Houston Economic Mobility Coalition | Shared Ambitions

From Shared Concern to Collective Action

The Houston Economic Mobility Coalition grew out of a regional conversation about what it would take to improve economic mobility at scale. At the inaugural Economic Mobility Summit in October 2025, cross-sector leaders identified the need for shared direction, common measures, stronger coordination, connected pathways for residents, and sustained infrastructure to support collective action.

In January 2026, partners committed to forming a coalition; in March, they established a three-year MOU; and in May 2026, the second Summit provided an opportunity for broader stakeholders to inform the coalition's emerging vision, mission, framework, and regional measurement approach. Since then, partners have been translating that shared direction into action by defining a set of shared ambitions. Ambitions are broad, long-term, system-level goals that define what the coalition seeks to make meaningfully different for Houston and its residents. These ambitions are meant to be direction-setting, not final strategies. The Summit and future engagements are opportunities to test, sharpen, and help shape what each ambition should mean in practice.

A Shared Direction

VISION:

A Houston where all people thrive, no matter where they start.

MISSION:

Uniting Houston's communities to drive actions that help every Houstonian reach their full potential.

The coalition's framework recognizes that upward mobility is shaped by interconnected systems and conditions across **basic needs, housing, education, jobs and health**, as well as connected people and communities and policy. **Ambitions** translate this framework into broad, long-term system goals for collective action.

Where the Coalition Adds Unique Value

The coalition is not intended to replace existing organizations, programs, or leadership. Its value is greatest where progress depends on multiple institutions and sectors acting together. The coalition prioritizes ambitions where:

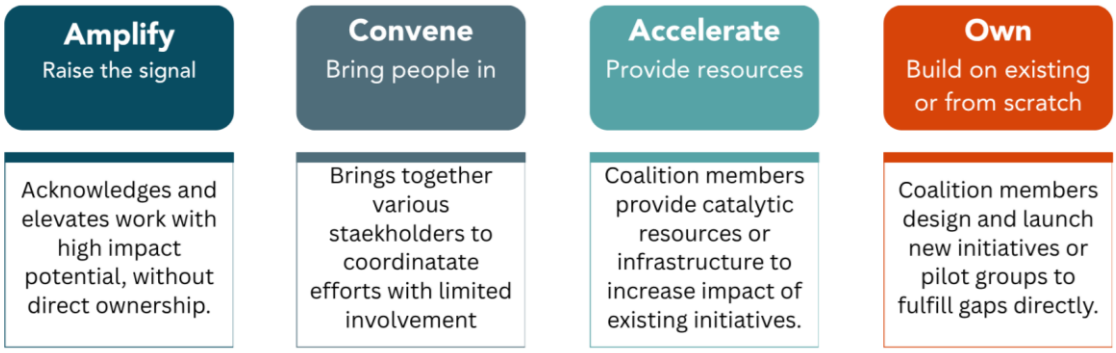
- **Coordination is the unlock** and no single organization or sector can solve the challenge alone.

- There is **potential for impact at scale** across a significant share of Houston residents.
- The opportunity is **grounded in evidence** and learning.
- Houston can **build on and strengthen existing assets** rather than create new ones.
- Progress can create **catalytic ripple effects** across multiple mobility pathways or conditions.

Across the portfolio, the coalition also seeks to span the systems shaping mobility, balance long-term systems change with near-term momentum, and concentrate coalition capacity where it can add the greatest value.

The Coalition's Role Varies by Ambition

The coalition plays a different role depending on what it can uniquely contribute:



These roles reflect the **depth and type of coalition involvement**, not the importance of an ambition. Across the current ambitions, the coalition plays each of these roles based on where it can add the most value within the current landscape.

Ambition Leadership

Each ambition has an Ambition Lead, a representative who stewards progress toward the shared goal. Ambition Leads guide the process to define strategy, coordinate across initiative teams and other ambitions, and are accountable for moving the ambition forward. Leading an ambition does not mean solving it alone. Initiative teams, coalition partners, residents, practitioners, and other subject-matter experts are essential to shaping and carrying out the work.

About These Ambition Briefs

The following ambition briefs are intended to establish a **shared starting point.** Together, they describe what the coalition is working toward, why each ambition matters for economic mobility in Houston, what progress could require, a starting list of the assets already available to build upon, and the coalition's potential role. As the work advances, specific strategies and initiatives will continue to be shaped with the organizations, practitioners, residents, and communities closest to each system.

Access to High-Quality Early Childhood Education

Ambition Overview

Ambition Statement: Expand access to high-quality early childhood education and family supports so Houston has a stronger, more coordinated early childhood ecosystem that improves kindergarten readiness, family stability, and long-term economic mobility outcomes.

This ambition is about making Houston a region where a child's access to high-quality early learning and family supports is not determined by income, ZIP code, language, or a parent's work schedule. It focuses on strengthening the early childhood ecosystem so families can more easily access affordable, high-quality care and supports from pregnancy through kindergarten entry. The ambition takes a two-generation approach, recognizing that children's healthy development and school readiness are closely connected to parents' well-being, access to dependable care, and ability to remain engaged in work, education, or training. Rather than creating a new system, the opportunity is to better connect and strengthen the assets Houston already has so families experience a more coordinated and supportive path through the early years.

Why This Ambition Matters

Connection to Economic Mobility and Houston

The problem to solve: Too many Houston families struggle to find reliable, affordable, high-quality early care and education that meets their children's needs and aligns with their work or school schedules, while providers face persistent workforce, facilities, and financial pressures that limit their ability to provide and sustain quality. Houston has significant early childhood assets, but separate funding streams, eligibility requirements, enrollment processes, and public institutions place much of the responsibility for navigating these systems on families. Limited availability, language barriers, unclear information, and disconnected referrals can make it difficult for families to access quality care, maternal and infant health services, and parenting supports. A more coordinated early childhood ecosystem would connect these assets, align investments and provider supports, simplify access, and strengthen continuity from pregnancy through kindergarten entry. Addressing these challenges is essential to supporting children's healthy development and school readiness while enabling parents to remain employed, pursue education or training, and build family economic stability. However, a stronger early childhood system will require not only better coordination, but a more sustainable financing model that recognizes the gap between the true cost of quality care and what families can afford.

Why it matters in Houston: Access to quality early learning is closely tied to Houston's future. Children need nurturing environments that support their development and prepare them for school, while parents need dependable, affordable care to sustain employment, pursue education, or complete training. When families cannot find care that meets their needs, the effects extend beyond the household to employers, schools, and the broader economy. ReadyNation's 2023 national report estimated that inadequate infant and toddler child care costs the U.S. economy $122 billion annually in lost earnings, employer productivity, and tax revenue[1]. Expanding access requires attention to both families and the providers who serve them. A stable early childhood workforce, sustainable programs, and stronger connections to health and basic needs supports can help families navigate challenges and give children a stronger start. Locally, the University of Houston's June 2026 Early REACH evaluation estimated that participating caregivers were 24 percentage points more likely to transition into employment and 8.1 percentage points more likely to remain employed than comparable nonparticipants.2 For Houston, this ambition is an investment in school readiness, parents' ability to enter and remain in the workforce, and long-term economic mobility through improved access to dependable care.

Why it matters in Houston: Harris County is home to approximately 333,000 children under the age of five[2], underscoring the importance of supporting families from birth through kindergarten. Despite the importance of early development and fewer than half of eligible Houston-area three- and four-year olds were enrolled in public pre-K in 2024[3], pointing to an opportunity to expand access and participation. Local evidence from Kinder Institute shows that public pre-K participants in Houston-area districts were more likely to be ready for kindergarten and less likely to be chronically absent in early elementary school[4] while Good Reason Houston reports that eligible students who attended public pre-K were 2.4 times more likely to meet early numeracy and literacy standards[5]. Access challenges extend beyond pre-K with Children at Risk identifying 169 Gulf Coast workforce-area ZIP codes as subsidy child care deserts, where demand is at least three times higher than supply, with 108 of those ZIP codes meeting that definition for at least three consecutive years[6]. These gaps affect not only children's development but also family economic stability with the University of Houston's 2026 Early REACH evaluation estimating that participating primary caregivers were 24-percentage-points more likely to transition into employment and 8.1-percentage-points more likely to remain employed[7].

Vision of Success and Conditions for Progress

What Could Progress Look Like and What Needs to Change?

Long-term outcome: Success would mean more children enter kindergarten ready to learn, families can find afford care that fits their schedules, and parents can remain connected to work, education, or training. Providers would be better positioned to retain skilled educators and sustain quality.

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[1] ReadyNation, Council for a Strong America, "$122 Billion: The Growing, Annual Cost of the Infant-Toddler Child Care Crisis" (2023), https://www.strongnation.org/articles/2038-122-billion-the-growing-annual-cost-of-the-infant-toddler-child-care-crisis.

[2] U.S. Census Bureau, QuickFacts: Harris County, Texas, 2025 population estimate and under-five share; approximately 333,000 calculated from reported figures, https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/harriscountytexas.

[3] Good Reason Houston, "Focus On: Early Childhood Education" (January 27, 2026), reporting 2024 enrollment and readiness findings, https://goodreasonhouston.org/early-childhood-education-houston-prekindergarten-enrollment/.

[4] Kinder Institute for Urban Research, "Pre-K Enrollment and Early Elementary Outcomes" (2024), https://kinder.rice.edu/research/pre-k-enrollment-and-early-elementary-outcomes.

[5] Good Reason Houston, "Focus On: Early Childhood Education" (January 27, 2026), reporting 2024 enrollment and readiness findings, https://goodreasonhouston.org/early-childhood-education-houston-prekindergarten-enrollment/.

[6] CHILDREN AT RISK, "Houston Child Care Sector Braces for Reduction in Subsidized Child Care Seats" (August 27, 2026), https://childrenatrisk.org/houston-press-conference-8-27-26/.

[7] University of Houston, "Evaluation of Harris County's Early REACH Contracted Slots Child Care Program," Second Annual Report (June 2026), https://www.uh.edu/class/ws/irwgs/research/child-care-and-workforce/early-reach-program/.

Progress should be assessed through enrollment, kindergarten readiness, family access, and provider stability, with attention to differences by income and geography.

What it could take to get there:

- **Sufficient, affordable supply:** Families can access high-quality early care and education that is available where they live, fits their schedules, and is affordable across income levels.
- **A financially sustainable early childhood market:** Public, private, philanthropic, and employer resources help close the structural gap between what quality care costs to provide and what families can afford, while supporting adequate compensation and long-term provider viability.
- **Sustainable provider capacity and quality:** Providers have the workforce, facilities, financing, and supports needed to maintain and expand quality over time.
- **Easier access and navigation for families:** Families can more easily understand their options, determine eligibility, enroll in care and supports, and move across programs without navigating disconnected systems on their own.
- **Aligned funding, policy, and accountability:** Public, philanthropic, and private resources are better aligned around shared priorities and outcomes, with clear roles for addressing barriers through coordination, new capacity, or policy change.

A Texas Policy Lab analysis of Harris County child care markets offers a geographic approach to this work; its 2021 findings should be updated before guiding current investments.[8]

Existing assets to build on: Houston can build on its many strong assets, programs and partnerships to scale this ambition. Harris County has invested in the Early Childhood Impact Fund and Early Learning Quality Network.[9] Early REACH's contracted child care approach is being evaluated by the University of Houston and Brazelton Touchpoints Center, with reports available to inform decisions about sustainability.[10] United Way Bright Beginnings, home-provider coaching, Workforce Solutions, public pre-K, Head Start, Collaborative for Children, Good Reason Houston, CHILDREN AT RISK, Greater Houston Strong Start Alliance, and family support organizations bring experience and trusted relationships.

Families and providers should help answer the central questions:

- Where and for whom are the biggest gaps in access, affordability, quality, hours, or navigation?
- Which barriers can be addressed by better coordination or use of existing resources, and which require new capacity, funding, or policy change?
- Which existing efforts are best positioned to scale or connect—and what important gaps remain unowned?

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[8] Texas Policy Lab, Rice University, "Harris County Child Care Supply and Demand Analysis" (2021), https://tplapps.rice.edu/shiny/childcare-supply-demand/.

[9] Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity, Early Childhood Initiatives Portfolio, https://deeo.harriscountytx.gov/Early-Childhood-Initiatives/ECI-Portfolio.

[10] Harris County Department of Economic Equity and Opportunity, Early Childhood Initiatives Portfolio, https://deeo.harriscountytx.gov/Early-Childhood-Initiatives/ECI-Portfolio.

Coalition Role

Why Is This Suited for Collective Action?

Coalition role: Accelerate. Houston already has significant early childhood leadership, programs, and infrastructure to build on. By mobilizing catalytic resources and shared infrastructure, the coalition could increase the impact of effective efforts by expanding and connecting them.

Coalition value-add: The first step towards acceleration would be convening partners and elevating family and provider perspectives as no single institution controls the full experience of finding care, enrolling, securing financial assistance, and accessing family supports. The coalition can help partners align referrals, data, investment, and policy priorities, then support the organizations best positioned to lead. United Way can organize the discussion and maintain follow-through, with leadership and commitments determined jointly.

Strategic Fit:

Coalition Criterion	Why This Ambition Meets It
Coordination is the Unlock	Early childhood spans multiple funding streams, public systems, providers, workforce supports, and family services that no single organization controls. Better coordination can align resources, strengthen provider capacity, simplify family access, and address shared data and policy barriers across the ecosystem.
Catalytic Ripple Effects	More reliable care can support parents' employment and training, providers' stability, and children's readiness for school, with benefits across mobility pathways.
Grounded in Evidence	Houston-area pre-K research, regional enrollment and child care access data, and Early REACH evaluations provide a local foundation for action. Recent research from other communities offers additional lessons: San Antonio's 2025 evaluation documented gains in children's academic and social-emotional skills, and a 2023 Boston study found increased high school graduation and college attendance among public preschool participants.[11,12] Denver's approach combines tuition assistance, provider quality improvement, and family outreach, offering a practical example of coordinated investment.[13] These findings and approaches should inform Houston's priorities, with updated local data and family and provider input guiding how strategies are adapted to community needs.

[11] Westat, "Pre-K 4 SA Education Centers: Year 11 Technical Report" (2025), https://prek4sa.com/wp-content/uploads/2025/05/Pre-K_SA_Evaluation_TechnicalReport_Year_11_compressed.pdf.

[12] Gray-Lobe, Pathak, and Walters, "The Long-Term Effects of Universal Preschool in Boston," The Quarterly Journal of Economics, 138(1), 363–411 (2023), https://doi.org/10.1093/qje/qjac036.

[13] Denver Preschool Program, "2024 Annual Report" (2025), https://dpp.org/dpp-annual-report-2024/.

Builds on What Exists	Public pre-K, Head Start, county investments, United Way programs, Workforce Solutions, and community partners provide experience and infrastructure to strengthen.
Potential for Impact at Scale	With ~333,000 children under five plus working parents and providers, the need extends across many communities. A local baseline and agreed measures are needed to estimate reach, target resources, and assess results.

Timeline

Years 1–3: Align partners, resources, and policy priorities; map gaps in access and existing investments, establish a shared baseline and measures, and assign partner roles; and begin expanding high-quality early learning and family supports through coordinated referrals and targeted pilots.

Years 3–5: Scale promising early childhood and family support strategies through coordinated investment, policy, and community partnerships, using local findings to expand affordable slots, strengthen provider workforce supports, and track children's readiness and parents' workforce participation.

Year 5 and beyond: Sustain a stronger, more coordinated early childhood ecosystem through ongoing funding commitments and shared reporting, with measurable progress in kindergarten readiness and parents' workforce participation and a foundation for long-term economic mobility.

What's Next:

How Others Can Help Shape the Work

Ambition Lead	United Way of Greater Houston
Coalition Role	Accelerate
Sign Up for the Next Engagement Opportunity	