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Ready Students, Ready Schools

How the Legislature Should Support Early Learning this Session

Texas lawmakers have recognized the need to bolster early learning to improve student outcomes, yet challenges remain in ensuring children enter school ready to learn and that schools are equipped to meet their needs. To address these challenges, the Legislature must prioritize early learning and address funding disparities for pre-k and students with disabilities that limit access to effective early instruction.

Last fall, the Texas House and Senate held interim hearings highlighting the urgent need for Texas to prioritize early learning as a critical strategy to improve educational outcomes. To build on these hearings and ensure students have a strong start in school, lawmakers must address two key challenges:

1. **Only 52% of Texas children are considered kindergarten-ready by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).**[1]

2. **According to the 2024 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR), only 46% of third-grade students met grade level in reading, and only 40% met grade level in math.**[2]

Early Learning is the Foundation of Later School Success

Children's experiences during their first eight years play a significant role in their growth and development.[3] Pre-k through third grade forms the foundation for children's literacy and math skills, which they will continue to build upon for years to come. Just as a house relies on a skilled craftsman with the right tools to lay a strong foundation, students' early learning requires a skilled teacher with several tools in their toolbox to meet each student's instructional needs. In a high-quality classroom during these early grades, a child may begin exploring alphabet blocks, but with guidance from a skilled teacher, they will quickly progress to sounding out letters and spelling new words.

Foundational learning, such as in high-quality pre-k and child care, strengthens students' readiness for school, with the strongest impact on low-income students, as well as students with special needs and dual language learners.[4] When children enter kindergarten with the necessary skills, they are better prepared to engage with the curriculum and adapt to the school environment, setting the stage for success in school and life. However, **students who enter kindergarten behind their peers often struggle to make significant enough gains to catch up by third grade**.[5]

Texas Has More Work to Do to Improve Early Literacy and Math

In the United States, one in ten children resides in Texas, positioning the state as a leader in shaping the next generation. With this large population, Texas boasts the largest pre-k program in the country, and the program's effectiveness has a direct impact on many young learners.[6] However, Texas falls short in several key areas, including teacher qualifications, class size, and funding.[7] To improve student outcomes, our classrooms must align with what research shows promotes student success. Furthermore, parents deserve meaningful options in supporting their child's foundational years, whether they prefer their young children to be at home with family, in a neighbor's home-based program, a high-quality child care center, or a local school. Unfortunately, the limited availability of public pre-k and child care, coupled with the high costs or difficult decision to leave the workforce, create challenges for Texas families. These challenges must be addressed to ensure that all children have access to the early education and care that sets them on a path to success.

The Legislature has taken important steps to recognize the impact of students' foundational learning that happens before kindergarten and the need for quality instruction in kindergarten through third grade to sustain that strong start. In 2019, the Legislature adopted House Bill 3, which created the Early Education Allotment and required schools to provide a full instructional day for eligible four-year-olds and incorporate Texas's high-quality pre-k components. Since 2019, the Legislature has also introduced additional requirements for high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), progress monitoring, teacher training, and targeted academic interventions to support and build on students' early learning experiences.

How is Texas Doing in Supporting Students Readiness for School?

The **Texas School Readiness Dashboard** shows that Texas is falling short in a number of key areas — such as health coverage, child hunger, and access to pre-k and high-quality child care — that play a key role in determining whether children start kindergarten ready to learn and succeed in school. In addition to the education-based strategies outlined in this brief, lawmakers can improve school readiness by addressing children's basic needs and development holistically, including alleviating childhood poverty, reducing the children's uninsured rate, improving access to mental health care for parents and children, improving support for young children with disabilities, and more. Learn more at txreadykids.org.

Sufficient Household Resources   **Positive Family-Child Interactions**   **Good Health and Development**   **Enriching Early Learning Experiences**

Still, Texas is missing the mark in vital benchmarks for later academic success – school readiness and third-grade reading and math scores. Texas's **Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA)** data show that **only 52 percent of Texas kindergarteners are considered ready for school** by TEA.[8] **However, students who attend Texas public pre-k are more likely to be considered ready for kindergarten by TEA than their peers who are eligible but do not attend public pre-k**.[9] By third grade, an even lower percentage of students meet grade-level standards for reading and math. Students not reading or performing math at grade level by third grade may be at a higher risk of falling behind in later grades, as these foundational skills are essential for understanding more complex concepts in all subject areas.

To Improve School Outcomes, Texas Must Have Ready Students and Ready Schools

To improve reading and math outcomes, Texas must increase the number of students starting school ready to learn and ensure the classrooms they enter reflect what kids need to learn – high-quality, evidenced-based instruction delivered by qualified teachers with a class size that enables that teacher to be their most effective.

Ready students have been exposed to foundational concepts that help them feel more confident and prepared to learn. These include academic knowledge, such as recognizing the alphabet, beginning writing abilities, counting, and understanding numbers, along with key social abilities, such as following directions and taking turns.

Ready schools are well-prepared to meet the needs of all students when they enter school – ensuring that teachers have the necessary training, resources, and support to tailor instruction to the varying levels of student readiness so that students who start behind are given the extra support they need to catch up, and those who are on track are challenged to stay ahead.

Four Key Conditions for Ready Schools

The Legislature has adopted several strategies to improve instruction in the early grades. Still, more attention is needed to the key conditions that enable schools to implement these strategies effectively. While experts suggest a number of school factors are essential to meeting the needs of young learners,[10] there are four key conditions the Legislature should prioritize during the 89th session:

1. **High-Quality Educators**:

Teachers are the most significant in-school factor for student success.[11] Texas must prioritize efforts to recruit and retain qualified teachers in pre-k through third grade by ensuring they possess the necessary degrees, certifications, and specialized training in early education and development, along with expertise in key instructional techniques for early literacy and numeracy. Additionally, the state must address critical gaps in hard-to-staff areas, such as bilingual and special education.[12]

2. **Classroom Environment**:

The learning environment plays a crucial role in student achievement. In pre-k, state law encourages districts to attempt to maintain a ratio of eleven students to every one teacher "to create conditions for high-quality classrooms."[13] Despite state law recommendations, Texas classrooms remain overcrowded. The median pre-k class size in Texas is 20 students, with a student-teacher ratio of 15-1 if instructional aides are included.[14] Ensuring low student-to-teacher ratios and manageable class sizes in every grade is fundamental to providing targeted instruction that meets each student's unique needs.

3. **Strategic Leadership**:

Effective school leadership is essential for driving educational outcomes. School leaders must be empowered with the autonomy, training, and support necessary to make informed, data-driven decisions. Providing training in early childhood education, targeted professional development, and resources that strengthen early literacy and numeracy programs helps principals become effective instructional leaders in their pre-k through third-grade classrooms.

4. **Students' Transition to School**:

A positive and supportive transition to school ensures that students are ready to engage with the curriculum and start building essential skills from day one. Partnerships between schools and community-based child care providers are one way to strengthen the continuity of learning and ensure families have the information they need to support their child's transition to school.

These four areas – high-quality educators, classroom environment, strategic leadership, and student transition to schools – are conditions lawmakers must support to meet students' needs effectively. Yet, funding gaps in the early grades create challenges and difficult decisions for school districts. For example, **pre-k is only funded at half the rate of kindergarten despite the Legislature mandating that schools provide the same number of instructional minutes in each grade.** The gap in funding between pre-k and all other grades makes it difficult for districts to achieve Texas's high-quality pre-k components, such as a strong curriculum, consistent progress monitoring, and maintaining low student-to-teacher ratios. While the Early Education Allotment may provide funding for some high-quality strategies like teacher training or tutoring, only kindergarten through third-grade students classified as educationally disadvantaged or emergent bilingual generate this funding, while pre-k students do not. Including pre-k students in the calculation of the Early Education Allotment would provide schools with more resources to implement promising practices from pre-k to third grade. Without addressing these conditions, strategies for improving instruction may fall short, preventing meaningful improvements in early-grade outcomes.

How the Legislature Should Support Early Learning

As Texas continues to confront these challenges, it is critical that lawmakers prioritize students' **access to foundational learning through high-quality child care or pre-k** that supports students' readiness for school and the **readiness of schools** to meet the needs of their students. During the upcoming **89th legislative session**, lawmakers should consider the following actions:

- **Increase Access to Pre-K and Child Care:** Leverage the Texas public pre-k program and the child care scholarship program to ensure more children enter kindergarten ready to learn by supporting access to high-quality early learning. The Legislature should provide additional funding for child care scholarships to address the 80,000+ family waitlist.
- **Address Funding Gaps in Pre-K**: Address the current funding gap by ensuring four-year-olds who attend full-day pre-k are eligible to receive full ADA funding and that pre-k students are included in the calculation of the Early Education Allotment.
- **Improve Access to Pre-K for Students with Disabilities**: Include students with disabilities in Texas pre-k eligibility. Allowing three- and four-year-olds with disabilities to be eligible for public pre-k in Texas will help them access early interventions and ensure schools have the resources to deliver effective services to achieve critical developmental and academic milestones.
- **Invest in High-Quality Educators**: Increase efforts to recruit and retain high-quality teachers, particularly in bilingual and special education. This could include reducing certification barriers and providing additional support for professional development.
- **Strengthen Partnerships Between Public Schools and Community-Based Child Care Providers**: Address bureaucratic barriers that are unnecessary to ensure quality instruction in early learning settings, provide better technical assistance and administrative support, and support policies and funding that ensure there is a sufficient supply of high-quality child care providers for districts to partner with.

The early years of a child's life lay the groundwork for future academic success. To improve the state's education outcomes, lawmakers must reaffirm their support for early learning by addressing critical funding gaps and providing the resources schools need to meet the needs of all students. When children are ready for school, and schools are ready for children, we set students and Texas on the pathway to success.

Endnotes

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