



**TEXAS SENATE COMMITTEE on HEALTH and HUMAN SERVICES  
TESTIMONY in SUPPORT of SENATE BILL 665  
March 1, 2001**

Senator Moncrief, Senator Carona, members of the committee, I want to thank you for allowing me to speak today on behalf of Senate Bill 665.

My name is John Ross. I am the Assistant Executive Director for Planning and Public Policy with Camp Fire Boys and Girls in Fort Worth. However, today I also represent two other constituencies. First, I am the chairperson for The Partnership For Children, a Tarrant County collaboration of nearly 30 organizations and community members supporting children from birth to six years old. Additionally, I am a member of the Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce's Quality Workforce and Education Committee. The Fort Worth Chamber's current legislative agenda endorses creating the Office of Early Childhood Coordination.

I believe that creating the Office of Early Childhood Coordination is a modest proposal that will provide tremendous dividends for Texas over the next 20 years. When business leaders create a long-range strategic plan to ensure their corporation's success in a future marketplace, we applaud such vision. And when political leaders take steps to create a long-range strategic plan to ensure the every Texas child is ready for school, we should also applaud such vision.

But why should we pay such focused attention to Texas' youngest citizens?

Over the past decade, a wealth of scientific research has emerged concerning the amazing capabilities of infants and young children. Virtually every skill that a successful adult must have essentially comes on-line in those first few years.

The ability to give and receive love. The ability to control one's behavior. The ability to make and maintain social relationships. The ability to communicate verbally. And the ability to think, plan, and process information.

All of these skills either do, or do not, come on-line in those first years.

To ensure that these critically important skills come on-line, infants and young children have three core requirements: a healthy physical beginning, an environment that provides safety, and nurturing caregivers who can provide the child with essential learning experiences.

But, a young child who does not have proper nutrition or health care, a young child who lives in a violent or neglectful environment, or a child who does not receive either nurturance or stimulating learning experiences will be a child unprepared to fulfill his destiny.

Public discourse about the importance of these early years is not new in Texas.



Since 1996, the *I Am Your Child Texas Network*, now working in over 30 Texas communities, has worked tirelessly to build community networks dedicated to ensuring that Texas' youngest children do indeed achieve their destiny.

In December 1998, the former first lady of Texas, Laura Bush, hosted a *Public Policy Conference on Early Childhood Development and Brain Research* that was attended by a number of legislators and their staff. Those conference proceedings provided ample validation to the concept that a child's earliest years are perhaps their most important.

United Way's in Texas have been championing both the Success By Six initiatives and the Youth Assets Movement. The Bank of America Foundation and United Way of America fund Success By Six initiatives. The Youth Assets Movement, supported by the Search Institute, state that to build successful youth, these youth must have certain assets. The foundations of asset building, according to the Search Institute, begin in infants and toddlers.

Dr. Bruce Perry, a Professor of Child Psychiatry with the Baylor College of Medicine, encourages Texans in both a recent public television series and through public speaking, to understand the rather stark public policy consequences for a child if that young child does not receive the nurturance she needs.

And finally, in the Texas Performance Review published prior to the 76<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislative Session, both the outgoing and incoming comptrollers approved of the need to Create a Texas Plan for Serving Children from Birth to Age Three. In many ways, Senate Bill 665 began with that recommendation.

What will the Office of Early Childhood Coordination do to build on our current knowledge about the value of young Texans?

According to Senate Bill 665, the Office of Early Childhood Coordination **Goals** are designed to protect and support a parent's role in a young child's life by linking government and community stakeholders with parents to ensure that every Texas child is ready for school. This recognition of the value of a caring parent in a young child's life is, I believe, at the heart of Senate Bill 665.

However, as I stated earlier, compelling evidence shows us that the roots of school-readiness are grounded in the years from a child's birth until they enter school. To accomplish such a comprehensive goal, you need a **Strategic Plan**. Senate Bill 665 provides for a thorough planning process with the scope, and authority, to explore not only state agency collaborative opportunities, but to look at both nationally successful early childhood service delivery models as well as successful local early childhood initiatives. Such an initiative exists in Fort Worth today. The Fort Worth Independent School District, in collaboration with a number of organizations, including Camp Fire, has created a kindergarten readiness program that links child care providers and elementary schools in an attempt to ensure that these kids are ready to begin school.

And finally, Senate Bill 665 provides for an **Advisory Committee** with representation not only from state agencies and early childhood development professionals, but representatives from parent constituencies, the business community, law enforcement, religious organizations and social service agencies. Such representation is designed to ensure that the Office of Early Childhood Coordination, and its Strategic Plan, will indeed focus on how to ensure that every Texas child is ready for school.



Before I close, let me tell you that you are not alone. Why does Senate Bill 665 include such diverse stakeholders on the Advisory Committee?

Law Enforcement understands that many of today's juvenile justice issues begin in those early years. The U.S. Department of Justice, through its Safe Start grants, acknowledges this reality. The recently retired Dallas Police Chief, Ben Click, stated in a final interview, that the only way we are going to avoid building more and more prisons is to focus on protecting and nurturing children from birth to three.

Mental Health professionals, led by the Mental Health Association of Texas, understand that many of the mental health issues communities face today have their roots in traumatic or neglectful early childhood experiences. Why are we seeing a spike in prescribing psychotropic drugs to preschool children? Why are child care providers stating that there has been a huge increase in rage and anger outbursts in preschool children? Why are pediatricians claiming that behavioral problems in children have soared over the past two decades? And why are elementary schools experiencing a dramatic increase in behavior management problems?

Business leaders understand that not only are early childhood issues significant in the lives of their current workforce, those same leaders have the foresight to realize that the future Texas workforce will be impacted by how well we care for our youngest Texans today. Corporate Champions for Children, founded in 1994 by Bob Bass, Mayor Kay Granger, and Elaine Agather, is a Tarrant County business collaboration dedicated to quality child care.

Finally, hundreds of Texas organizations understand. In your packet, the brown sheet lists Senate Bill 665 supporters. Most of those organizations are collaborations, representing from 30-75 organizations themselves.

In closing, I want to thank you for considering Senate Bill 665. I respectfully request that your committee move this legislation forward so that we can ensure that all young Texans are able to fulfill their destiny.



**OFFICE of EARLY CHILDHOOD COORDINATION  
Supporters**

- Austin Child Care Council
- Camp Fire Boys and Girls – First Texas Council
- Child Development Educators Association
- Children’s Hospital Association of Texas
- City of Fort Worth (pending)
- Community Action Network of Austin
- Corporate Champions for Children: Tarrant County
- Crime Prevention Resource Center: Tarrant County
- East Texas Support Services, Inc.
- East Texas Workforce Development Board
- Fight Crime Invest In Kids (national)
- Fort Worth Chamber of Commerce
- Heart of Texas Workforce Development Board
- I Am Your Child: Brownwood Group
- I Am Your Child Texas Network
- Lubbock Area Children's Legislative Agenda
- Mental Health Association of Texas
- Tarrant Area Community of Churches
- Tarrant County Youth Collaboration
- Texas Association for the Education of Young Children
- Texans Care For Children
- The Parenting Center: Tarrant County
- United Way of Metro Tarrant County