

**Senate Bill 21
Texas PreKindergarten**

**Presented by Vicki Spillman, Regional Manager, Bright Horizons Family Solutions
to the Senate Committee on Education
March 12, 2009**

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today regarding Senate Bill 21, and the importance of high-quality early childhood programs and experiences for children in Texas.

I'm Vicki Spillman, Regional Manager with Bright Horizons Family Solutions. I work from the San Antonio area, but my region covers south Texas. I've been working in the early education field in Texas for 27 years beginning as a classroom teacher right out of college.

Bright Horizons is the leading provider of employer-sponsored child care and early education. We operate more than 650 child care centers and schools through the US, including 22 here in Texas.

Our mission is to partner with employers to provide the highest-quality early education, provided by the most qualified early educators, in a way that meets the needs of working families and supports employers achieve their business goals of having the best and most productive workforce possible. We have the highest rate of accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children of any multi-site provider.

We partner with dozens of key Texas employers whose businesses are vital to the economy of our state. These include employers like USAA, Yum Brands, JC Penney and many more. Through our partnerships with them and hundreds of other employers across the country, Bright Horizons alone has secured more than \$1 billion in private investment in early education. This private investment helps underwrite the significant costs of providing high quality care and education. But this is a public and private responsibility and more effort is needed.

Quality early childhood programs prepare children for success in school and life. They offer a curriculum that respects and challenges children as active learners at a critical time in their lives. Our programs engage children in language, science, math, and social activities. And they develop full partnerships with families by both meeting the needs of working families and fully engaging families in the educational development of their children.

For years, our state has chosen to hold back rather than invest in high-quality child care and early learning programs. With that limited investment, our business – the business of providing high quality early care and education experiences for young children – suffers and Texas's children and families are short-changed.

The lack of investment impacts access to and the quality of early learning experiences for all children in all settings. For instance, the child care subsidy payment rates across Texas are impossibly low. The problem with this is we are essentially asking a business (the business of child care) to provide a service with a willingness to only pay a portion of the costs of that service. At these rates, Texas child care providers are faced with having to turn away subsidy-eligible families because the business can not afford to stay afloat. Bright Horizons would gladly serve subsidy-eligible families in Texas if we could afford it. Families are forced into lesser choices, or risk not being able to go to work. All children

deserve access to the highest possible quality of care, and parents need to know their children are safe and learning while they are at work. There is an urgent need to increase child care reimbursement rates to child care providers who serve the most at risk children in Texas. Unfortunately, some providers have little choice but to close their doors because they can no longer afford to serve the children in their area, the majority of which are on the subsidy program.

Senate Bill 21 addresses one part of the early learning opportunity, prekindergarten for 4-year olds (and some 3-year olds). The bill is interesting and good because of the specific requirement to partner with community-based providers. An integrated approach like this allows school districts to save tax dollars by partnering with local child care and Head Start centers to provide pre-k services in our existing facilities instead of building new facilities or purchasing temporary buildings. Child care centers like mine are ready and, with collaboration prioritized by the ISDs, will be able to deliver high-quality preK for our four-year-olds for a full school day.

Schools need to be encouraged, and quality early learning providers need to be supported if true collaboration is to flourish. SB 21 has provisions that move in this direction. Specifically, it:

- Requires at least 20 percent of new dollars to be used in partnership with community-based providers
- Allows for multiple types of partnerships, including direct delivery of preK by community-based providers
- Requires the Commission of Education to provide technical assistance to ISDs and community-based providers to promote collaborative contracts

As a high quality child care provider, I welcome this partnership so we can serve our children and our community in the most effective way. But until there is a comprehensive effort birth to age 5, we won't reap the full promise of investing in early education.

Thank you for your time and consideration.