

## Questions to Ask Regarding Senate Bill 50

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Senate Bill 50 claims laudable goals of increasing school readiness and overall quality among public and private providers of pre-kindergarten, as well as improving the recruitment, retention, and quality of early childhood educators. The bill would expand the successful Texas Early Education Model (TEEM), a program whereby public and private centers partner to deliver high quality half-day pre-K without the need for additional public school classroom space. However, the bill also expands or creates other programs with no evidence to justify their use of taxpayer dollars. In evaluating Senate Bill 50, the following questions must be asked.

### *What is the cost of Senate Bill 50?*

The fiscal note for SB 50 is \$3 million. However, it did have a \$122 million contingency rider that is indicative of how expensive pre-kindergarten expansion might be. In this rider, \$80 million was allocated for pre-K expansion over the biennium, with another \$40 million for increased child care reimbursement rates, and \$2 million in implementation costs for other portions of the bill.

### *Is Pre-K expansion needed?*

According to research, no. Research demonstrates that only low-income students show any lasting academic benefit from pre-K. Currently, low-income students in Texas already qualify for free public pre-K, in addition to students with limited English proficiency, and children of active duty military or military members who were killed in service. The only eligible children who are not enrolled in pre-K either choose not to enroll, or live in school districts that do not offer pre-K.

One child care expert estimates that 950 eligible students reside in districts that should

offer pre-K but obtain waivers. In addition, an estimated 720 eligible students live in districts that are not required to offer pre-K. In total, there are an estimated 1,670 four-year-olds in Texas who are eligible for pre-K but do not have the opportunity to enroll. **With \$40 million requested for pre-K expansion, this indicates a per-student cost of \$24,000 if every eligible student chooses to enroll.** That's eight times what we currently spend per student on pre-K. Where is the additional money going?

Section 4 of SB 50 may provide the answer. It would allow school readiness integration projects (public/private pre-K partnerships) to use available funds to, among other things, "increase income eligibility levels for pre-K" that already exist in statute. In other words, pre-K providers could begin enrolling higher-income students at taxpayer expense. With 60 percent of four-year-olds already enrolled in public pre-K in Texas, and no research showing lasting benefits for middle- and upper-income children, it is inexcusable to use taxpayer dollars to increase pre-K eligibility. (Note: Senator Janek amended the bill to limit the income expansion to 300 percent of the federal poverty level, but this is nearly \$62,000 for a family of four—well above the state's median family income.) SB 50 would bypass current statute, allowing local providers to arbitrarily expand eligibility and enrollment at the expense of Texas taxpayers. In addition, a loophole could allow providers to extend services to three-year-olds of ANY income level.

### *Is there any indication that Texas students are generally not ready for kindergarten?*

No. School districts must administer a reading assessment during the kindergarten year. **Information from the TEA states that in 2004-05, 83 percent of kindergarteners met grade-**

**level expectations on the reading assessments.** While this still leaves room for improvement, it suggests the need for a targeted approach rather than a wholesale expansion of the public pre-K bureaucracy.

National evidence also suggests that, by and large, U.S. children are ready for kindergarten. While our early grade level scores compare favorably to other countries, it isn't until the middle and high school grades that U.S. children fall behind. This suggests a need for strengthening the high school curriculum, not adding more layers of government education in the early years.

### ***Does the state need to provide early childhood educator training?***

No. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of existing private providers of early childhood educator training. In addition, there is no data to indicate that the available privately-provided options are insufficient. This provision in SB 50 would ask taxpayers to fund government-provided training for which there is no evidence of need.

### ***Should taxpayers subsidize early childhood educators' higher education?***

No. SB 50 creates the "Texas Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education Career Development," the purpose of which is to "promote the recognition of early childhood educators as professionals and assist in the development of professional standards and educational opportunities for those educators." In essence, this program would encourage early childhood educators to seek further training by subsidizing their higher education. Expenses eligible for reimbursement would include tuition, on-campus housing, books, and transportation. This is problematic for several reasons:

- First, it is not the duty of government to decide which portions of the labor force should be subsidized by other taxpayers. **The market should determine salaries and qualifications for early childhood educators, just as it does for other professions.**
- Second, the Texas Workforce Commission implemented the Train Our Teachers (TOT) program for early childhood educators in 2000. The program was virtually identical to the one outlined in SB 50, providing stipends to educators to obtain higher education on the condition that they would finish their degrees and remain in the early childhood profession for a period of time. Unfortunately, most recipients failed to complete

the program's requirements, and also failed to repay the taxpayer money that had been granted to them. **The program was discontinued by the Commission in 2004.**

- Finally, the program asks taxpayers to subsidize the higher education of early childhood educators, which will in turn allow these educators to command a higher salary. **But this is bad news for taxpayers, who will be hit with a double whammy: the cost of the subsidies and the higher cost of child care.**

### ***What measures should be used to certify a pre-K program as "School Ready"?***

The only measure that should be used is the percentage of students who graduate the program ready for kindergarten, as measured by reading instruments currently administered by all Texas public schools. Unfortunately, other arbitrary components have found their way into the school readiness certification system, such as classroom design and teacher testimonials. SB 50 continues this trend by adding "multiple measures of program quality in addition to the results of a reading instrument" to the criteria for school readiness.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

While the stated intent of SB 50—to increase the quality of early childhood education throughout Texas—is laudable, the bill currently contains many provisions that do not directly lend themselves to this goal. In order to preserve the positive aspects of TEEM while protecting taxpayers and private preschool providers, the following changes to SB 50 should be considered:

- Limit TEEM expansion to four-year-olds, including only those who already qualify for pre-K in Texas. There is no research to support extending pre-K to three-year-olds or higher-income families.
- Delete the "Texas Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education Career Development." There is no demonstrated need for this program, and similar programs in the past have failed.
- Ensure that kindergarten readiness is the only determining factor in school readiness certification. Certification focus should be on results, not process. ★

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