



NEXT STEPS FOR TEXAS PRE-K

A SURVEY OF SCHOOL DISTRICTS' PRE-K PRIORITIES & CHALLENGES



Acknowledgments

We would like to thank everyone who contributed their valuable time and expertise to bring this report to fruition.

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assistance in distributing the survey to regional school districts.

The school districts that participated in the survey provided thoughtful and detailed responses to the questions posed, making this report possible.

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About the Commit Partnership

The Commit Partnership is a community navigator and connector, working to ensure that all DFW students receive an excellent and equitable education that prepares them to flourish in college and career. A coalition of over 200 partners, Commit works collaboratively to help solve the region's biggest systematic challenges, including

improving early childhood education, preparing and retaining effective educators, and increasing postsecondary completion rates. The Partnership strives to analyze data and engage expertise to inform action, activate the community to achieve shared goals, and grow capacities of education systems and stakeholders.

About Texans Care for Children

Texans Care for Children drives policy change to improve the lives of Texas children today for a stronger Texas tomorrow. The organization envisions a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise.

Texans Care for Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization. The organization develops policy solutions, produces research, and engages Texas

community leaders to educate policymakers, the media, and the public about what works to improve the well-being of Texas children and families.

Funded by a variety of foundations and individual donations, Texans Care for Children's work covers child protective services, juvenile justice, mental well-being, health, early childhood, and the ways that each of those policy areas work together to shape children's lives and the future of Texas.

Executive Summary

In 2018, Texans Care for Children and the Commit Partnership conducted an online survey of Texas school districts to better understand their pre-k priorities and challenges. The survey included several questions about the impact of the Texas Legislature's 2017 decisions to eliminate funding for the short-lived \$118 million per year High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program, as well as the \$30 million supplemental pre-k funding, and to require all school districts to meet high-quality pre-k standards outlined in Rider 78.

Survey participants represent a meaningful cross-section of Texas school districts. In total, 95 districts, representing 38 percent of the state's pre-k enrollment, took the survey.



Districts reported that:

- The Legislature's 2017 pre-k decisions were harmful to district pre-k programs. The loss of funding led school districts to cut back on important investments, such as professional development, early childhood-focused personnel, and technology and materials.
- These cuts also harmed programs outside of early education. For example, districts reported that the loss of pre-k funding led to higher class sizes in other grades, reduced professional development opportunities for K-2 teachers, and less funding for instructional materials and classroom technology.
- Districts offering full-day pre-k reported the greatest challenges from the pre-k cuts.
- The requirements in Rider 78 – particularly combined with the loss of funding – created significant challenges for districts.
- Districts overwhelmingly aspire to provide high-quality, full-day pre-k.

The survey findings underscore that policymakers should:

1. accompany increased pre-k quality requirements with additional state investment, provided in a sustainable and reliable manner, so that districts can feasibly meet those requirements; and
2. invest in full-day pre-k for districts that want to offer it.

Background

Decades of national and local research show that high-quality pre-k helps children get off to a strong start that leads to greater academic success for years to come. Effective pre-k programs are proven to boost academic and behavioral outcomes as well as graduation rates.¹ For example, participation in a high-quality pre-k program is correlated with improved third grade reading outcomes, a critical benchmark in determining long-term student success. According to 2018 data from Dallas ISD, third graders who were previously enrolled in the district's pre-k program were 23 percent more likely to be on grade level for reading compared to those third graders who were not in the district's pre-k program.² Additionally, pre-k has been shown to be a significant cost-saver. Researchers at the University of Texas at Austin found that Texas pre-k saved the state of Texas \$142 million during the 2013-14 school year by reducing grade retention and the need for special education, not counting savings achieved in other areas.³

Under state law, Texas school districts are required to offer at least a half-day (three hours) of voluntary pre-k to four-year-olds who meet any of the following eligibility criteria:

- are eligible for free or reduced-price lunch,
- are unable to speak or comprehend the English language,
- have ever been in foster care,
- are homeless,
- have a parent who is on active duty with the military or was killed or injured on active duty, or
- have a parent who is eligible for the Star of Texas Award as a peace officer, firefighter, or emergency medical first responder.

Texas pre-k is funded through the Foundation School Program, the formal name of the formulas that determine the funding for public school districts and charter schools for operations and facilities. Through this financing, only a half-day of pre-k is funded by the state. If districts choose to operate full-day programs, they must use resources from other operating funds.

Unfortunately, investment in high quality Texas pre-k has traditionally fallen short of the demand. According to the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Texas ranks 28th in state pre-k spending per child and 37th in total state spending on pre-k.⁴ Texas pre-k quality standards are among the lowest in the nation, undercutting student learning and shortchanging taxpayers. According to the same NIEER analysis, Texas only meets four out of ten quality benchmarks for high-quality pre-k.

To better harness the power of pre-k, the Texas Legislature approved House Bill 4 in 2015, creating the High-Quality Pre-K Grant Program. It was championed by Governor Greg Abbott, policymakers in both parties, and leaders from the business, faith, law enforcement, and education sectors across the state.

HB 4 authorized the creation of a grant program that provided up to \$1,500 per pre-k student, on top of the Foundation School Program funding districts normally receive, to all school districts that applied for the funding and met the eligibility criteria. The high-quality criteria included enhanced standards related to curriculum, teacher qualifications, academic performance, family engagement, and additional reporting requirements.

The grant program was funded for a single school year, 2016-17, and would need to be renewed each legislative session. Given the significant demand for the grant funds, approved districts only ended up receiving \$734 per student for a single year. Still, the investment was a promising start to expanding access to quality pre-k to more Texas families, supporting 86 percent of the state's pre-k students and serving districts across the state and the economic spectrum.⁵

Unfortunately, in the 2017 legislative session, lawmakers eliminated the \$118 million in funding for the High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program, as well as an additional \$30 million in supplemental pre-k funding that the Legislature had consistently allocated to districts since 2013.⁶

Unfortunately, in the 2017 legislative session, lawmakers eliminated \$118 million in funding for the High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program, as well as an additional \$30 million in supplemental pre-k funding that the Legislature had consistently allocated to districts since 2013.

In addition to the loss of these funding streams, in 2017, the Legislature also passed budget Rider 78, requiring all districts and charter schools offering pre-k to spend at least 15 percent of their pre-k formula funding on high-quality standards defined in the High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program. These heightened requirements were mandated for all districts, regardless of whether they applied for the grant money in the previous biennium.

Purpose of this Report

After Texas leaders approved nearly \$150 million in cuts to pre-k in 2017, it was unclear how the state would move forward on efforts to boost school readiness and reduce achievement gaps already apparent in early childhood. Districts also faced a new set of funding challenges with state requirements to accomplish more with less.

To better understand these challenges and the opportunities ahead, Texans Care for Children and the Commit Partnership worked together to survey school districts to discern community pre-k efforts, obstacles, and priorities. We sought to learn from the districts how state policy changes have impacted their programs and learn more about how to best support their goals for improving the educational outcomes of young students.

As Texas leaders consider ways to recommit to investing in high-quality pre-k, we hope the perspectives of school districts and this report help inform their path forward.

Methodology

The prekindergarten survey was drafted collaboratively by the Commit Partnership and Texans Care for Children and administered online using Survey Monkey. The survey included thirteen total questions, with a mix of quantitative and qualitative items.

Every district in the state with an identifiable early childhood contact designated by the Texas Education Agency was invited via email to complete the survey. In total, over 800 school district personnel received an invitation

to participate. At a minimum, every recipient received: 1) an initial email invitation to complete the survey and 2) at least two reminder emails to complete the survey. Some school districts were encouraged to participate through regional partners, local Education Service Centers or follow-up phone calls by the Commit Partnership or Texans Care for Children.

The initial invitations were sent to school districts in mid-June 2018 and the survey was closed on August 15, 2018.

Survey Participation

Survey participants represent a meaningful cross-section of Texas school districts. In total, 95 districts took the survey in 49 Texas counties. The survey data includes the perspective of a majority of the state's most populous school districts, including the top five and 13 of the top 20.*

In addition to representation from the state's largest districts, the survey includes the perspectives of rural districts (20 percent), major suburban districts (30 percent) and districts of other non-urban categories (31 percent), according to district type classification from the Texas Education Agency.⁷

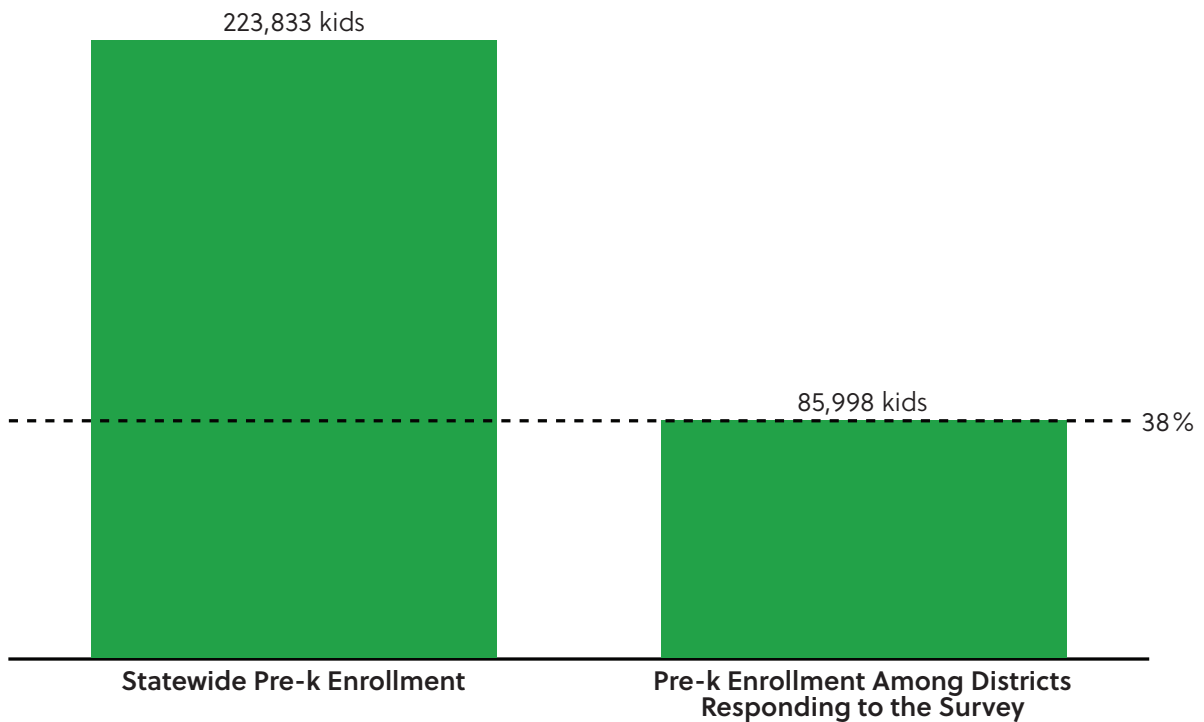
The districts that responded to the survey educate a significant proportion of the state's pre-k children. Nearly two out of every five children enrolled in pre-k in Texas attend a district that responded to the survey.⁸

The survey participants provide full-day pre-k programs at similar rates to the state overall.⁹ Statewide, 72 percent of school districts offer some full-day pre-k programs to eligible families. Of districts that participated in our survey, 69 percent offer some full-day programming.

The survey respondents also provide a meaningful window into the experience of districts participating in the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Program. Most districts (66 percent) that participated in the survey received funding through the High-Quality Prekindergarten Grant Program for the 2016-2017 academic year. The responding districts received 44 percent of the total grants approved for the 2016-2017 academic year.

* Houston ISD (1), Dallas ISD (2), Northside ISD (3), Fort Worth ISD (4), Austin ISD (5), Katy ISD (7), North East ISD (9), Arlington ISD (10), El Paso ISD (11), Garland ISD (12), Pasadena ISD (14), Plano ISD (15), Frisco ISD (18).

Survey Respondents Serve Two out of Every Five Children Enrolled in Pre-k in Texas



Key Findings

The Legislature's 2017 Decisions to Cut Funding and Add New, Unfunded Requirements Were Harmful to Pre-k Programs

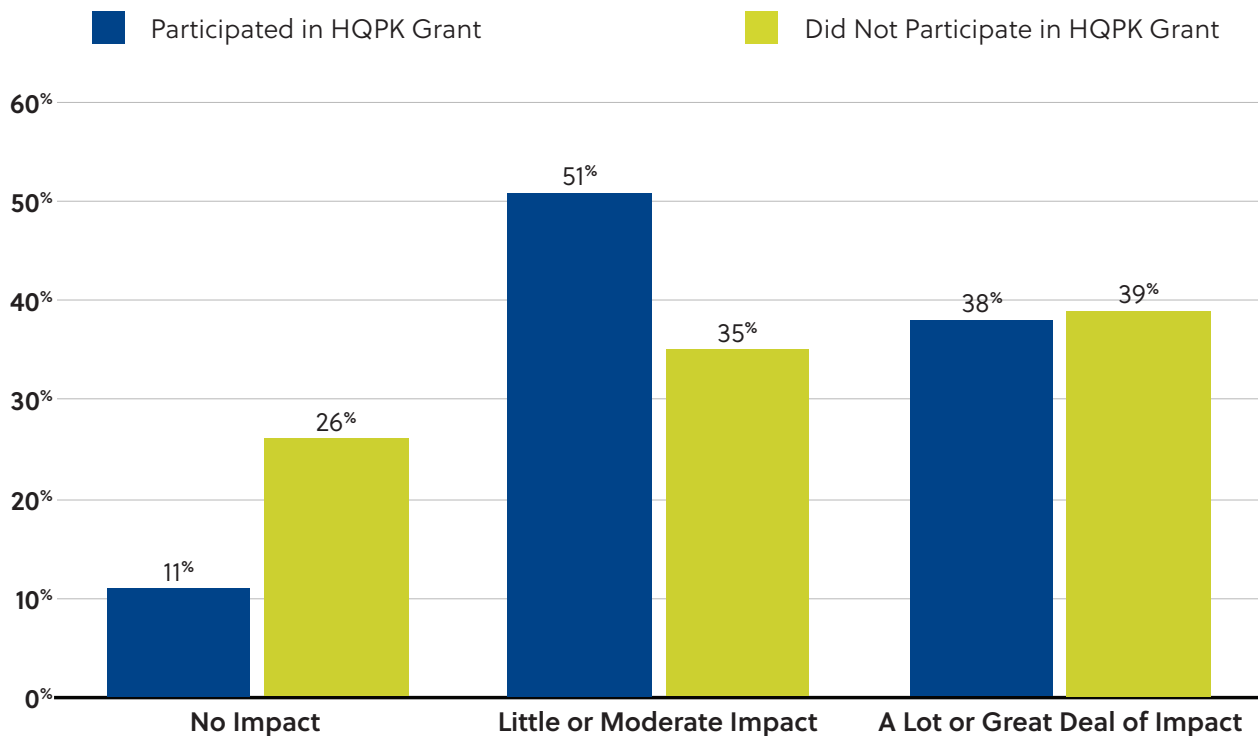
In 2017, the Legislature eliminated \$118 million in High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program funds and \$30 million in supplemental pre-k funding. Some large districts lost as much as \$9 million in grant funding, in addition to lost supplemental pre-k allocations. Other districts lost smaller amounts, but experienced similar effects on their budgets.

In addition to the difficulties caused by funding cuts, districts cited the requirements of Rider 78

as a substantial challenge. The new budget rider, approved in 2017, requires all districts to spend 15 percent of their pre-k formula funding on one or more of the quality measures defined by Rider 78, including increased pre-k teacher training and/or qualifications, a pre-k curriculum aligned with the Texas Prekindergarten Guidelines, student progress monitoring, program evaluation, development of a family engagement plan, and a recommended student-to-teacher ratio of 11:1. School districts overwhelmingly agreed that state cuts to pre-k in 2017 negatively affected districts' pre-k programs. **Sixty-two percent of surveyed districts said the loss of the pre-k funding negatively impacted their pre-k programs at least "a moderate amount" while 38 percent of districts said the cuts had "a lot" or "a great deal" of impact on their pre-k programs.**

Districts Report That the Legislature's 2017 Decisions Harmed Pre-k

Reported Impact for Districts Participating in the High-Quality Pre-k Grant Program and Those Not Participating



One Bexar County district explained, “We are working hard to expand our program, but without additional funding sources, it is difficult to open additional classrooms and properly equip them. Items to build literacy which are costly and often need to be replaced are not in the budget when there are no additional funds. Activities that will enrich our students...are more limited without additional funds. Many grant funds have been spent on technology. Once the purchased items exceed their lifespan, there will not be funds to replace them.”

In addition to a loss of funds to support classroom materials, districts cited a host of other challenges after the pre-k funding cuts including reduced spending on instructional coaching, staff compensation, and recruitment efforts. One district described laying off its Early Childhood Director as a result of the funding cuts. Another said that Hurricane Harvey combined with pre-k funding cuts and new Rider 78 requirements “placed additional burdens on an already stretched local budget.”

The requirements imposed by Rider 78 were both confusing and difficult to implement. In fact, 57 percent of respondents said they would benefit from additional guidance from the Texas Education Agency on implementing the rider.

To determine which of Rider 78’s cited standards would be the “most structurally or economically difficult for the district to implement,” our survey asked districts to rank the standards by most (1) to least (6) difficult to implement. Districts overwhelmingly cited student-to-teacher ratios (55 percent) and teacher training/qualifications (21 percent) as the most burdensome standards to achieve without new funding.

Rider 78 was a mandate for all districts that provide pre-k, regardless of whether they participated in the grant program. Therefore, those districts that had not received the grants and implemented the program requirements face a particularly difficult task. Consequently, over two-thirds of districts that had not received pre-k grant funds responded that these policy decisions impacted their programs at least a “moderate amount.” Thirty percent said the cuts had “a lot” of impact.

One of these districts explained, “We were not grant recipients, but with the new high-quality pre-k unfunded mandates, we were required to pay for GOLD assessments and additional professional development and mentoring for pre-k teachers.” While districts moving towards more quality standards is a step in the right direction, implementing new requirements without additional funding created significant budgetary and organizational challenges for districts.



The 2017 Pre-k Cuts Harmed Grades and District Programs Outside of Early Education

More than two-thirds (69 percent) of district respondents said the loss of pre-k funding in 2017 created budget challenges that harmed district efforts in other grades.

For example, a district near College Station explained that, as a result of state pre-k cuts, the district shifted other budget funds and staff to support pre-k programs, "Our pre-k aides were funded out of the local budget to help maintain 11:1 ratios, therefore class sizes increased in other grades."

A North Texas district committed to their pre-k program shared that the district "redirected funding" to cover the loss of pre-k funding which "exacerbated already tough budget times within the district." They added that, "our ability to execute equity programs, provide compensation adjustments, materials, and resources were limited."

Other districts cited numerous examples of cutbacks they had to make due to the loss of state pre-k funding, including reduced professional development for K-2 teachers and less money for instructional materials and classroom technology. Districts' decisions to make cuts in other areas to minimize cuts in their pre-k programs reflect their view that early education is a high priority.

69%

**of Respondents Report
Pre-K Cuts Harmed District
Efforts in Other Grades**



Districts That Have Most Embraced Full-Day Pre-k Expressed the Greatest Challenges from 2017 State Budget Cuts

Fifty percent of districts with full-day pre-k said the 2017 funding cuts impacted their pre-k programs “a lot” or “a great deal,” compared to only 14 percent of districts without full-day programming.

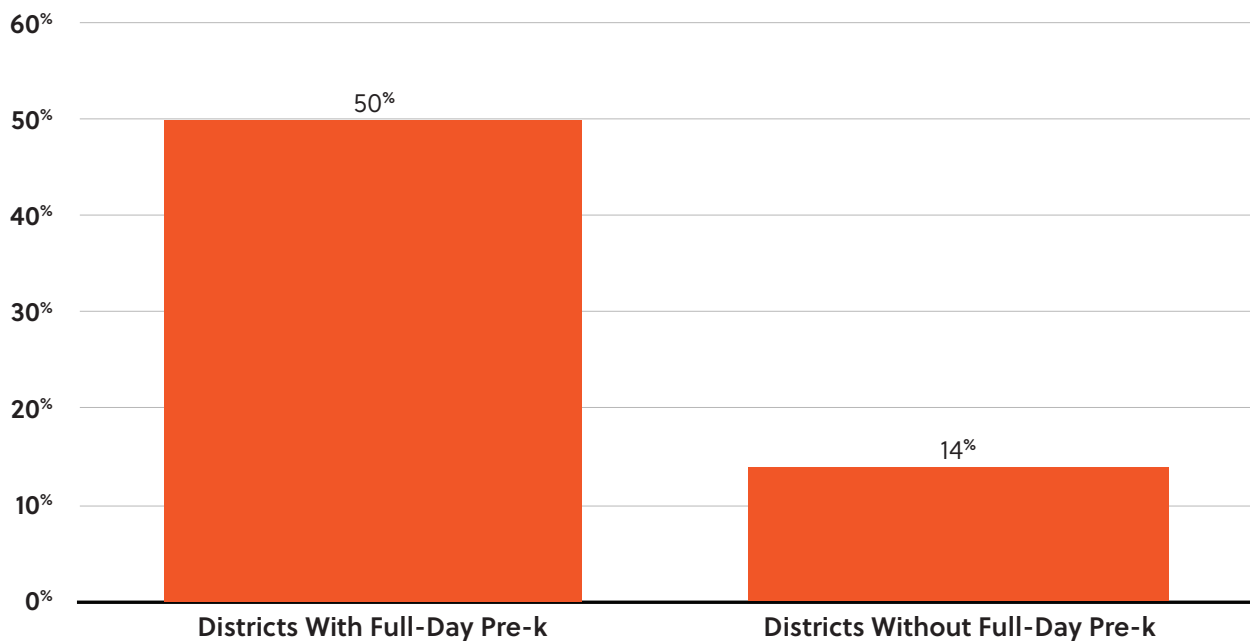
Districts with full-day pre-k also cited more harm from funding cuts in district priorities outside of early childhood. Forty-two percent of districts

with full-day pre-k said the 2017 funding cuts impacted other budget areas at least “a lot” or a “great deal,” while only eight percent of other districts said the same.

Unfortunately, the loss of pre-k funding significantly harmed districts that have embraced increased access to high-quality pre-k by offering full-day programs. The decision to offer full-day pre-k ultimately made districts more vulnerable to the impact of pre-k funding cuts, as districts relied on every penny of additional funds to provide the second half-day of instruction not covered through the formula. Funding decisions by the legislature have penalized most those school districts that are providing more children and families access to quality early education opportunities through full-day pre-k.

Districts Offering Full-Day Pre-K Report More Harm from Legislature’s Pre-K Decisions

Percentage of Districts Reporting A Lot or Great Deal of Impact



Despite Challenges, Districts Aspire to Provide High-Quality, Full-Day Pre-k

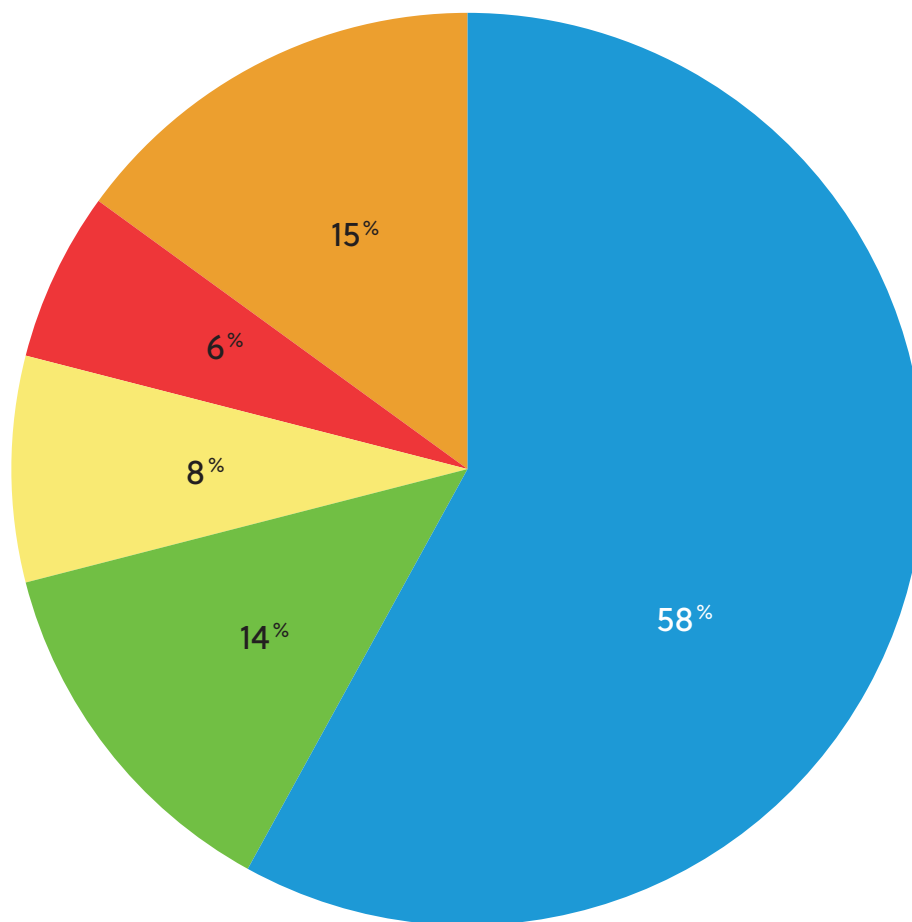
In addition to discussing the challenges that resulted from the Legislature's decisions in 2017, we asked districts how they would invest additional state dollars, if allocated, to support pre-k. Overwhelmingly, school district respondents

selected full-day pre-k as their **top priority for any additional state dollars available for pre-k.**

One of the districts that cited full-day pre-k as its top priority explained, "Full-day pre-k is the most important. The families will not bring [their child] to a half-day program due to time constraints and transportation." Another district added that, "Students are ready for full-day pre-k by the age of 4. The educational environment is important for the group and development of the students."

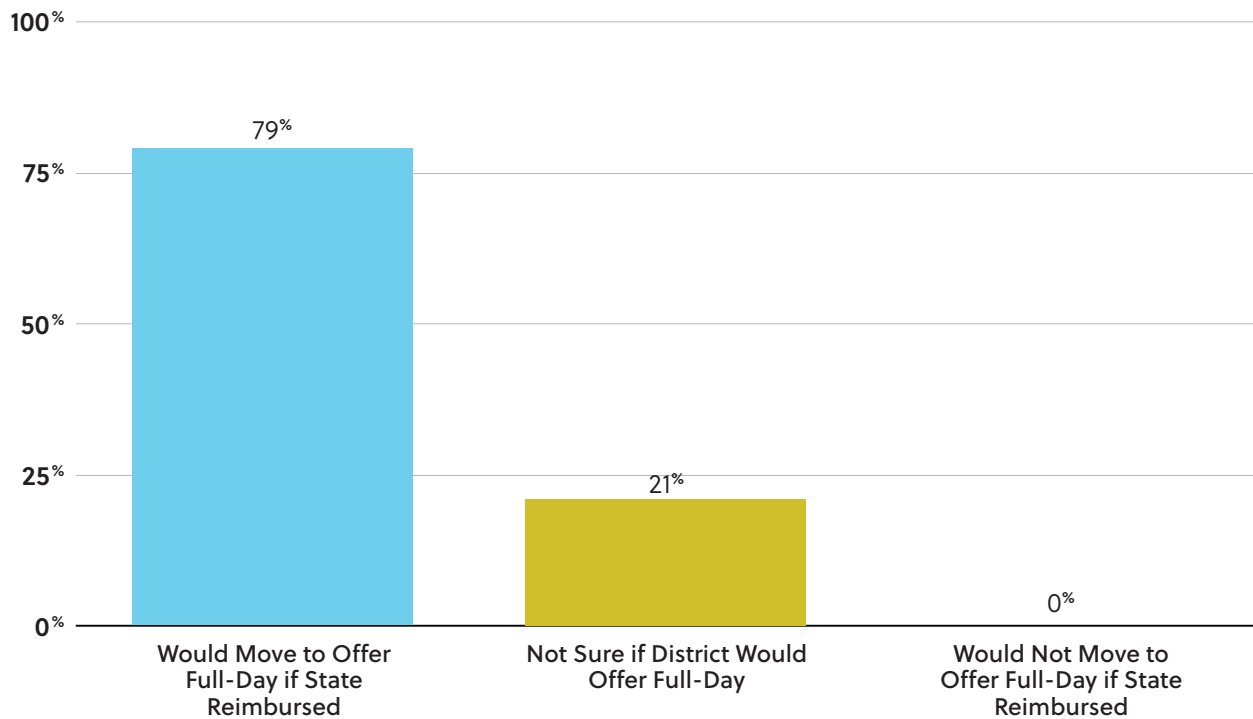
Majority of Respondents Cite Full-Day as Top Pre-k Priority

If Additional State Pre-k Funding Was Available, Districts Reported They Would Prioritize the Following Investments



Districts with Half-Day Pre-k Are Eager to Expand to Full-Day with Additional State Dollars

District Responses When Asked If They Would Offer Full-Day Pre-k If Additional State Dollars Were Available



Furthermore, districts currently offering only half-day pre-k are eager to expand to full-day pre-k. Nearly four out of five (79 percent) district respondents not currently offering full-day pre-k programs said they would start to do so if the state reimbursed for a full-day of instruction. The remaining 21 percent said they were “not sure.” There were no districts that said they would definitely not offer full-day pre-k if the state reimbursed for such.

Although full-day pre-k was clearly the top priority, other investments in quality generated significant interest. The second highest ranked choice, improved student-to-teacher ratios, and the third highest choice, teacher skills and training, are also important indicators of high-quality pre-k classrooms. One North Texas district explained, “the most critical [quality measure] to high-quality pre-k is high-quality personnel, and staffing levels that reduce teacher-student ratios.

Then, those staff members must receive quality professional development opportunities and face-to-face coaching in order to most effectively implement the curriculum and guide all students towards mastery.”

One of the state’s larger districts stated that, “Providing instructional coaching provides the greatest impact on teacher capacity; funds to provide substitutes so teachers can attend professional development would be another significant benefit to more funding. For our families, transportation for pre-k children would be a great benefit.”

Districts’ responses demonstrate how important additional state funding is to maintaining and boosting the quality of their pre-k programs. Overwhelmingly, districts expressed a desire for state funding for full-day pre-k to ensure their young students get off to a strong start.

Conclusion

Texas pre-k is at a crossroads. Our research shows that districts across the state are committed to their pre-k students, but in light of the unreliable nature of the state's investment in quality pre-k, the surveyed districts have struggled to sustain recent investments they made in their teachers, aides, student progress monitoring, and classrooms. Many districts also indicated that, to maintain access to quality pre-k for their communities, they had to divert funds from other areas of the budget used to support grades K-12 to fill the budget gap created by the state's pre-k cuts and approval of Rider 78.

Those districts that have embraced full-day, high-quality programs faced the biggest hit from the funding cuts, citing considerable challenges to maintaining their investments.

Nevertheless, districts continue to embrace quality and find creative ways to retain as many of these investments as possible. Across the state, districts aspire to even stronger outcomes for their students by expanding to full-day pre-k and taking other steps to improving the classroom learning environment and educator training.

The report outlines two important takeaways for state policymakers:

1. **State policymakers should ensure that new high-quality pre-k requirements are accompanied by sustainable and reliable funding streams.** For districts to make long-term investments in quality improvements to their pre-k programs, they need to be able to count on consistent funding dedicated to pre-k within the school finance formula.
2. **State policymakers should make further investments in full-day pre-k.** Many districts aspire to provide full-day pre-k for eligible Texas families who want that option for their children, as long as the state provides sustainable and sufficient funding for school districts to do so.

The path to all Texas children showing up to kindergarten ready to learn will take leadership, collaboration, and resources. Districts have demonstrated they are eager to expand and enhance pre-k for the benefit of Texas kids and the future of our state – they just need the funding and support to do it.

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