



Testimony before the Commission on Public School Finance

by Emily Sass, Policy Analyst

Chairman Brister and Members of the Committee:

My name is Emily Sass, and I represent the Texas Public Policy Foundation, where I serve as the K-12 education policy analyst. Thank you for the invitation to speak today. We look forward to working with you to empower parents, students, and teachers for the best outcomes in education.

Texas spends significantly on public education. Inflation-adjusted spending per student is up 7.6 percent since the [2004-05 school year](#). This past session, the state devoted over [half of its general revenue](#) to funding education from the beginning of a child's educational career through college. Considering that the next largest item in the budget is health and human services, which is supplemented substantially by the federal government (\$43.8 billion in the last budget), the state of Texas has clearly expressed that education continues to be a top priority. We spend amply on education; it's time to focus on getting more education for our money.

We realize that many districts operate with some level of efficiency. However, we are seeing evidences of bloat within the system. For example, between fiscal years 1993 and 2015, the Texas student population grew by 48 percent. The number of teachers grew 56 percent, and the number of non-teaching staff grew by 66 percent. If Texas had simply limited the growth of its non-teaching staff to the same level of growth as its student population, Texas would have saved [\\$2.2 billion annually](#). That money could have been either returned to taxpayers, or sent to target needs within Texas education, or something else. Acknowledging efficiency in Texas education is not the same thing as saying that total efficiency has been achieved.

We can all agree that the focus of our education resources, from the state to the local level, should be the good of Texas students. Approaches that result in better outcomes for Texas students in academic achievement and life beyond high school should constitute success for Texas education. While Texas ranks at the top nationally when our student population is split out by racial attainment, it trails the nation in overall performance. The [recent report](#) from the House Select Committee on Economic Competitiveness noted that, by Texas Workforce Commission numbers as of September 2017, 300,260 jobs were posted and 543,637 Texans were unemployed. This indicates that there is a mismatch between the skills needed in today's workforce and the skills that workers possess. Closing that gap is critical to the future success of our economy. This commission has a golden opportunity to identify the best improvements to make in Texas education.

Keeping that focus on increasing student success with existing resources, today we recommend two measures.

The first is to untether teacher compensation from teacher longevity. It doesn't matter to kids whether their teacher has been teaching for two years or twenty, or has a bachelor's degree or a doctorate. What matters to students is how effectively that teacher can help them progress and max out their potential. Research has consistently shown that years of [teaching experience](#) (beyond the first few) and [advanced degrees](#) held by teachers bear no correlation with the actual value that teachers bring to a classroom. We must change the current salary schedule's implication that time spent, not value added, is Texas' chief priority to be rewarded.

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You have heard from districts from across the state and with vastly differing characteristics that have made merit-based teacher pay a priority and reaped corresponding benefits. No one can forget Dallas ISD superintendent Michael Hinojosa's enthusiasm for a program he initially opposed. Staff members from Lubbock ISD pointed out the impact that recruiting and rewarding high performing teachers have made on their most struggling schools. The superintendent of Bloomberg ISD emphasized the importance of offering good teachers a career path and chances for advancement that include staying in the classroom. A key takeaway from all of these narratives was that no two districts behaved exactly alike. Each of these school districts employed differing strategies based on their resources and their district's needs and priorities, but they all experienced benefits in teacher morale, retention, and, most importantly, student achievement.

Tying teacher pay to the value they bring to their classrooms and districts could be as simple as setting the teacher salary schedule to expire by the end of the 2020-21 school year. To ensure a smooth transition, the Legislature could add a hold-harmless provision for individual educator compensation through 2021-22, and a hold-harmless for collective educator compensation through 2022-23. This approach expands local control and allows principals and districts to work together to develop their own pay system based on their district's characteristics. The House Select Committee on Economic Competitiveness [report](#) noted that "the importance of local control for school districts was stressed with the explanation that local control granted from the state is important for hiring staff and providing a safe campus for students."

Second, we would suggest expanding innovation and competition through encouraging the growth of charter schools. Research has found that charter schools tend to perform more efficiently than their traditional counterparts and that increased choices in a region encourage more efficient district behavior. Caroline Hoxby of Stanford University has [found](#) that charter schools in proximity to traditional schools increased the academic performance of students within traditional schools. Sarah Cordes recently wrote an [article](#) detailing her findings that students in traditional New York City schools experienced increases in academic achievement when charter schools entered the neighborhood. Those increases were most pronounced when traditional schools and charter schools were co-located in the same building. By welcoming the growth and introduction of new charter operators and structures in Texas, the state will be encouraging efficient, innovative new actors while simultaneously encouraging efficiency and achievement in traditional public schools.

We encourage you to continue to identify best practices that can boost the ultimate goal of Texas education—increasing outcomes for our students. Freeing up teacher pay and continuing to encourage new school models will work toward that goal. We look forward to working with you all to leverage education resources to achieve the best possible outcomes for Texas students.



Emily Sass is a Policy Analyst with the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Education Freedom. Before coming to the Foundation, Emily was on Senator Ted Cruz's state staff as Deputy Regional Director for North Texas, serving as the Senator's liaison on all policy topics to a fourteen-county region. Previously, she has worked as staff in the Texas House of Representatives and on multiple campaigns. A trained classical musician and former teacher, Emily holds a Bachelor of Arts in Music from Thomas Edison State University. While in college, she also served on the leadership team for Patriot Academy, a national conference in conservative policy and leadership for high school, college, and graduate students.

