

# **EDUCATION**

Texas Democrats believe a world class education system is a moral imperative and an economic necessity. Every child should be provided the opportunity to succeed - not just a select few. Achieving student success requires an unwavering state commitment to provide every Texas child the opportunity to receive a quality education from pre-K through college or career programs. The changing demographics of the Texas student population pose new challenges that must be met to keep the Texas economy strong and our communities prosperous. Owing to inadequate investment in public education, minority and economically disadvantaged Texas students continue to suffer from a persistent achievement gap. Every child should have access to an educational program that values highly skilled teachers and encourages critical thinking and creativity, without the harmful impact of high stakes standardized testing.

## **Public Education Funding**

The Texas Constitution guarantees the right to a suitable free public education for all Texas children. Texas Democrats condemn the unanimous decision by Texas Supreme Court justices and the Governor who declared “victory” when the Court refused to enforce the constitutional right that guarantees a free public education for every Texas child. The Republican legislative majority has shortchanged education funding every session since taking control of both houses. In 2011, Republicans cut public school funding by \$5.4 billion despite having more than enough in the state “Rainy Day Fund” and still haven’t fully restored those funding cuts. Correcting the deficiencies in funding Texas public education must be a legislative budget priority. Texas Democrats believe:

- the state should establish a 100% equitable school finance system with sufficient state revenue to provide every child the opportunity to learn in an exemplary program;
- the state should equitably reduce reliance on "Robin Hood" recapture;
- state funding formulas should fully reflect all student and district cost differences and the impact of inflation and state mandates; and
- the federal government should fully fund all federal education mandates and should fully

fund the Every Student Succeeds Act.

### **Preservation of the Texas Public Education System**

Texas Democrats support the Constitution's "duty of the legislature" to provide suitable support for a system of "free public schools" and prohibition on using public school funds for the support of "any sectarian school." Texas Democrats:

- oppose the misnamed "school choice" schemes of using public tax money for the support of private and sectarian schools;
- believe "school choice" is a deceptive marketing frame that purports to advocate something that already exists - school choice - but whose true purpose is to divert public school funds to vouchers or tax credit systems supporting private and sectarian schools;
- That adoption of any vouchers or tax credit scheme would unavoidably financially and academically damage public schools in Texas.

### **Pre-K and Early Childhood Education**

Early childhood education is essential to help students from all backgrounds begin to cultivate the skills that will last the rest of their lives. We believe:

- every eligible Texas child must have access to high-quality, full-day Pre-K and kindergarten;
- the Texas Education Agency should establish appropriate quality standards for Pre-K programs to insure that students are receiving the highest quality instruction;
- schools and teachers must be equipped with resources and effective techniques to ensure that every child performs at grade level in reading, social studies, math, and science by third grade;
- state support should be provided for family literacy programs that enable parents to assist their children; and
- resources must be provided to reverse the loss of teachers' aides due to the 2011 cuts.

### **Every Student Should Have a Highly Qualified Teacher**

Half of new teachers leave the profession within five years, leaving many students taught by teachers who are not certified to teach the subjects they are teaching. Early career educators are driven from the profession by low teacher pay, the constraints placed on them by high stakes testing, and inadequate funding that forces teachers to spend hundreds of dollars from their own pockets for for their classrooms. Democrats believe we must work to attract the best teachers and keep them in our classroom.

- Bring Texas teacher pay in line with the national average.
- Increase the state contribution to health insurance for educational employees, which has remained stagnant for 14 years while premium costs have eaten away at take home pay for teachers and other school employees.
- Guarantee early acceptance to college and a teaching job to high school students in the top 20% of their class who commit to a teaching career upon certification.
- Enhance the Teach for Texas Loan Repayment Program by tying loan forgiveness to years of teaching service, opening the program to all fields of study and allowing current teachers to go back to school to get additional certification in critical needs fields.

- Restore funding for the Educational Aide Exemption to help teachers' aides go back to school to get certified as full-time teachers.
- Prepare high school students for careers in teaching by creating an educational endorsement pathway specific to teaching readiness.
- Restore, respect and safeguard the rights and benefits of education employees.
- Guarantee that every class has a teacher certified to teach that subject.
- Recruit and train teachers who reflect the state's diversity.
- Provide a mentor or master teacher for every novice teacher.
- Oppose test-based performance pay.
- Respect support personnel by providing them due process employment rights and a salary schedule.

### **Quality Classroom Learning Environment**

Crowded classrooms and an overreliance on high stakes standardized tests that stifle creativity and leave little time for genuine teaching and learning. Smaller class sizes improve student performance, but class size waivers are all too common. Teachers have sued TEA over plans to increase the testing stakes by imposing a statewide test-based "Value Added Measure" as a teacher evaluation metric, despite research that demonstrates such measures are not valid. Parents have sued TEA over numerous flaws in the STAAR test. There is a better way to create an excellent classroom learning environment to help students think critically and succeed. Therefore, Texas Democrats support:

- extending appropriate class size limits to all grades and enforce those limits;
- replacing high-stakes tests that effectively punish students, teachers and schools, with multiple measures designed to diagnose student needs and improve instruction;
- a prohibition on awarding taxpayer dollars to corporations to develop high-stakes tests;
- rejecting efforts to impose a corporate-designed test-based "Value Added" teacher evaluation system and base teacher evaluation on multiple measures designed by practicing educators;
- ending inappropriate testing of students with disabilities whose individual education plans call for alternative assessments of their educational progress;
- providing free, accurate and updated instructional materials aligned with educationally appropriate, non-ideological state curriculum standards and tests, including ethnic studies and environmental education programs;
- equipping classrooms with free computers, high-speed internet access and digital instructional materials; and
- adequately defining and funding programs targeted to increase student proficiency in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM).

### **Community Schools: A Proven, Sustainable Way to Improve Schools**

Parental and community involvement in neighborhood schools has long been the hallmark of successful public schools. The community school model, engaging parents, educators and community in designing and implementing school improvement plans, offers a proven blueprint for restoring excellence in public education. This model provides real local control and accountability that detached, corporate-run schools simply cannot match. Texas should:

- require every school to meet high standards and repeal "home rule" and "innovation" statutes that allow standards to be reduced and serve as a pathway to privatization;

- oppose A-F school ratings, which serve only to stigmatize schools and undermine struggling communities while doing nothing to improve children’s education.
- oppose the creation of a statewide so-called “achievement” or “recovery” school district that would grant control of a neighborhood school to Austin-based bureaucrats who could contract with private operators to run neighborhood schools without local accountability;
- utilize existing statutes and encourage expansion of neighborhood charter schools that are run by parents and teachers who establish curriculum and policy within state standards;
- strengthen state oversight and academic and financial standards for charter schools to provide the same level of accountability required of neighborhood schools;
- strengthen state oversight of homeschooling; and
- reject efforts to provide state funds for and shift students into for-profit, low-quality, unaccountable “virtual schools” at taxpayers’ expense.

### **Opportunity for Every Child**

Many children who enter school with unique needs have extraordinary potential, if we simply address their needs and provide them an opportunity to succeed. Texas should:

- reject efforts to destroy bilingual education;
- promote multi-language instruction, beginning in elementary school, to make all students fluent in English and at least one other language;
- support Title IX protections for gender equity in public education institutions;
- support child nutrition acts that provide for free school breakfasts, lunches, and after school snacks, as well as summer lunch programs;
- ensure that every student has access to appropriate academic counseling services, as well as psychological and social services provided by competent and licensed professionals;
- provide and appropriately fund high-quality career and technical education programs;
- provide arts and music education in all schools;
- ensure that every school has a fully funded and staffed library, fully equipped with both print and electronic media, that is regularly open and accessible to students and faculty;
- provide universally accessible after-school programs for grades pre-K-12; and
- develop peer-reviewed curriculum for mandatory ethnic studies classes, such as Indigenous, Chicano, and African-American studies.

To make the promise of educational opportunity a reality for students at risk of dropping out or failing academically, we believe the state should support:

- school-community collaboration that brings educational and social services together under one roof to help at-risk students and their families;
- dual-credit and early-college programs that draw at-risk students into college and career paths while still in high school;
- equitable distribution of highly qualified teachers, to change practices that too often match the most at-risk students with the least experienced and least prepared teachers;
- Focus efforts to close the academic achievement gap through the equitable distribution of high qualified teachers, eliminating disproportionate administration of disciplines impacting African-American and Latino students, and advocating culturally relevant learning and wraparound services to meet students’ social, emotional, and health needs;
- comprehensive age-appropriate sex education programs with a contraception component, to reduce dropout rates due to unintended pregnancy; and
- access to affordable programs for adults who have dropped out of the education process.

## **Preserving the defined benefit pension for retired teachers**

Most retired teachers worked for years with inadequate pay and have no Social Security.

Texas Democrats support:

- protecting the TRS defined benefit pension system against attempts to turn it into a risky 401-k plan that could put most retirees' pensions at risk;
- providing a regular COLA for every retired teacher;
- repealing the federal government pension offset and windfall elimination provisions that unfairly reduce Social Security benefits for Texas educational employees; and
- improving the TRS-Care health insurance program for retired educators.

## **SBOE Reform**

All too often, extremists on the State Board of Education have made a laughingstock of our state's process by approving curriculum standards and textbooks that violate the integrity and reliability of mainstream science and social studies, leading even conservative think tanks to call our social studies curriculum standards a "politicized distortion of history." Texas Democrats believe the State Board of Education should:

- develop curriculum standards and textbook requirements based on peer-reviewed research and written by subject matter experts, not the opinions of partisan extremists;
- adopt instructional materials that preserve and teach the methods and content of professional science and social studies experts without censorship or illegitimate editing;
- insist on the exercise of sober fiduciary responsibility for the Permanent School Fund;
- expose and prohibit conflicts of interest; and
- insist on due diligence in the screening of charter applicants and quickly rescind the charter school applicants and quickly rescinding the charters of schools that violate Texas public school education statutes.

## **Making Schools Safe and Bully-Free**

Students, teachers and school personnel should be safe from acts of violence and must be protected from bullying, including cyber-bullying. We support fair enforcement of disciplinary standards, early interventions and mediation which support the success of every child regardless of their current socio-economic circumstances.

- School campuses and functions must be weapon-free and drug-free.
- Teachers deserve support when they exercise their statutory right to remove a disruptive student from class as guaranteed in the Texas Education Code.
- Full compliance with Title IX implementing regulations regarding a student's gender identity and with the DOE and DOJ directive to school principals contained in the document "Examples of Policies and Emerging Practices for Supporting Transgender Students."
- Implementation of systematic programs should be utilized to identify instances of bullying and implement school-wide positive behavior interventions and supports, to prevent violence, disruption, bullying, and harassment:
- Eliminate disparities in discipline based on race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression or any other improper grounds.

In light of Texas current discriminatory suspension and expulsion rates, Texas Democrats have taken the lead in passing legislation to eliminate disparities in discipline based on race, ethnicity, national origin, disability, gender, sexual orientation, gender identity/expression, or any other

improper grounds. The Texas Education Agency should be directed to investigate and correct any patterns of apparent discriminatory enforcement or non-enforcement of discipline standards, including standards for out-of-school suspension.

Texas Democrats have enacted and will work to implement measures to stop indiscriminate use of misdemeanor ticketing for minor infractions on campus and indiscriminate expulsion or placement of students in disciplinary alternative education programs for trivial misconduct. Students referred to disciplinary alternative education programs should continue to receive strong academic instruction. When a student's misconduct is serious enough to warrant disciplinary placement, the state should make sure the disciplinary setting offers a full array of educational and social/behavioral services to help that student get back on track.