

Testimony to Senate Finance Committee: Addressing Non-Academic Barriers to Student Learning

Every school day, teachers, counselors, nurses, principals, and coaches interact with students experiencing social, emotional, and behavioral challenges that interfere with learning. Just as Texas needs to help schools better address academic barriers to learning, it must also help schools implement strategies and classroom conditions that address non-academic barriers to learning.

Social-emotional and health needs have a significant impact on student learning. Extensive research shows students who are physically, socially, and emotionally well are better learners and experience more success in school.¹ Schools that provide safe and supportive learning environments experience lower dropout rates, decreased incidence of violence, increased teacher retention, and higher student achievement.²

In any given classroom in Texas, there are multiple non-academic barriers that undermine and impede student learning and academic performance:

- Nearly 60% of school age children in Texas are economically disadvantaged.³
- One in five students has a diagnosable mental disorder. Most are in general education.
- In 2015, there were more than 40,000 school-age children who were confirmed by CPS as victims of abuse and neglect.⁴
- One in 2 high school students reported feeling like they did not matter to people in their community.⁵
- One in 4 high school students reported having felt so sad or hopeless for two weeks or more during the previous year that they stopped doing their usual activities.⁶
- One in 5 high school students reported being bullied on school property during the previous year.⁷
- One in 6 high school students reported actually making a plan to attempt suicide during the previous year.⁸ One in 10 students attempted suicide one or more times in the previous year.⁹

Texans Care for Children is a statewide, non-profit, non-partisan, multi-issue children's policy organization. We drive policy change to improve the lives of Texas children today for a stronger Texas tomorrow. We envision a Texas in which all children grow up to be healthy, safe, successful, and on a path to fulfill their promise.

On average, schools use about 14 different strategies or programs to prevent violence and promote safe learning environments.¹⁰ Instead of adopting a different program to combat each new problem that emerges, schools can develop a consistent and long-term strategy that addresses multiple student concerns through a set of well-integrated programs and services.¹¹ Rather than having siloed efforts that are disconnected from each other, schools have the opportunity to strategically align policies, strategies and practices, weaving together school and community resources, to promote students' healthy development and learning and prevent things schools, students, families and the state wants to see less of: bullying, truancy, mental health concerns, substance abuse, disciplinary actions, and school failure.

TEA provides little guidance to districts on using available resources to more effectively address non-academic barriers to learning. The agency has one FTE dedicated to Health and Safety. Education service centers (ESCs) offer schools information and training on things like positive behavior management and supports, bullying prevention, and family and community engagement. However, with separate ESCs leading different efforts, training related to school climate is largely planned and delivered in silos. Outside of some narrow mandates, much of the training is optional.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

1. **Establish an Office of Student Learning Supports at TEA, with a minimum of one FTE, charged with leading agency efforts to address non-academic barriers to student learning.**
2. **Direct TEA to develop a plan that identifies and coordinates resources currently available to assist TEA, districts, and schools in addressing non-academic barriers to student learning.** The agency should develop the plan in conjunction with other state agencies that provide services and supports that help keep students physically and mentally well and in school learning.
3. **Increase – not decrease - funding for Education Service Centers (ESCs).** ESCs serve as TEA's boots-on-the-ground in providing schools with training and technical assistance on effective practices. This network should be strengthened, not weakened.
4. **Expand the role of and appropriation to the Texas Behavior Support Network within Region 4 Education Service Center (ESC)** to include support to school districts on the effects of trauma, school-based trauma-informed practices, and integrating mental health training and services into a positive behavior interventions and supports (PBIS) framework.

Thank you for your time and commitment. If you have any questions, please feel free to contact me at 512.473.2274 or jsaxton@txchildren.org.

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¹ Basch CE. (2010) Healthier Students Are Better Learners: A Missing Link in School Reforms to Close the Achievement Gap. Columbia University; http://www.equitycampaign.org/i/a/document/12557_EquityMattersVol6_Web03082010.pdf.

² National School Climate Center. <http://www.schoolclimate.org/>

³ Texas Education Agency 2018-2019 Legislative Appropriations Request, Administrator's Statement.

⁴ DFPS 2015 Annual Report and Data Book

⁵ Texas Department of State Health Services. *2013 Texas Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS)*
<http://healthdata.dshs.texas.gov/HealthRisks/YRBS>

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Gottfredson, G.D., and Gottfredson, D.C. (2001). What schools do to prevent problem behavior and promote safe environments. *Journal of Educational and Psychological Consultation*, 12(4), 313-344.

¹¹ National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2016). Preventing Bullying Through Science, Policy, and Practice.