

SUBJECT: Extending free pre-K eligibility to certain children in foster care

COMMITTEE: Public Education — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 13 ayes — Dutton, Lozano, Allen, Allison, K. Bell, Bernal, Buckley, M. González, Huberty, K. King, Meza, Talarico, VanDeaver

0 nays

WITNESSES: For — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Andrea Chevalier, Association of Texas Professional Educators; Jason Sabo, Children at Risk; Charles Gaines, Raise Your Hand Texas; Grover Campbell, Texas Association of School Boards; Dena Donaldson, Texas AFT; Barry Haenisch, Texas Association of Community Schools; Amy Beneski, Texas Association of School Administrators; Paige Williams, Texas Classroom Teachers Association; Mark Terry, Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors Association; Eric Woomer, Texas Pediatric Society; Suzi Kennon, Texas PTA; Starlee Coleman, Texas Public Charter Schools Association; Carrie Griffith, Texas State Teachers Association; Brittney Taylor, TexProtects; Jennifer Allmon, The Texas Catholic Conference of Bishops; Molly Weiner, United Ways of Texas; Lisa Norman; Thomas Parkinson)

Against — None

On — (*Registered, but did not testify:* Eric Marin, Fuat Aki, Monica Martinez, and Melody Parrish, Texas Education Agency)

BACKGROUND: Education Code sec. 29.153 requires a school district with at least 15 eligible children to offer free prekindergarten classes. Children who are at least age 3 are eligible for enrollment if they meet certain other criteria, including being educationally disadvantaged, unable to understand English, or homeless or having a parent who is an active-duty member of the military, a member of the military who was injured or killed on active duty, or a person eligible for the Star of Texas Award. A child who is or ever has been in the conservatorship of the Department of Family and Protective Services also is eligible.

DIGEST: HB 725 would extend eligibility for free public school prekindergarten programs to a child at least 3 years old living in Texas who was or had been in foster care in another state or territory.

This bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2021.

SUPPORTERS SAY: HB 725 would help Texas families with young children who had been in another state's foster care system access important prekindergarten education opportunities. The Legislature has recognized the importance of early intervention for children in the Texas foster care system by making them eligible for free prekindergarten. This same eligibility should be extended to children from another state who have been adopted by Texans or who are living with relatives in this state. Whether or not these children were located in Texas during their time in foster care should not be the determining factor in whether they now qualify for services designed to help the neediest young learners prepare for kindergarten.

The Legislative Budget Board in its fiscal note estimates the number of eligible students would not be large enough to have a significant fiscal impact to the Foundation School Program.

CRITICS SAY: No concerns identified.