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Written Testimony – HB 4 Rulemaking
Chandra Villanueva – villanueva@cphp.org

The Center for Public Policy Priorities is an independent public policy organization that uses data and analysis to advocate for solutions that enable Texans of all background to reach their full potential.

At CPPP, we envision a Texas where everyone is healthy, well-educated, and financially secure. Helping kids start school ready to learn is one of the best ways to ensure Texans have the chance to compete and succeed in life. That is why we applaud Governor Abbott for declaring Pre-K an emergency item and Representative Dan Huberty for his leadership on the passage of the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Program (HB 4).

HB 4 requires the Commissioner of Education to establish a high-quality grant program, while leaving a wide degree of flexibility to define quality and grant amounts. In defining a high-quality Pre-K program, the Center for Public Policy Priorities recommends the Commissioner include criteria for a full-day program, nationally recognized class-size limits and ratios, and effective discipline policies. The grant program should also be structured in a way that a district can predict the amount of grant support from year to year.

A Full-Day Program:

The more exposure a child has to educational instruction, the greater the educational gains will be. For children who are significantly behind, exposure to high-quality Pre-K for extended periods is crucial for closing achievement gaps.

In a random assignment study of low-income urban districts in the Northeast, the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) found that children who participated in a high-quality full-day program improved twice as much on a battery of developmental assessments in vocabulary and math skills compared to those who only attended a half-day program.^{1 i}

Further studies ranging from local samples to large-scale national surveys support the conclusion that English language learners and economically disadvantaged students exposed to full-day Pre-K outperform their peers.ⁱⁱ

The fact that 49 percent of Texas Pre-K students are currently in a full-day program despite the state only providing funding for a half day of instruction shows that parents and school districts value expanded full-day programs; enough so that districts with the means are devoting valuable resources to Pre-K improvements despite the considerable extra operating costs.ⁱⁱⁱ

Recommendation: The Commissioner should include a full-day program in the criteria for a high-quality program.

Class-size Limits and Staff-Child Ratios:

¹ A high-quality Pre-K program was defined by small classroom sizes (18.5 to 13.2) and all teachers having a college degree.

The 2014 rankings of state Pre-K programs by NIEER ranks Texas at the bottom in quality standards measures compared to 53 programs in 40 states and the District of Columbia.² Of the ten quality standard benchmarks identified by NIEER, Texas Pre-K only meets two—comprehensive early learning standards and at least 15 hours a year of in-service training for Pre-K teachers.^{iv}

Texas lags far behind other states particularly in class-size limits and staff-child ratios. NIEER sets the quality benchmark for class-sizes at 20 Pre-K students or fewer and the staff-child ratio at 1:10 or better. Most states meet these standards, including eighty-seven percent of states that require a staff-child ratio of 1:10 or better. But Texas has no cap on the number of Pre-K students in a class or on the number of students for each staff person.

Recommendation: The Commissioner should include nationally recognized class-size limits and staff-child ratios in the criteria for a high-quality program.

Effective Discipline Policies:

A recent report by Texas Appleseed shed light on the disruptive practice of exclusionary discipline policies such as in-school and out-of-school suspension in early grades. Exclusionary practices deny students valuable learning time and do not improve student behavior. During the 2013-14 school year there were 2,513 out-of-school suspension actions³ in our Pre-K classrooms.^v

One of the primary goals of Pre-K programs is to develop social and emotional skills among children. The use of exclusionary discipline policies runs counter to this goal and illustrates the need for support and training on research-based alternatives.

Recommendation: The Commissioner should require, as part of the criteria for a high-quality program, a written policy, available to parents, that limits the use of in- and out-of-school suspensions and specifies under what circumstances exclusionary practices are appropriate.

Grant Amounts:

In order to implement and sustain a high-quality Pre-K program, districts need a reliable and stable funding source. Variable grant amounts make it difficult to prepare for the future and set districts up for failure when funding runs out or decreases significantly.

We encourage the Commissioner to set the grant amounts to \$1,500 per student, the maximum allowed in HB 4. Even with maximum grant funding, many districts will still need to reallocate operating funding towards Pre-K improvements. Though fewer children may be served and the grants may not cover all expenses, districts will know the value of the grant and be able to develop programs that use those funds efficiently.

Recommendation: The Commissioner should set the grant amount at the maximum to better assist districts in implementing a high-quality program.

² There are 10 states that do not offer state-supported Pre-K. Some states have more than one Pre-K program available.

³ An individual student may be removed from school on multiple occasions during the year.

ⁱ Robin, Kenneth B., Ellen C. Frede and W. Steven Barnett. *Is More Better? The Effects of Full-Day vs. Half-Day Preschool on Early School Achievement*. National Institute for Early Education Research, May 2006.

ⁱⁱ Pianta, Robert C. and Catherine Wolcott. *Pre-Kindergarten for the Modern Age: A Scalable, Affordable, High-Quality Plan for Texas*. Raise Your Hand Texas, 2014.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sanborn, Robert. et al. *The State of Pre-K: Realities and Opportunities in Texas*. Children at Risk, 2014.

^{iv} Barnett, WS. *The State of Preschool 2014*. National Institute for Early Education Research, 2015.

^v *Suspended Childhood: An Analysis of Exclusionary Discipline of Texas' Pre-K and Elementary School Students*. Texas Appleseed, 2015.