

Comments on House Bill 2 by Chairman Brad Buckley

HB 2 takes an important step forward, especially by providing pre-k for children with disabilities, and presents an opportunity for a meaningful investment in early learning.

High-Quality Pre-K Improves Student Outcomes

Decades of research show that effective pre-k programs help children start kindergarten with strong early literacy, pre-math, and social skills and, over time, reduce both grade retention and the need for special education services.¹ For example, a University of Texas study estimated that pre-k saves the state \$142 million annually by reducing special education expenditures and preventing grade retention alone – without accounting for savings generated through other pre-k benefits.²

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. Still, Texas is missing the mark in vital benchmarks for later academic success – school readiness and third-grade reading and math scores. The state's **Kindergarten Entry Assessment (KEA) data show that only 52 percent of Texas kindergarteners are considered ready for school by TEA.**³ **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.**⁴ 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.

HB 2 Makes Crucial Strides – Particularly for Children with Disabilities

HB 2 includes a number of strategies to support young learners, such as reducing barriers for pre-k partnerships and supporting teacher pathways by waiving first-time fees for special education and bilingual certifications. HB 2 also adds students with disabilities in Texas pre-k eligibility – a critical step to ensure access to effective early intervention and instruction.

HB 2 helps children with disabilities access effective early intervention and instruction.

For students with disabilities, access to early intervention and instruction is critical. For example, a student with a language delay benefits from one-on-one interventions with a speech-language pathologist and from being in the language-rich environment of a high-quality pre-k classroom, practicing appropriate language use with their non-disabled peers. However, unlike other grades, enrollment in the Texas public pre-k program is limited, and eligibility does not explicitly include students with disabilities. Texas schools may provide access to a speech or physical therapist, however, without pre-k eligibility, children with disabilities may miss out on enriching early learning opportunities that help them learn from a trained teacher, as well as their peers.

House Bill 2 Can Take Additional Steps to Strengthen Early Learning

To Significantly Improve Early Learning Outcomes, Texas’s Early Literacy and Math Strategies Must Include Emergent Bilingual Students

Emergent Bilingual students (formerly known as English Learners), whose home language is a language other than English, have always made up a significant portion of the Texas public school population. Currently, nearly 1 in 4 Texas students are Emergent Bilingual.⁵ However, the educational outcomes of these students require greater focus. School districts should use the most effective strategies for ensuring that Emergent Bilingual students are strong readers, speakers, and writers in English and their home language. Data from TEA show that **Emergent Bilingual students served through well-implemented dual language immersion programs achieved, on average, higher academic outcomes than their peers served through any other language program.**⁶

In January 2023, TEA released the state’s Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan, as directed by the Legislature. This effort provides a roadmap and direction on how policymakers can support Emergent Bilingual students across the state. The Plan includes useful new data, an excellent summary of stakeholder suggestions, and several planned agency strategies and legislative recommendations for lawmakers. Still, the Legislature has yet to enact any of these recommendations, including requiring TEA to create rules for a robust support system for bilingual education.

Texas Should Fully Fund Pre-K to Enhance Pre-K and Early Grade Effectiveness

The state’s current school funding formulas only provide up to half of the funding generated by average daily attendance (ADA) for pre-k, even though the Legislature requires districts to offer full-day pre-k for eligible four-year-olds. School districts are partly able to offset the costs by using the Early Education Allotment, which is generated by low-income and bilingual students in kindergarten through 3rd grade. However, because of the numerous important literacy and math initiatives districts are taking on in the early grades, such as reading academies, the allotment is stretched thin. Not fully funding pre-k has a cost that extends beyond the pre-k classroom – it forces school districts to redirect funds that could otherwise be used to support high-dosage tutoring, reading intervention, student support services, smaller class sizes, and specialists. Additional funding for pre-k can have an immediate impact on Texas classrooms’ ability to execute these high-quality literacy and numeracy strategies from pre-k to 3rd grade.

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4. Texas Commission on Public School Finance (2018). Funding for Impact: Equitable Funding for Students Who Need It the Most. Retrieved from:

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