Testimony

Senate Bill 3

Testimony before the Senate Finance Committee

by Kara Belew, Senior Education Policy Advisor

I.   Ensure 2020-21 budget appropriations are below Conservative Texas Budget recommendations.

The Foundation recommends that the Texas Legislature pass what could be the third straight Conservative Texas Budget (CTB). The 2020-21 Conservative Texas Budget keeps the state's budget below $156.5 billion in state funds and $234.1 billion in all funds based on an 8 percent increase in population growth plus inflation over the last two fiscal years.

Senate Bill 1 is $696 million below the Conservative Texas Budget in state spending but is $1.7 billion above in all funds.

II.   Taxpayer spending on public education is at an all time high in total and on a per student basis.

Texas taxpayers are spending more money in total and per student on public education than ever before. In fact, in 2017 taxpayers contributed $17.7 billion more *per year* than just a decade ago.

Texas Education Agency (TEA) data provides that funding per student enrolled has increased from $9,423 in FY 2007 to $11,392 in FY 2017, an increase of 21 percent. In addition, total funding has increased from $43.1 billion in FY 2007 to $60.8 billion, an increase of 41 percent.
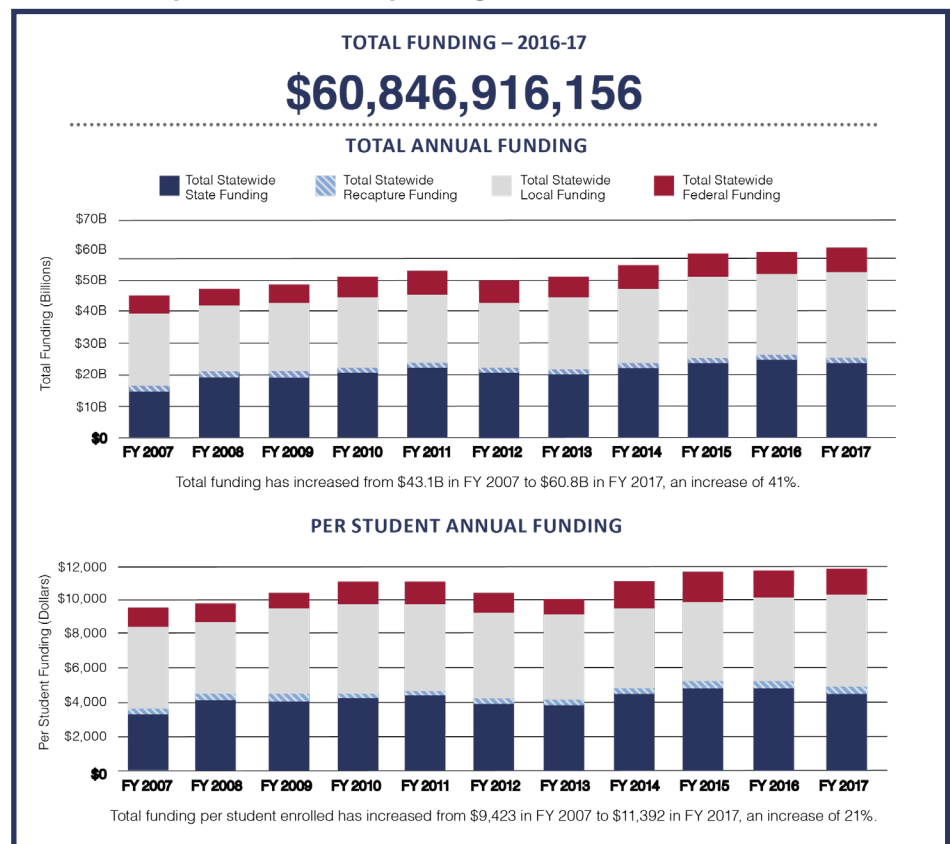
The majority of this increased taxpayer funding was provided to school districts in the General Appropriations Act through increases to the Foundation School Program formula funding "basic allotment" and increases associated with Tier II required by rising property values in Austin ISD (TEA 2018b).

As a result, much of the new taxpayer dollars appropriated over the last decade were not required to be spent on evidence-based and effective programs that are the most likely to improve student outcomes and direct money to the classroom (TPPF).

III. More taxpayer money for public education will not necessarily lead to better student results.

Currently, in Texas, some very high poverty and low spending school districts or schools are achieving some of the best results in the nation. For example, despite having very high percentages of economically disadvantaged and English Language Learning students—and the district spending less per student and on teacher salaries than the statewide

Table 1. Total public education spending in the state of Texas

TOTAL FUNDING – 2016-17

$60,846,916,156

TOTAL ANNUAL FUNDING

Total funding has increased from $43.1B in FY 2007 to $60.8B in FY 2017, an increase of 41%.

PER STUDENT ANNUAL FUNDING

Total funding per student enrolled has increased from $9,423 in FY 2007 to $11,392 in FY 2017, an increase of 21%.

Source: TEA 2019.

average—Putegnat Elementary in Brownsville ISD is significantly outperforming many Texas schools and has the highest 3rd grade reading results in the nation.

The principal of Putegnat Elementary, Aidee Vasquez, recently testified that the Putegnat student outcome results are associated with several effective programs, including having the principal as a teacher leader, focusing on curriculum, curriculum alignment, helping teachers teach the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, frequent teacher meetings to discuss student data, monitoring student progress, and setting student outcome goals.

In its Right on Public Education Plan, the Foundation recommends that:

(1)   the Legislature direct school boards to adopt meaningful and time-limited goals for improvement at each district and school in math and reading and monitor progress toward goals;

(2)   in conjunction with school boards setting meaningful goals, principals, teachers, teacher leaders and school teams use data-driven and evidence-based tools to teach the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and monitor student progress, similar to practices at Putegnat Elementary (TPPF).

Table 2. Putegnat Elementary, Brownsville ISD vs. Statewide average student results

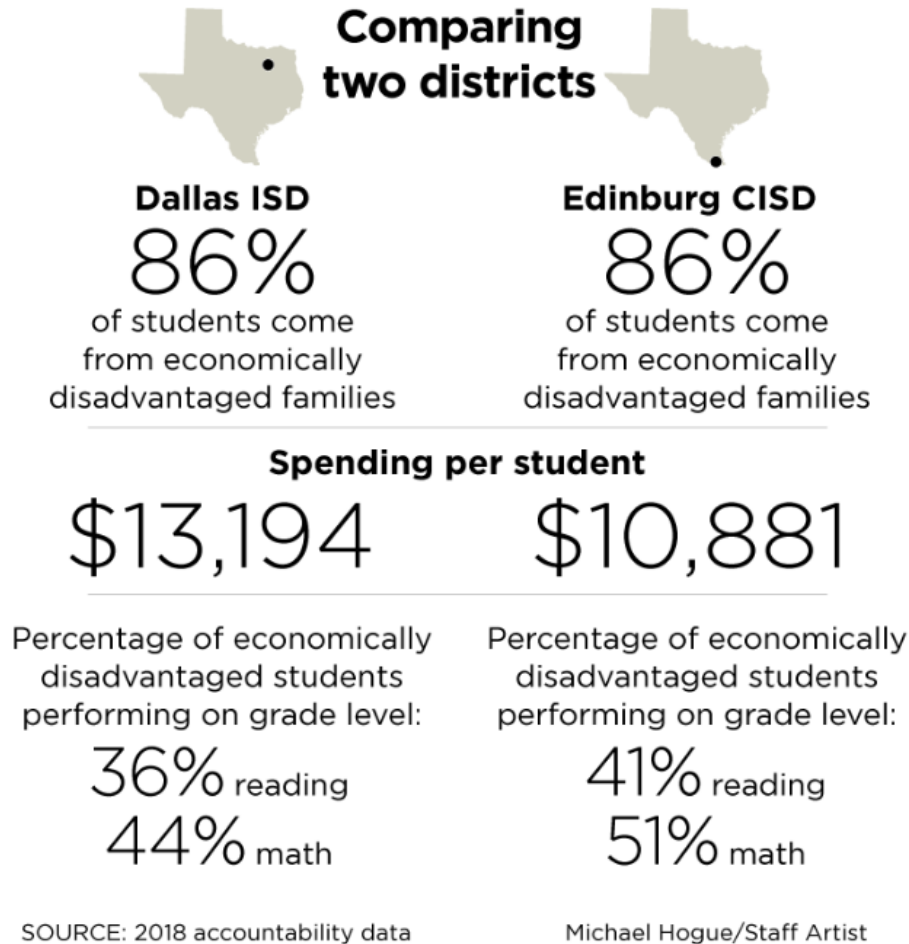| Subject	Percent of student performing at grade level in Putegnat Elementary vs. Statewide average (Data from Texas Education Agency txschools.gov)
Reading	**69% at** grade level vs. 46% state average
Math	**74% at** grade level vs. 50% state average

	Putegnat Elementary vs. Statewide average statistics (Data from Texas Education Agency txschools.gov)
Economically Disadvantaged Students	99.1% vs. 59%
English Language Learners	77.7% vs. 18.9%
Hispanic Students	96.9% vs. 52.4%
Average Teacher Salary	$53,137 vs. $53,334
District Spending Per Student	$11,114 vs. $12,787

Source: txschools.gov; TEA 2018a.

TEA data—from actual Texas school districts—indicates that some school districts with high percentages of economically disadvantaged students are achieving relatively good student results at a lower cost than other school districts (Morath). Further, both the Texas Education Agency and the Texas Supreme Court recognize there is no significant relationship between spending and education outcomes (Morath; *Morath v. Taxpayer & Student Fairness Coal.*), proving more taxpayer dollars do not guarantee better schools or more educated students.

Compare, for example, the results of Dallas ISD and Edinburg CISD (Belew):

Comparing two districts

Dallas ISD
86%
of students come from economically disadvantaged families

Edinburg CISD
86%
of students come from economically disadvantaged families

Spending per student

$13,194

$10,881

Percentage of economically disadvantaged students performing on grade level:
36% reading
44% math

Percentage of economically disadvantaged students performing on grade level:
41% reading
51% math

SOURCE: 2018 accountability data

Michael Hogue/Staff Artist

IV. All taxpayer funds for public education should be appropriated to pay teachers based on their effectiveness, improve student results, and reduce recapture and property tax burdens.

Senate Bill 3 deserves praise for putting a legislative focus on teachers. The quality of our classroom teachers is the most important in-school factor that affects student success (TPPF). The more effective teachers that Texas can place and retain in classrooms, the better for students and the state.

Research suggests that student outcomes could be improved if Texas were to:

- Identify effective principals, teacher leaders, and teachers, in part by using data-driven analysis (TPPF);

- Pay all principals, teacher leaders, and teachers based on locally developed merit pay systems; allowing the most effective educators to receive merit pay salary increases, especially those who are educating disadvantaged children, teaching at improvement-required schools, or ensuring children are reading and doing math at grade level before 3rd grade (TPPF);

- As with the effective programs at Putegnat Elementary, Brownsville ISD, and other districts, ensure school boards adopt reading and math goals and support principals, teacher leaders, teachers and school teams in using schoolwide data-driven and evidence-based tools to teach the Texas curriculum standards and monitor student progress and related professional development (TPPF).

In this way, the funding could be leveraged to support existing teacher pay programs or to create new ones as determined by local districts.

Such an approach would benefit Texas teachers, students, and taxpayers:

- **Teachers**: This approach would invite, reward, and retain top teaching talent across the state.
- **Students**: This approach would target state funds toward measures that are most likely to improve student results.
- **Taxpayers**: This approach would ensure that a significant new taxpayer investment can be spent as effectively as possible.

Please also see *Right on Education: Texas' Agenda to Restore Money to the Classroom and Eliminate the Main School Property Tax* (TPPF).

References

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Kara L. Belew, J.D., CPA, is an attorney and accountant with expertise in public education finance and policy. She served both Gov. Perry and Gov. Abbott in key education and budget positions. She recently served as Gov. Abbott's statewide budget director, focusing on franchise and property tax relief. As the senior education advisor at the Texas Public Policy Foundation's Center for Innovation in Education, Belew is devoted to ensuring that the $114 billion in taxpayer dollars spent on public education each biennium is utilized to improve student outcomes across Texas, and not on water parks and expensive administration buildings. In addition, Belew works to ensure that taxpayers, parents, legislators, and educators are informed about Texas' dismal student results. She also focuses on policies that will support every child in Texas having good school options in their neighborhood, because no child should be trapped in a failing Texas school.

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