

# Invest in early grades and school mental health strategies to address learning loss

## Testimony to the Senate Finance Committee related to Article III funding

We appreciate the Legislature's commitment to fully fund the education funding components of House Bill 3 (2019). However, without sufficient action this session, the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic and the statewide winter weather disaster threaten long-term learning loss that could derail the educational trajectories of Texas children. Smart investments in our schools - using both state and federal dollars - are needed to ensure schools are equipped to use campus-wide practices and targeted interventions shown to help students be resilient in the face of trauma and adversity and be successful in school - even when their lives have been turned upside down.

### **While all students are affected by the pandemic, we know the challenges and impacts haven't been the same for all students.**

- Enrollment has significantly declined across grade levels, but especially in pre-k, which has seen a 22 percent drop in the 2020-21 school year.
- Students living in poverty, students of color, students with disabilities, English Learners, and students with a history of mental health concerns or trauma are among groups whose educations are most likely to be adversely impacted by COVID-19.
- Some students face technology gaps; others find learning difficult when they are not in classrooms with their teachers; and other students struggle to focus on their schoolwork because they feel anxious, isolated, overwhelmed or are grieving.

### **The damage and disruption caused by the recent winter storm has created new challenges and exacerbated existing ones for students in Texas.**

- Schools throughout the state must deal with burst water pipes and flood damage - just as many families and teachers are facing in their homes - causing further disruption to both in-person and virtual instruction.

- Families, educators, and mental health experts worry about both the short- and long-term effects of the multiple challenges on children’s health, education, and well-being.
- News headlines report:

*For Texas kids dealing with COVID-19 losses, isolation and food insecurity, the winter storm is another blow. The long-lasting effects of this traumatic year could “change a generation.” - [Dallas Morning News, 2/19/21](#)*

*The pandemic had already destabilized parents, teachers and students. Now the winter storm's damage to buildings is preventing schools from even serving as lifelines for students in need of shelter and food. - [Texas Tribune, 2/19/21](#)*

## Recommendations

State leaders must provide schools with funding and guidance to ensure all students whose education has been affected by the pandemic and winter storm disaster have access to the type of school-based interventions that meet their learning recovery needs.

- 1. Leverage federal COVID relief funds to support educational needs among pre-k through third grade students and students affected by trauma and emotional concerns, just as many other states have done.**
  - a. Ensure the \$553 million TEA is receiving through ESSER II funds supports social-emotional and early learning strategies.
  - b. Work with the Governor’s office to maximize the \$134 million GEER II funding that is available to support social-emotional and early learning strategies.
- 2. Fund TEA Exceptional Item 1 at a minimum of \$40 million to address learning loss and reduce achievement gaps. Ensure agency efforts to combat learning loss include:**
  - a. Support for school practices, procedures, and services that help prevent and address learning loss related to stress, grief, trauma, and other social-emotional concerns.
  - b. Targeted supports for recruiting and retaining bilingual educators and instructional materials that help cultivate biliteracy in pre-k through third grade.
- 3. Ensure TEA reports disaggregated data on enrollment declines among students during the 2020-21 academic year.**
  - a. Consider adding a PEIMS code that can be used to identify students who have stopped attending school during the current academic year, similar to the PEIMS code that was created in the aftermath of Hurricane Harvey to identify students affected by Hurricane Harvey.
- 4. Issue statewide hold-harmless across grade levels for the Spring Semester to ensure districts are funded at pre-COVID enrollment levels.** With so many children missing out on effective instruction, this step will ensure school districts are able to maintain essential staff and effectively address learning loss and developmental delays.

Thank you for considering our comments. We look forward to working with the Committee this session.