Texas Public POLICY FOUNDATION

OPEN THE BLACK BOX:

Protecting Texas Kids from Foreign Influence in K-12 Education

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KEY POINTS

- Texas lacks mandatory disclosure of foreign funding, curriculum, and contracts in public schools, leaving parents and lawmakers in the dark.
- Foreign-backed entities are already shaping Texas classrooms through funding, curriculum, teacher training, and school partnerships, including documented cases involving QFI and the Chinese Communist Party.
- Sen. Ted Cruz's federal TRACE Act would require disclosure to parents. A Texas "Reject Act" would go further by banning curriculum funded by entities tied to designated foreign terrorist organizations.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Texas public schools are operating without any requirement to disclose foreign funding, foreign-linked curriculum, or foreign contracts, creating a curricular black box that hostile foreign actors are actively exploiting. Qatar Foundation International, the U.S. arm of a registered foreign agent of the Qatari government, has funneled hundreds of thousands of dollars into Houston and Austin school districts to fund Arabic language programs and teacher training. Leaked photographs showed a map of the Middle East that omitted Israel and labeled the territory "Palestine, "in an Irving charter school classroom. The Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR)-New Jersey, a chapter of an organization designated by Governor Abbott as a foreign terrorist organization, co-sponsored the Dallas Islamic Games, which was scheduled to use facilities at Colleyville Heritage High School. The Chinese Communist Party has influenced Houston ISD's Mandarin immersion programming through educational partnerships with Chinese institutions. In 2013, Houston ISD's Mandarin Chinese Language Immersion Magnet School entered a "Sister School" agreement with the Elementary School Affiliated to Renmin University of China, facilitating exchanges between teachers and students, collaboration on language instruction, and lessons involving Chinese instructors in Houston ISD. All of this has occurred without mandatory public disclosure, parental notification, or legislative oversight.

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The solution is the TRACE + Reject framework. Senator Ted Cruz's federal TRACE Act would require schools receiving federal funding to notify parents of any foreign-funded curriculum, foreign contracts, and foreign compensation of school employees. A complementary Texas-level Reject Act would go further by prohibiting any curriculum, instructional materials, or teacher training content funded by entities tied to designated foreign terrorist organizations from being used in Texas public schools.

Texas lawmakers must act now to open the black box, restore parental transparency, and ensure that the next generation of Texas children is educated on American values, not the ideological priorities of foreign adversaries who revel at any chance to cripple our nation and state.

CURRICULUM APPROVAL PROCESS IN TEXAS

Texas operates under a curriculum approval process based on Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state's official academic standards adopted by the State Board of Education (SBOE) (TEA, n.d.-b). The TEKS establish what students must learn at each grade level and in each subject area, from kindergarten through twelfth grade, across core disciplines including mathematics, English language arts, science, social studies, and certain electives. State law sets the TEKS as the required curriculum for core subjects. All instructional materials must align with these approved standards. The SBOE does not dictate day-to-day teaching but reviews and approves specific high-quality instructional materials (HQIM), such as textbooks and workbooks, so districts know which products meet state standards (TEA, 2024). ISDs bear primary responsibility for selecting instructional materials that align with the TEKS. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) maintains an Instructional Materials List of state-reviewed and approved materials. Districts may use state funding to purchase from this list and can also procure materials not on the list with local funds, provided they demonstrate alignment with the TEKS.

The IMRA Review Process

For materials seeking state approval and associated funding incentives, publishers must submit their materials to the Instructional Materials Review and Approval (IMRA) process (TEA, n.d.-a), created by House Bill 1605 (2023). IMRA tasks the SBOE with reviewing instructional materials for alignment with the TEKS and English Language Proficiency Standards (ELPS), factual accuracy, suitability, and quality.

Under IMRA:

- Publishers submit materials for specific subject-grade combinations to the TEA-managed vetting system.
- TEA invites stakeholders, including teachers, parents, and subject-matter experts, to review materials online and submit feedback during an open-review window.
- The SBOE then votes to place each product on an approved list, a rejected list, or takes no action.

- Approved HQIM become available for districts to purchase through the state's instructional-materials ordering system (EMAT). Districts that adopt SBOE-approved materials receive an additional $40 per student entitlement.

Publishers must provide parent portals for approved materials, and districts are required to establish local review processes. Texas law also guarantees parental access to instructional materials under TEC §26.006. Importantly, there is no state statute restricting participation to U.S.-based companies. A foreign-owned entity can submit materials and be treated as a publisher if it meets all procedural, technical, format, and contractual requirements. Submitted materials must be associated with a publisher or entity accountable for the content (including copyright and corrections), and approved lists identify the supplying publisher (typically by ISBN or bundle). However, Texas does not require publishers to disclose all individual authors, subcontractors, or foreign-based vendors.

Remaining Gaps and Vulnerabilities

While IMRA strengthens scrutiny of core instructional materials compared to prior systems—emphasizing full TEKS coverage, quality rubrics, and parent access—significant loopholes persist, particularly regarding supplemental, enrichment, and non-core content:

- **Supplemental and Enrichment Materials:** Language immersion programs, cultural grants, teacher professional development, donated classroom resources, and extracurricular or "enrichment" activities fall outside the definition of core instructional materials subject to full SBOE/IMRA vetting. Districts retain substantial autonomy to accept external grants or use such resources.

- **Lack of Comprehensive Foreign Funding Disclosure:** There is no statutory requirement for proactive, mandatory public reporting of foreign sources of funding, contracts, partnerships, or indirect influence (e.g., teacher training stipends, facility rentals, or supplemental programs). Issues frequently surface only reactively through news reports, parental complaints, or leaks.

- **"Black Box" Effect and Charter School Flexibility:** Without full chain-of-creation transparency, biased perspectives or unvetted content can embed quietly. Open-enrollment charter schools must follow the TEKS but have greater flexibility in selecting vendors, entering foreign partnerships, and accepting external grants, thereby creating additional avenues for nefarious influence that bypass standard district-level oversight.

QATAR, THE MUSLIM BROTHERHOOD, AND THE RED-GREEN ALLIANCE

Qatar's Documented Support for Islamist Terrorism

Any serious discussion of foreign influence in Texas education must begin with Qatar. The Gulf state occupies a unique and troubling position in the international landscape: it hosts American military installations (U.S. Department of State, 2025), maintains diplomatic relations with the United States (U.S. Embassy in Qatar, n.d.), and simultaneously serves as the primary financial backer of Hamas, one of the world's most active Islamist terrorist organizations (Pilichowski, 2025).

The documentation of Qatari support for terrorism is extensive and bipartisan. Former Defense Secretary Robert Gates stated plainly that Qatar does not aggressively pursue Hamas, Taliban, or al-Qaeda financing networks within its borders (Ellyatt & Gamble, 2017). A 2014 State Department report acknowledged that Qatar's disruption of terrorist financing by Qatari individuals and charitable associations remains inconsistent (Levitt, 2014). A 2018 House National Security Subcommittee hearing identified Qatar as a central actor in facilitating Muslim Brotherhood terrorist activities by providing financial support and safe harbor (Jasser, 2018).

In November 2025, Texas Governor Greg Abbott formally designated both the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim Brotherhood as foreign terrorist organizations and transnational criminal organizations.

Since Hamas took control of Gaza in 2007, Qatar has provided an estimated $1.8 billion to the terrorist group and has hosted Hamas's political headquarters in Doha (Pilichowski, 2025). Hamas's former political chief, Ismail Haniyeh, reportedly described Qatar as the main artery of Hamas funding (Times of Israel, 2025). In 2018, Qatar began sending hundreds of millions of dollars to Gaza, ostensibly for humanitarian purposes, with the practical effect of sustaining Hamas's grip on the territory (The New York Times, 2023).

Qatar's relationship with the Muslim Brotherhood is similarly well-documented. The Brotherhood, a Sunni Islamist fundamentalist organization founded in Egypt in the 1920s, gave rise to Hamas following the 1967 Six-Day War. Qatar has historically provided the Brotherhood with safe haven, media infrastructure (primarily through Al Jazeera), and financial support (Counter Extremism Project, n.d.). During the 2011 Arab Spring, Qatar actively sponsored Islamist movements, provided material support, and shielded Brotherhood-linked groups across the region (Ulrichsen, 2014).

In November 2025, Texas Governor Greg Abbott formally designated both the Council on American-Islamic Relations (CAIR) and the Muslim Brotherhood as foreign terrorist organizations and transnational criminal organizations (Office of the Governor of Texas, 2025). The governor's proclamation details the organizations' efforts to support terrorism across the globe and to subvert American laws through violence, intimidation, and harassment.

Qatar Foundation International: The Education Arm of a Foreign Influence Operation

Qatar's primary vehicle for educational influence in the United States is the Qatar Foundation, established in 1995 by the Father Emir of Qatar, Sheikh Hamad bin Khalifa Al Thani. Although described as a private nonprofit, the Qatar Foundation is, by the analysis of independent researchers, indivisible from the Qatari government and functions as a state-led organization (Arnold, 2022a). In 2018, the Qatar Foundation registered as a foreign agent with the U.S. Department of Justice—an acknowledgment that its activities are directed by a foreign government and political party (Influence Watch, n.d.).

The U.S. arm of the Qatar Foundation is known as Qatar Foundation International (QFI) (Qatar Foundation International, n.d.). QFI describes its mission as promoting Arabic language education in American K–12 public schools. Its programs include classroom enrichment grants for Arabic language instruction, teacher certification support, and professional development funding for Arabic teachers.

In practice, QFI's reach in Texas has been substantial. In 2015, Houston ISD received a $75,000–$85,000 grant from QFI to launch the Arabic Immersion Magnet School (AIMS) (Isensee, 2015). In 2016, only 18% of students at Burnet Middle School and 25% at Austin High School were reading at grade level. That same year, rather than directing resources toward core literacy remediation, Austin Independent School District accepted $100,000 from QFI to launch an Arabic language and culture program at three campuses: Burnet Middle School, Austin High School, and International/Eastside Memorial High School (Austin ISD, 2016).

QFI's involvement does not end with initial grant awards. Summer 2025 documentation confirms that QFI funded the Houston ISD Summer Immersion Institute (Qatar Foundation International, 2025)—meaning that Qatari-backed education programming in Texas K–12 schools is an ongoing, active reality. An MOU between HISD and QFI explicitly

states that the parties share a common interest in the important role that Arabic language and culture education plays in the Americas and the need to promote and strengthen the teaching and learning of Arabic (Houston Independent School District & Qatar Foundation International, 2015).

QFI also funds the Arabic Teachers Council of the South, which provides professional development grants—$1,000 for in-person training sessions and $500 for online presentations—to Arabic language teachers in public schools (Qatar Foundation International, n.d.). One such in-person training session was scheduled at Houston's Arabic Immersion Magnet School in April 2025, putting Qatari funding directly behind how Texas public school teachers are trained to teach.

What Qatar-Linked Curriculum Actually Contains

Perhaps the most disturbing documented case of QFI-linked curriculum content involves Manara Academy, a public charter school in Irving, Texas (Standing for Freedom Center, 2024). An American educator who worked at a Qatar Foundation educational institution in Doha told the Middle East Forum that faculty were prohibited from purchasing maps showing the State of Israel—the entire territory was instead labeled Palestine (National Review, 2018). Mentioning Israel or the Holocaust could result in severe reprisals from the Qatari Ministry of Education.

Leaked classroom photographs from Manara Academy confirmed that a QFI-supported classroom displayed a large map of the Middle East conspicuously missing Israel and labeling the territory Palestine (Standing for Freedom Center, 2024). This occurred in a taxpayer-funded Texas public charter school, using materials supported by a foreign government with a documented history of funding Hamas.

Further documentation obtained by the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) reveals the extent to which Austin ISD resisted transparency about its QFI-funded curriculum, and the extent to which that curriculum promoted religious content in a public school setting. When FDD submitted a public information request for the Arabic-program teaching materials, Austin ISD officials initially refused to release the files, stating they would need to hire a $50,000 translator first, purportedly to ensure the documents contained no student information (Weichselbaum, 2026). District administrators acknowledged they did not know what was actually being taught in the QFI-funded program. The Texas Attorney General's office ultimately intervened, and the materials were released to FDD without a translator being hired (Weichselbaum, 2026).

Once obtained, those materials showed religious content embedded throughout ostensibly secular language instruction. A second-grade curriculum developed by the State of Qatar and published in 2006 instructed teachers that its lessons were "compatible with Qatari values and the Arab and Islamic culture," and listed vocabulary words for second graders to master that included "Allah" and "emir" alongside basic colors and occupations (Weichselbaum, 2026). Separately, one classroom assignment had students decorate greeting cards featuring a mosque and text praising the Muslim Prophet Muhammad, and instructed children to attach a cutout image of the Ka'ba, Islam's most sacred site, to the card (Weichselbaum, 2026).

These findings compound the concerns raised elsewhere in Austin's QFI-funded materials, which also included a Saudi-published textbook containing antisemitic conspiracy content about Jewish influence in the West (Weichselbaum, 2026). Taken together, the pattern is consistent: a foreign government-funded program, operating in a public school system with no legislative reporting requirement, embedding religious and ideological content into what is marketed to parents and districts as neutral language instruction.

Where else is this curriculum being used, and why doesn't the public know about it? Texas has no reporting system, no audit mechanism, and no

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legislative requirement that would answer that question. The curricular black box remains intact.

The Chinese Communist Party: A Parallel Playbook

Qatar is not the only hostile foreign actor employing soft-power education strategies in Texas. The Chinese Communist Party (CCP) has used Confucius Institutes—embedded in American universities and linked to China's government—to shape curriculum, suppress dissent on topics such as Taiwan, Tibet, and Tiananmen, and cultivate sympathy for Chinese authoritarianism (Edwards, 2021). Public pressure led to many Confucius Institutes being closed, but the CCP adapted its approach rather than retreating.

Houston ISD has entered into curriculum-sharing partnerships with multiple foreign-linked organizations, including entities from China that helped shape its Mandarin Chinese Immersion Magnet School (MIMS, n.d.). District officials defended the arrangement by noting that funding and operations were comparable to other public schools—a response that conspicuously avoids addressing the content and ideological framing of the materials.

Texas A&M University provides a case study on the scale of foreign funding that can go unreported. The university initially reported $131 million in Qatari funds through 2017 (Arnold, 2022b). When the U.S. Department of Education investigated foreign funding underreporting in 2020, the actual figure was found to exceed $600 million, with pre-2017 funds alone totaling $244 million, nearly double the initially disclosed amount. Notably, some of Texas A&M's Qatar-funded research, conducted through the Texas Engineering Experiment Station, concerns cybersecurity and nuclear proliferation—areas of direct national security significance (Arnold, 2022b).

China employs a "whole society" approach to intelligence gathering. The "Thousand Talents Plan" encourages Chinese students involved in research in the U.S. to share sensitive knowledge and intellectual property with the CCP (Chang, 2024). In 2020, U.S. intelligence agencies identified and investigated information espionage operations conducted by Chinese students and professors inside higher education institutions in Texas (Dilanian, 2020). Senator Ted Cruz (R-TX) has passed legislation to curtail the influence of the CCP on Junior Reserve Officers' Training Corps (JROTC) programs, which are used to help prepare high school students for military roles. A 2020 Center for Immigration Studies report identified several private schools that have been purchased by Chinese investors in recent years (Arthur, 2020).

The soft-power tactics extend to Texas's public school system. The Texas House Select Committee on Securing Texas from Hostile Foreign Organizations published a 2024 report detailing the extent to which the CCP seeks to "control influence" over educational materials (Texas House Select Committee on Securing Texas from Hostile Foreign Organizations, 2024). The report states, "Adversary-controlled cultural exchanges and financial gifts to school systems may serve as avenues for infiltration."

The Red-Green Alliance: A Unified Strategy

The foreign influence problem in Texas education does not operate in isolation. It is part of a coordinated ideological strategy that researchers and national security analysts describe as the Red-Green Alliance: an alignment between radical secular Marxist movements and Islamist organizations. These forces are united not by shared theology or political theory, but by a shared hostility to Western values: constitutional government, religious liberty, free expression, and the rule of law.

Austin Independent School District eliminated Good Friday as a school holiday for the 2025–26 and 2026–27 school years, replacing it with Cesar Chavez and Dolores Huerta Day (Austin ISD, 2026a), while continuing to recognize Eid al-Fitr, one of Islam's two most significant religious holidays (Austin ISD, 2026b). The Austin City Council separately designated January as Muslim Heritage Month, formally launched with a City Hall proclamation (Austin City Council, 2026). Taken together, these decisions reflect an inconsistency worth scrutinizing: institutions removing recognition of majority-tradition religious observance while adding recognition of others—a pattern that deserves transparency about how such decisions are made.

The recent incident at Grapevine-Colleyville ISD—in which Colleyville Heritage High School facilities were rented for the Dallas Islamic Games, an event co-sponsored by CAIR-New Jersey, a chapter of an organization that Governor Abbott designated a terrorist organization in November 2025—illustrates this very point (Office of the Attorney General of Texas, 2026). The school district's administration approved the rental at the staff level, without board awareness. State legislators, including Reps. Cole Hefner and Jared Patterson, immediately demanded cancellation. The district ultimately canceled the booking, but not before the episode illustrated how easily designated terrorist-linked organizations can access Texas public school infrastructure when no reporting or vetting requirements are in place.

OVERVIEW OF THE TRACE ACT

Senator Ted Cruz's Transparency in Reporting of Adversarial Contributions to Education (TRACE) Act, introduced in the Senate with Sen. Cynthia Lummis (R-WY) as a companion to Rep. Aaron Bean's (R-FL) House legislation, would address the federal side of the foreign influence problem in K–12 education (Cruz, 2024). The bill has not yet passed either chamber of Congress. If enacted, the Act would establish three core requirements for public schools that receive federal funding.

First, the TRACE Act would require schools to give parents the opportunity to review any curriculum that has been provided by or purchased with foreign funds. The bill text does not specify the exact mechanism (e.g., a parent portal, written notice, or in-person review). Implementation details would be left to individual school districts. This provision would restore parents' foundational right to know what their children are being taught and from where that instruction originates.

Second, the TRACE Act would require that schools notify parents of any foreign contracts or financial transactions. This would close the most significant gap in current federal K–12 transparency law by requiring proactive disclosure rather than leaving parents to discover such arrangements through investigative journalism or FOIA requests.

Third, the TRACE Act would require notifying parents of how many school employees are compensated by another country or foreign adversary, and whether foreign nations have donated to the institution. This provision would address the teacher compensation dimension of foreign influence, an avenue through which QFI and similar organizations fund teacher training and professional development.

Disclosure is necessary but insufficient. Texas needs a complementary state-level framework that empowers rejection, not merely notification. That additional framework is the proposed "Reject Act."

The proposed Reject Act would establish the rejection mechanism. Any curriculum, instructional materials, or teacher training content funded or gifted to a Texas school district by any individual, entity, or foreign government that is tied to, affiliated with, or designated as a foreign terrorist organization under federal law or Texas law would be prohibited from use in Texas public schools.

For Texas families, this means that no Texas school district could accept curriculum, teacher training, or classroom materials from an organization tied to

any radical extremist organization, and every family would have a right to know what foreign money is shaping their child's classroom.

CONCLUSION

Foreign governments and foreign-linked organizations have already found avenues into Texas classrooms through grants, cultural programs, teacher training, curriculum partnerships, and the use of school facilities. In some cases, the content introduced through these relationships has included radical material that parents and taxpayers had no clear way to identify before it reached the classroom.

When schools cannot identify who is funding or supplying educational content, parents cannot evaluate what is being taught to their children, and districts cannot assess whether outside partners are advancing foreign interests. Students deserve instructional materials that are accurate, age-appropriate, and consistent with the educational mission of Texas public schools.

Texas should therefore close the curricular black box. Texas should require disclosure of foreign funding, contracts, partnerships, curriculum, and teacher-training arrangements, while giving parents clear access to that information. But disclosure alone is not enough. Texas should also prohibit public schools from using curriculum, instructional materials, or teacher-training content funded or supplied by entities tied to designated foreign terrorist organizations.

Foreign governments and organizations should not be able to influence the education of Texas children in secret. Texas parents should know who is helping shape their children's education, and the state should have the authority to reject partnerships that threaten that education's integrity. Texas has a responsibility to ensure that its public schools remain accountable first and foremost to Texas families. ■

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