

Budget Recommendations Regarding Early Childhood Education and Student Mental Health

Testimony to the Legislative Budget Board and Office of the Governor on the Texas Education Agency's 2022-2023 Legislative Appropriations Request

COVID-19 has disrupted the lives of children and families in every part of the state. The crisis has created new challenges to student learning and exacerbated problems that existed prior to the pandemic. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) includes just one exceptional item that is aimed at ensuring COVID-19 does not widen the achievement gap among students who have historically lacked access to equitable education opportunities, including low-income, Black, and Hispanic students. Texans Care for Children supports the agency's request to ensure students - including English Learners and students in the early grades - have access to educators, materials, and targeted interventions that help them meet their learning goals during the pandemic.

Unfortunately, the TEA LAR provides no funding to address the widening of academic gaps resulting from the social, emotional, and psychological distress related to COVID-19. The fact is, a student will not benefit from the best delivered instructional support strategies if her brain is being hijacked by her body's physiological response to fear, anxiety, trauma, or grief. Brain science and studies on past widespread crisis events project the pandemic will continue to affect the learning, thinking, and behavior of many students for months or even years after COVID-19 has been contained. Students targeted in TEA's EI 1 are at higher risk for experiencing longer term trauma-related effects. As the Legislative Budget Board and the Office of the Governor consider the FY 2022-2023 Legislative Appropriations Request (LAR) submitted by TEA, we respectfully offer the following recommendations that focus on supporting the learning of young students, English Learners, and students experiencing mental distress due to COVID-19 and other adversities.

Early Childhood Education

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.

Unfortunately, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, closures of schools and child care, as well as broader social isolation, have disrupted young children's access to effective learning opportunities 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 compared to other students.¹ Among these students in early grades, we are also particularly concerned about the pandemic-related learning loss experienced by English Learners, given the importance of these early years for developing students' language skills in both their home language and in English. 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.

The fact is, our youngest kids learn best through hands-on engagement with teachers attentive to their needs and face-to-face interactions with other kids to build social skills. That's especially true for writing and language development in early grades. Because of this, experts are reporting a significant "academic slide" as schools open for in-person instruction.

Recommendations Regarding Early Childhood Education

1. **Fully fund the TEA Exceptional Item related to "Ensuring Equitable Opportunities through Targeted Supports."** In light of the way the pandemic has disrupted learning, including for English Learners and other students in early grades, we are pleased to see the exceptional item request to support educators, school materials, and targeted interventions. Due to the immense impact of COVID-19 on the educational opportunities of English Learners, we believe this funding should include targeted supports for recruiting and retaining bilingual educators and disseminating high-quality materials that help cultivate biliteracy and bilingualism in pre-k through third grade.
2. **Extend hold harmless protections for district funding until enrollment stabilizes.** Due to COVID-19, enrollment has significantly declined in Texas pre-k and kindergarten. According to a recent article from the Dallas Morning News, Dallas ISD is missing nearly 15,000 students from its original projections, with pre-k enrollment down by more than 37 percent. With so many young children missing out on quality instruction, and falling academically and developmentally behind, now is not the time to cut district

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>

funding. State leaders should continue monitoring these declines in attendance and enrollment and maintain hold harmless protections until enrollment returns to projected levels.

3. **Ensure the 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 four-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 requesting an exemption from the full-day pre-k program for two to three years, and COVID-19 related challenges have put additional strains on school district budgets. State leaders 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.
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

Texas policymakers and school districts have increasingly recognized that for students to perform well in the classroom and behave well in school, it's important to address student mental health within the school setting. Even before COVID-19 disrupted the lives of children and families across the state, the Texas Legislature took significant steps to make sure school districts had practices and procedures in place to support student mental health, provide safe and supportive learning environments, and use trauma-informed practices. The provisions enacted in SB 11, HB 18, HB 19, and HB 906 in the 2019 legislative session addressing the mental health of students are even more integral now, as the rates of distress and despair among students, families, and educators are projected to rise due to COVID-19. The fact is, a student will not benefit from the best delivered instructional support strategies if her brain is being hijacked by her body's physiological response to fear, anxiety, trauma, or grief.

Early evidence already points to increases in mental health concerns that can interfere with students' ability to learn, whether they are experienced by a young person or an adult they are close to:

- A national survey found increases in teens (ages 13-17) and young adults (18-23) reporting symptoms of depression since the start of the pandemic.² Other groups found by the survey to be most affected are people with pre-existing mental health issues, low-income individuals, and people of color.

² American Psychological Association (2020). *Stress in America 2020: A National Mental Health Crisis*. <https://www.apa.org/news/press/releases/stress/2020/sia-mental-health-crisis.pdf>

- Depression symptoms and serious psychological distress in the U.S. are triple the level measured in 2018, and higher than those reported after other large-scale traumas like September 11th and Hurricane Katrina.³ The rise in depression and anxiety amid the COVID-19 pandemic, especially among young adults, was worse than what researchers expected.

While stress, anxiety, and feelings of grief or sadness during the pandemic are normal responses, they can affect a student’s ability to show up for school – whether in building or remotely – ready to learn. That’s why it’s important for schools to be prepared to support the social emotional wellness of students who may be struggling. Fortunately, children are resilient, and most students will recover without significant or long-term effects to their education. However, other students will continue to struggle, even after the virus has been contained. Students at higher risk are those who had mental health concerns before the pandemic, students living in poverty, students of color, and those with a prior history of trauma or adversity. The education systems - and the school leaders, support staff, and educators working on the front lines - need to be prepared to address social-emotional effects of the pandemic on student learning in both the short and long term.

Students, families, educators, and schools all need the Texas Legislature and other state leaders to once again make student mental health a priority in 2021 and the years to come. The TEA and ESCs need funding to provide districts with enhanced training, technical assistance, and other services on school practices and procedures that prevent and address mental health concerns among students created or worsened by the pandemic and other adversities that are interfering with their learning. School districts need funding to help implement and maximize the mental health legislation enacted in 2019 to ensure the distress, grief, and adversity caused by COVID-19 doesn’t harm students’ education in the years to come.

Recommendations Regarding Student Mental Health

To address the mental health related barriers to student learning that have been created or exacerbated by COVID-19, the Texas Legislature should:

1. **Leverage existing and future federal COVID-19 relief funds that become available 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. 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, including strategies addressed in the recommendations below.
2. **Build upon TEA’s exceptional item request regarding “Ensuring Equitable Opportunities through Targeted Supports” and provide TEA with funding and direction to provide targeted support addressing**

³ Studies reported in “The Surprising Mental Toll of COVID” published in *Scientific American*, December 2020. <https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-surprising-mental-toll-of-covid/>

barriers to student learning associated with stress, anxiety, grief, and psychological distress associated with COVID-19 and other adversities. Addressing the negative social and emotional effects of the pandemic on student learning will complement and enhance the other interventions included in TEA’s EI request. District leaders, support staff, and educators need access to robust training, technical assistance, tools, and guidance to help them identify, coordinate, and scaffold a range of practices and procedures to ensure students are “head-ready” to benefit from the instruction provided to them, be it in building or remotely.

- 3. Establish and fund an office with at least 4.0 permanent FTEs to support agency activities related to student mental health.** This includes addressing the social, emotional, and behavioral concerns and trauma among students stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic and supporting the implementation of SB 11, HB 18, HB 19, and HB 906 provisions related to mental health promotion and intervention, substance abuse prevention and intervention, suicide prevention, and multi-tiered safe and supportive school programs. The HB 906 Collaborative Task Force on Public School Mental Health Services year one report cites the immediate need for additional capacity within the TEA to assist districts in addressing the short and long-term social, emotional, and behavioral effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on student learning.⁴

While the agency has done impressive work using existing staff and federal grants when possible to assist districts in implementing various components of recent legislation, it is woefully inadequate in the face of the significant challenges facing students, families, and teachers across the state related to the pandemic. There is 1.0 permanent FTE at TEA dedicated to supporting implementation of student mental health legislation passed by the Legislature in 2019.⁵ The House introduced and passed a base budget in 2019 that included funding for six FTEs at TEA to focus on school practices related to positive school climates, student mental health, and trauma-informed practices. This funding was removed in the budget conference committee.

- 4. Increase the capacity of ESCs to assist districts in implementing effective school mental health practices.** In 2019, the Texas Legislature enacted and funded HB 19 to have clinically trained LMHA staff be embedded within each education service center (ESC) to serve as a resource for educators in knowing how to “recognize and refer” potential mental health, trauma, or substance abuse concerns among students and help connect families to mental health related services when needed. Thankfully, most students who are in distress do not need clinical services but will benefit from smart school-based practices, procedures, and strategies that help prevent or manage social, emotional, or behavior challenges that interfere with students’ learning. The state should 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. This

⁴ <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/HB-906-Mental-Health-Task-Force-Year-1-Report.pdf>

⁵ TEA current staffing for student mental health also includes 1.5 FTE non-permanent positions focused on specific projects that are funded with federal discretionary grants slated to end in 2023.

technical assistance from ESCs on non-clinical school-based practices and procedures aimed at helping students learn would complement the “recognize and refer” technical assistance role provided by HB 19 for students who may need specialized services from a mental health provider .

5. **Leverage the School Safety Allotment (SSA) and Safe and Supportive School Program (SSSP) to assist districts in preventing distress caused or exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis from jeopardizing student safety or academic achievement.** In response to the school shooting crisis at Santa Fe High School, the Texas Legislature established in 2019 the SSA and campus-based multi-tiered SSSPs in SB 11 and appropriated funds for the SSA to offset district costs related to facility safety or student mental health. Legislative leadership is needed to address the current crisis that is affecting students in every part of the state. The Texas Legislature should continue to fund the SSA in 2021 and include a budget rider requiring districts to use at least 75 percent of the allotment to support SSSPs components targeting school climate, social and emotional aspects of student learning, and behavioral and mental health.
6. **Establish and appropriate funding to a school mental health matching grant program.** Just as the Legislature used the Economic Stabilization Fund in SB 500 in 2019 to provide districts with funds to improve the physical safety of students and school staff, the Legislature should use the ESF to establish a matching grant program in which districts can apply to TEA for funding to support the development and implementation of comprehensive plans to address the social, emotional, and behavioral needs of students using research-based practices. The state has seen great success in establishing similar mental health grant programs to assist communities in developing and implementing coordinated strategies to address local needs. The program should prioritize non-metro districts located in under-resourced communities and provide enhanced training, technical assistance, coaching, and evaluation services.
7. **Increase access to school-based mental health and substance use prevention 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; school-based youth substance use prevention and intervention programming administered by the Health and Humans Services Commission; and school-based health centers supported by the Department of State Health Services.
8. **Fund the establishment of a state center for enhanced technical assistance on school mental health.** Just as the state established and funded the Texas School Safety Center to provide schools with a reliable source for information, guidance, training, and technical assistance on effective school-safety practices, Texas should leverage federal funding and general revenue to establish a center of excellence that supports the use of evidence-based school practices through enhanced training, technical assistance, and coaching related to components of student mental health identified in Education Code Sec. 38.351. The HB 906 Collaborative Task Force on Public School Mental Health Services identifies the need for a center to expand and support evidence-based practices related to student mental health.