

**HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES
COMPILATION OF PUBLIC COMMENTS**

Submitted to the Committee on Youth Health & Safety, Select
For HB 13

Compiled on: Tuesday, April 4, 2023 12:26 PM

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Hearing Date: March 27, 2023 2:30 PM - or upon final adjourn./recess or bill referral if permission granted

Jared Braun
Myself/One Houston
Houston, TX

I recognize HB 13's inclusion of mental health first aid and its intent to increase awareness and recognition of mental health. This will help teachers and staff feel better supported and equipped to identify students that might need mental health supports or services. But, then what?

The bill removes mental health strategies as allowable uses of the school safety allotment, and mental health is not mentioned in the TEA's directive to create "a directory of approved vendors of school safety technology and equipment a school district may select from when using funds allocated under this section."

School Districts need dedicated but flexible funds to implement school mental health strategies depending on specific campus needs. The school safety allotment needs explicit mention of dedicated funds to mental health.

Colby Nichols
Leander Independent School District
Austin, TX

Madam Chairwoman,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this written testimony regarding House Bill 13. We are pleased to support this critical legislation from Chairman King. We especially appreciate the Chairman's funding mechanism under the bill moving the school safety allotment to \$100 per student.

We believe the flexibility of the allotment is its greatest strength. The statute's elimination of the laundry list of allowable expenses will assist in our ability to provide the best solutions for our students. While we appreciate the need for an agency to vet vendors, we are concerned with limiting districts to only those approved by the Safety Center. Perhaps more information about that process would dissuade the agency from arbitrarily dismissing certain vendor products which may appeal to some districts.

In regards to the guardian program, while we understand its utility for some smaller districts, this program is not a viable option for our district. We would appreciate these stipends for encouraging other security officials interested in serving the District.

Thank you for this thoughtful legislation and all the work that Chairman King and his staff did to help keep kids safe. We appreciate the Committee for considering this legislation and hope our feedback may assist it in its work.

Sincerely,

Bruce Gearing, Ed.D
Superintendent

Diana Tang
Self
Houston, TX

There is a need to support mental health in schools. Over the past two decades, the rate of Texas children who have felt hopeless, struggled with anxiety or depression, and experienced suicidal ideation have been rising. Students who are emotionally and mentally well are able to better engage in learning.

The inclusion of Mental Health First Aid training is a great first step, but Texas does not currently provide dedicated funding to schools for mental health. Texas should join states like Ohio and Florida that have created allotments for student mental health and well-being in schools. I urge legislators to add a mental health allotment into this bill. Districts should never have to choose between safety/security and mental health.

Additionally, this bill also allows for "school guardians program" to be added to district which would allow school guardians to be able to carry firearms on campus. I urge lawmakers to remove this from HB 13. To prevent tragedies we must implement strong school safety solutions, but arming teachers is not one of them. School shootings are chaotic and in these moments of chaos, we cannot ask teachers to stop a shooter, potentially a former student. Having access to a gun in the classroom increases the likelihood that a student will access a gun and that someone will be shot outside of an active shooter incident. Schools are places for books and backpacks, not weapons. Instead, we need proven solutions that are backed by data, and that intervene before violence occurs.

Amy Beneski, Dep. Exec Director
Texas Association of School Administrators
Austin, TX
March 27, 2023

Re: HB 13 training, preparedness, & funding for school safety & school safety emergencies.

Madam Chair & Members of the House Select Committee on Youth Health & Safety:

The Texas Association of School Administrators (TASA) appreciates the opportunity to provide written testimony in “support” of HB 13 as filed by Chairman Ken King. The health and safety of students and school district employees is of paramount concern to the membership of TASA.

We appreciate the practical provisions of HB 13 that allow mental health first aid training to happen over multiple years. Providing an allotment, which allows employees to be reimbursed for travel and training fees is also a valued component of the bill.

Providing a stipend of up to \$25,000 per school year for school guardians to participate in training and instruction in mental health first aid and trauma-informed-care will ensure guardians have the tools needed to work in school settings. The stipend also provides a monetary incentive for employees to take on this additional important work.

TASA appreciates Chairman King’s recognition that enhancing infrastructure for every school campus and district to meet TEA established minimum standards requires funding. TEA estimated the costs for districts to comply with these standards to be approximately \$2.1 billion, not including any requirements the legislature may impose during the 88th Legislative Session.

We believe the increase in the School Safety Allotment (SSA) to \$100 per student is a critical step in the right direction. During interim hearings on school safety in both chambers, superintendents expressed the need for there to be a minimum floor for smaller/rural districts for the SSA as the static amount doesn’t always cover the costs of the needed materials or services and we hope consideration will be given to adding this type of floor.

TASA applauds Chairman King in his efforts to help ensure school districts have the resources needed to provide safe schools communities. Please feel free to reach out to me if you have any questions or need additional information.

Sincerely,

Amy Beneski
Deputy Executive Director, Governmental Relations
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Hailey McMahon
Texans Care for Children
Austin, TX

At Texans Care for Children we appreciate the work of Representative King and this committee to promote the mental health, safety, and well-being of our kids.

We support schools having the necessary funding to provide safe environments and supportive climates for all Texas children. The increased investments proposed in this bill are a welcome step forward. Prior funding in the school safety allotment has not been sufficient, especially in some smaller districts, to meet the needs of all their students.

Texas does not currently provide dedicated funding to schools for comprehensive mental health strategies. But, the school safety allotment has provided school districts the option to use funds for mental health personnel, licensed counselors, and social workers, for behavioral health services, and for suicide prevention. Many districts have done this with great results!

Our worry is that, as currently drafted, the bill removes the range of allowable uses of the school safety allotment, including mental health and effective prevention practices. Instead, the SSA must be used to “improve school safety and security” - a term that is not defined.

With these proposed changes, school districts may be confused whether SSA funds can be used for supports that promote positive school environments and the mental wellbeing of all their students.

Additionally, in proposed Section 48.115(c-1) related to the creation of an approved vendor directory, the list is described as a directory of vendors for “school safety technology and equipment.” This also seems to exclude local organizations that partner with schools to promote student mental wellbeing.

We believe the intent of this bill is to continue to allow schools to use school safety allotment funding to best fit their needs, including supporting students' mental health. We urge you to clarify this intent in the bill language.

For example, the bill could reinstate prior language from Section 48.115(b) around the use of funds for mental health supports. Or, the bill could clarify that “Funds allocated under this section must be used to improve school safety, security, and positive school environments.”

Further, the language in section c-1 should not be limited to a directory solely focused on safety technology and equipment. Ultimately, we believe schools should have dedicated funding to support the mental wellbeing of all their students so schools don't have to choose between security equipment or mental health.

Thank you for your time and consideration. I'd be happy to answer any questions if you'd like to contact me.

Mark Wiggins

Association of Texas Professional Educators

AUSTIN, TX

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) offers the following neutral input on HB 13 by Rep. King, which would add mental health first aid training requirements for each district employee who regularly interacts with children.

School safety is one of ATPE's top legislative priorities. ATPE's 2022-23 Legislative Program, which was unanimously adopted by members of the 2022 House of Delegates, states the following:

"ATPE supports measures to ensure all educational settings are safe and secure environments where students, school employees, and volunteers can be productive."

Training has become a sensitive issue among Texas educators. Recent legislation has sought to reduce the load of required training, albeit with mixed results. The reading academies mandated by HB 3 in 2019 are an example of a well-intended training requirement that educators feel has become a hardship. While the reading academies are different in both size and scope from the training proposed in HB 13, we would like to avoid making any of the same mistakes. ATPE therefore recommends the following changes to HB 13:

1. Strike "first aid" in all references to "mental health first aid training" so that the language simply reads "mental health training." This will provide a degree of flexibility and avoid locking schools into a single vendor that has resulted in mixed feedback from educators in the field.
2. Add a stipend. One of the chief complaints educators have raised regarding specific state required trainings, such as the reading academies, concerns uncompensated time. We believe the addition of a modest stipend, as contemplated in other sections of the bill, would increase educator buy-in.

Nothing is more important than the safety of Texas children. HB 13 is an important step in that direction and ATPE appreciates the opportunity to work with the Texas Legislature to make schools safer for students and staff. We respectfully ask your consideration of these recommendations, which we believe will make the bill stronger and more efficacious. For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or government@atpe.org.

Christine Bryan, VP, IT and Public Policy

Clarity Child Guidance Center

SAN ANTONIO, TX

Clarity Child Guidance Center is ON HB 13. Clarity is a non-profit providing inpatient and outpatient behavioral health services to children ages 3-17. Clarity's patient census is comprised of 60% low-income, state-supported children through Medicaid, CHIP, STAR Health, STAR Kids and low-cost contracts with area local mental health authorities. Clarity also provides outpatient services to several school districts in Bexar County.

We appreciate all the work the legislature has done over the years to put a focus on mental health in schools, especially with the post-covid stressors. We are very appreciative of the large increase in financial support this bill provides, but have concerns that the focus may be read, or misinterpreted, as an increase in funding for the "security" aspect of the bill.

The school safety allotment has allowed school districts to use this funding to allow for security or mental health programs as the district deemed necessary or appropriate. Our concern is that by lining out mental health as a permissible use, regardless of the intent, may appear as funding is no longer directed for those programs that promote emotional well-being.

It is our concern that the language related to "a directory of approved vendors of school safety", without mentioning other types of positive school climate suppliers or providers, also lends itself to reading the overall language in the use of the funding specifically for school security.

We believe the overall intent of this bill is to broaden the use of the funding for programs that allow for safe and emotional well-being in our classrooms. Even in the law's current form, there is ambiguity about how much should be allocated for security versus mental health programs, and we have been supporting a separate school mental health allotment for that reason. But without that mechanism, we would respectfully ask for clarification in this bill's language to reduce any further confusion or reduction in the programs schools have successfully put into place.

Again, we appreciate the intent of the bill, but look for clarification in the bill's final form. Thank you for your consideration.

Theresa Williams, Dr.

Plano Independent School District

Plano, TX

Plano ISD supports HB 13.

Bryan Mares

National Association of Social Workers-Texas

Austin, TX

The National Association of Social Workers - Texas Chapter (NASW-TX) represents about 5,000 social workers across the state. Many of our members are school social workers, providing essential mental health services for Texas students. We are submitting testimony on HB 13 to address our concerns and offer recommendations for improvement.

We appreciate the committee's effort in studying youth mental health and safety during the interim and the investments Texas is putting forth toward youth mental health needs this session. The School Safety Allotment Fund provides critical funding to Texas schools to address those needs. Often, school-based crisis assessment, prevention, and mental health support are sufficient to promote the safety of Texas students, teachers, and staff. Although there has been increased investment into youth mental health support and student safety, HB 13 in its current language eliminates all mental health uses including mental and behavioral health services, evidence-based prevention and treatment programs, and providing licensed mental health personnel, with the exception of mental health first aid training. Mental health supports are paramount to ensuring safe?? and supportive schools.

We have further concerns with the fact that HB 13 places a greater emphasis on arming school staff as a safety measure, rather than concentrating on the mental health and wellbeing of its students. There is no evidence that arming school teachers and other staff makes schools safer, and many teachers are ardently against the idea of being armed. Following the school shooting in Uvalde, a survey by the Texas American Federation of Teachers found that 77% of Texas school employees surveyed said they "do not want to be armed or expected to intercept a gunman." While we appreciate the concerns to protect Texas students, we believe that more investment in school mental health services is paramount to ensuring the health and well-being of students.

We encourage the committee to consider investing in mental health services through HB 13, by restoring funding to mental health professionals in schools. Research suggests that increasing investments in employing licensed social workers, mental health professionals, and evidence-based supportive services prevents crime among students and mitigates involvement by the criminal justice system.

Please reach out to NASW-TX and the Texas Coalition of Healthy Minds if you have any questions or if we can serve as a resource regarding HB 13.