

More Work Is Needed to Achieve HB 3's Goal of Strong Readers by Third Grade

Testimony to the Texas Senate Education Committee

In 2019, Texas lawmakers declared third grade reading a priority, passing several important early childhood policies as part of HB 3.

In 2019, state leaders made significant progress on early childhood education policy, most notably passing HB 3, a school finance bill that included funding for full-day pre-k for eligible four-year-olds. **Research from Texas and across the U.S. shows that effective pre-k programs help students start kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed, boost early literacy and academic achievement, and reduce both grade retention and provision of special education services.**¹ This research demonstrated that there are key elements to quality pre-k: engaging learning environments, well-trained teachers, low student-teacher ratios, a curriculum that effectively prepares children for kindergarten, full-day programs, and meaningful engagement of families in their child's education.

The full-day pre-k funding in HB 3 is provided through the new Early Education Allotment, which distributes to districts an estimated \$780 million per year for full-day pre-k or other early reading and mathematics strategies. The funding is distributed as a 0.1 weight in the state's funding formulas for each student in kindergarten through third grade who is classified as economically disadvantaged and/or an emergent bilingual student (English Learner).

Under HB 3, districts are now required to offer full-day programs to eligible four-year-old students. Before seeking a waiver or building new classroom space to meet the requirement, districts must explore partnerships with quality child care or Head Start providers.

The Legislature also recognized the importance of better supporting Dual Language Immersion (DLI) programs by creating the Dual Language Allotment, which provides weighted funding to incentivize the provision of DLI programs to improve students' reading ability by third grade. **Regardless of the language spoken at home,**

¹ Texans Care for Children (2019). The Research is Clear: High-Quality Pre-K Pays Off. Retrieved at: <https://txchildren.org/posts/2019/1/23/the-research-is-clear-high-quality-pre-k-pays-off>

helping students become bilingual has well-documented cognitive benefits for children and strengthens the ability of the state to compete in a global, multilingual economy.² When young children develop their literacy skills in their home language, it speeds up their ability to learn English and other subjects. Importantly, pre-k and elementary school teachers can cultivate English skills while ensuring that children's first language continues to flourish.

HB 3 includes other important early literacy provisions, such as:

- Requirements for pre-k programs around increased teacher training and/or qualifications, student progress monitoring, and the development of a plan to engage families in their children's education.
- Requirement for districts to use a phonics curriculum, ensure that each K-3 classroom teacher and principal has attended a teacher literacy achievement academy, and prioritize the placement of highly effective teachers in K-2.
- Requirement for each school district to administer a kindergarten reading assessment instrument adopted by TEA, limiting the high variance in assessments previously used across the state.

However, HB 3's vision for early grade success is under threat as a result of COVID-19's impact and other enduring challenges.

While all students have been affected by the pandemic, we know the challenges and impacts have not been the same for all students.

- Enrollment has significantly declined across grade levels, **but especially in pre-k**, which saw a 22 percent drop in the 2020-21 school year.³ Even in 2022, enrollment has not returned to pre-pandemic levels.
- Students living in poverty, students of color, students with disabilities, students who are emergent bilingual (English Learners), and students with a history of mental health concerns or trauma are among groups whose education is most likely to have been adversely impacted by COVID-19.⁴
- Despite the creation of the Dual Language Allotment through HB 3, the percentage of emergent bilingual students in dual language programs remains unchanged (21 percent) since pre-HB 3.⁵

² Texas Education Agency (2016). Effective Practices in Bilingual Education Program Model Implementation: A Review of the Literature. Retrieved at: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/Bilingual%20Education%20Programs%20Literature%20Review%20Jan%20202019.pdf>

³ The Houston Chronicle (2021). Texas public school pre-K enrollment tumbles 22 percent. Retrieved at:

<https://www.houstonchronicle.com/news/houston-texas/education/article/Texas-public-school-pre-K-enrollment-tumbles-22-15856433.php>

⁴ Texas Education Agency (2020). Summary of Student Engagement in Virtual Learning in School Year 2019-2020. Retrieved at <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/covid/covid19-Student-Engagement.pdf>

⁵ Texas Education Agency (2022). : TEA English Learners by Program, SY18-19, SY19-20, SY20-21. Retrieved at: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/enroll-2020-21.pdf>

- More than 1 in 4 students in pre-k through 3rd grade are emergent bilingual, but from 2010 to 2019, the number of teachers certified in bilingual education fell by about 20 percent. The pandemic made the challenge of recruiting and retaining bilingual educators even more difficult.⁶
- According to the National Institute for Early Education Research, Texas only meets 4 out of 10 benchmarks for providing quality and effective pre-k. In comparison, Arkansas meets 8 benchmarks, Oklahoma, New Mexico, and Tennessee meet 9, and Alabama meets all 10.⁷
- In 2021, 236 districts requested waivers from the pre-k class size limit requirement of 22 students per class. Over half of those seeking waivers cited teacher resignations or shortages as drivers of the request, and shortages have continued to worsen.⁸

During the 2023 session, lawmakers should build on the foundation of HB 3 so that all Texas students have a strong start and become strong readers by third grade.

- 1. Ensure more parents can access quality pre-k in more places – public schools, licensed child care centers, faith-based programs, family child care homes, and Head Start – as the Legislature seeks to better support a “mixed delivery system”.**
 - a. Promote partnerships between public schools and high-quality child care providers by providing increased and improved technical assistance and by reducing bureaucratic barriers to make these partnerships easier to set up and sustain.
 - b. Align the eligibility and enrollment requirements for public pre-k and child care subsidies for children enrolled in a pre-k partnership setting. This will provide families with more options and help ease administrative burdens for child care and district personnel who currently have to serve two different groups of children with distinct funding streams and state rules.
- 2. Continue strengthening pre-k quality.**
 - a. Increase pre-k quality by using research-based curricula, screening and assessment procedures that promote effective teaching practices, and teaching strategies that better engage a child’s family to meet their educational goals.
 - b. Move beyond simply approving curriculum and ensure districts have support in executing a research-based curriculum.
 - c. Ensure all staff, including teaching assistants, receive professional development and coaching to provide an enriching early education.

⁶ The Texas Tribune (2022). Texas schools are majority Hispanic. There’s been a shortage of bilingual teachers since 1990, and the pandemic made it worse. Retrieved at: <https://www.texastribune.org/2022/02/11/texas-teacher-shortage-pandemic/>

⁷ NIEER (2022). The State of Preschool Yearbook. Retrieved at: <https://nieer.org/state-preschool-yearbooks-yearbook2021>

⁸ Texas Education Agency (2022). Waivers Online Report. Retrieved at: <https://tealprod.tea.state.tx.us/WaiversReports/Tea.WaiversReports.Web/>

- d. Build on pre-k class size limits adopted last session by ensuring districts have supports to keep class sizes low and improve student-teacher ratios.
3. **Develop a robust strategy to recruit and retain quality educators of young children, particularly those who are bilingual certified.** As Texas develops a strategic plan to recruit and retain more certified bilingual educators, as directed by the Legislature last session via SB 560, state leaders should consider the following strategies as a starting place:
- a. Reduce programmatic barriers for educators and pre-service teachers to access bilingual education certification programs.
 - b. Protect and increase state financial support for bilingual education and ESL programs in schools through per-pupil funding.
 - c. Provide greater support for bilingual certified educators, including compensation and loan repayment assistance.
 - d. Expand teacher preparatory programs and invest in strategies to attract bilingual members of school communities as certified teachers.
 - e. Increase grants from the Texas Education Agency's Grow-Your-Own teacher program to recruit and retain more educators from local communities.