

Building on HB 3 Must Focus on Early Childhood

Testimony to the Public Education Committee, Interim Charge 1

The Issue

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.

In 2019, state leaders made significant progress on early childhood education policy, most notably passing HB 3, a school finance bill that included landmark funding for full day pre-k for eligible 4-year olds. The full-day pre-k funding in HB 3 is provided through the new Early Education Allotment, which distributes to districts an estimated \$780 million per year for full-day pre-k or other early reading and mathematics strategies. The funding is distributed as a 0.1 weight in the state's funding formulas for each student in kindergarten through third grade who is classified as economically disadvantaged and/ or an English Learner.

Under HB 3, districts are now required to offer full-day programs to eligible four-year-old students. Before seeking a waiver or building new classroom space to meet the requirement, districts must explore partnerships with quality child care or Head Start providers. HB 3 includes other early childhood provisions, such as:

- Requirement for pre-k programs to meet quality requirements around student progress monitoring, increased teacher training and/or qualifications, and the development of a plan to engage families in their children's education.
- Requirement for districts to provide for the use of a phonics curriculum, ensure that each K-3 classroom teacher and principal has attended a teacher literacy achievement academy, and prioritize the placement of highly effective teachers in K-2.
- Requirement for each school district to administer a kindergarten reading assessment instrument adopted by TEA, limiting the high variance in assessments previously used across the state.
- Provision directing the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to collect data on pre-k class sizes and student-teacher ratios to better assess student access to quality pre-k programs.

- Allocation of the new Dual Language Allotment based on students' enrollment in a one-way or two-way dual language program.

Unfortunately, due to the coronavirus pandemic, the 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.¹ 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.

Key Early Learning Questions to Address as the Legislature Monitors Implementation of HB 3

HB 3 provides Texas the opportunity to harness the power of a well supported, well-funded early education system. However, its success will depend on how Texas builds on the progress from 2019 and follows through to ensure implementation meets the goals of HB 3. During the remainder of this interim and during the 2021 session, we urge the committee to assess how school districts and the Texas Education Agency have implemented the early childhood components of HB 3 and consider what additional steps may be needed to clarify and amend the law to best serve the needs of young children. In assessing implementation, here are some key questions the committee should consider:

How have districts leveraged the Early Education Allotment to provide full-day pre-k and improve early learning environments?

The Early Education Allotment was among the most critical provisions in HB 3 to elevate the quality of early childhood education, including full-day pre-k programs. However, there is not any current data on how districts have used this funding. According to HB 3, districts may use this funding to fund programs and services “designed to improve student performance in reading and mathematics in prekindergarten through third grade, including programs and services designed to assist the district in achieving the goals set in the district’s early childhood literacy and mathematics proficiency plans..” Because the Legislature also required districts to provide full-day pre-k, there was an assumption that districts would use this allotment to provide full-day pre-k if they didn’t already offer it. However, over 100 school districts submitted waivers for two to three years², and COVID-19 related challenges have put additional strains on school district budgets. The Committee should assess how districts have utilized this new funding and assess what grades were supported, what new strategies were funded, and how that coincides with the state’s goals around improving third grade reading proficiency.

How can the Legislature continue encouraging partnerships between districts and quality child care providers?

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>

² Texas Education Agency (2020). *Waivers Online Report*. Retrieved at: <https://tealprod.tea.state.tx.us/WaiversReports/Tea.WaiversReports.Web/>

Before seeking a waiver to meet the full-day pre-k requirement, or before constructing, repurposing, or leasing a classroom facility or issuing bonds to meet the full-day pre-k requirement, HB 3 requires districts to solicit or consider a public-private partnership with high quality child care or Head Start programs. School districts and child care providers have the opportunity to leverage multiple funding streams and work together to expand access to high-quality early childhood education in their region. Unfortunately there is no available data for policymakers and communities to see how many districts are leveraging community partnerships to provide high-quality, full-day pre-k. The Legislature should consider ways to collect better data and provide greater incentives to pursue partnerships that offer a quality early education continuum from birth through the first day of Kindergarten.

How can the Legislature build on HB 3 to improve educational opportunities for young English Learners?

English learners, who have always made up a significant portion of the Texas public school population, account for a particularly large share of enrollment in early grades. ELs account for 38 percent of pre-k students and 27 percent of students in kindergarten through second grade. Across all grades, one in five Texas students is designated as an English Learner. In their final report, the Texas School Finance Commission wrote, “any recommendations for reallocation of existing funding or new investments should be prioritized toward low-income and English language learner students.”³ Part of that strategy for lawmakers was the creation of a new dual language allotment to better incentivize the ramp up of quality dual language programs. Dual language programs are effective for all students, but particularly important for emergent bilingual, English Learner children. However, we know that in 2019-20, just 25 percent of English Learners were in dual language programs.⁴ To understand the impact of that strategy, the committee should explore how this allotment has served English Learner students specifically, and assess whether the new allotment has led to the ramp up of quality dual language programs among districts with a high number of English Learner students.

How can the Legislature support districts hit by significant reductions in pre-k enrollment?

With concerns around COVID-19 and families’ difficulties accessing remote learning, enrollment is likely down in many Texas pre-k and elementary schools. 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.⁵ Dallas ISD has been among the most aggressive districts in the state in recruiting families to their pre-k programs and embracing full-day, high-quality programs. With so many young children missing out on quality instruction, more children will be academically and developmentally behind when they arrive in Kindergarten. The Legislature should continue monitoring these declines in enrollment and consider ways to ensure districts are able to maintain their funding and quality standards as they meet the additional needs and challenges of providing a quality education.

³ Texas School Finance Commission (2018) *Funding for Impact: Equitable Funding for Students Who Need It the Most*. Retrieved at: <https://tea.texas.gov/sites/default/files/Texas%20Commission%20on%20Public%20School%20Finance%20Final%20Report.pdf>

⁴ TEA PEIMS Request (2020) *English Learner Enrollment by Program*.

⁵ Dallas Morning News (2020). *Early Look at Dallas ISD enrollment figures paints a grim picture*. Retrieved at: <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2020/09/14/early-look-at-dallas-isd-enrollment-figures-paints-a-grim-picture/>

Additional Steps Needed

1. **Continue fully funding educational components of HB 3.** We appreciate that Chairman Huberty and other legislators have said the Legislature won't walk away from its 2019 commitment to funding schools. Given all the challenges that schools, teachers, and children are facing right now, we know they need that funding more than ever. We urge the Legislature to fully fund education and to address the revenue shortfall using the Rainy Day Fund, federal relief funding for states, and other revenue options.
2. **Ensure 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 4-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. The Committee 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.
3. **Update high-quality prekindergarten standards required in HB 3 to include a maximum class size of 22 students and a student- teacher ratio of no more than 11:1.** While state law sets a limit of 22 students per class for kindergarten through fourth grade, there is no statewide standard for pre-k classes. A 2016 report commissioned by the Texas Education Agency recommended a maximum of 22 students and no more than 11 students for each teacher or aide in a classroom with more than 15 students.⁶
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.

⁶ Texas Education Agency (2016). Texas Public Prekindergarten Class Size and Student-to-Teacher Ratio Study. Retrieved from: https://tea.texas.gov/Reports_and_Data/Program_Evaluations/Research_Reports/Program_Evaluation__Research_Reports/