

PRIORITIZING EDUCATION, PRIORITIZING TEXAS:

Teachers' Views and Recommendations on
School Funding in the Lone Star State



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+++++ INTRODUCTION +++++

Budgets are a reflection of our priorities. For any Texan who is concerned about how our state will compete in the rapidly changing and uncertain future, the education of our children must be a top priority. Texas has not updated its school finance formula in 34 years.¹ During this time, the state's population has doubled and the number of children who live in poverty has grown substantially. In addition, the state's contribution to public school funding has declined from nearly 50 percent in 2008 to 38 percent in 2016.² Not only does this shift the burden of school funding onto the local public school districts, but it also puts them in a position of applying for grants and seeking bond elections, neither of which is sustainable. And in the case of rising property taxes, there is no guarantee that the money will stay in education.

Given the urgency and high importance of getting our school funding right, the Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows set out to study and explore how the mismatch between our rapidly changing student population and the maintenance of the same school finance system have affected Texas' classrooms.

The Teach Plus Texas Policy Fellows are a group of 29 demonstrably-effective Texas teachers—spanning grades K-12 in every major subject, traditional district and public charter schools, and the Lone Star State from Dallas to the Rio Grande Valley and Houston to Amarillo—who examine the effects that policy has on our classrooms and advocate for what we believe is best for our students. For the past year, we have studied the mechanics of school finance as well as solicited teacher opinions, suggestions, and anecdotes that reveal how the effects of our school finance are perceived by those on the front lines of our education system. We tackled the following questions:

1. Is there a shortage of funds in our schools today?
2. If there is, how specifically are our students and teachers affected?
3. How do teachers recommend we allocate the funding if more resources become available?

FINDINGS

1. Teachers believe that more resources need to be provided for the education of high-need student groups (i.e. special education, English language learners, at risk, economically disadvantaged, etc.).
2. Teachers report that insufficient counseling services negatively impact student achievement.
3. Teachers report that large class sizes and low teacher pay negatively impact student learning.
4. Teachers say that schools need equitable access to technology, adequate school facilities, and funding for classroom expenses.

RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Provide more funding for high-need student populations.
2. Adequately serve students with social-emotional needs.
3. Hire more essential personnel.
4. Strategically improve teacher compensation.

+++++ METHODOLOGY +++++

We conducted focus groups across Texas on the subject of school funding, reaching 227 teachers. We asked the participants the following questions:

1. Could you share examples from recent years of how you and your school used funds in a way that improved educational opportunities and outcomes for students?
2. Do you feel a shortage of funding in your school or district? If so, in what areas?
3. On average, how much of your own money do you spend on your students and classroom each year?
4. As a teacher, you see the impact of our school finance system on children firsthand. It is important that decision makers hear these stories of specific students and classrooms. If funding cuts, lack of funds, or misspent funds have impacted you or your students directly, please share the story of that impact (e.g., a child impacted by the loss of a school counselor or art teacher, a leaky classroom, old textbooks, a neighborhood school that could be closed, etc.)

Upon completing our focus groups, we aggregated and analyzed the responses and looked for common trends and insightful stories. Following our analysis, we put together recommendations for the state regarding action on this topic.

+++++ FINDINGS +++++

Our focus groups' and survey respondents overwhelmingly felt that our schools are underfunded. Whether it be in the number of students a teacher has in her classroom or the building he is working in, the teachers' responses all point to the same conclusion: School funding is insufficient, and the current system negatively impacts student outcomes.

FINDING 1: TEACHERS BELIEVE THAT MORE RESOURCES NEED TO BE PROVIDED FOR THE EDUCATION OF HIGH-NEED STUDENT GROUPS (I.E. SPECIAL EDUCATION, ENGLISH LANGUAGE LEARNERS, AT RISK, ECONOMICALLY DISADVANTAGED, ETC.)

Teachers across the state reported that the students who are hardest hit by insufficient funding are those in high-need student

groups, such as students in special education, English language learners, and economically disadvantaged students. Said one teacher,

“My district is better than many, but as a special education teacher I see that we struggle to provide optimum services with the personnel limitations of our budget. We have certified teachers with master’s degrees earning instructional aid incomes. Our ELL staff is grossly outnumbered given the number of ELL students at my school.”

Teachers believe that additional funding for these groups will not only support those sub-populations, but improve education overall.

Research reinforces this point. According to a recent report, “while expenditures on all instructional programs decreased over the past five years, low-income students and those in need of additional supports bore a greater share of the cuts.”³

According to the Texas Education Agency’s 2016-2017 report on Enrollment to Public Schools, statewide enrollment has increased by more than 2 million students since the 1988 school year. With a growing number of students attending public schools, the number of Title I schools has increased by 24 percent.⁴ Within the past 10 years, the state has seen the same increase in the number of students who are labeled as being economically disadvantaged.⁵ There has been a steady

increase in the number of students who are identified as at-risk by the PEIMS system.⁶ Apart from that, there are now more students than ever who are identified as English language learners who benefit from having strong bilingual education and English as second language services. From 2004-2016, many Texas ISDs underidentified students with disabilities under IDEA due to a low target identification rate set by TEA.⁷ Following a monitoring report from the U.S. Department of Education in 2017, Texas Education Agency no longer uses a target rate of identification for students with disabilities. We are currently seeing a surge in identification of percentage of students receiving special education services.

One respondent emphasised, *“I cannot meet all of their varied needs as just one person, and need more support to ensure all of them are successful (our most critical students catching up and our most high achieving students being enriched and challenged). I also have a student with severe social and behavioral needs who has no counselor to talk to.”* Said another, *“We need more specialists/inclusion teachers, mainly for English language learners.”*

FINDING 2: TEACHERS REPORT THAT INSUFFICIENT COUNSELING SERVICES NEGATIVELY IMPACT STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT.

Time and time again, teachers spoke of the need for proper counseling staff that can support the social emotional needs of their students. Even existing counselors often cannot perform their duty, because they are needed to complete tasks related to state testing. One teacher remarked, *“Our counselor is time and time again pulled for academic support like STAAR and other areas versus supporting*

our struggling kids that need extra help.” When students who are in emotional distress come to school, their inability to regulate their own behavior negatively affects the classroom environment and the learning of all students. One teacher spoke of younger students who physically harm others, while another teacher mentioned how graduation rates have been affected due to the lack of a counselor.

One of my students, who I will call Maribel, could really use the services of a counselor right now. Her mother was released from prison at the end of January, and she's struggling to adjust. This is affecting her academic progress. Unfortunately, I cannot send Maribel to the counselor's office because he is busy being the special education, dyslexia, and Gifted & Talented coordinator.

— San Antonio teacher Sarah Perez, before the School Finance Commission, March 19th, 2018

FINDING 3: TEACHERS REPORT THAT LARGE CLASS SIZES AND LOW TEACHER PAY NEGATIVELY IMPACT STUDENT LEARNING.

When asked how the level of school funding impacted their schools, many teachers described class sizes large enough to limit student achievement, and reported that low pay leads to teacher turnover and deters others from entering the profession altogether. In some schools, principals have to make difficult hiring decisions about what will harm children less. *“My school can hire only a certain number of teachers per department,”* explained one teacher. *“Our school struggles with reading so they decided to allocate one math teacher to the English department, leaving the math department a teacher short. This leaves larger class sizes for the math department.”*

On April 6, 2018, the local CBS affiliate ran a story about class sizes in Odessa Permian High School. One precalculus teacher reported having 63 students in one class.⁸ They had to pull in extra chairs and share desks. The teacher calculated that with 50-minute classes, the students would get less than one minute of individual attention per class.

Teachers also reported that low teacher pay is hurting the profession—and as a result, students across Texas. Across the state, teachers cited low salaries as a reason that teachers leave the profession or have to take on second jobs to pay the bills. Said one teacher: *“Teachers are underpaid and our salaries do not keep up with the cost of living and rising insurance costs.”*

FINDING 4: TEACHERS SAY THAT SCHOOLS NEED EQUITABLE ACCESS TO TECHNOLOGY, ADEQUATE SCHOOL FACILITIES, AND FUNDING FOR CLASSROOM EXPENSES.

Teachers report that learning conditions have an important impact on student learning. And lack of technology, crumbling school

TECHNOLOGY

Teachers consistently raised lack of technology as an educational barrier in districts across the state. The state has a set of technology standards for every grade level, yet there is no means of ensuring that working, modern technology is accessible to all students and the teachers that serve them. With the way technology has been integrated into every part of society, not every

buildings, and lack of funding for supplies, are hurting students' chances for success.

Texas school is capable of fully preparing their students for jobs in today's workforce.

“I teach an Exploring Computer Science class, but do not have daily access to a computer lab. I requested that I could have access to a laptop cart, but it has been six months and there has been no progress,” said one teacher. Teachers also

mentioned how with extra funds, the school was able to purchase updated equipment and software. One teacher mentioned using her own money to purchase an intervention software for her students to use in the

classroom and at home. Another teacher commented, *“We have basically zero technology in early childhood, yet this is an area where we are graded on T-TESS.”*

ADEQUATE SCHOOL FACILITIES

Many teachers spoke of the state of the buildings where they teach. They cited crumbling walls, leaking roofs, and even the fear of exposing themselves or their students to asbestos. In these classrooms and schools, inadequate facilities also create an environment that is not suitable to learning. One teacher wrote, *“Our building constantly*

has leaks, holes in the ceilings, broken AC/Heating systems, broken plumbing, and overall unsanitary conditions to promote a conducive learning environment.” Another teacher stated, *“The carpet is well worn, and a few years ago, we found mold in large areas, under the carpet, in some classrooms and the school gym. Yet, we were told there were no funds to take care of this.”*

FUNDING FOR CLASSROOM EXPENSES

For Texas teachers, larger class sizes not only means having to give each student less individual time, but it also means that they need to spend more money from their own paychecks to serve these additional students. In our focus groups, 81 percent of teachers reported that they spend \$300 or more per year on supplies for their classrooms and 27 percent of teachers reported spending \$1,000 or more each year. Of the teachers we surveyed, the average reported out-of-pocket expense was almost \$700 per year.⁹

Said one teacher, *“I teach pre-K and for the past five years, I have spent in excess of \$1,000 per year on my students and classroom for basic things like supplies and new and engaging center materials.”* Another teacher reported, *“We don’t have enough books in our classrooms and literacy library for diverse learners. The books in our literacy library are out of date. The textbooks are outdated and do not meet rigor of STAAR, but we can’t afford sources that do.”*

What Teachers Spend Out-of-Pocket

Up to \$299	19%
\$300-\$999	53%
\$1,000+	27%

Does not add up to 100% because of rounding.

RECOMMENDATION 1: PROVIDE MORE FUNDING FOR HIGH-NEED STUDENT POPULATIONS.

In order to fund Texas schools in a more equitable manner, the state should provide more funding for the education of specific student groups like English language learners, students with disabilities, and economically disadvantaged students. This should include funding for qualified personnel and adequate, effective professional development to build the teaching capacity of all teachers. To ensure that funds are following the students to which they were allocated, there needs to be a transparent way of tracking the money being spent on each student in relation to their need.

RECOMMENDATION 2: ADEQUATELY SERVE STUDENTS WITH SOCIAL-EMOTIONAL NEEDS.

To better serve students who experience trauma or social emotional stress, the state should provide funds for the hiring of support personnel such as counselors, social workers, and school psychologists who are equipped to diagnose and treat mental illness, so that the staff-to-student ratio is more equitable. The state should also provide funds to train teachers on how to better manage the behavior of these students as it arises in the classroom.

RECOMMENDATION 3: HIRE MORE ESSENTIAL PERSONNEL.

The state should allocate funds for the hiring of more teachers and support personnel to alleviate the strain of larger-than-average class sizes and more appropriately serve students in the highest-need areas.

RECOMMENDATION 4: STRATEGICALLY IMPROVE TEACHER COMPENSATION.

The state should identify ways to competitively compensate effective teachers—especially those working in high-need areas or with special student populations, so as to ensure that the most qualified teachers are being recruited and retained in the classroom.

+++++ CONCLUSION +++++

Teachers are clear: We need more funding to better serve all of our students' needs. With its lack of technology resources, poorly maintained school facilities, an increase in the general student body as well as in special populations, and a need to reduce the size of our largest classes, the state's current funding model does not provide the appropriate financial support to educate our students. The students we support today will be the ones we'll depend on in the future. If we're to ensure the success of our state for years to come, we must adequately invest in our schools, teachers, and students.

+++++ **ENDNOTES** +++++

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⁴ Texas Education Agency, "Enrollment Trends", June, 2017. Accessed from https://tea.texas.gov/acctres/enroll_index.html p. 23

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⁶ Texas Education Agency, "Enrollment Trends", June 2017. Accessed from https://tea.texas.gov/acctres/enroll_index.html p. 50

⁷ Texas Part B 2017 Monitoring Visit Letter Enclosure. Retrieved from <https://www2.ed.gov/fund/data/report/idea/partbdmsrpts/dms-tx-b-2017-enclosure.pdf>

⁸ CBS7, Midland, Texas, "Impact felt from oversized class sizes", April 06, 2018. Accessed at <http://www.cbs7.com/content/news/Impact-felt-from-oversized-class-sizes-479036223.html>

⁹ Question: "On average, how much of your own money do you spend on your students and classroom each year?" (N=227)