

Response to Public Interim Charge 1

Texas House Public Education Committee

SUBMITTED BY

ONE Houston: 2021 Legislative Session Issue Action Team

September 30, 2020



Dear Honorable Chairman Huberty and House Public Education Committee Members:

The Organizing Network for Education (ONE) Houston is a network of students, parents, educators and community members who organize through political and social action to bring about educational change. On behalf of ONE Houston and our members we thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony on House Interim Charge 1 D. It is our hope that our testimony will provide valuable insight to the committee so that students across the great state of Texas are better supported in their academic endeavors.

Interim Charge 1 D

Mental health in our schools is an important issue that has been addressed in House Bill 18. Addressing mental health is important in the social and emotional development of the students in our school systems. The need to destigmatize mental health from a negative perspective to one that embodies more positivity is important to accomplish this goal. While HB18 does emphasize mental health, it puts the onus on addressing students' mental health needs on teachers.

Educators are fully committed to supporting each student holistically but in reality teachers are responsible for students beyond just academics. Educators are charged with teaching various subjects, handling discipline, and supporting students and their parents in various ways. With that in mind even if educators were trained to provide the mental health needs of a student they would not be able to do so effectively for all of their students during instruction time. This increases the education achievement gap.

HB18 notes that school districts can hire outside nonphysician mental health professionals to meet the goals of the policy. We are in support of this effort if every school campus has the ability to properly staff mental health professionals such as licensed social workers, psychiatrist and mental health counselors, we believe that the mental health needs of all students can be met. Though HB18 grants permission for these mental health professionals it does not provide funding to make this happen. We believe the Texas Legislature needs to allocate funding specifically to execute this policy. Many school districts already struggle with funding; more specifically schools struggle to prioritize mental health professionals on campus often due to a lack of funding,

With funding from the Texas State Legislature, school districts should be funded to improve the student to support HB 18 by improving the counselor ratio to meaningfully meet the academic and socio-emotional needs of each student on their campus. The state is very much capable of providing these additional financial resources. It is an investment in youth and an investment in our future workforce. When student to counselor ratios exceed the national recommendation students' academic, emotional, and social needs are not adequately met by their school counselors due to their limited time and capacity according to The Collaborative for Academic, Social, and Emotional Learning.

Recommendation:

ONE Houston proposes the following recommendation:

- Provide funding so that school districts can prioritize the hiring and retention of enough mental health professionals; specifically, counselors on every campus to meet the nationally recommended ratio.
- Reallocate the state budget allowing for additional hiring of school counselors to support students' mental health.
- Provide funding to school districts so they may create a new position at each campus that manages the academic and administrative duties currently assigned to counselors permitting mental health staff (LPC, MSW, etc.) workloads and job descriptions that solely support mental and socio-emotional needs of students. Which is the intention behind HB 18.
- Partner with university graduate training programs to develop a school counselor talent pipeline and/or residency program.