

Reframing Early Education:

THE CRITICAL CASE FOR CHANGE

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



earlymatters
A Historic Coalition on Early Education



Early Matters

PROPOSED 10-YEAR VISION FOR HOUSTON &
HARRIS COUNTY, TEXAS

WHAT IS EARLY MATTERS?

We are a broad-based coalition of business, civic, education, philanthropic and nonprofit organizations and volunteers, working together to raise awareness about the importance of high quality early education and to make a strong case for increased investment in this critical, high return on investment area.

CASE STATEMENT

The scientific evidence is abundantly clear – an investment in our young children through engaged parenting and high quality early education programs makes a lifelong difference in school outcomes and workforce readiness. We need to put this knowledge to work, as we are at a critical time in our community’s evolution with many more jobs requiring post high school education. Only 1 of 5 children in our region are graduating from high school and completing some form of post high school credential. However, Houston’s rapidly growing employers in the petrochemical, medical and manufacturing fields desperately need employees with the post high school education. Early education receives limited public funding, and the state standards for quality early education programs are far too low. As a result, few families are able to access high quality early education. We must invest more heavily in the early stages of our children’s learning and development, a time in which we see the highest financial return on investment and the greatest impact on preparing children for a bright and successful future.

THE VISION

We envision a Greater Houston Region where young children are a part of supportive and nurturing families and are able to participate in high quality early education, knowing that intentional early investments significantly improve Kindergarten readiness, 3rd grade reading mastery, high school graduation rates, post high school education/credentialing and workforce readiness.

www.earlymattershouston.org

Executive Summary

IMPROVING THE QUALITY OF &
ACCESS TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION



Recently, the Early Matters committee has developed a long-range plan to improve the quality of and access to early childhood education in the 13-county Texas Gulf Coast region. Early Matters looks at the specific ways our region can employ proven strategies that both build on the strength of families — the first and most important support system for children — and generate a better-coordinated and better-resourced early learning and development system. This report aims to identify and bring together the multiple key players, from public and private sectors, who help shape early learning experiences and environments, and whose collaboration is profoundly needed. We believe that a well-coordinated early learning and development system will result in high levels of Kindergarten readiness that positively influences continued learning and life success.

Three key areas of partnership targeted in this report include: primary caregivers (e.g. parents), early childhood professionals (e.g. preschool teachers), and early healthcare providers (e.g. pediatricians). Within these three areas there is substantial diversity in the level of knowledge, skill, and utilization of quality practices that promote healthy development in young children. The goal of a regionally coordinated early learning and development system is to share resources and information across partnerships, promote professional dialogue, ensure quality of practice, and effectively disseminate critical information to the public.

CHALLENGES FACING THE TEXAS GULF COAST REGION

Houston and the Gulf Coast regions overall are known for their “can do” attitude, individual self-reliance and

enthusiasm to take on major projects that have long-lasting impact. But in the last 30 years, the Houston and the Gulf Coast regions have experienced dramatic changes that, if left unaddressed, could put the children of these regions and our community overall at risk:

- **The job market has changed.** People with a high school education who used to be able to easily find well-paying jobs now need some form of post-high school training or education to secure a job that pays a living wage.¹ In fact, trends suggest that the 2016 market will demand a workforce in which nearly 55% of jobs will require an Associate or higher degree.²
- **Not enough children are making it through the educational pipeline.** Only one of five students in Texas completes a degree or certificate within six years of high school graduation.
- **A growing number of children, in particular children from lower-income families, are arriving at Kindergarten unprepared for school.** For example, as many as 60% of Houston-area Kindergartners entered the 2012-13 school year lacking requisite reading-readiness skills.³ A majority of young children now have working parents who need to involve other adults in the care of their young children, and many children are in the care of adults who do not have the background or training needed to support their learning and development.

IMPORTANCE OF EARLY LEARNING & DEVELOPMENT

A growing body of research over the last 20 years has established the critical importance of the early years in a child’s life. The architecture of the brain, or the brain’s

MAJORITY OF CHILDREN NOT READY FOR KINDERGARTEN

Letter Identification



NOT READY

Counting



NOT READY

Number Recognition



NOT READY

Writing Name



NOT READY

—HOUSTON INDEPENDENT SCHOOL DISTRICT, DEPARTMENT OF EARLY EDUCATION, 2013

neural connections, is formed rapidly during these early years. The experiences of a child, especially those shared by a child and significant adults in his or her life, stimulate these neural connections. Early health, nutrition, and emotional well-being also have significant impacts on cognitive development. And research has shown that higher-quality early learning and development environments lead to better language, cognitive and social skills through early elementary school. Primary caregivers, early healthcare providers, and early childhood professionals all contribute to the quality of these developmental influences.

On the other hand, failing to make the most of these early years means that far too many of our young children do not receive what they need early on and arrive the first day of school already behind. If they are not reading on grade level by the end of 3rd grade, they are four times more likely to drop out of school. A lower graduation rate means fewer qualified candidates for the jobs that pay a living wage and help continue to grow and build our economy.

Different Systems of Early Learning & Development

PARENT & INFORMAL CARE

Forty-three percent of young children in the Texas Gulf Coast region are cared for at home by a parent. Approximately another quarter (**22%**) are cared for in “informal care” environments by a family member, friend or neighbor who is not the child’s primary caregiver.

REGULATED CARE

The remaining **35%** of children in our region are enrolled in one of the three systems of early care and education: state-regulated childcare, federally-regulated Head Start, and state-regulated Pre-Kindergarten.

Each of these vastly different service-delivery models will be discussed in depth in this report, as well as the challenge they present: an especially fragmented early learning and development system. This fragmentation results in concerning ranges in quality, conflicting approaches in instruction, inconsistent funding and regulating mechanisms, and limited collaboration among professionals from different early childhood settings.

Taking a Regional Approach

To ensure that children from all early learning systems are ready for school, early childhood settings need to offer activities and interactions that adequately stimulate social, emotional, physical and cognitive development. Unfortunately, Texas ranks low on many indicators of quality early care and education and has been slow to address these shortcomings at the state level. In addition, there is no state-wide system of governance and funding for early childhood education.

In 2009, Governor Rick Perry created the Texas Early Learning Council, housed at the Children’s Learning Institute (CLI) at the University of Texas Health Science Center. A three-year federal grant provided funding for the Council to develop early learning standards for infants and toddlers, a framework for a quality rating and improvement system to rate early childhood programs, a career ladder, and definitions of core competencies for the early childhood education workforce. While CLI continues to implement most of the Council’s programs and services, no state agency has the responsibility to implement its larger recommendations as laid out in the Council’s *Texas Early Childhood Education Needs Assessment: Final Report*. These recommendations include a consistent method of data collection across agencies, developing a quality rating scale for early childhood programs, and expanding services for children under age four.

DROPOUT RATES

The dropout rate is an epidemic that affects the entire community.

51%

of students in the Houston Area fail to graduate within 4 years of entering high school

—COMMUNITIES IN SCHOOLS OF HOUSTON, INC.

Only

1 of 5

Texas children make it through the system with some form of post high school credential

—NATIONAL CENTER FOR HIGHER EDUCATION MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS

75%

of prison inmates are high school dropouts

—CHILDREN AT RISK, 2011; BUREAU OF JUSTICE STATISTIC

Rather than wait for the state to restructure and fund the implementation of these recommendations, community leaders in the Texas Gulf Coast region have opted to take a regional approach to improving the early learning and development system. This approach will build on the recommendations of the Council and help ensure that:

- All children in our region are developmentally ready to enter Kindergarten and better positioned to succeed in school;
- The Texas Gulf Coast region is better positioned to have a talented workforce to support economic growth and a high quality of life; and
- Taxpayers are investing where it can make the most difference in educational outcomes and reduce costs for remediation, specialized services, juvenile detention, and incarceration.

Overview of the Early Matters Plan

To improve the quality of and access to early childhood education — and ultimately improve school readiness — in the region, the Early Matters Committee has developed a plan with a series of goals and strategies. The Committee adopted five guiding principles during the planning process:

1. Recommendations should reflect the critical role of parents and families in child development.
2. Efforts should focus on improving the *quality* of the early learning and development system first and then on expanding access.
3. Initial program improvements should serve children most at risk and then expand to include all children.
4. Funding should be prioritized based on need and the potential return on investment.

5. New funding should be invested in programs that have demonstrated results and are modeled after proven research-based strategies.

Goal 1: Community Support for Quality and Access.

Strengthen community support for high-quality, accessible early childhood education among families, elected officials, educators, and business and civic leaders.

Goal 2: Quality Standards. Apply research- and evidence-based standards in guiding family and educator interactions with young children and in measuring the quality and impact of early learning and development programs and services.

Goal 3: Family Support. Ensure that parents and other caregivers have access to evidence-based and culturally appropriate parent support programs and resources.

Goal 4: Healthcare Engagement. Utilize healthcare providers and settings for medical care as access points for providing families with resources and support to enhance their children's early development.

Goal 5: Professional Development. Ensure that early childhood education program staff have access to evidence-based instructional resources and opportunities to develop the knowledge, skills, confidence and support systems to help children reach their full potential.

Goal 6: Financing and Governance. Develop a financing and governance structure that provides a sustainable community investment in an early learning and development system and measures the impact of the system on school readiness.

Goal 7: State-Wide System. Build partnerships across Texas to strengthen state infrastructure and financial resources for early learning and development.

earlymatters COALITION PARTNERS

Listing as of February 24, 2016

