

Fully Fund Pre-k Grants and Address Non-Academic Barriers to Student Learning

Testimony to House Appropriations Article III Subcommittee

High-quality early education and support for students facing non-academic challenges are critical for ensuring student success. We urge the Subcommittee to maintain the current level of annual funding for the high-quality grant program by providing \$236 million and direct TEA to develop a plan to coordinate resources available for addressing non-academic barriers, among other steps.

We appreciate the opportunity to testify to the Subcommittee today. We would like to address two critical issues in Article III: the high-quality pre-k grant program and non-academic barriers to student learning.

High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program

Research shows that Texas pre-k improves student scores in third grade, reduces special education costs, and creates other benefits by ensuring that children start kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed. As you know, Texas provides state funding for a half day of voluntary public school pre-k to four-year-olds that are low-income, English Language Learners, or meet other eligibility criteria. Some districts use local funds to expand to a full day, serve three-year-olds, or implement other pre-k improvement measures.

While the state needs to continue improving quality standards for Texas pre-k, such as setting class size and student-teacher ratio limits, **local quality improvement efforts combined with the state's new high-quality grant program are helping prepare children for success in school.**

Our research on the implementation of the new grant program shows a high level of demand. Districts serving 86 percent of the state's pre-k students are participating. Districts also report they are seeking greater certainty and predictability regarding the pre-k quality funding.

It's important to note that the \$118 million **pre-k grants appropriation that school districts are using this school year translates into \$734 per student, about half of the \$1,500 per student originally envisioned** for the program. Maintaining at least the same \$118 million appropriation per year is critical for the success of the program and the success of students.

RECOMMENDATION:

1. Appropriate \$236 million over the biennium to the high-quality pre-k grant program.

Non-Academic Barriers to Student Learning

Social-emotional and health needs have a significant impact on student learning. Extensive research shows students who are physically, socially, and emotionally well are better learners and experience more success in school.¹ Schools that provide safe and supportive learning environments experience lower dropout rates, decreased incidence of violence, increased teacher retention, and higher student achievement.²

In any given classroom in Texas, there are multiple non-academic barriers that undermine and impede student learning and academic performance, many of which are interrelated:

- Nearly 60 percent of school age children in Texas are economically disadvantaged.³
- One in five students has a diagnosable mental disorder. Most are in general education.
- In 2015, there were more than 40,000 school-age children who were confirmed by CPS as victims of abuse and neglect.⁴
- One in 2 high school students reported feeling like they did not matter to people in their community.⁵
- One in 4 high school students reported having felt so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more during the previous year that they stopped doing their usual activities.⁶
- One in 5 high school students reported being bullied on school property during the previous year.⁷
- One in 6 high school students reported actually making a plan to attempt suicide in during the previous year.⁸ One in 10 students attempted suicide one or more times in the previous year.⁹

Instead of adopting a different program to combat each new problem that emerges, schools can develop a consistent and long-term strategy that addresses multiple student concerns.¹⁰ On average, schools use about 14 different strategies or programs to prevent violence and promote safe learning environments.¹¹ Rather than having siloed efforts that are disconnected from each other, schools have the opportunity to strategically align policies, strategies and practices, weaving together school and community resources, to promote students' healthy development and learning and prevent those things that schools, students, families and the state wants to see less of: bullying, truancy, mental health concerns, substance abuse, disciplinary actions, and school failure.

TEA provides little guidance to districts on using and integrating available resources in ways that address multiple, interrelated barriers to learning. The agency has one FTE dedicated to Health and Safety. Education service centers (ESCs) offer schools information and training on things like positive behavior management and supports, bullying prevention, and family and community engagement. However, with separate ESCs leading different efforts, training related to school climate is largely planned and delivered in silos. Outside of some narrow mandates, much of the training is optional.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. Establish an Office of Student Learning Supports at TEA, with a minimum of one FTE, charged with leading agency efforts to address non-academic barriers to student learning.
2. Direct TEA to develop a plan that identifies and coordinates resources currently available to assist TEA, districts, and schools in addressing non-academic barriers to student learning. The agency should develop the plan in conjunction with other state agencies that provide services and supports that help keep students physically and mentally well and in school learning.
3. Increase – not decrease – funding for Education Resource Centers (ESCs). ESCs serve as TEA’s boots-on-the-ground in providing schools with training and technical assistance on effective practices. This network should be strengthened, not weakened.
4. Expand the role of and appropriation to the Texas Behavior Support Network within Region 4 Education Service Center (ESC) to include support to school districts on the effects of trauma, school-based trauma-informed practices, and integrating mental health training and services into a positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) framework.

Thank you for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 512.473.2274.

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Texans Care for Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization. We drive policy change to improve the lives of Texas children today for a stronger Texas tomorrow. We envision a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise.

¹ Basch CE. (2010) Healthier Students Are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap. Columbia University; http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf.

² National School Climate Center. <http://www.schoolclimate.org/>

³ Texas Education Agency 2018-2019 Legislative Appropriations Request, Administrator’s Statement.

⁴ DFPS 2015 Annual Report and Data Book

⁵ Texas Department of State Health Services. 2013 Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) <http://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/HealthRisks/YRBS>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice.

¹¹ Gottfredson, G.D., and Gottfredson, D.C. (2001). What schools do to prevent problem behavior and promote safe environments. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 12(4), 313-344.