

External Relations Notes
Texas Rising Star Stakeholder Meetings

February 19, 2020 – Arlington

TWC Child Care and Early Learning staff hosted a regional stakeholder meeting in Arlington on Wednesday, February 19, 2020.

Lindsay Hill provided an overview of the Texas Rising Star (TRS) 4-year review and the workgroup's recommendations which are summarized at <https://twc.texas.gov/files/partners/trs-4-yr-review-recommendations-twc.pdf>, noting that the TWC Commissioners will consider the recommendations as well as public input before making final decisions and that some recommendations may require additional discussion. She opened the floor for comments and questions from the attendees.

A mentor asked whether there has been any discussion relating to child care program directors that were not in charge when deficiencies were cited and whether a probationary period could be considered in these situations. She said new management is being penalized for mistakes made under old management. Ms. Hill said this had not been discussed but could be considered.

Several providers voiced concerns about HHSC Child Care Licensing (CCL) issues and the impact of deficiencies which can cause them to lose TRS star levels or their TRS status altogether, resulting in a significant loss of revenue. Providers said the process seems punitive. One suggested that licensing should not be the only determinant of quality and it should be based on a combination of licensing and TRS guidelines. Several participants mentioned that many deficiencies are based on paperwork issues. They said that, with more than 2,200 licensing standards, being limited to 15 total deficiencies is arbitrary and may not be enough to indicate a provider's quality. One provider noted that CCL inspectors can be inconsistent with some more focused on files while others look for issues such as missing outlet covers. He noted that a licensing representative that finds an issue may cite a deficiency or provide immediate technical assistance or not mention it at all. Providers also mentioned difficulties getting CCL to correct machine errors that cause deficiencies to be recorded in error. A provider suggested reducing the length of time a violation would remain in a provider's history; TWC currently looks at 12 months of history.

Ms. Hill noted that CCL is under HHSC and that cross training and closer connections with regional CCL offices should help with some of the issues the providers mentioned. Providers have the right to appeal any citation. The CCL district director was present at the meeting and said that providers may contact her with their concerns.

Ms. Hill said that meeting licensing is the foundation for quality. She said the workgroup recommended looking at options to minimize the impact of licensing deficiencies, such as allowing a provider with a first occurrence of a critical deficiency to be given a 6-month probation and technical assistance instead of dropping a star level. Reagan Miller said that the workgroup discussed this issue and determined that providers with serious deficiencies cannot be quality because TRS should be above licensing. She said the workgroup discussed trying to find a balance and giving providers an opportunity to correct a one-off deficiency. She said the original limits on deficiencies were based on analysis of data regarding the average number of deficiencies and that TWC would look at this data again.

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Providers mentioned that the CCL penalties are far less than the penalties imposed by TRS which can result in significant revenue losses for a provider. One asked whether TWC wants to help programs become TRS or shoot them down and asked the purpose of unannounced TRS visits. She feels that providers are being heavily monitored and evaluated on the job and that they are trying to do their best, but when mistakes lead to citations for deficiencies, it seems that the system is quick to shoot them down. She said they need mentoring, tutoring, and resources.

Ms. Hill said the revisions include supports and that a providers' Continuous Quality Improvement Plan (CQIP) would include more robust support and technical assistance for programs. She mentioned that TWC is looking at doing cross-training with CCL and assessors and mentors to ensure that licensing and TRS understand each other. She also noted recommendations to provide additional supports and training for mentors and to limit the financial impact of deficiencies. Ms. Miller said that five child care providers on the workgroup promoted this issue from the standpoint that, if providers can fix a mistake, they should not be penalized financially because then their ability to provide quality is impacted.

Melanie Rubin with the Dallas Early Education Alliance said that she is encouraged by the direction taken in the recommendations. She said that, when providers are dropped a star level, it hurts providers that serve many subsidized kids more than those who serve few subsidized kids. She suggested looking at other ways to move to quality and being sensitive to the impact. She suggested possibly weighting deficiencies based on the impact to kids; paperwork errors should not be weighted as heavily.

A provider mentioned that director qualification requirements differ for child care centers and school-age programs. Ms. Hill said that the recommended changes would streamline these standards to match.

An assessor asked about the recommendation that would require mentors and assessors to take a training course, how long it would take, whether it would be online, and if it will be the same as the online directors training course. Ms. Hill said it would not be the same course. The training would take 4 to 8 weeks and be online.

The assessor asked if there would be more funding to pay assessors. Ms. Miller said that there is a recommendation to centralize assessors. Under the recommendation, Boards would have mentors, but the state would procure assessors through a competitive procurement. The amount of money for the assessors would be determined through the procurement and the entity hiring the assessors. Currently, assessor pay is a local Board decision. Assessors are direct reports in some Board areas while others are employed through child care contractors. Under the recommendation, all mentors would still be employed at the local level, but assessors would be employed through a central entity. The recommendation was made to improve reliability and consistency for assessors. The assessor asked if she would be working for someone out of Austin. Ms. Miller said the employer of record would change based on the procurement and selection process. It could be a university or another entity that responds to the procurement.

Kara Waddell with Child Care Group commended the workgroup for their efforts and suggested looking at the future direction of the Quality Rating System. She said providers want to be accountable to a few powerful standards and that money should go to programs that are doing hard work. She said there

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should be a single set of standards for the entire early learning system and that parents should be able to go to a single place to find all the early education sources. Her organization wants to help codesign something different for the future.

An assessor asked how providers will demonstrate the use of curriculum under the proposed revisions and what curriculum supports would be included. Ms. Hill said that information will come from the director interview, a review of lesson plans, and classroom observation. Classroom supports could include but not be limited to planning time, having a curriculum coordinator onsite, or access to online resources. She said the assessor would be looking for supports from a list. The assessor asked how they would validate that the program is using formal or informal assessments. Ms. Hill explained that the measure would look at whether they are using assessments at all and how they are being used. If the provider is using them, the assessor would look at how they are informing instruction and whether there is a formal written process.

Kimberly Howard with Teaching Strategies asked for clarification of what constitutes a “formal” assessment. Ms. Hill said a formal assessment would be a valid, research-based tool. Ms. Hill said observational assessments would be considered “informal” and that the assessor would look at how it informs teaching. Ms. Howard mentioned that her organization has significant funding to provide resources statewide.

Jerletha McDonald with the Arlington-DFW Child Care Provider Association asked how the recommended changes affect how national accreditation is treated. Ms. Hill said TRS certification would no longer be automatic for programs with a national accreditation but that the programs would be required to be assessed on Category 2: Teacher-Child Interaction and Category 4: Indoor-Outdoor Environments.

Ximena Antonez with Rainwater Foundation, which provides BOOST funding to assist child care programs, said that expanding use of Texas Early Childhood Professional Development System (TECPDS), the child care Workforce Registry, is an important step toward professionalizing the field. She recommends working on technical assistance for programs that are at risk of losing their TRS status. She said her organization has been working with programs with deficiencies to get them ready to join TRS and that not one of the programs they have assisted has lost a star rating. She is excited about the direction being taken, and her organization wants to help build a better system. A provider expressed concern that TECPDS has a job board and emails notifications of job openings to staff.

Lyn Lucas with Camp Fire said that her organization is looking at ways to help providers qualify for TRS. She said that a lot of programs that are serving subsidized kids want to get to that level but need additional support. She asked if quality dollars would be available to support programs that become TRS 1-star. Ms. Hill said that TRS 1-star provider would not receive an enhanced rate, but Boards could provide quality support if they choose. Ms. Miller noted that Boards already have the ability to help providers become TRS certified or increase their star levels.

A provider said that Child Care Associates, the child care contractor for Tarrant County, limits support for nationally accredited providers. Another provider said their Board requires them to receive technical

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assistance only from Educational First Steps. Shari Anderson with Child Care Group said that they coordinate with other entities that assist providers but try not to duplicate services. Ms. Hill noted that it is a Board decision and that providers should share concerns with their Board.

Libby McCabe with Commit and Early Matters Dallas expressed support for making consequences for deficiencies less punitive. She said that they are worried about adding a TRS 1-star level unless there is a timeline and sufficient supports to get providers to move up in star level. She said there also needs to be an increase in reimbursement rates for the 0-2 age group.

Mike Mizell with Kaleidoscope Child Development in Dallas said that providers do not receive enough income from subsidies or private pay families to support teacher quality. He said that school districts are taking Pre-K kids, further reducing revenue for providers, and that districts do not want to partner with providers on Pre-K. Ms. Miller said that Pre-K partnerships will be a challenge but that TWC is working with the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to hold a Pre-K summit to bring together education and the workforce system and provide information and resources on how Pre-K partnerships can be done. Mr. Mizell mentioned that child care providers are subject to thousands of standards and that very few can knock them out of being eligible to participate in Pre-K partnerships while school districts are not affected by anything.

A mentor asked for clarification on changes in parent engagement measurements, group size and ratio measures, and director training requirements related to early learning. Ms. Hill said that measures that were duplicative of CCL requirements were removed. Group size and ratio measures will be based on those present rather than on enrollment. The workgroup decided to match director training requirement with the school-age measure.

Michelle Buckley with the Early Learning Alliance said that they have been working on an initiative in Tarrant County on parent engagement strategies. She said professional development is needed and that it should be part of the statewide plan.

Melanie Rubin with the Dallas Early Education Alliance said mental health needs to be incorporated into developmental screening and assessments. She supports requiring all subsidized providers to be TRS and said there should be a timeline for providers coming in as a TRS 1-star to move up in quality. She suggested the proposed TRS 1-star level could be called an "Empty Star" and cautioned against watering down the TRS brand. Ms. Hill said the workgroup discussed the idea of making TRS participation mandatory and setting a timeline for providers to move up. She said there is concern in rural areas that lack child care capacity and said it would be a balancing act to determine a feasible timeframe and how it can be implemented. Ms. Hill also mentioned a new measure in the recommended health and nutrition guidelines for programs that offer supports to staff and parents such as information and resources on oral health, breastfeeding, mental health, benefits, and other areas that are looking at the whole child and that this could include training for staff and parents on healthy development.

Shari Anderson with Child Care Group said they support the recommendation for a TRS 1-star level and that every child should be in a quality program. She said timelines should be in place and that the process needs to be intentional. She said providers could go out of business and that families will not

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have access to child care. She noted that some providers in Dallas County are 100% subsidy and that these programs are not sustainable. She said strategies are needed to help them.

A provider asked for clarification regarding proposed revisions to Category 2: Teacher-Child Interactions, particularly a measure focused on self-help skill building which she said is a concern for marginalized children who need more. Ms. Hill explained that self-help skill building is being added to the revamped category and that mentors will receive training to help teachers build their interaction repertoire.

Sam Horn with Child Care Group asked whether minimum screening would look different with the addition of the TRS 1-star level and said they would want a provider to be able to move up in quality. Ms. Hill said providers would have to meet initial eligibility requirements to be a TRS 1-star and that there would be messaging tied to this new level so that programs can understand what it means for them and decide if they want to move forward. She said the most vulnerable children are in facilities that have multiple deficiencies and that the workgroup agreed to take the minimal step of adding the TRS 1-star level to address this. Ms. Hill mentioned that TWC is developing a cost calculator that providers in each Board area could use to determine what their revenue would be at each TRS star level.

Marla Moon with Workforce Solutions Northeast Texas said that she understands the importance of quality care. She asked what the impact would be on the availability of child care in her rural area if providers are required to pass the screening form and what supports would be available to move providers up in quality. Ms. Hill said that the workgroup did not recommend making TRS participation mandatory at this time, partly because of the concerns in rural areas, but said there is a lot of chatter about this issue. She said that a good percentage of providers would pass the initial screening.

Shenee Bagsby with the North Central asked who would do the screening for the TRS 1-stars. Ms. Hill said TWC is working to automate the screening form for the Boards.

A mentor asked what could be counted as compensatory supports. Ms. Hill provided examples, including benefits, paid time off, and extra professional development.

An assessor expressed concern about outsourcing assessors because she has heard horror stories about other areas where mentors and assessors do not work well together and is concerned about child care centers being scared away from TRS.

A participant asked about training under Category 2: Teacher-Child Interactions. Ms. Hill said the TRS assessor training and certification course was developed through a Children's Learning Institute (CLI) study and that it is specific to TRS and its measures. She said the CLI study and other workgroup materials are available on the workgroup webpage.

A provider asked about the proposed change that would require nationally accredited that currently are automatically eligible for TRS without any assessments to be assessed on Category 2: Teacher-Child Interactions and Category 4: Indoor/Outdoor Environments. Ms. Hill said the workgroup's recommendation stems from the CLI study that showed that nationally accredited providers were not

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scoring at a 4-star level. She said several states do not automatically place national accreditations on the top rung of their Quality Rating and Improvement Systems.

A provider asked whether a provider's history with accreditation and TRS would be considered or if they need to be monitored even more. Ms. Hill said the recommendations would add a step for programs with national accreditation but would streamline measures. She said a program's history is not looked at. Several providers spoke in favor of considering a program's history.

Another provider suggested adding star levels with higher compensation, stating that the TRS 4-star level is problematic because parents want to know why a 4-star program is not a 5-star. Ms. Hill noted that adding higher star levels would likely require a change in statute.

A provider voiced concern about not being eligible for certain grants to improve her facilities because she is in the wrong zip code. She is concerned that the school districts are expanding Pre-K programs and that this will add to providers' struggles. Board staff said grant fund availability is based on demographics. Ms. Hill noted that local Boards have many different initiatives and that TWC is working on initiatives related to staff retention, helping programs deal with challenging behaviors, and a family child care network.

A mentor asked about the implementation timeline for the recommended revisions. Ms. Hill said that rules are anticipated to be approved by October and that training would take place from October through December. Implementation would start in January 2021. Ms. Miller said that TWC is developing a tool that would help providers determine what their new scores would be under the new system.

A provider asked where the revenue goes when a center loses its TRS status. Ms. Miller explained that all Boards receive a funding allocation each year and that 2% must be spent on quality. The rest of the allocation is for direct care. The amount of care a Board can provide depends on the mix of children served in the area as well as the number of quality providers. If a Board has more quality providers receiving higher reimbursement rates, they will be able to serve fewer kids.

Jerletha McDonald, a family home provider, asked if measures could be added regarding provider/staff self-care. Stephanie Whitehurst with Child Care Associates suggested making it a CQIP item instead of a measure. Ms. McDonald concurred with the suggestion.

A provider from Texarkana urged looking at the relationship between mentors and assessors. She said that the mentor sets the tone and trains the provider on what to expect. She said there could be a disconnect if the mentor and assessor are not working together. Ms. Hill said that both mentors and assessors would be required to go through a training course. The assessors would be required to be certified to ensure that they are valid and reliable and consistently scoring in the same way.

Participants were encouraged to email comments and suggestions to trs4yearreview@twc.state.tx.us .