

Senate Bill 21
Texas PreKindergarten

Presented by Afshan Akbar, District Manager, Children's Courtyard
to the Senate Committee on Education
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Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Senate Bill 21, and the importance of collaborations between public schools and child care centers for a successful prekindergarten initiative in Texas. It is an important issue to child care providers in Texas, as well as for families wanting to access programs for their young children.

My name is Afshan Akbar, and I am the District Manager for Children's Courtyard. We have 55 schools here in Texas. We are also part of The Learning Care Group which has 1,200 schools in 37 states. Learning Care Group currently participates in 23 state preK programs throughout the country, thus we have a lot of experience running school readiness programs and with many different school-community preK collaboration models. And we're not alone. We are a member of the Early Care and Education Consortium, a nationwide alliance of America's leading providers of quality early learning programs whose 8,000 member centers collectively enroll nearly 800,000 children daily in child care, prekindergarten, and afterschool programs.

Here in Texas, Learning Care Group has 173 schools. Our schools are high quality - the majority are nationally accredited, and many are school readiness certified or have achieved Texas Rising Star Status. Our programs address children's changing needs at multiple ages and in multiple planes of development - cognitive, physical, social, and emotional. We have a research-based curriculum and have the best trained and educated staff available in our area.

Early learning programs are most successful when they are a collaborative effort between schools, community-based programs like child care, and families. Including community-based providers of high-quality programs means including experts in child development in settings where children already are.

High-quality child care helps children, families and communities prosper. It helps children learn and develop skills they need to succeed in school and in life. It gives parents the support and peace of mind they need to be productive at work. And it helps our nation stay competitive, by producing a stronger workforce now and in the future. But for many families - especially, but not only, low income families - high-quality child care is unaffordable or unattainable. I have worked in this field for ten years and I have seen children benefit from their experience in structured early childhood education programs. We know this makes a difference.

For years, our state has chosen to hold back rather than invest in high-quality child care and early learning programs. Limited resources mean that our business - the business of caring for and providing educational experiences for young children - suffers. And of course, we short-change Texas's children and families.

Senate Bill 21 addresses one part of the early learning opportunity, prekindergarten for 4-year olds (and some 3-year olds). The bill is interesting and good because of the specific requirement to partner with community-based providers. As a child care provider, I welcome this partnership so we can serve our community in the most effective way.

The legislation would add preK to the state school funding formula, to incorporate it into our broader system of education. In the bill, at least 20 percent of the new funds are to be used in contract partnership with community-based providers who meet requirements.

An integrated approach like this allows school districts to save tax dollars by partnering with local child care and Head Start centers to provide pre-k services in our existing facilities instead of building new facilities or purchasing temporary buildings.

But schools need to be encouraged and quality early learning providers need to be supported if true collaboration is to flourish. SB 21 has provisions that move in this direction. Specifically, it:

- Requires at least 20 percent of new dollars to be used in partnership with community-based providers
- Allows for multiple types of partnerships, including direct delivery of preK by community-based providers
- Requires the Commission of Education to provide technical assistance to ISDs and community-based providers to promote collaborative contracts

These provisions will help assure the success of this preK expansion.

Establishing collaborations with school districts has been challenging. Our current preK collaborations are the result of many years of effort throughout Texas. We appreciate the collaborations we have, but it has been a long and frustrating process.

Working through solutions at that table isn't always easy. We had to figure out staffing and eligibility. Some of the challenges were managerial. And some challenges arose from our four partners being new to one another.

Despite these challenges, collaboration between school districts and community-based early learning providers is the right thing to do for the children, their families, and our communities.

- Children benefit because they get continuity of care in a program they're already familiar with. In most cases the children we have in our ISD preK's are children that we had in our care before they were of preK age. Therefore where we have these partnerships, it means less transition for the family and that means less stress for the child.
- Families benefit because partnerships allow for children to have the full day of care they need for the full work day. For a working parent, attending preK at school is a challenge without child care. With the collaboration, parents go to work assured that their 3- and 4-year-old preK children aren't being shuffled from location to location. They stay right where their parents dropped them off in the morning and receive the benefits of state preK and our high quality programming for the rest of the day without disruption.
- And communities reap rewards as well. Collaborations leverage the existing resources in the child care and early learning community – age-appropriate facilities, knowledgeable staff, and appropriate and stimulating materials. Literally, millions are saved alone by not having to fund costly new school buildings.

Senate Bill 21 creates a strong preK initiative for Texas children because of the collaborative nature of the program design. The required set-aside for community-based child care providers like mine means

we can all work together to efficiently and effectively serve children in high-quality early learning programs. The state does not have to build new infrastructure to successfully implement this legislation.

However, SB 21 is only one part of the solution to the challenge of assuring our children arrive at school ready to learn and grow. For the infants and toddlers in our centers and schools, Texas will need to support increased funding for child care assistance to working Texans. Until there is a comprehensive effort birth to age 5, the full promise of investing in early education will be limited.

Thank you for your time and consideration.