



POLICY MANUAL



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BACKGROUND ON EARLY REACH

Early REACH is a 4 year pilot program designed to establish 800 new spaces in high-quality child care centers. This pilot program is funded through Harris County's American Rescue Plan Act (ARPA) funding.

Harris County will partner with existing child care centers to offer high-quality spaces to prioritized families. Spaces will be available to children ages 0 to 4 who either A) live in areas of Harris County with a high Social Vulnerability Index,¹ and/or B) whose families face economic hardship. In addition to increasing the number of children served in high-quality centers, the pilot aims to stabilize small child care businesses by securing a livable wage for child care workers.

Harris County is partnering with BakerRipley and United Way of Greater Houston to oversee, implement, and make decisions on behalf of Early REACH. BakerRipley convenes an advisory committee composed of child care centers, families, Workforce Solutions representatives, and other key stakeholders to oversee Early REACH's successful implementation. For more information about how to participate in this advisory committee please visit this [website](#).

OVERVIEW OF PROGRAM STANDARDS

The following Early REACH standards, alongside the center's contract with BakerRipley, establish the rules, procedures, and guidance for implementing this pilot. As this is a pilot program, modifications may occur during its implementation at the request of BakerRipley or the Early REACH Advisory Committee. All programs selected to participate will be utilizing Reggio Emilia-inspired approaches and are required to provide a flexible learning environment to support this methodology. Harris County has final approval on any changes to program standards. Any changes will be documented and promptly communicated to all affected parties.

CHILD CARE CENTERS

Eligibility to participate

To participate in Early REACH, a child care center must:

- Have an effective, full permit issued by Texas Health and Human Services, Child Care Regulation (CCR) to operate in Harris County, Texas. Exception: Centers in their initial permit stage must be equipped to accommodate and support inclusive care for children with special needs, and all other Early REACH standards.
- Meet compliance with minimum CCR requirements and any federal, state or local laws as they pertain to operating a child care business. Centers must not have been cited for more than one of the following deficiencies and/or abuse/neglect violations within the last year of applying:
 - 745.635 Criminal Convictions of Central Registry Findings-Take appropriate Action

- 745.641 Background Checks Requirement - Providing Direct Care
 - 746.1201(4) Responsibilities of Employees and Caregivers - Ensure No Child is Abused, Neglected, or Exploited
 - 746.1201(5) Responsibilities of Employees and Caregivers - Report Suspected Child Abuse, Neglect or Exploitation
 - 745.621 Background Check Requirements
 - 746.1003 Directors Responsibilities
 - 746.1201(1) Responsibilities of Employees and Caregivers - Demonstrate Competency, Good Judgment, Self-Centered
 - 746.1203(2) Responsibilities of Caregivers - Supervision of Children
 - 746.1315 First Aid and CPR Requirements
 - 746.2805 Prohibited Punishments
 - 746.3805(a) Administering Medication - How to Administer Medication
 - 746.3805(b) Administering Medication - How to Administer Medication
- Meet one of the following quality standards:
 - Be certified as a Texas Rising Star (TRS) 2, 3, or 4 rated center or meet Entry Level Designation; or
 - Be seeking or have accreditation from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC); or
 - If the center is not currently involved in a quality improvement program, they must demonstrate a commitment toward wanting to raise their standards
 - Be able to serve children from 0 to 4 years of age by no later than the start of the school year
 - Have the ability to increase the number of publicly-funded spaces currently offered
 - Example Center A (eligible): Center A currently has 45 children enrolled at their center but their building capacity is 90 children. They can apply for up to 45 Early REACH contracted spaces because they are expanding their capacity by creating additional spaces as long as they are meeting stated Early REACH child/staff ratios by contract execution. .
 - Example Center B (not eligible): Center B currently has 120 children enrolled at their center and their building capacity is 120 children. They will not be eligible for Early REACH contracted spaces because they do not have the ability to create additional spaces in their center, beyond their current enrollment number.

While Early Reach will be accepting child care centers across Harris County, priority will be given to those who are located in a quality child care desert² and those who have the ability to accommodate a larger capacity of Early REACH children and families. Child care centers will be considered part of the Early REACH pilot once they have submitted a completed application, been approved, and have entered into a contract with Early REACH.

¹ For the purposes of this program, high need on the social vulnerability index is considered to be 0.75 or above on the [CDC/ATSDR SVI](#).

Lead Teacher Requirements

Participating centers are required to ensure that each participating classroom will be assigned one lead teacher (at a minimum), responsible for implementation of Early REACH program methods, improvement recommendations, and assessments of children with support from the center's director. That lead teacher must at a minimum:

- Hold a CDA or if no CDA, be enrolled in a CDA class within 120 days of hire to be completed within one year of hire date
- Be present in the Early REACH classroom for the portion of the program day in which the greatest number of children who participate in the program are in attendance

Staff Compensation

All centers must ensure that all lead teachers, assistant teachers, and, when applicable (see appendix), substitutes associated with the Early REACH program and counted in the ratios for Early REACH classrooms are paid a minimum of \$15 per hour. For centers where this represents a change in practice, technical assistance will be provided in updating their budget as part of their participation in the Early REACH pilot to support this shift in payment practice.

Centers participating in the program will be required to submit proof of compensation for each lead teacher, assistant teacher, and when applicable, substitutes in the form of an offer letter to their assigned compliance support monitor (CSM). Offer letters must be submitted to assigned CSM's via email, no later than five (5) business days after new hire date. Offer letters must:

- Be written on center's/company's letterhead.
- Be signed by the employee and center owner and/or director, and must contain the following:
- Staff member's full name (as it appears on state issued ID)
- Title/position: Lead Teacher, Assistant Teacher, or Substitute Teacher
- Employment Status – Part Time or Full Time
- Child care center address
- Early REACH Hire Date

NOTE: Staff who were employed with the center prior to contracting with Early REACH and who have transitioned into an Early REACH staffing role must have documented proof of original date of hire AND the date in which the staff transitioned into an Early REACH role (i.e. Jane Doe: Original hire date - 1/1/1996; Early REACH Transition Date: 8/1/2023) Effective December 1, 2023, supplemental documents in the form of timesheets and payroll registers must be submitted no later than the 5th of every month for the prior month's payroll activities to the center's assigned CSM for all Early REACH staff.

<https://tplapps.rice.edu/shiny/texas-county-child-care-deserts-03/>

Classroom Requirements

To be considered for Early REACH funding, Early REACH classrooms must be open for full days of care Monday through Friday for at least 8 hours a day.

Texas Health and Human Services', Child Care Regulation, defines classroom ratio as the number of children one caregiver may supervise. Child/caregiver ratio is based on the specified age of the children in a caregiver's group or the age of the youngest child in the group. Early REACH centers must meet the following minimum ratios and group sizes in any classroom funded with Early REACH funding.:

Specified Age Group	Teacher to Child Ratio	Maximum Group Size and number of children two or more caregivers may supervise
Infant (0-17 months)	1:4	8
Toddlers (18-23 months)	1:8	16
Toddler (2 years)	1:9	18
Pre-K (3 Years)	1:13	26
Pre-K (4 years)	1:15	30

All centers participating in Early REACH must always adhere to Early REACH child/staff ratios. If a center fails to comply with these ratios, Early REACH may reduce the number of child care spaces to meet program standards. Repeated failure to comply with program ratios will result in probationary status and/or removal from the program.

Extenuating Circumstances Policy: In cases where a center is struggling to meet Early REACH child/staff ratios due to extenuating circumstances such as illness, staff turnover, or other unforeseen challenges, the center may request a temporary adjustment to revert to minimum standards ratios for a specified period. This adjustment will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis, and centers must submit a written request to Early REACH United Way leadership, the center's assigned Compliance Support Monitor and Coach, and provide documentation of the circumstances affecting their staffing levels. During this time, the center's director should ensure that teachers are supported, especially as the increase in children may impact the quality of care. Early REACH will work with the center to create a plan for returning to full compliance as soon as possible.

It is incumbent on the participating center to provide services for the family for the purpose of continuity of care throughout the duration of the pilot as long as the enrolled child is eligible and funding is available. For example, if a center enrolls an Early REACH participating family whose child is 6 months old, the child cannot lose their funding when they become 18 months old.

Supporting Attendance

Every Early REACH child care center must track attendance for each child enrolled and report attendance to BakerRipley using Early REACH's data management system within 48 hours of the attendance date. Child care centers will receive payment for every child who attends at least one day in the month that the center is receiving payment for. The center is responsible for implementing a process to ensure children are safe when they do not arrive at school. If a child is unexpectedly absent, and the designated family member has not contacted the program within one hour of the program start time, the program must attempt to contact the parent to ensure the child's wellbeing.

Early REACH child care centers will need to notify BakerRipley when an enrolled child does not attend the center and they are unable to contact the child's family for over 2 weeks. Early REACH program sites will be responsible for noting if excessive absences are due to a child's documented chronic illness, disability, or court-ordered custody or visitation agreement. If a child has excessive absences due to custody agreements the program site at a minimum, the center should work with the family member who enrolled the child to identify a plan for establishing continuous attendance when the child is with the enrolled family member.

BakerRipley will provide Early REACH program sites with information and resources about the benefits of regular attendance. BakerRipley will also attempt to make direct contact with a child's parents if a child has multiple unexplained absences (such as 10 days of consecutive absences without contact with the center). BakerRipley and the Early REACH program site will use attendance data to identify children with patterns of absence that put them at risk of missing more than forty program days per year, per the Texas Workforce Commission attendance policy for infants and toddlers and develop strategies to improve individual attendance among identified children. These strategies may include contacting families directly to encourage attendance and connecting them with community resources to help them ensure their child's attendance.

Supporting attendance of children experiencing homelessness

If a program determines a child is experiencing homelessness, it must allow the child to attend for up to 30 days³ or as long as allowed under state licensing requirements, without immunization and other records, to give the family reasonable time to present these documents. A program must work with families to get children immunized as soon as possible in order to comply with state licensing requirements. If a child experiencing homelessness is unable to attend classes regularly because the family does not have transportation to and from the program facility, the program must utilize community resources, where possible, to provide transportation for the child.

Required Reporting

Participating centers must complete monthly reports, which include:

- Number of classrooms participating in the Early REACH Program
- Number of expanded classroom spaces
- Number of children enrolled in a classroom space and their associated attendance with reasons for absence if given
- Number of children no longer enrolled in a classroom space with documented reason
- Number of teachers participating in Early REACH classrooms with basic demographic data such as race, ethnicity, and gender
- Number of teachers who exit Early REACH classrooms with documented reason
- Number of children with disabilities and documentation detailing the supports being offered to them
- The number of children transitioning between classrooms. For example, if 2 children move from the Toddler 2 Classroom to the Toddler 3 Classroom, this transition must be documented and reported.

Centers may be asked to complete additional reporting as required by contractual obligations or pilot evaluation requirements.

In accordance with HHS standards: <https://www.hhs.texas.gov/sites/default/files/documents/doing-business-with-hhs/provider-portal/protective-services/ccl/min-standards/chapter-746-centers.pdf>

All child care centers are required to report the following to the Early REACH Program Supervisor, assigned Early REACH coach, and assigned Compliance Support Monitor within the specified timeframe:

- **Within 24 hours:**
 - Any allegations of suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation against the child care center or any of its staff members by a family member of a child in care, Child Care Regulation, Child Protective Services, Law Enforcement, or any other child welfare agency.

Note: *This is in addition to reporting any suspected abuse, neglect, or exploitation to the Texas Child Abuse Hotline (800-252-5400) as required by Child Care Regulation.*
 - Any allegation of serious mistreatment or serious supervision of children reported to Child Care Regulation or any allegation that renders the center unsafe for children in care.
 - Any arrests, indictments, convictions, or involvement with Child Care Regulation, Child Protective Services, Law Enforcement, or any other agencies

providing child or adult protective services of any of the following after acceptance into the program:

- Child Care Center Owner(s)
 - Child Care Center Director(s) or Assistant Director(s) employed at the center
 - Child Care Center staff including teachers, caregivers, substitute caregivers, or volunteers employed or working with children at center
 - Child Care Center Contractor(s) counted in the child-to-caregiver ratio or who may have unsupervised access to children in care
 - Any “high” weighted violations cited by Child Care Regulation
- **Within 3 days:**
 - Any change to the child care center:
 - Name
 - Phone number
 - Address
 - Leadership, such as the owner and/or director
 - Licensed capacity or any other licensing issues that affect Center’s ability to enroll or serve Early REACH students, even temporarily
 - Actual capacity to enroll or serve Early REACH students (including staffing or facility issues affecting care)
 - Type of operating permit
 - Change in property ownership, rental, or lease agreements
 - Written notification from Child Care Regulation regarding citations of any medium - high weighted deficiencies, regardless of whether they are posted on the CCR website.

Service for Children with Disabilities

Early REACH child care centers must ensure that children with disabilities are documented. Acceptable forms of documentation include confirmation of the child’s enrollment in or receipt of benefits from one or more of the following programs:

- Supplemental Security Income (SSI) benefits
- Social Security Disability Insurance (SSDI) benefits
- Texas Health and Human Services, Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) program
- A Head Start program that identified the child as having a disability
- Public school special education services, including Early Childhood Special Education
- Documentation from a qualified healthcare provider

As part of their monthly reporting Early REACH centers will need to include specifications and documentation on how they are supporting children with disabilities through accommodations, service providers, and family outreach.

Coaching and Quality Improvement Support System

1. **Early Childhood Coach:** All participating centers will work with an assigned United Way Early Childhood Coach that will provide individualized, bespoke coaching services. Alongside this coach, participating centers will work through challenges, receive trainings, and be in regular contact with them about the day-to-day operations of their center. All participating centers will work with their assigned United Way coach to develop an action plan.. Action plans will specifically address the S.M.A.R.T goals identified and agreed upon by the coach and center staff. Development of action plans will include teachers focusing on areas of growth, verbal or written feedback, and recommended resources and self-study assigned by the coach using program platforms. , Trainings may include how to use the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) tool, how to use the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) tool, Quarterly Professional Development trainings for teachers, Leadership Development training for directors, and training on how the center can obtain MWBE status.
2. **Quality Rated Cohort Groups:** Child care centers that are struggling with implementing quality improvement plans or are placed in provisional or probationary status will be able to access additional resources through quality rated cohort groups. These cohort groups will offer child care centers the following benefits:
 - Opportunities to learn best practices from existing high-quality centers in the program;
 - Additional and targeted coaching hours; and
 - Higher touch technical assistance supports

United Way of Greater Houston will be providing these support services and will work in partnership with individual centers to ensure they have all the resources they need to provide children high-quality experiences in their classrooms.

Compliance Support Monitoring

All child care centers participating in Early REACH will have at least three annual documented announced visits by United Way’s compliance and support monitors. These visits will ensure compliance with Early REACH standards and policies, including, but not limited to, classroom staffing, classroom attendance, adherence to coaching recommendations, and the required program reporting.

Additional visits, both announced or unannounced, may occur if:

- the child care center fails to meet program requirements,

- fails to adhere to criteria outlined in the child care center's quality improvement plan, or
- indicates a need for technical assistance.

Failure to adhere to program guidelines will result in the center being placed on a service improvement plan. Failure to meet the requirements outlined in the service improvement plan, address concerns, and/or failure to allow Early REACH coaches, Compliance and Support Monitors or other identified Early REACH staff access to the center may lead to termination of contract."

Communication

- **With Families:** Child care centers are responsible for maintaining timely and necessary communication with all Early REACH families. Centers should ensure there is a documented record of attempted and successful communication with Early REACH families. Examples of where documentation should exist include but are not limited to issues related to attendance, transition to prekindergarten, expressed concerns about center or program, behavioral concerns, transfer requests, adding a new child if newborn or gained custody, and voluntary withdrawal from the program.
- **With BakerRipley, United Way, and Harris County:** A timely, honest, and supportive communication environment will be expected of all Early REACH centers, BakerRipley, United Way, and Harris County staff members. Clear and consistent communication plays a pivotal role in achieving and sustaining the high standards of quality that Early REACH aims to support.

To ensure alignment and mutual accountability, communication expectations will be explicitly outlined in the center agreement. These expectations will cover a range of communication types, including but not limited to:

- **Timely Reporting:** Centers will be required to promptly report significant incidents, staffing challenges, compliance updates, and other relevant operational matters. Regular updates on progress toward quality improvement goals are essential for transparency and ongoing support.
- **Proactive Communication:** Centers are expected to anticipate potential challenges and notify relevant parties as early as possible. Whether related to staffing ratios, safety concerns, or compliance issues, proactive communication will enable collaborative problem-solving and help prevent larger issues from arising.
- **Feedback and Collaboration:** Open lines of communication should be maintained between centers and Early REACH partners, such as BakerRipley, United Way, and Harris County staff. This includes active participation in feedback discussions, quality improvement initiatives, and training opportunities. Centers will be encouraged to both give and receive feedback constructively to foster continuous improvement.

- **Parent and Community Engagement:** Centers striving for increased quality will also need to prioritize effective communication with parents and community members. This includes sharing information about program enhancements, child progress, and any upcoming changes, ensuring parents are engaged and informed throughout their child’s development.

Failure to meet these communication standards can hinder the ability to achieve quality improvement goals and may result in the termination of the contract. Maintaining a consistent, honest, and collaborative communication culture is critical to the success of the Early REACH program and its participating centers. All parties must uphold these standards to ensure that centers can effectively grow and improve in their quality of care.

Suspension/Expulsion

While Early REACH will not withhold funds from any program that deems suspension and expulsion necessary in an individual case, centers must assure that suspension and expulsion will only be used as a last resort for a child for the safety of the child, staff, and other children in the classroom. The process of suspension and expulsion can only be determined with trusting collaboration between an early childhood mental health consultant, parents or designated adult family members, program staff, and other community support when no other developmentally appropriate options are available. United Way coaches will be available to provide support and technical assistance for Early REACH centers as they make decisions that are best for the child regarding suspensions and/or expulsions.

In line with our goal to promote positive behavioral outcomes, Early REACH offers two options for centers when addressing suspensions or expulsions:

Early REACH is dedicated to fostering inclusive environments that nurture the growth and development of every child, regardless of ability. We understand that guiding and responding to challenging behaviors, developmental needs, or disabilities can be complex, and we recognize that teachers may sometimes feel frustrated or lack specific skills to address certain behaviors effectively. However, expelling or suspending children from care does not align with our values and can negatively impact both the child and their family. Research and guidelines from the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) affirm that high-quality, consistent early education experiences are crucial for developing social-emotional skills, positive behaviors, and a strong foundation for lifelong learning.

1. **Behavioral Plan Development:** The center can work collaboratively with Early REACH to develop a comprehensive behavioral support plan for the child. This plan should include strategies for managing challenging behaviors both in the classroom and at home, along with additional support as needed. In extreme circumstances, a center may suspend a child from the program (for up to 2 days) and must immediately contact their coach to develop a plan for the child to return to care.
2. **Expulsion from center:** If the center decides not to accept support through Option One and elects to proceed with expulsion, the following will occur: The child’s space will remain vacated, and no

other child will be enrolled in that spot. Instead, the space will be reserved for the child, ensuring their enrollment follows them should circumstances change.

Early childhood inclusion embodies the values, beliefs, and practices that uphold every child's right to participate in a range of activities and environments. Expulsion disrupts a child's opportunity to form stable, supportive relationships, impacts family stability, and limits access to essential resources and support. Early REACH is committed to partnering with teachers, recognizing the challenges they face, and providing tools and training to build their confidence and effectiveness in guiding all children's behavior. With the use of the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment (DECA) system, we equip teachers with evidence-based strategies to support social-emotional development, resilience, and positive behavior management. DECA helps staff understand each child's unique strengths and areas for growth, creating individualized approaches that foster a positive classroom environment.

Each center is expected to have a policy in place within their handbooks that reflects or exceeds the below policies, ensuring a consistent and supportive approach for all children, including those with special rights and behavioral needs. This policy should be communicated clearly to all staff, families, and caregivers, reinforcing the commitment to providing an inclusive, nurturing environment where every child can thrive. Failure to follow this policy may result in termination from the program to ensure the highest standards of care and support for all children and families.

Our program includes a dedicated Behavior Support Specialist who will collaborate with staff and families to develop tailored support plans, empower teachers to create a stable, and create an inclusive space for every child. We also value the importance of data in informing our decisions. By analyzing behavioral support and intervention data, we continually refine our practices and implement strategies to actively reduce expulsions and suspensions. In line with these principles, we will adhere to the policies below to ensure inclusive practices, effective behavioral support, and positive outcomes for every child, teacher, and family in Early REACH.

Child care centers must contact BakerRipley and United Way as soon as possible when a child is at-risk for suspension or expulsion due to behavior concerns. In adherence to the commitment to fair and just practices, participating childcare centers must adhere strictly to steps below before suspension or expulsion may be considered or executed:

1. Contact the child care center coach for recurring issues with a child that requires additional support.
2. Create and retain documentation of incidents involving the child in care.
3. Create an action plan for the child that applies to both in-center and at-home environments.
4. Deploy strategies provided by the child care center coach to manage challenging behavior.
5. Deploy resources provided during prior professional development training.
6. Contact the child's family providing feedback about progress in the classroom.

7. Determine if a referral to Early Childhood Intervention services is appropriate for the child and family needs.

If after these steps are taken, the participating child care center deems suspension is necessary, the goal should be for the child to be returned to normal participation as soon as possible with various strategies in place, such as:

- Maintain documentation for the child in the classroom and at home.
- A written plan for support for the child in the classroom and at home.
- Coaching or professional development for supporting staff in trauma-based restorative strategies and how to manage challenging behavior
- Ongoing direct contact with the family about student progress in the classroom.
- Determining whether a referral to early intervention services is appropriate for the child.

Early REACH Provisional Status

Centers may be placed on provisional status in the Early REACH program at the discretion of Early REACH leadership. This status may apply to centers that are new to the program and/or have not attained TRS entry-level designation.

New centers on provisional status:

- Will be enrolled in a quality rated cohort group as directed by United Way compliance and support monitors
- May participate in Early REACH if they maintain adequate progress as reported to Early REACH by United Way's compliance and support monitors. Adequate progress may include, but is not limited to, qualifying and attaining entry-level designation for Texas Rising Star (TRS). For more information on attaining entry level designation please visit this [website](#).

Centers that do not achieve at least a two-star rating during the initial twelve months may, at United Way's sole discretion and not subject to appeal, be granted an additional six months in Early REACH on probationary status.

Early REACH Probationary Status

Centers may be placed on probationary status in the Early REACH program if they:

- Do not achieve at least a TRS two-star rating during the initial twelve months of participation in the program
- Lose their TRS star rating certification
- Lose their NAEYC accreditation, and/or
- In a probationary period with TRS

- Failing to meet program expectations and/or contractual obligations including but not limited to child/staff ratios or any violation that places a child at risk.

Centers placed in Early REACH probationary status:

- Will be placed on a Service Improvement Plan
- Will be enrolled in a quality rated cohort group as directed by quality rated guidelines and requirements
- May continue to participate in Early REACH and accept new children into participating classrooms for up to six

(6) consecutive months if they maintain adequate progress as reported to Early REACH by the center's Compliance and Support Monitor

Center Deficiencies

Moderate Deficiencies (5 or more, Medium-High): Centers with 5 or more Medium-High deficiencies within a 12-month period will be placed on a 6-month Probationary period. During this time, they will be placed on a Service Improvement Plan aimed at addressing the identified deficiencies. Additionally, centers that consistently violate or fail to adhere to program procedures and expectations may also be subject to probation. Failure to demonstrate improvement may result in:

- Reduction of authorized classroom spaces or denial of new classroom spaces,
- Removal of Early REACH children, and/or
- Removal from the Early REACH program

Severe Deficiencies (1 or more, High): Centers with any High-Weighted deficiencies involving child safety will face immediate review by the review committee that consists of representatives from Early REACH's leadership team and BakerRipley's compliance team to determine the appropriate course of action by Early REACH. Early REACH will notify the center upon receiving notice of the deficiency and the review committee will conduct a thorough investigation, which may take up to 30 days. If additional time is needed, the review committee will provide written notification to the center. Review may result in:

- Center will be placed on a probation period. During this time, they will be placed on a Service Improvement Plan aimed at addressing the identified deficiencies. Failure to demonstrate improvement may result in removal from the Early REACH program
- Removal from the Early REACH program

Service Improvement Plan

Centers may be placed on a written service improvement plan with specific timelines and deliverables if Early REACH leadership, in its sole judgment, determines it is necessary. This may occur following a center's failure to comply with Early REACH program policies or meet the terms, conditions, or obligations outlined in the Early REACH Center Agreement. These improvement

plans are designed to guide centers back on track and uphold the quality standards that are central to Early REACH's mission.

A center on a service improvement plan that fails to cure the conditions outlined in the service improvement plan by the required timeline may be subject to consequences including;

- Reduction of authorized classroom spaces or denial of new classroom spaces,
- Removal of Early REACH children, and/or
- Removal from the Early REACH program.

Removal from Early REACH Program

Centers may be removed from the Early REACH program and have their Early REACH agreement terminated if they:

- Receive a citation from Child Care Regulation for abuse, neglect, or exploitation of a child in care
Note: if the citation is overturned after due process (administrative review and/or appeal of the citation), the center can reapply for readmittance into Early REACH
- Commit fraud including providing false or misleading information to the program or dual enrollment of a child who is already receiving subsidized care
- Fail to make progress towards continuous quality improvement plan
- Fail to meet quality rating requirements as outlined in this policy manual
- Fail to meet the expectations for centers outlined in this policy manual
- Undergo any of the following facility changes throughout the life of their contract:
 - Change in ownership
 - Change in location
 - Change in facility type with Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) Child Care Regulation (CCR)
 - Revocation of the permit to operate

Note: *The Center will not be entitled to payment until requirements to be an Early REACH Center are met and a new Agreement is signed in the event a center is removed from the Early REACH program for any reasons listed above. This includes the application phase after the sale of a facility and before a new permit is issued by CCR.*

Implementation Study

The Early REACH program will be partnering with research institutions to learn from this pilot and study the effects that this new payment and quality improvement model could have on the Harris County early childhood system. Early REACH child care centers will be required to participate in the research study and will be seen as crucial partners in creating a new funding model that uses public funds to serve children and families in a way that benefits them the most. Early REACH child

care centers are required to contribute data, participate in semi-structured interviews, and allow researchers to come to visit their facilities.

Business Coaching

Business Coaching has been provided to Early REACH centers, focusing on areas such as leadership, marketing, financial planning, and enrollment. Ongoing support will ensure centers are equipped to improve operations and financial health. Participation in Business Coaching is mandatory for all Early REACH centers, and it will play a critical role in ensuring the long-term success of both individual centers and the program as a whole.

PAYMENTS

Overview

Families participating in the Early REACH program will not be responsible for paying for their children's care. BakerRipley will pay Early REACH child care centers directly on behalf of families. The information in this section will focus on the payment model and rates child care centers should expect when they elect to participate in the Early REACH program.

Rates

Age Group	Daily	Monthly	Quarterly
Infant (0-17 months)	\$74.00	\$1,609.50	\$4,828.50
Toddlers (18-36 months)	\$69.00	\$1,500.75	\$4,502.25
PreK (36+ months)	\$64.00	\$1,392.00	\$4,176.00

Spaces subject to the rates outlined above are defined as a full day, full week, full year of child care. Early REACH rates are based on full-time care and will be paid as such even if the participating child is attending on a part-time basis.

Paid Holidays/Closure Days: Early REACH centers will be paid for each classroom space for up to nine (9) holidays/pre-planned closures during each calendar year. Additional closures that are not classified as Emergency Closures will not be paid. The Center will report planned closure days each year.

Emergency Closures: Early REACH centers will be paid for days when the facility is closed due to emergency situations, such as weather, fire, electrical, or gas outage for up to five (5) business days per calendar year. The Center must notify BakerRipley that the facility is closed within 24 hours of emergency closing.

Payment Model

Initial set up:

- After Early REACH child care centers are selected, BakerRipley will award each selected center a number of contracted spaces by age band. The number of awarded spaces by age group in the initial contract will determine that center's initial monthly payment.
- In the first three calendar months of a center's participation in the pilot, BakerRipley will make upfront payments to the Early REACH center at the beginning of each month based on the number of contracted spaces by age band they were awarded.
 - **Example:** if a center was contracted ten (10) toddler seats, they would receive a monthly payment of \$14,490 (10 contracted spaces x toddler monthly rate \$1,449 = \$14,490)
- BakerRipley will make monthly payments to Early REACH centers for their first three full calendar months of participation without taking enrollment into account. Therefore, Early REACH centers have the first three full calendar months of the pilot to recruit and enroll eligible children for their contracted Early REACH spaces. If a center is contracted mid-month, the prorated month will not count towards the first full three calendar months. This includes centers contracted between June 2023 through August 2023.
 - **Example 1:** A center is contracted on the first business day of the month in July 2023; the first three full calendar months will be July, August, and September for receiving payments. Beginning October, Early REACH will not pay for spaces that have remained unfilled for the first three months. If unfilled spaces are filled in months four (October) or five (November), the center will receive a supplemental payment for newly filled spaces.
 - **Example 2:** A center is contracted mid-month in July, the first month for calculating the first three months begins in August. However, they will still receive a prorated payment for July. The three months would be August, September, and October. They will no longer received payment for spaces that have remained unfilled for the first three months beginning month four (November) and also month five (December).After three calendar months of participating in the pilot, if a center has filled all contracted spaces, their monthly upfront payment will remain the same or be adjusted based on the age bands served, if different and as long as funds are available. If they did not enroll all spaces and have openings in their allocation, that center's monthly payment will be calculated based on the enrolled spaces.
 - **Example 3:** if the previous center who was contracted ten (10) toddler seats in June has filled only five (5) of them at the end of August, their payment for September would be \$7,245.00 (5 enrolled spaces x toddler monthly rate of \$1,449.00 = \$7,245.00)

- Centers will have months four and five to fill the spot with an eligible child. Centers may fill this spot with an eligible child from a different age band than the child that previously occupied it with the approval of their assigned BakerRipley eligibility specialist. If the spot is unfilled, that spot may be reallocated for month six, based on demand, capacity, and funding across the pilot program.
 - **Example:** if center A has unfilled spaces, but center B is oversubscribed, spaces may be moved from center A to center B in month six if BakerRipley is otherwise unable to add more spaces to meet demand. Note: A reduction and/or increase of spaces will require an amendment to their agreement via an Early REACH Authorization Change Form to approve the reduction and/or increase of contracted spaces.

On-going:

- Centers will be paid in advance monthly as long as spaces remain filled.
- If a child withdraws from or stops attending an Early REACH space, or moves from one Early REACH center to another, that center will still be paid for that contracted space for the month following the last month the child attended for at least one day.
 - Example: if a child's last day is in July, the center will continue to receive payment for that child's space for the month of August while the center works on filling the space with another child.
- The center has two calendar months following the last month the child attended for at least one day to fill that space. Any vacant space unfilled for two calendar months may be reallocated to another participating Early REACH center, depending on demand, capacity, and funding across the pilot program.
 - Example: if a child's last day is in July, the center has August and September to fill that space.

Note: In instances where Early REACH undergoes significant transitions, such as the implementation of a new system or changes in enrollment policies (e.g., shifting from a first-come, first-served basis to a priority scoring system), child care centers will not lose unfilled spaces, and no penalties will be imposed during these transitional periods.
- If additional spaces are approved beyond the contracted amount, payments will be processed as follows:
 - **Example 1:** If a center is approved to increase by 1 space effective from the 1st of the upcoming month, a full payment will be made for that space.
 - **Example 2:** If a center is approved to increase by 1 space on a date other than the beginning of the month (e.g., the 15th), payment will be prorated based on the remaining business days in the month. The prorated amount will be calculated as follows: (daily rate x business days remaining).

Payments to a center cannot exceed the number of contracted spaces as stated in the center agreement. Additionally, payments cannot exceed more than 100% of each center's licensed or actual capacity or exceed the sum of the capacity of each classroom as defined by the allowed ratios in this agreement. BakerRipley may adjust the number of Early REACH contracted spaces by delivering an Early REACH Authorization Change Form. Such a form will be considered delivered when hand-delivered, sent by certified mail, return receipt requested or by email with a delivery receipt.

Note: *Early REACH is funded throughout September 2026. Beginning in June 2025, Early REACH may begin to reduce the number of paid classroom spaces at centers based on budget needs as children leave the spaces. The center will still be paid for that contracted space for the month the child last attended for at least one day.*

Rate Differences in Tuition and Center Fees

Early REACH pays for regular full-time child care, which includes the cost of classroom supplies, materials and application/enrollment/registration fees ("Regular Cost for Care"). Upon enrollment in Early REACH, a family will not be charged the difference between the center's published tuition rate and the amount of the contracted space for any child participating in the program. However, Early REACH is not responsible for covering fees outside of tuition for families in the Early REACH program including:

- Incidental fees associated with early drop-off or late pick-up outside normal operating hours.
 - Centers may charge these fees; however, these costs will not be covered by Early REACH and should be charged directly to the family.
- Field trips
- Transportation fees
- Uniforms
- Other center fees

In order to support programs serving children from diverse economic backgrounds or using multiple funding sources, a program may charge fees to private-pay families and other non-Early REACH enrolled families to the extent allowed by any other applicable federal, state, or local funding sources.

CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

This section details the eligibility, application, and attendance requirements for children and families participating in the Early REACH Pilot Program.

Eligibility Requirements

Children and families are eligible to participate if they meet these requirements:

- **Residency:** Live in Harris County AND
- **Age:** Children are aged zero to four AND
- **Demonstrate financial need via one of the following:**
 - Live in a family that makes [85% less of State Median Income](#) (SMI) (approx. \$87,732 annually for a family of four, see table below for more information) OR
 - Live in an area of high need according to the [Social Vulnerability Index](#) (high need considered to be 0.75 or above) OR
 - Are experiencing homelessness OR
 - Are in foster care OR
 - Receive WIC, SNAP, TANF, free or reduced lunch, or SSI income

NOTE: There is no requirement for family members or children to be citizens to be served by Early REACH.

Family Size – Number of Persons in the Family	Monthly Income 85% SMI	Annual Income 85% SMI
2	\$4,971	\$59,652
3	\$6,141	\$73,692
4	\$7,311	\$87,732
5	\$8,481	\$101,772
6	\$9,650	\$115,800
7	\$9,870	\$118,440
8	\$10,089	\$121,068
9	\$10,308	\$123,696
10	\$10,528	\$126,336
11	\$10,747	\$128,964
12	\$10,966	\$131,592
13	\$11,186	\$134,232
14	\$11,405	\$136,860

15

\$11,624

\$139,488

A recruitment and outreach plan will be developed to detail the method to reach prioritized families. Child care centers shall make all reasonable efforts to recruit eligible families and children to fill their approved classroom spaces.

BakerRipley shall conduct outreach efforts and search the Early REACH waitlist for eligible families and children to fill approved classroom spaces. If, after 30 days, outreach efforts have been conducted by both the center and BakerRipley, all families on the Early REACH waitlist have been contacted, and no eligible children are available to fill a classroom space, a non-eligible family may be enrolled if:

- Family income is equal to or less than 100% SMI OR
- The children are living at an address that falls within a Census Tract with a Social Vulnerability Index (SVI) between 0.5-0.75 on a scale from 0 to 1.

Eligibility Determination

The following documents will be accepted to verify eligibility:

Eligibility Requirement	Documents to Verify Eligibility
Residence: Live in Harris County	<p>Please provide one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Current photo ID with address ● Current utility bill (water, gas, cell phone, internet, or other utility provider to applicant address) ● Lease ● Mortgage Statement ● Deed ● Mail from government office, financial institution, or utility provider to applicant at address
Age: Children aged zero to four	<p>Please provide one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Birth certificate (U.S. Government-Issued or Foreign Government-Issued) ● Court records ● Passport ● State-issued identification ● Hospital certificate of live birth ● Immigration card ● Social Security Administration record

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Immigration court order • Homeland Security documents <p><i>Note: Procedures shall be developed to allow the enrollment of children without documented proof of age who are clearly (visibly) under the age of 4 at the time of enrollment and will remain below 4 for 1 year after initial enrollment. Such enrollment shall be for 1 year to allow the family to obtain documented proof of the child's age.</i></p>
<p>Proof of Income or Other Eligibility</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Live in a family that makes 85% less of SMI OR • Live in a <u>census tract</u> area of high need according to the SVI (high need considered to be .75 or above) <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are experiencing homelessness • Are in foster care • Receive WIC, SNAP, TANF, free or reduced lunch, or SSI income 	<p>Proof of Income with one of the following:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 2022 tax return listing all adult household members • 2022 W-2(s) for every job held by each adult household member • 2022 1099(s) for every job held by each adult in the household • Unemployment compensation statement <p>OR</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Pay stubs from the past 30 days prior to application • Profit & Loss ledger from the past 30 days prior to application date • Stipend(s), alimony, pension/retirement/annuity monthly award letter(s) • Letter from employer verifying monthly salary/wages prior to application • SSI or SSDI income statement • Proof of Public Benefit (TANF, WIC, SNAP, National School Lunch Program (Free and/or Reduced School Lunch) • Certification of Zero income statement

Additional Children in an Eligible Family: Once a family has been deemed eligible for participating in the Early REACH pilot program, any new children the family may have will also be eligible for the Early REACH program.

Eligibility Duration

A child's eligibility is valid for the duration of the Early REACH program or until September 1st after their 4th birthday.

- **Example 1:** A child turns 4 on 8/5/2024. The child would be eligible until 9/1/2024.
- **Example 2:** A child turns 4 on 9/5/2024. The child would be eligible until 9/1/2025.

Application Process

BakerRipley will ensure there is a publicly available application for families. This application is available in at least the following languages as soon as practicable: English, Spanish, Chinese, and Vietnamese. The application is available in formats accessible to priority families including but not limited to this [website](#).

The application should be completed by a parent or other family member who is a primary caregiver, foster parent, authorized caregiver, guardian, or the person with whom the child has been placed for purposes of adoption pending a final adoption decree. The official application date shall be the date the initial application was received by BakerRipley.

Applicant Selection Process

While funding is available, applicants who are deemed eligible for Early REACH will be approved. Once a family has been approved, they will be notified and asked to rank the top 3 child care centers of their choice for enrollment. Early REACH will work with families and centers to help ensure a family is matched with their highest choice possible, given constraints around spaces and capacity. This match is contingent upon there being centers with open spaces to fill as part of their contract. In the event that a family does not get their top choice and chooses not to enroll in the center they are matched with, they will be placed on the wait list for the center of preference until a space opens up at that center. In the event there are no centers with Early REACH space open, then the family will be added to a waitlist for a space.

In the event of more applications than funding available, Early REACH will also maintain a wait list for families who have applied but are not yet selected for funding. Families of children not selected will be informed of their place on the waitlist and connected to other resources to support their enrollment in child care.

After the Early REACH program has reached its funding capacity it will prioritize enrollment from the waitlist using the following rubric:

Prioritization Criteria	Points
Families living in an area of high need according to the Social Vulnerability Index (high need considered to be 0.75 or above)	40
Children in foster care	40
Children experiencing homelessness	40
Families receiving WIC, SNAP, or at/or below the poverty level	30
Children aged 0 to 2	20
Children eligible for IDEA Part B or Part C/Special Education services	25

NOTE: *If there are more children who meet priority factors than available spaces, a randomized process will be used to select families.*

Targeted Outreach

Centers with vacant spaces after BakerRipley has screened all applicants meeting the prioritization criteria above may be given the opportunity to recruit families that have not already applied. In these cases, BakerRipley will provide the center the application link for the center to share with families to apply. This will occur after the Early REACH eligibility team has completed the following:

- Reviewed all applications of families that selected the center.
- Reviewed applications of families living within 10 miles of the childcare center.
- Extended the childcare center to families outside the specified criteria.

Disenrollment Procedures

The Early REACH procedures manual will address how families will disenroll from the program. Such procedures shall include but are not limited to:

- Determining if an alternate Early REACH placement (transfer) would be beneficial for the families (e.g., if a family is moving to a new part of Harris County where an Early REACH center is located) and referring or adding the family to the waitlist for that program.
 - Families are allowed a maximum of two transfers to a different Early REACH center. Any requests for transfers beyond this limit will be evaluated on a case-by-case basis.
- Documentation on how Early REACH supports children transitioning to Pre-K programs as they disenroll.
- Documentation of reasons why the family is disenrolling. If the family is disenrolled for any reason other than their own stated desire to disenroll, documentation will include that they were informed of their right to appeal the disenrollment.

***Note:** Families can appeal additional transfers using our grievance procedure*

Parent Webinar

As part of our commitment to keeping families informed and engaged, Early REACH requires all families participating in the program to view the Early REACH Parent Webinar. The purpose of this webinar is to provide essential information about the program, including an overview of policies, reporting requirements, and key expectations for families.

Parental Commitment and Expectations

In accordance with our commitment to maintaining a safe and respectful environment for all, Early REACH requires participants to conduct themselves in a respectful manner towards our dedicated staff, center personnel, and other families. Any form of disrespectful or retaliatory behavior, including but not limited to, verbal abuse, harassment, or intimidation, will not be tolerated. Additionally parents must follow all policies and procedures established by their chosen child care center. Failure to adhere to this policy may result in the termination of assistance or denial of services. All families participating in Early REACH are required to review and sign the Parental Commitment and Expectations form, acknowledging their understanding and agreement to abide by these expectations.

[Parental Commitment and Expectation Form](#)

Grievances Related to Eligibility, Application, and Enrollment

Families have the right to appeal decisions made related to eligibility, application, and enrollment in Early REACH. Once a family has been deemed ineligible, they will receive written communication via email stating BakerRipley's grievance policy for denied applicants to contest the result of the eligibility, application, and enrollment process.

Attendance Expectations for Families

Early REACH child care centers will need to communicate to all selected families that they must agree to enroll their children for full time (5 days a week), full year care (aligned to the center's calendar). The maximum number of allowable annual unexcused absences for a child funded in the Early REACH program is 40 cumulative days or 10 consecutive days. Annual absences will be counted from July through June. Once a family has reached 20 cumulative days or 5 consecutive absences, they will be required to develop an attendance action plan in collaboration with their child care center to support the child's regular attendance in the program. This attendance action plan will also be submitted to their United Way compliance and support monitor to keep on file. At a minimum, this attendance action plan will identify barriers to attendance and provide necessary support to the family. If a participating family continues to struggle with attendance, their child care center or Early REACH may place them at risk of losing their funded space. Families that do not bring their children into their assigned center for 10 consecutive days without contact with the center or with BakerRipley would be considered to have dropped out and are subject to losing their space.

Note: A full day as defined by the center's policy manual.

APPENDIX: DEFINITIONS

- **Advisory Committee:** A community-based committee composed of child care centers, families, representatives from Workforce Solutions, and other key stakeholders to serve in an advisory capacity to the Governing Council.
- **Assistant Teacher:** A teacher who is in the classroom for a minimum of 15 hours per week who supports the lead teacher by helping with classroom management, lesson preparation, and providing individual attention to children in care. They assist in daily activities, ensuring the classroom runs smoothly, and children receive needed guidance. Assistant teachers must be compensated at the program teacher rate.
- **Children in foster care:** Refers to the 24-hour substitute care for children placed away from their parents or guardians and for whom the state agency has placement and care responsibility. This includes but is not limited to placements in foster family homes, foster homes of relatives, group homes, emergency shelters, residential facilities, child-care institutions, and pre-adoptive homes. A child is in foster care in accordance with this definition regardless of whether the foster care facility is licensed, and payments are made by the state or local agency for the care of the child, whether adoption subsidy payments are being made prior to the finalization of an adoption, or whether there is a federal matching of any payments that are made.
- **Expulsion:** Complete removal or un-enrolling a child based on repeated and continuous behavior.
- **Floater Teacher:** A floater teacher regularly rotates between classrooms, providing consistent support during busy periods, staff breaks, or transition times. Unlike substitutes, floaters are a regular part of the center's staff and should be familiar with each classroom's routines and needs. Floater teachers must spend no more than **10 hours per week** in classrooms, providing ongoing support without being assigned to any single classroom full-time. Floater teachers are not considered program staff; therefore, are not required to be compensated at the Early REACH teacher rate.
- **Governing Council:** A group of individuals from BakerRipley and United Way of Greater Houston who have been appointed to oversee and make decisions on behalf of Early REACH.
- **Homelessness:**⁴ Families who lack a fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. If a child is living with non-parent relatives due to loss of housing, economic hardship, substance abuse, incarceration, or a similar reason, the child may meet the definition of a homeless child.
- **Lead Teacher:** The primary teacher responsible for managing the classroom, planning and delivering lessons, working with program early childhood coaches, and overseeing the development of children in the classroom. They set the curriculum, assess children using program evaluation tools, and ensure a positive learning environment. Lead teachers consistently oversee classroom operations.
- **Parent/Caregiver:** In these policies, "Parent/Caregiver" is made in reference to parents, legal caregivers, or person(s) acting as *in loco parentis*.
- **Quality child care desert:** Defined where demand exceeds supply in quality child care seats by at least 3-to-1. Based on a 2020 analysis conducted by the Texas Policy Lab, measured by assessing the ratio between the total supply of quality child care available to the amount of demand/children in the community. The Texas Policy Lab defines a child care market by assessing care within a 3-mile radius

census tract because low-income families usually use care available within a 3-mile radius from their homes.

- **Social Vulnerability Index:** The Center for Disease Control (CDC) SVI uses U.S. Census data to determine the social vulnerability of every census tract. Census tracts are subdivisions of counties for which the Census collects statistical data. The [CDC/ATSDR SVI](#) ranks each tract on 16 social factors, including poverty, lack of vehicle access, and crowded housing, and groups them into four related themes.
- **Substitute Teacher:** A substitute teacher temporarily fills in for lead or assistant teachers due to planned or unplanned absences, for **no more than two days per week**. On the third day in a classroom within the same week, the substitute is considered a program teacher and must be compensated at the program teacher rate for that week. Substitutes provide short-term coverage as needed, often with little advance notice.
- **Suspension:** excluding a child from the classroom, whether by placing him/her in another part of the building or excluding the child from the building or sending a child home early, or limiting the number of hours per day (s)he can attend.
- **Unexcused absence:** absences in which the family does not communicate with the child care center they are enrolled in.

⁴ A full definition of homelessness is available on the McKinney Vento [website](#).

Appendix: Director Requirements

As part of their participation in the Early REACH program, directors listed on a center's Child Care Regulation License, or those serving as acting directors overseeing daily operations at any Early REACH child care center, will be responsible for:

- Attending all quarterly trainings required for Early REACH participation, unless prior notification has been given to, and approval granted by, UW leadership for any absence.
- Working with Early REACH coach on individualized professional development opportunities for director and staff including directors' meetings, family connections training, and quarterly conferences
- Completing each professional development session in its entirety
- Participating in all evaluation activities related to Early REACH training and professional development including but not limited to surveys, interviews, and focus groups
- Submitting all required data for program reporting
- Implementing ideas and learnings from Early REACH leadership training supporting directors as the Center's instructional leader
- Ensuring staff who work in an Early REACH classroom attend required individualized training and coaching
- Designating one staff person to represent the Center for all family engagement training
- Providing support to teachers who work in Early REACH classrooms to complete classroom or child assessments and enter any applicable data into evaluation systems used by the program
- Documenting required Early REACH requirements in a timely manner
- Allowing teachers access to technology including, computers, printers, cameras, tablets, etc. to assist in documentation and any required teacher assignments

Note: While owners are welcome to attend training and professional development opportunities, their involvement will not count toward meeting the program's official requirements for directors.

The information in this policy manual is subject to periodic updates. As more information becomes available, BakerRipley will update this document.⁵

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