



February 18, 2021

The Honorable Jane Nelson
Chair, Senate Committee on Finance
1400 Congress Avenue, 1E.5
Austin, Texas, 78701

Dear Chairwoman Nelson:

On behalf of the four statewide teacher membership organizations, we appreciate this opportunity to provide input on the Texas Education Agency's 2022-2023 budget in Senate Bill 1. We want to thank you for upholding your promise to fully fund House Bill 3 (86R) as a baseline, however the COVID-19 pandemic and its unprecedented challenges call for additional investment. Throughout the pandemic, the commitment of teachers has become even more vital to our state. School personnel, especially our teachers, have been working tirelessly to ensure that students across Texas receive a quality education.

Further investments are essential not only to help preserve school programs and continue obligations, but to ensure that districts will not have to lay off critical personnel and teachers, and to provide vital mental health supports and professionals on campus. For the upcoming biennium, committee members should consider how to make certain school districts have the resources they need to accommodate changes in the learning environment and meet the challenges ahead, especially in terms of learning loss. Below are priorities and areas of interest to educators that will help us meet our state's education goals:

Immediate Investments

The following are examples of immediate short-term needs brought about by the coronavirus pandemic. Each represents a problem that requires an immediate infusion of one-time funding. This category of investment is critically important, because it is essential that we avoid failing a generation of children by not adequately funding the state's educational response to the impact of COVID-19, and it is also important that we do not repeat the mistakes of the 2009 – 2011 budget cycles, during which one-time money was used to fund ongoing expenditures in one budget, creating a massive hole resulting in devastating cuts in the next.

- In the supplemental appropriations bill, reimburse districts at 100% for the additional expenses they have incurred due to COVID-19, including PPE, technology, increased substitute teacher costs, etc.
- Extend the hold-harmless through the current school year and into the next biennium as enrollment and attendance stabilize to pre-pandemic levels. Without the hold-harmless, districts will lose funding due to unforeseen drops in enrollment because of the pandemic. Continuing this level of funding is necessary for districts to overcome the challenges of the pandemic.
- Designate specific funding to address COVID-19 learning loss, in particular for increased contact hours between students and educators. These initiatives will require funding for additional compensation to cover additional work, short-term supplementary and support personnel, and instructional materials. This high-impact but short-term initiative is an ideal use for one-time federal relief funds designated to education.

- Use additional federal funds for school infrastructure projects, such as upgrading aging HVAC systems. This is another excellent example of high-impact projects that utilize one-time spending with one-time money.
- Provide vital mental health supports and professionals on campus to help address increased need in the aftermath of the pandemic.

Long-Term Investments

- Recognize the hard work and dedication exhibited by the state’s public-school educators and incent the best students of today to become the educators of tomorrow by building on the progress made by HB 3 to improve compensation for **all** campus educators.
- Enhance formula-funding to improve special education services, including additional special education teachers and personnel and supportive inclusion classrooms.
- Increase the state contribution toward active employee health insurance to address the affordability crisis for school employees. Funding for their health insurance has been stagnant at \$75 for each eligible employee since the inception of the current system.

In addition to these critical investments, there are some areas where the committee should consider reallocating spending within Article III for the upcoming biennium. We recommend the following:

- Pause the expansion of the Texas Teacher Incentive Allotment to evaluate its structure, fairness and equal access, and effectiveness.
- Require that appropriations for STAAR testing be limited to spending only for the tests required by the U.S. Department of Education, including taking advantage of any available federal waivers in the current school year. Bills filed in previous sessions that would have limited state testing to that required by federal law showed substantial savings to the state.
- Cap the amount of funds that flow to charter schools to preserve the original intent of open-enrollment charters as schools of innovation. The parallel school system is inefficient, lacks transparency, and is costly, tripling over the last 10 years to about \$3.54 billion.

We hope these priorities from frontline teachers can assist you in developing a budget that invests in our state, our students, and our public education system as we overcome challenges of the pandemic, and that fosters an environment that allows children to reach their highest potential. We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with you.

Respectfully,

Association of Texas Professional Educators

Texas Classroom Teachers Association

Texas American Federation of Teachers

Texas State Teachers Association

CC: Members of the Senate Committee on Finance