

earlymatters

Building a New Future for Early Childhood in Texas

From the Ground Up: Stakeholder Insights for a Stronger Early Childhood System

ABOUT THIS REPORT

In the fall and winter of 2025–2026, Early Matters heard from hundreds of early childhood stakeholders across Texas: 717 child care providers through a statewide survey and more than 70 participants in regional focus groups spanning six regions. Together they offer the quantitative scale of provider experience and the qualitative texture of what that experience looks and feels like on the ground. And more importantly, they point toward what a better system could look like in Texas.

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These findings speak directly to consequential work currently underway in Texas through the Quad Agency Child Care Initiative, the Governor's Task Force on Governance of Early Care and Learning, and Early Matters' legislative efforts. Every recommendation in this report is grounded in provider voice and in a shared conviction that meaningful reform is not only necessary, but achievable.

WHAT WE FOUND

SURVEY FINDINGS

The system feels fragmented

1/3 of providers report inconsistent expectations across agencies and have received conflicting guidance.

TRS vs. Licensing conflicts are sharpest fault line

Providers face unresolvable standoffs between different expectations and miscommunication between the two agencies overseeing each process.

Compliance burden crowds out quality

44% say multi-agency requirements interfere with care; among large programs (150+ children), that rises to 81%.

Providers reported that communication quality varies by agency

Agency roles are widely misunderstood

Many providers cannot identify which agency manages which programs, especially TWC, TRS, Local Workforce Boards, and CCS.

Providers want partnership, not just simplification

They want to be treated as professionals and included in rulemaking.

FOCUS GROUP FINDINGS

Governance fragmentation is the root cause

It was named as the foundational barrier in every region, regardless of stakeholder type.

Workforce devaluation is structural

ECE educators are classified at the same occupational level as janitors and pet groomers; El Paso data shows wages up to \$24.85/hr in neighboring NM vs. \$9.18 median in Texas.

The 0–3 gap is a funding model failure

Reimbursement rates don't reflect the true cost of infant/toddler care; rated highest priority (4.91/5.0) by focus group participants.

Family navigation is an invisible crisis

"Reapplication fatigue" across HHSC, TWC, TEA, and Head Start; ECI-to-Pre-K transition cliff at age 3 leaves children without services.

Inspector inconsistency is a trust problem

Providers described inspectors who threatened to "find something to write up" regardless of compliance, with no responsive complaint process.

Business engagement is ready but needs state infrastructure

Businesses are ready. Employers want to invest in innovative models and are interested in state pathways and incentives.