

# Schools Need Assistance in Keeping Students Healthy, Safe, and Learning

## Testimony to the Legislative Budget Board and Office of the Governor on the Texas Education Agency's 2020-2021 Legislative Appropriations Request

The Texas Education Agency's budget request provides a good starting place to address the health, safety, and educational needs of students. The Texas Legislature should support and increase funding for agency requests for Safe and Healthy Schools and Special Education Supports.

Texans Care for Children appreciates the opportunity to comment on the Texas Education Agency (TEA) 2020-2021 Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR).

The best-taught math lesson using state-of-the-art instructional methods will not make a difference for students who are suffering from trauma, depression, or anxiety disorders. The trauma of Hurricane Harvey and recent legislative hearings on safe and supportive schools have driven home the importance of addressing student mental health and implementing strategies to provide positive school climates. Some school districts have been able to implement programs and provide services aimed at supporting mental health, improving behavior, reducing suspensions, preventing suicides, and improving academic performance, but districts have had little state funding or guidance to support these efforts.

Recently released data – particularly new data on the high rate of suicide attempts among Texas high school students – confirm that many high school students in Texas experience significant threats to their health, safety, and education:<sup>1</sup>

- 12 percent – one out of eight – **attempted suicide** in the last year.
- 34 percent – one out of three – had feelings of **sadness/hopelessness** disrupt their regular activities.
- 19 percent – one out of five - were **bullied at school** during the last year.
- 12 percent – one out of eight – reported **binge drinking** in past month.
- 10 percent – one out of ten – reported having experienced **sexual violence** in the last year.

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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.

As the Legislative Budget Board and the Office of the Governor consider the FY 2020-2021 LAR submitted by TEA, we respectfully offer the following recommendations.

1. **The Legislature should provide additional and ongoing funding for TEA Exceptional Item 1: Safe and Health Schools Initiative.** We strongly support TEA's request for funds to support its Safe and Health Schools Initiative. We commend TEA for its leadership and vision in laying out a pathway for the state to provide school districts and charter schools with guidance, training, and technical assistance on addressing the mental health component of student learning and creating safe and supportive school climates. However, the one year of grant funding requested in the LAR to assist schools will not go very far in a state with over 8,700 public schools across more than 1,200 school systems and charters. The agency's request is a good starting place, but it is not sufficient.
2. **The Legislature should provide additional and ongoing funding for TEA Exceptional Item 2: Special Education Supports.** Students with qualifying disabilities, including those with Emotional Disturbance (ED), rely on special education services, supports, and protections to reach their educational potential. Enrollment in special education due to ED dropped by 42 percent between 2004 and 2014. Policies and practices implemented by TEA in 2004 and acted upon by districts drastically reduced the number of students enrolled in special education and prevented thousands of students with serious emotional disturbance in Texas from receiving services necessary for their education.<sup>2</sup> The corrective action plan entered into by TEA with the U.S. Department of Education requires districts to identify, locate, and evaluate all children suspected of having a disability who needed special education services but were not served and to provide them with compensatory services. The agency's request is a good starting place, but it is not sufficient.

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<sup>1</sup> Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. *Texas High School Youth Risk Behavior Survey 2017*. <https://nccd.cdc.gov/Youthonline/App/Results.aspx?LID=TX>

<sup>2</sup> Houston Chronicle analysis of data collected by the Texas Education Agency and the National Center for Education Statistics in the U.S. Dept. of Education