness Dashboard (2024). Texans Care for Children. Retrieved at: <https://txreadykids.org/>

¹³ Child Care by the Numbers (2024). Texas Workforce Commission. Retrieved at: https://ccbn.twc.texas.gov/childcarenumbers/Texas_Statewide_System_monthly.html