

HB 2310 Will Establish the Texas Plan to Better Support Preschoolers with Disabilities and Delays

HB 2310 by Rep. Claudia Ordaz will support the creation of a multi-agency strategic plan for the improvement of early learning and educational opportunities for young children with disabilities and developmental delays.

Enhancing Early Learning Opportunities for Children with Disabilities is Critical

The first five years of life provide a foundation for a child's success both inside and outside the classroom. During this pivotal period, children begin to master new skills, such as learning to walk, speaking their first words, and learning to share. When a child enrolls in an early learning program — whether it be a community-based child care provider, a church-based program, or a public school pre-k classroom — their world opens. For maybe the first time, children interact with and learn from people beyond their family members.

These early experiences are particularly vital for children with disabilities. However, for some Texas families, seeing their child with autism or Down syndrome learning and playing in class alongside their typically developing peers is far from reality.



Despite Important Steps, Texas Preschoolers with Disabilities Face Significant Barriers

In recent years, Texas lawmakers and agency leaders have made strides in improving support for young children with disabilities. This includes increasing funding for Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) for infants and toddlers and distributing funds to provide training for child care educators to create more inclusive early learning settings. However, Texas has more work to do. For example:

1. Many parents in Texas struggle to find a full-day, reliable child care provider who will accept a child with a disability and educate them alongside their nondisabled peers.¹

¹ Texas Workforce Commission. (2024). *Child care stakeholder input survey*. [Unpublished raw data].

2. The transition from ECI (for kids under age three) to Early Childhood Special Education (ECSE) (for kids ages three to five) can be challenging for parents to navigate, leading to gaps in services or children missing services altogether.^{2,3}
3. Some school districts are struggling to execute special education evaluations in a timely manner, including evaluations for children ages three to five with disabilities who may qualify for ECSE services.⁴

One of the primary barriers to effectively addressing these challenges is that the responsibility to support early education for children with disabilities is split across multiple state agencies.

- The Texas Education Agency (TEA) oversees the public pre-k and Early Childhood Special Education programs,
- The Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) oversees the Child Care Services Program and the state's child care quality rating and improvement program, Texas Rising Star, and
- The Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) oversees the Early Childhood Intervention program for infants and toddlers with disabilities, as well as Child Care Regulation (CCR), which establishes and enforces minimum child care licensing standards.

In part due to this disjointed approach, the state lacks a coordinated vision for how to effectively serve children with disabilities and their families, leading to nagging administrative barriers, conflicting rules and guidance, and missed opportunities for impactful collaboration. These challenges make it more difficult for state leaders to identify and produce policies to help parents find the care and support they need for their young children with disabilities.

HB 2310 Will Bring Agency Leaders Together to Develop a Plan to Better Serve Preschoolers with Disabilities and their Families

HB 2310 will bring agency leaders from the TEA, TWC, and HHSC together to collaboratively improve the early learning environments and outcomes for children with disabilities and delays. In developing the four-year strategic plan, the agencies will:

- Develop more effective strategies to support children with disabilities in early childhood education settings
- Identify and address any existing administrative barriers relating to ensuring more effective learning environments for young children with disabilities
- Coordinate with, at a minimum, representatives of state, regional, and local agencies, the Governor's Texas Early Learning Council, nonprofit organizations, and relevant social services providers.

Through a shared vision and strategic plan, these agencies will be empowered to more effectively implement lawmakers' vision for high-quality educational environments for children with disabilities. With a unified state plan, Texas leaders can ensure that young children have the opportunities in the first five years of life that pave the way for success in school, relationships, and overall health for the rest of their lives.

² Early Care and Education in Tarrant County, Texas: Community Feedback on Child Care Navigation (2024). Early Learning Alliance. Retrieved at: <https://earlylearningntx.org/blog/new-research-finding-child-care-in-tarrant-county-still-challenging-for-parents-of-young-children>

³ Early Childhood System Needs Assessment in Texas (2023). Dorothy J. Mandell, PhD. Retrieved at: <https://www.earlylearningtexas.org/telc-project-updates.html>

⁴ The demand for special education evaluations has exploded — and Texas schools can't keep up (2024). San Antonio Express-News. Retrieved at: <https://www.expressnews.com/politics/article/special-education-evaluations-18392066.php>