

Budget Recommendations Regarding Early Childhood Education and Student Mental Health

Input to the Texas House Appropriations Article III Subcommittee on Interim Charge 1

Texans Care for Children appreciates the opportunity to provide input on Interim Charge 1. Our comments focus on two areas within the purview of the Texas Education Agency: implementation of legislation passed by the 86th Texas Legislature related to early childhood education and student mental health.

In addition to the recommendations below regarding specific programs and priorities, we urge the Legislature to fully fund services for children and families next session. The Legislature took significant strides on school funding and mental health last year, and we are pleased to see the high level of interest among legislators in continuing and building on those efforts as the state contends with a revenue shortfall. In light of the additional challenges facing schools, teachers, children, and families during the pandemic — including the mental health toll and the disruption of learning during the critical years of early childhood — it will be more important than ever than state leaders fully fund education and other key services during the next biennium.

Early Childhood Education (Interim Charge 1a)

The Issue

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. This research has demonstrated that the key elements to quality pre-k include 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.

In 2019, state leaders made significant progress on early childhood education policy, most notably passing HB 3, a school finance bill that included landmark funding for full day pre-k for eligible 4-year olds. 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 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. HB 3 includes other early childhood provisions, such as:

- Requirement for pre-k programs to meet quality requirements around student progress monitoring, increased teacher training and/or qualifications, and the development of a plan to engage families in their children's education.
- Requirement for districts to provide for the use of 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.
- Provision directing the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to collect data on pre-k class sizes and student-teacher ratios to better assess student access to quality pre-k programs.
- Allocation of the new Dual Language Allotment based on students' enrollment in a one-way or two-way dual language program.

Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus pandemic, closures of schools and child care, as well as broader social isolation, have disrupted young children's access to effective learning opportunities education during the critical window of early childhood. A Texas Education Agency report found that this past spring, pre-k and kindergarten students — as well as children of color and low-income kids—were less engaged in distance learning.¹ During the pandemic, teachers are working harder than ever, schools are facing new costs like laptops and personal protective equipment, and lots of kids are at risk of falling behind, particularly young children and English Learners. With so much progress on the line, and the urgency greater than ever, lawmakers must ensure that the needs of young children in schools are addressed this session.

Recommendations Regarding Early Childhood Education

1. **Fully fund educational components of HB 3.** We appreciate that legislative leaders like Chairman Huberty have said that during this revenue shortfall, the Legislature won't walk away from its 2019 commitment to funding schools. Given all the challenges that schools, teachers, and children are facing right now, we know they need that funding more than ever. We look forward to working with the Legislature next session to fully fund

¹ 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>

education and to address the revenue shortfall using the Rainy Day Fund, federal relief funding for states, and other revenue options.

2. **Ensure Early Education Allotment supports children in pre-k, including young English Learners.** One of the most critical actions taken by the Legislature last session was requiring districts to offer full-day pre-k to all eligible 4-year olds. With the Early Education Allotment, districts now have access to funding that will allow them to ramp up their half-day programs to full-day and begin raising the quality of instruction. However, over 100 school districts submitted waivers for two to three years, and COVID-19 related challenges have put additional strains on school district budgets. The Committee should consider ways to ensure the Early Education Allotment continues to support the expansion to full-day pre-k and that districts have other resources to meet their needs in the older grades.
3. **Update high-quality prekindergarten standards required in HB 3 to include a maximum class size of 22 students and a student- teacher ratio of no more than 11:1.** While state law sets a limit of 22 students per class for kindergarten through fourth grade, there is no statewide standard for pre-k classes. A 2016 report commissioned by the Texas Education Agency recommended a maximum of 22 students and no more than 11 students for each teacher or aide in a classroom with more than 15 students.² While pre-k classes are temporarily lower due to COVID-19, it’s an ideal time to ensure children have access to quality teacher-child interactions. That is only possible with smaller, more manageable class sizes.
4. **Protect and increase state financial support for bilingual education/ESL programs in schools through per-pupil funding.** Although many of HB 3’s innovative strategies will support English Learner children and bilingual education, weighted funding for these children has not increased since the 1980s. These weights should be based on updated cost studies that account for the needs of a diverse set of students and that account for COVID-19 and other new related costs.

Student Mental Health (Interim Charges 1c, 1d, and 1f)

The Issue

Before COVID-19 threatened the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students all across the state, the Texas Legislature made the mental health of students a priority. This same leadership is needed now more than ever. The Legislature must build upon the strong progress it made last session so students can attend schools where they feel safe, connected, and supported; and where underlying trauma or mental health concerns among students are met with research-based practices that help students be successful in school instead of ineffective school practices that can lead to students being pushed out of their classrooms.

² Texas Education Agency (2016). Texas Public Prekindergarten Class Size and Student-to-Teacher Ratio Study. Retrieved from: https://tea.texas.gov/Reports_and_Data/Program_Evaluations/Research_Reports/Program_Evaluation___Research_Reports/

The following laws passed by the 86th Texas Legislature provide a valuable framework to prevent mental health concerns from interfering with the education and well-being of students:

- *HB 18 and SB 11 Student Mental Health Provisions.* Districts are required to provide for safe and supportive school programs; they are also required to have plans, practices, or procedures related to promoting positive school climates, trauma and grief, mental health and substance use prevention and intervention, and suicide.
- *HB 19 Mental Health and Substance Use Resources for Educators.* The Legislature provided for each ESC to have an onsite Non-Physician Mental Health Professionals (NPMHP) who is employed by a local mental health authority who is responsible for increasing awareness and understanding among districts and educators of student mental health and the availability of mental health and substance use services. NPMHPs have clinical mental health backgrounds and focus on helping educators be able to recognize potential mental health, trauma, or substance abuse concerns among students and help connect families to mental health related services when needed.
- *School Safety Allotment Funds.* School districts are able to use the SB 11 School Safety Allotment to support mental health programs and strategies, along with strategies that support multi-hazard emergency plans and the physical security of school facilities. Information is not collected/reported on the number of districts choosing to use School Safety Allotment funds to support mental health strategies. Since the level of funding for the per-student allotment is dependent upon a discretionary legislative appropriation, it is likely difficult for many districts — especially smaller districts with fewer students — to add mental supports like hiring additional school counselors or social workers without any assurances of sustainable funding each biennium.

Recommendations Regarding Student Mental Health

1. **Leverage existing and future federal COVID-19 relief funds to support student mental health and supportive school climate strategies.** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act includes funding to address the impact of COVID-19 on k-12 education, including providing mental health services and social emotional support. Schoolwide approaches that support student mental health and positive school climates benefit all students, and they are particularly effective in improving educational outcomes among academically disadvantaged groups (students in low-income households, students with disabilities, English learners, students of color, students experiencing homelessness, and students in foster care). The Legislature should explore ways to maximize both existing and any future federal funding that becomes available to help advance efforts to address student mental health and supportive school climates.
2. **Provide TEA with funding to dedicate additional staff to coordinate and administer agency activities related to student mental health.** While the budget passed by the House included funding for 6 FTEs dedicated to assist districts in implementing school practices related to positive school climates, student mental health, and trauma informed practices, the funding was removed in the budget conference committee.

TEA received no funds to support the implementations of school mental health legislation enacted in 2019. This has left the agency with just 1.0 permanent FTE responsible for carrying out agency activities related to mental health, trauma-informed practices, substance abuse prevention and intervention, and suicide prevention. This is woefully inadequate. Fortunately, TEA is using federal discretionary grant funds to provide an additional 1.5 FTE to support agency student mental health activities, but the federal grant ends in 2023. The Legislature should appropriate funds and provide direction to TEA to establish an office staffed with at least 4.0 permanent FTEs to support agency activities related to: student mental health; assisting districts in addressing the social, emotional, and behavioral concerns and trauma among students stemming from the COVID-19; and provisions within SB 11 and HB 18 related to mental health promotion and intervention, substance abuse prevention and intervention, suicide prevention, and multi-tiered safe and supportive school programs.

3. **Increase the capacity of ESCs to assist districts in implementing effective school mental health practices.** Fund ESCs to provide technical assistance to districts in using multi-tiered systems of support aimed at preventing and/or mitigating the negative effects of trauma, mental health and substance use/misuse concerns on student learning. Having ESC professionals available to provide districts with technical assistance services to prevent and mitigate the negative effects of mental health concerns on student learning would complement the “recognize and refer” services offered by NPMHP’s established by HB 19.
4. **Dedicate a portion of the Safe and Supportive School Allotment to support mental health strategies.** Continue to fund the Safe and Supportive School Allotment, including a requirement that districts use a portion of the allotment on strategies that support supportive school climates and student mental health. School districts need consistent levels of funding for mental health related services and supports.
5. **Establish a school mental health matching grant program.** Establish a matching grant program in which districts can apply to TEA for funding to support the development and implementation of comprehensive plans that address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students grounded in research-based practices. Priority should be given to non-metro districts located in under-resourced communities and provide enhanced training, technical assistance, coaching, and evaluation services.
6. **Increase access to school-based mental health services.** Coordinate with the Article II Subcommittee to increase access among school districts to partner with community-based providers to provide on-site, telehealth, and/or community-based mental health services to students.
7. **Establish a state center for enhanced technical assistance on school mental health.** Provide TEA with funding and direction to request proposals for the establishment of a Center of Excellence in Texas that can provide school districts and ESCs with enhanced training, technical assistance, coaching on research-based practices related to areas identified in Education Code Sec. 38.351.