



MARCH 2022

Laredo Learns 2030

Healthy Beginnings, Supported Families, High-Quality
Early Care and Learning | Report & Recommendations



Family.

It is the beating heart of Laredo, the energy that powers the city, and the soul that helps us thrive. Our community is built by the families who've made their homes here for generations — and those who've come more recently. How can we honor their dedication, tenacity, and commitment?

We can commit to a bold vision: that we can make Laredo the best place in Texas to be born and raise a family.

To build a strong foundation for our children, we need to support our babies, toddlers, and their parents. We need to deeply understand our early learning ecosystem - our strengths and our challenges. We will need to build pathways to ensure that all children have healthy beginnings, that every family in our community is supported, and that access to high-quality early learning is available to all. We will need to grow with and learn from and with each other.

This is not an easy task. To make Laredo a child-friendly and family-strengthening place to live, we'll need to band together with friends, neighbors, and community leaders. We'll need to work together and learn together, from the City of Laredo to Webb County.

We know that our work will focus on three primary areas: strengthening prenatal and postpartum health services for low-income mothers, infants, and toddlers, increasing our screening efforts to connect children and families to needed home visiting and early intervention supports, and increasing access to high-quality care and learning programs.

In the pages below, you'll learn a little bit more about these systems in Laredo. You'll hear from some community members, read some key findings about the state of our community, and review potential strategies to help us grow into the city we hope to become. As this initiative moves forward, we will need you to learn with us, lead with us, and champion our city. Let's partner together to achieve this bold vision for tomorrow.

We are Laredo. A Learning City. A Leading City. A City with Families at the Center.

Viva Laredo!



A blue ink signature of Pete Saenz, written in a cursive style.

Mayor Pete Saenz



A blue ink signature of Tano E. Tijerina, written in a stylized, cursive script.

Hon. Tano E. Tijerina

Partnering to Understanding the Laredo Landscape

The city of Laredo has committed to a bold effort: to optimize the early care and learning system for Laredo families and create a Learning City at Laredo focused on prenatal-3 (LoC@L PN-3). To begin this work, Texas A&M International University (TAMIU) has partnered with Start Early to conduct a PN-3 system analysis to identify opportunities to strengthen programs, policies, and systems to increase access to all families.



As part of this effort, Start Early has gathered publicly available data about the systems serving children aged 0-3 and their families, with a specific focus on compiling the measures included in the **Community Profile Tool** developed by the National Collaborative for Infants and Toddlers (NCIT)¹. This included a review of Census data, information from the Texas Education Agency, data from Workforce Development Boards, county data sources, and other resources. Start Early also conducted a number of stakeholder interviews with key community leaders and service providers, as well as a parent focus group. Through these interviews, additional qualitative information was collected that provided insight into community values, hopes, and concerns.

Finally, Start Early partnered closely with TAMIU to craft the data profiles below, leveraging the NCIT tool but reflecting the unique needs and strengths of Laredo. Finally, recommendations were developed which align to opportunity areas; these are aimed to support and guide future investments in the early learning space. Note that this report represents a snapshot — not only were some data unavailable, but circumstances, programs, and outcomes can change rapidly. These recommendations are intended to spark discussion and debate, as Laredo community members add their own perspectives and knowledge, and interrogate the findings and interpretations included here.

“Laredo is a very welcoming city - it’s the kind of place that people don’t leave. It’s the deep and rich sense of community. Neighbors help neighbors here. There’s a feeling of unity.” — **GLORIA FLORES, EDUCATION COORDINATOR, WEBB COUNTY**

Inspiring Change: Making Laredo the Best Place to Be Born and Raise a Family

Early life experiences are critical in fostering a child's early brain development and laying the groundwork for lifelong success. Families of all kinds need extra support when raising young children which can cause strain on everything from resources to employment. To ensure that parents and children in Laredo are prepared to thrive, and that the long term economic future of Webb County is bright, prenatal to 3 systems must be high-quality, accessible, and affordable.



More than 1 Million Neural Connections formed every second in the first years of life²

13%

Return on Investment for every dollar spent on high-quality early learning³

\$4.9

Billion estimated total impact of childcare breakdowns on Texas economy⁴

Who Lives in Laredo? Laredo is a young city, relative to both Texas and the United States, which includes a large proportion of multilingual residents and immigrants.

255,505

Total population of Laredo.⁵ (Up **20,000** since 2010)

1/3 of the total population

is under 18.⁶ For comparison, **1/4** of the population in Texas is under 18.

18,684

Estimated children aged 3 and under⁷

Laredo is the county seat of Webb County, which sits on the southwest border between Texas and Mexico. It covers approximately 100 square miles on the north bank of the Rio Grande River, and is connected to Mexico's Nuevo Laredo by the Gateway to the Americas International Bridge.

95% of Laredo's population identifies as White and Latino/Hispanic

25% Approximate percentage of Laredo residents who are foreign-born

» **1/3** have been granted citizenship

» **39% of children under 6** have at least one foreign-born parent.⁸

90% speak a language other than English, primarily Spanish

» Nearly **1/2** speak English 'less than very well.'⁹

The economic needs of Laredo are varied, in part depending on geography. Webb County has one of the highest concentrations of colonias in Texas. Colonias are underdeveloped subdivisions, typically inhabited initially by immigrants and then by their families, that may not have access to basic infrastructure such as water and electricity.¹⁰

\$47,593 Median household income

Average per capita annual income of \$18,771.¹¹

25% of all Laredians are estimated to live in poverty.¹²

39% of children under 5 live in poverty, highlighting the unique pressures on families with young children.



47% of 4 year olds in Laredo are considered ready for Kindergarten based on assessments of language development and early literacy.¹³ Kindergarten readiness is a measure of both a student's preparedness – academically, socially, physically, and holistically – as well as the readiness of family, school, and community.



Ensuring Healthy Beginnings for Laredo's Children

To support a strong start for all children, Laredo commits to strengthening the quality of and access to prenatal/postpartum health services for low-income mothers and health services for low-income infants and toddlers. Access to these services, including prenatal screenings, care for high-risk pregnancies, care during labor and delivery, neonatal and pediatric supports, and the availability of insurance or low-cost care, play a critical role in building a strong foundation and ensuring that Laredo is the best place for a child to be born.

Pre and perinatal outcomes are a key part of a healthy beginning.

In Laredo, there are some promising signs – such as an infant mortality rate lower than Texas as a whole – but also opportunities for improvement.

4.8 per 1,000

Laredo's infant mortality rate

6.5 per 1000: Texas's infant mortality rate¹⁴

11.1% Preterm birth rate.¹⁵

The estimated cost of a preterm baby is approximately **10 times** that of a healthy baby.¹⁶

1 in 2 births in Webb county is by Cesarean; one of the highest rates of any county.¹⁷

C-sections can be life-saving, but can lead to unneeded complications and costs if unnecessary.¹⁸

16.3% of women received no or late prenatal services¹⁹

Access to insurance is also a critical factor in understanding how women and children experience the medical system. In Laredo, many people are without consistent access. There is ample evidence that uninsured people would have increased access to care and experience better health outcomes if insured.²⁰

42% of women between the ages of 15 and 44 have no health insurance.²¹

35% Total uninsured population (under 65).²²

13% Uninsured children under 19.²³



"Actually experiencing birthing and postpartum, it is so shocking what you actually go through. That wasn't delivered in the classes [I took]. I wish there were more options to reach out and really prepare you as much as possible."
— Laredo Parent

Understanding which health services are readily available to Laredo's children and families also provides critical insight.

20 estimated ob/gyns – roughly 1 per every 13,832 Webb county residents

- » Compared to national average of 1 to 7,758 residents.²⁴
- » Approximately 1/2 of all counties in the US are in need of an ob/gyn²⁵

Laredo would benefit from a high risk pregnancy specialist.

20 estimated pediatricians – a ratio of approximately 1 per every 13,832 residents

- » Compared to the national average of 1,429.²⁶
- » 1,029 emergency department visits per 10,000 infants; this rate, which is above average, may indicate a need for increased non-emergent resources.²⁷

Laredo: A City of Supported Families

When families feel supported, they are better able to navigate the challenges of raising young children and build nurturing, responsive parent-child relationships. The overall wellness of Laredo's families includes economic stability and factors like mental health and social support. Access to early identification and intervention for children with developmental needs is also critical. Laredo has a wealth of services and resources for families to access and commits to increasing the number of low-income infants, toddlers, and families who are screened and successfully connected to necessary services by 2030.

What do we know about Laredo's families?

4.6 Number of days per month that Webb County adults report feeling mentally unwell²⁸

35% Adults reporting they are in poor or fair health²⁹

"People focus on the baby, but people don't focus on the mother.... They don't take the time to ask 'How are you feeling? Are you scared? Do you need time off to put your mind together?'"

— Laredo Parent

39% of children under 5 are living below 100% of the federal poverty level.³⁰ (compared to 15.5% nationally.³¹)

For a family of 3, the poverty level is \$21,960.

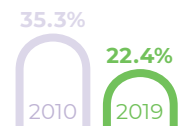
Approximately **150 families** are served annually through programs like the Nurse-Family Partnership and Early Head Start.³²

Early Childhood Intervention (ECI) services can provide crucial support to young children with developmental delays or disabilities and their families. Early identification of special needs in young children can strengthen developmental outcomes.³³

2.6% of children under 5 are identified with a disability and/or receiving disability services³⁴

719 children served by ECI Project Ninos³⁵; **90** children served in Pathways, a program for children who have demonstrated some signs of autism but have not yet received a diagnosis

Food insecurity for children dropped from 35.3% in 2010 to 22.4% in 2019.³⁶



Food and nutrition are key to healthy child development and family wellness. In Laredo, many families would benefit from access to adequate and healthy food.

16% overall food insecurity in Webb County.³⁷



46.2% of children 4 and under receive WIC services; 69% are eligible³⁸

61.8% of Laredo residents would benefit from access to healthy foods³⁹



High-Quality Early Care and Learning is the Foundation for Laredo's Future

Nurturing and enriching early childhood experiences are critical for early brain development. Both the formal early care and education system and Laredo's first educators – families – play a key role in the development of young children, as well as serving as a critical foundation for workforce stability. Laredo's future relies on accessible, affordable and high-quality early learning experiences and robust support for families and educators as part of Laredo Learns 2030.

Access to quality formal childcare is a challenge across the nation, particularly for infants and toddlers. In Laredo, there are a number of challenges facing families as they seek care.

115 total Laredo childcare providers serve infants and toddlers⁴⁰

6,330 is the maximum capacity of these providers, but that includes all age groups; the true number of infants and toddlers served is far lower.

Only **34%** of the estimated infants and toddlers in Laredo could be served in these slots, even if they were all reserved for infants and toddlers.

58% of Webb County is considered a **childcare desert**⁴¹ with either no child care providers or so few options that there are more than three times as many children as licensed child care slots.⁴²

\$7,920 is the approximate annual cost of child care for an infant in Texas.⁴³ **For many families, this is 10%-50% of their entire annual income.**

» **Families with incomes below 85% of the state median income are eligible for assistance.**

» **Not all eligible are served.** 673 families with infants and toddlers received child care assistance in 2021 through Workforce Solutions of South Texas.⁴⁴ **400 families are on the waitlist, suggesting significant unmet need.**⁴⁵



Many parents rely on childcare subsidies to afford childcare, but there is still a significant gap.



Parents have to make many choices while looking for childcare.

While they may consider everything from cost to transportation to hours, quality is a key driver.

Texas Rising Star (TRS) is the state's quality rating and improvement program.

25% of Laredo-area providers are in the TRS program – up from 14.5% in 2018.⁴⁶

★ ★ **5 providers**
★ ★ ★ **10 providers**
★ ★ ★ ★ **17 providers**

In addition to improving quality in formal childcare settings, additional resources could help parents and other caregivers.

Recommendations to Support Laredo's Prenatal-3 System

Healthy Beginnings: Innovative Approaches to Enhancing Care

GOAL: Increase the quality of and access to prenatal and postpartum health services for low-income mothers and health services for low-income infants and toddlers

Building on Laredo's Now:

- » Increasing the supply of medical providers (e.g. doulas, midwives, ob/gyns, pediatricians, and specialists) providing prenatal and pediatric services is a key next step to ensuring Laredo's mothers and children have a healthy beginning.
- » Additionally, Laredo can work to clear barriers that prevent access to services by increasing enrollment in health insurance, funding additional health programs for the uninsured, and finding solutions for logistical hurdles like transportation.

Envisioning Laredo 2030:

Ensuring that women have access to proven and innovative care programs can help create a strong prenatal system. For example:

- » Group-based care systems are an option to consider for implementation in Laredo. **Centering Pregnancy** is a prenatal care model that strives to empower women to manage their care and maximize time with healthcare providers in a comfortable group setting. Research suggests women prefer this model of care,⁴⁷ that it reduces racial disparities in birth outcomes, and that it reduces the rate of preterm births.
- » **Doula services** could provide additional support for underserved women during pregnancy, delivery and the postpartum period. In New York,⁴⁸ this model appeared to positively impact birth weights and preterm birth rates. This **implementation guide**⁴⁹ could serve as a resource for Laredo to explore in supporting new home visitors or existing promotoras towards specialization in perinatal health and doula training.



“Women don’t always seek prenatal care because they aren’t sick. They think of themselves last and think of their kids first. Their priority is family.”

— **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW**

Supported Families: Creating a Coherent and Connected System

GOAL: Increase the number of low-income infants, toddlers, and families who are screened and successfully connected to necessary services

Building on Laredo's Now:

- » Laredo has several robust home visiting programs that serve approximately 150 families annually. Increasing the number served and connecting additional families to home visiting who do not qualify under the current eligibility criteria would allow for increased impact.
- » Pediatricians, home visitors, and Early Head Start currently conduct developmental screening that can help identify needs. However, ensuring screening is universal and that those conducting screening are equipped to consistently make data-driven referrals to early intervention and other early learning programs is an area of opportunity.

Envisioning Laredo 2030:

Many stakeholders elevated the importance of ensuring families are connected to Laredo's many resources and are able to access them. A family navigator program⁵⁰ could help Laredo's families — and service providers — connect the dots between resources. For example:

- » At **Families First in Atlanta**, Navigators complete a Resiliency Assessment to understand a family's unique needs. They then connect families to resources ranging from financial assistance to parenting support to housing and nutrition.⁵¹
- » **Help Me Grow** is a system model to ensure communities identify vulnerable children, link families to community-based services, and empower families to support their children's healthy development. **Help Me Grow North Texas** also employs family navigators to help make those links.

“At TAMIU, we are privileged to serve Laredo and experience the community's innovation, resilience, and *todos juntos* spirit. Laredo is the foundation of our learning environment – it is a learning city committed to being at the frontera of creating a stronger and more integrated prenatal-3 system. Through our LoC@al PN-3 project, we hope to partner with the many dedicated stakeholders in Laredo as we work to fulfill our commitment to improving the lives of the citizens of our community and beyond.”

— DR. FILIZ SHINE, TEXAS A&M INTERNATIONAL UNIVERSITY

High-Quality Early Care and Learning: Empower Families and Educators to Thrive

GOAL: Increase access to high-quality child care programs serving low-income infants and toddlers

Building on Laredo's Now:

- » The Bright by Text program can create 'surround sound' messaging for Laredo families about key developmental milestones, community resources, and early learning strategies for families to use at home. Expanding participation through targeted recruitment provides an opportunity for more families to engage.
- » Laredo has already seen increased participation in the Texas Rising Stars program. The city can continue to support more providers as they enroll in TRS and work towards increased quality across the city.

Envisioning Laredo 2030:

Extending training, technical assistance and peer support to small child care providers, including licensed or registered family home providers and informal family, friend, and neighbor (FFN) caregivers, can help enhance quality and facilitate participation in the childcare assistance program.

- » The **Providers Advancing School Options (PASO)** program is a training program designed specifically to support Latino FFN providers which includes home visits and certifications.

Play and Learn Sessions allow caregivers an opportunity to receive coaching and support while participating in developmentally-appropriate learning activities with their children. For example:

- » The **YMCA of Silicon Valley** offers a Nana y Yo program that takes place over 36 weeks. Children and their caregivers - whether parents, grandparents or childcare providers - can attend together, learning and playing with coaching from facilitators.
- » Additional examples can be seen **here**.



“We teach the foundational skills required for Kindergarten success. We partner with our parents and empower them to be an active part of their child's education, including through dual language training and tools. We also want to provide parents with valuable information on child development as soon as mothers find out they are expecting. I believe that we can make a significant difference if we provide support as soon at birth.”

— **CORDELIA CUELLAR,**
UNITED INDEPENDENT SCHOOL
DISTRICTS

Opportunities for Advocacy and Engagement

In addition to local context, Laredo's PN-3 ecosystem is deeply impacted by state and federal policy and funding. There are a number of key opportunities for Laredo's community leaders to advocate for change with state and federal policymakers.

- » **Medicaid Expansion** would potentially impact between 6,000 and 8,000 uninsured adults in Webb County, half of whom are estimated to be female. This would have a significant impact on the medical system as a whole, as well as impacting the health and preconception/prenatal wellness of affected women.⁵²
- » Texas spends only 4% of funds received for Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) on **basic needs**, reaching approximately 4% of families experiencing poverty.⁵³ The state's spending on **childcare through TANF** is also limited.⁵⁴ Increasing funding to either childcare or basic needs spending would support families with young children.
- » Expanded federal resources for childcare could significantly impact the early learning and care sector, creating additional seats and/or reducing the cost burden felt by families. There is already momentum for **federal action** on this front, but continued advocacy is needed.

In addition to those highlighted above, a review of the resources developed by the **Texas Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center** would be instructive.

"I work for SCAN, Inc. Border Project LAUNCH providing infant and early childhood mental health consultations and caregiver trainings to promote the social and emotional well-being of children. I visit early education centers and schools and observe children who are exhibiting challenging or concerning behaviors. I provide support and guidance to the caregivers and educators in order to increase positive outcomes. Then we host a mental health consultation meeting with the teacher, caregiver, and involved school administration. I deliver the findings of the observation, make recommendations and referrals, and we have constant follow ups."

— **SAN JUANITA GUERRA,**
SCAN, INC.

Opportunities to Put Families at the Center

Probing Questions

- » How do families decide between types of childcare (e.g. learning centers, licensed or registered family child care homes, informal care with family members, friends or neighbors)? What are their preferences and priorities?
- » Why is the use of child care subsidies with extended family members, friends, and neighbors so low?
- » What supports are available to family/friend/neighbor providers? What supports would they want?
- » What barriers face Laredo residents in accessing support and care (medical, health, mental health, beyond)? How do those barriers vary based on neighborhood or geography?
- » How accurately are undocumented Laredo residents represented in the data?

Key Wonderings

- » Does the report and systems map reflect what you know about Laredo?
- » Which of these data points resonate most with you?
- » Which data doesn't align with your experience or understanding?
- » What surprised you about this data? What do you think would surprise others?
- » Which of Laredo's promising practices or opportunities are not reflected?
- » As you reflect on the assets and opportunities in Laredo, what feels most important for your community right now?
- » How do the systems in place in Laredo reflect your community's values and priorities?



“I'm sure it's easier said than done, but I think community programs that create awareness [are important to building a support system]. Whether that's using different partnerships between school districts, community leaders, public health officials – I've seen things here recently that have been much more impactful.”

— PARENT FOCUS GROUP

What's Next for Laredo and the LoC@L PN-3 Project?

Laredo is at the *frontera* of the innovation and change happening across Texas for children and families. From the many dedicated service providers to Laredo's parents – first educators raising families – the desire and commitment for innovating and strengthening the PN-3 system is clear. The LoC@L PN-3 Project seeks systems-level change to ensure all parents and children can access the programs they need to provide a strong foundation for healthy development and learning for their child.



“There are so many barriers to families accessing insurance, even if they are eligible. They may move or their phone numbers may change. They may have a hard time using the online portal. And everything is time sensitive.”

— **STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEW**

This needs assessment represents one step towards accomplishing this goal, elevating some of the key data, strong programs, and opportunities for growth. While Start Early sought to capture many of the most salient elements of the PN-3 system, continued collaborative learning will help ensure that solutions are community-driven and optimized.

The second step in this work is to establish a robust PN-3 parent leader network. As called for by many of the stakeholders interviewed for this needs assessment, this network can elevate family voice and build community capacity to improve the quality of PN-3 services and improve the outcomes for all infants, toddlers and their families in Laredo. The work to create this network is ongoing.

Additionally, the LoC@L project will also connect parents and caregivers — Laredo's first educators — to the Bright By Text service in a city-wide effort to ensure all the children are on track for healthy development by age three. This initiative seeks to build shared language and common understanding about the importance of early brain development, as well as connect families to community resources and programs.

Finally, the opportunities and examples in this resource can serve to galvanize community leaders, policymakers, and funders to build on the community's existing strengths, expand access to impactful programs, and consider pathways to bring new programs and opportunities to Laredo.

Together, at the *frontera* of innovation and possibility, every stakeholder — from first educators to service providers to educators and beyond — can come together to make Laredo the best place to be born and raise a family.

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“Our *promotoras* are certified community health workers. They support underserved populations, including those with health illiteracy. We have 20 who go out into the community and can support on a range of topics from prenatal care to pre-diabetes courses. It complements our other offerings like telemedicine, 24 hour nurse hotlines, and traditional medical dental, and behavioral health care. Our CEO is actually also certified and taught classes himself.”

— **MARA LOPEZ, DIRECTOR OF MARKETING, GATEWAY COMMUNITY HEALTH CENTER**

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Start Early (formerly known as the Ounce of Prevention) is a nonprofit public-private partnership advancing quality early learning and care for families with children, before birth through their earliest years, to help close the opportunity gap. For nearly 40 years, Start Early has delivered best-in-class doula, home visiting and Early Head Start and Head Start programs. Bringing expertise in program delivery, research and evaluation, professional development and policy and advocacy, Start Early works in partnership with communities and other experts to drive systemic change so that millions more children, families and educators can thrive. Learn more at **[StartEarly.org](https://www.startearly.org)**.



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The University aggressively serves as 1. A transformative education destination, 2. A diverse forum for learning, research and service, 3. A collaborative hub that seeks out and values partnerships, and 4. A vital agent of excellence delivering its mission through giving and leading. The University celebrated its milestone 50th Anniversary in 2020. Additional information is found at **[tamiau.edu](https://www.tamiau.edu)**.