

External Relations Notes
Texas Rising Star Stakeholder Meetings

February 26, 2020 – El Paso

TWC Child Care and Early Learning staff hosted a regional stakeholder meeting in El Paso on Wednesday, February 26, 2020.

Lindsay Hill provided an overview of the Texas Rising Star (TRS) 4-year review process and the workgroup's recommendations which are summarized at <https://twc.texas.gov/files/partners/trs-4-yr-review-recommendations-twc.pdf>. She said these recommendations will be considered by the TWC Commissioners along with public input before decisions are made. Attendees were invited to provide comments or ask questions.

Regarding a TRS workgroup recommendation to establish a TRS 1-star level focused on licensing compliance with a long-term goal for all subsidy providers to be TRS, Board staff asked, if all providers are TRS 1-star, what support would be provided to encourage providers to increase their star level. Ms. Hill said that providers would not be required to move up, but the Board could outreach the TRS 1-stars and provide a mentor if a provider wants to increase their star level. Board staff said that they currently have providers in the queue to become TRS and that a TRS 1-star level would dilute the process.

Reagan Miller said the workgroup wanted to create an entry point to get more providers interested in TRS. She asked how many providers are in Borderplex's queue. Board staff said they currently have 11 providers in the queue. Borderplex has set a performance measure to increase TRS providers from 80 to 88. Board staff said it takes time to mentor and that they provide help to prepare providers for assessment. They said Borderplex has a high percentage of TRS 4-star providers and that it means a lot to the providers to come in at the 4-star level. They said they have 325 subsidy providers and asked where the line would be drawn. Ms. Miller said, at some point, they could all have to be TRS 1-star. The question is how many would be interested. She asked how long it takes to move a provider from being interested in TRS to the assessment phase. Board staff said it depends on the capacity and willingness of the provider but that it could take 3 to 6 months.

A provider asked if TRS 1-star providers would have access to the same training and financial advantages as higher level TRS providers. Ms. Hill said TRS 1-star providers would not receive enhanced reimbursement rates, but Board could choose to provide other assistance. A provider said she would be interested in the TRS 1-star and having access to training and things that would benefit her program. She has not been interested in being TRS 4-star due to a lack of time to go through 3 to 6 months of assessment. She believes her program is great, but her teachers have had all the training they want and do not want to retrain. She asked if the process could be condensed.

Ms. Hill said the length of time for process depends on a provider's willingness and cooperation. She referenced a TRS workgroup recommendation to change the weighting of categories that are scored to determine a provider's TRS status. With this change, Category 2: Teacher-Child Interactions would be weighted at 40% and that Category 1: Director and Staff Qualifications and Training, Category 3: Program Administration, and Category 4: Indoor/Outdoor Environments would each be weighted at 20%. She said, with the weighting of the categories, teachers would not have to have degrees in order

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for a provider to be a TRS 4-star. She suggested sitting with a mentor for a quick evaluation. The mentor could identify things the provider could work on. She said TRS is a hybrid model. Some measures must be met, such as policy and programmatic measures. However, other points-based measures would allow a provider to make up for lower scoring measures in other categories.

Ms. Miller said the concern about there being too much emphasis on degrees over good teachers with many years of experience was brought up at another stakeholder meeting. She said this is addressed in the recommendation to give Category 2 greater weight. She said that TWC is developing a revenue calculator that will help providers understand how much they could earn at each TRS star level. The data will include each Board's rates and be based on the provider's enrollment of subsidized kids. She said this will be made available to Boards and on the TWC website soon.

A provider asked if there is concern about parents' perception of a TRS 1-star. Ms. Hill said that the TRS workgroup also recommended developing an outreach plan to explain TRS to parents and programs. She said people need to understand what is quality and why they should want their children in a quality program. Ms. Miller said that concerns have been raised that referring to providers as a TRS 1-star can be confusing and that consideration is being given to other terminology. A provider said that the TRS 1-star terminology would be rewarding a provider for nothing.

Ms. Hill said that, currently, children are in centers that have high numbers of deficiencies with HHSC Child Care Licensing and that there is concern that programs that are not in good standing with licensing are receiving subsidies. She said that, if providers can pass a screening form, it would indicate that they do not have critical deficiencies or high numbers of violations. She said TWC is looking to automate the screening form to minimize the burden.

Dr. Sylvia Acosta with YWCA said that early childhood education is one of the most important economic development tools. She said that creating a system with a TRS 1-star would create complacency. She said there needs to be a way to identify providers that are meeting minimum standards but that there should be a higher minimum requirement for TRS. She spoke of the importance of ensuring that children are improving their educational outcomes and that they are ready for kindergarten and said providers should be striving to be at a higher level. She stated that their commitment should not be based on reimbursement but on child outcomes. Regarding the recommended outreach campaign, she said that it is difficult to reach parents and educate on TRS as it currently exists and that trying to explain a TRS 1-star level would not change perception. She said people will mistake a 1-star for a provider that is achieving a higher level. Dr. Acosta said she agrees that anyone serving subsidized children should pass a screening form but said there should not be a star attached to it at all.

Board staff said that they have had conversation with staff in other Board areas and that the feeling is that a TRS 1-star will devalue the process and that some other terminology should be used. They agree with the concept of outreaching providers and said that it works and is needed.

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A provider expressed concern about possibly adding to the workload of mentors that are stretched thin and the capacity of current training is not enough for her to send all her teachers so they can meet their training requirements. Ms. Hill said that this is a valid concern and that Child Care and Early Learning staff are gathering data on ideal caseloads for mentors and what their caseloads look like now. She said additional supports may be needed. She said that the TRS workgroup also proposed centralizing the assessment function. Under this recommendation, one entity would employ the assessors. This would free up Board funds for mentors.

A provider expressed concern that the Board offers his center resources it does not need or want. Examples mentioned were a garden and computers that his center does not use. He said his center does not believe in providing electronics for kids at all, though they are assessed on that. He said his center needed chairs, but the Board did not provide them. He said, when grants are offered, he wants options of what to take.

Ms. Hill noted that the technology measure is not required, but if a provider chooses to provide technology, it should be intentional and developmental. She said each Board is provided funding for quality initiatives and can make decisions about what to provide based on local needs. She said providers can decline unwanted materials. She encouraged the provider to talk with the Board about his program's needs so that they can focus their funds on a different initiative.

A provider said that funds always matter to providers. They said all their staff received raises when additional funds were given to 4-star providers. They said their area has the lowest reimbursement rates in the state even for TRS 4-star. They said private centers compete with large non-profits and that national chains avoid the area because they cannot make money. The provider said the school district now wants to take 4-year-olds and 3-year-olds.

A provider said that 3-year-olds should not be attending a big school. He said El Paso ISD is implementing a pre-school through 8th grade model that will serve all grade levels on the same campus. He said 93% of child care in El Paso is provided by non-profits. The child care industry is very difficult for those paying taxes and trying to turn a profit. He said, even with increased rates, the area is well below the state average.

Ms. Miller said that the challenge with child care versus Pre-K and Head Start is that Pre-K and Head Start are fully funded. She said 15% or less of all child care programs are in the subsidy program. Private pay families are paying for the vast majority of child care. She said that families are already having difficulty affording it and that while TWC may be able to increase rates, private pay parents may not be able to afford to pay more. She said TWC is doing what it can to increase rates, noting that rates were recently re-benchmarked due to information gathered in market rate surveys. She said the mix of for-profit providers versus non-profits used in the market rate survey is not known.

A home provider said that her program is TRS 4-star with national accreditation. She said this does not benefit her, but she chooses to do it. She said that many parents in El Paso are only concerned about the cost of child care and are not looking for quality. She said she gets no help from TRS to pay for her national accreditation. She relayed that another provider said she did not want to be in TRS because she

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does not want all the inspections. The home provider said she wants more support and that materials are given to her that she does not need, including books that are duplicated from the year before. She suggested the Board ask providers what they need or conduct a survey.

A provider commented that they like the workgroup recommendations to simplify the process and to condense and remove curriculum measures. They suggested that mentors visit centers to see what can be expedited to make the process easier.

A provider asked for clarification of a workgroup recommendation regarding group size and ratio. Ms. Hill said that, currently, group size and ratio are one measure but that both are scored. The lower score of the two is given. The workgroup determined that they should be split since they are both scored and because both are integral to quality. She explained that these measures would be based on attendance the day of the assessment visit since this gives a more accurate depiction of what the day is like.

Ms. Hill encouraged attendees to review the information on the TRS workgroup website at <https://twc.texas.gov/partners/texas-rising-star-workgroup> and to email any questions or comments to trs4yearreview@twc.state.tx.us.