

# Classrooms in Crisis



Challenges

Students and Schools

Faced Through COVID-19

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# Classrooms in Crisis: Challenges Students & Schools Faced Through COVID-19

## Executive Summary

COVID-19 changed our public education landscape nearly overnight. Thousands of Texas schools and nearly 5.5 million students faced a school year like never before. Schools had to quickly develop tools and resources that would support the pivot to a virtual classroom, shift to educating children in crisis, and learn a whole new suite of software and skills, all while grappling with a worldwide health crisis that has not been experienced in the last 100 years.

When it became clear that schools would need to close for an extended amount of time, school districts quickly worked to develop solutions to prevent long-term impact to education and support services. Few people could predict the amount of time that these solutions would need to be in place and the impact that a multi-year pandemic would have on our education systems and the education and care of Texas children.

In this report, CHILDREN AT RISK examines the impact of the pandemic on Texas children using a whole child approach. What became very clear during the pandemic was that schools are not only centers for academic learning for Texas children, but that they serve as community social safety nets for many families: providing access to nutrition, preventative health screenings, childcare and mental health support. This report reviews data across various indicators of academic success including test scores, food insecurity, mental health outcomes, and others. By looking at education, health and well-being and poverty trends through 2021, the report presents a landscape view of these factors, the disparities across various demographics, and recommendations for how to move forward from the exceptional circumstances we found ourselves in the past two years. It is not unexpected that there will be gaps in learning from the up to 2 years of remote and interrupted learning. However, with an intentional strategy and the right resources, we can continue to support districts and students as we move forward and prepare for the future.

*Whole School, Whole Community,  
Whole Child Model<sup>1</sup>*



# Policy Recommendations

## Chronic Absenteeism

- Establish an official definition of chronic absenteeism in the Texas Education Code (missing 10% of school days) so that precise datasets can be collected and used to focus on areas with particularly high absence rates.
- Add chronic absenteeism to the “at risk” category to better support students who are chronically absent and therefore at risk of dropping out.
- Require the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to report chronic absenteeism to increase transparency and facilitate targeted improvement of student supports.

## Digital Divide

- Utilize federal funding to bridge the affordability and racial gap by providing access vouchers for equipment and service costs for families of students currently eligible for free and reduced-price lunch or other low-income criteria.
- Redefine "coverage" based on serious gaps revealed by COVID-19 in actual impacts on learners and their communities.
- As more and more employers go to remote or flexible work environments, providing internet access as an employment benefit could go far to support families that may be struggling with access and connectivity issues.

## Special Education

- Expand research on how the pandemic impacted children in special education academically, but also developmentally, socially, and emotionally.
- Continue to provide full funding for Texas Senate Bill 89, COVID-19 Special Education Recovery Act, to ensure that it is having its intended effects and the pandemic learning loss within special education is not detrimental to student academic and social development.

## Teacher Workforce

- Ensure teachers receive competitive pay and benefits through their entire teaching career. Texas ranks second to last in retirement benefits offered to new teachers. To retain experienced, passionate teachers, it must be financially reasonable to remain in the field.
- Respect allotted teacher time to prepare and take breaks. Teachers are guaranteed time that's intended for preparation and planning. Lawmakers and administrators must ensure this time is protected as preparation time and not used for other purposes.

## Nutrition

- Expand the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP) that allows high-poverty U.S. schools and school districts to serve school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students by lowering the eligibility threshold for CEP from 40 percent to 25 percent, expanding automatic enrollment in the program, and increasing program funding. By doing so, lawmakers could strengthen CEP and help provide free school meals to an additional 9 million kids.
- Establish standard emergency preparedness pivot plans for nutritional services to quickly respond to any future situation that requires a return to virtual at-home learning.



## **Preventative Screenings**

- Establish catch-up clinics to identify children who were missed due to COVID virtual learning.
- Perform outreach to families who missed scheduled hearing/vision screenings due to virtual learning.

## **Childhood Immunizations**

- Explore offering onsite low/no cost immunization clinics for students, staff, and the community.
- Develop a district and school based response plan should COVID-19 or other infectious disease cause future disruption for in-person learning.
- Reestablish strategic Texas Vaccines for Children sites that closed due to COVID-19, but that were effective previously to improve childhood and COVID-19 vaccination rates.

## **Mental Health**

- Set required ratios for counselors and mental health professionals per student in public schools.
- Provide long-term funding for schools to establish school-based health centers that include mental health services.
- Sustainably fund school mental health services: 78% of Texas school districts plan to spend federal ESSR funds on Mental and Physical Health with mental health professional being the second most commonly reported staffing category. When these funds run out, Texas must support schools and increase mental health services for students with sustainable funding.

## **Social Safety Net Programs**

- Reinstate the Expanded Child Tax Credit so parents can continue affording food, school supplies, and other basic needs while inflation hits record highs.
- Expand school nutrition programs so that all students have access to the nutritious meals needed to learn and thrive in the classroom.
- Facilitate benefit uptake through agency communication.
- Allow for telephonic signature for SNAP and other benefits.

## **Child Care**

- Create a State Funding Stream for Quality Early Childhood Education so that parents can rely on child care and get back to work.
- Support and build an educated, experienced, and adequately compensated early childhood education workforce through a statewide articulation framework.

## **Housing Insecurity**

- Invest in school social workers who often identify resources for students and families and, ideally, identify early risk factors of housing instability.
- Disincentivize evicting tenants through policies like increased notice requirements, higher costs for eviction filing, and expanded rights to representation for those facing eviction proceedings.

## COVID-19 & Education

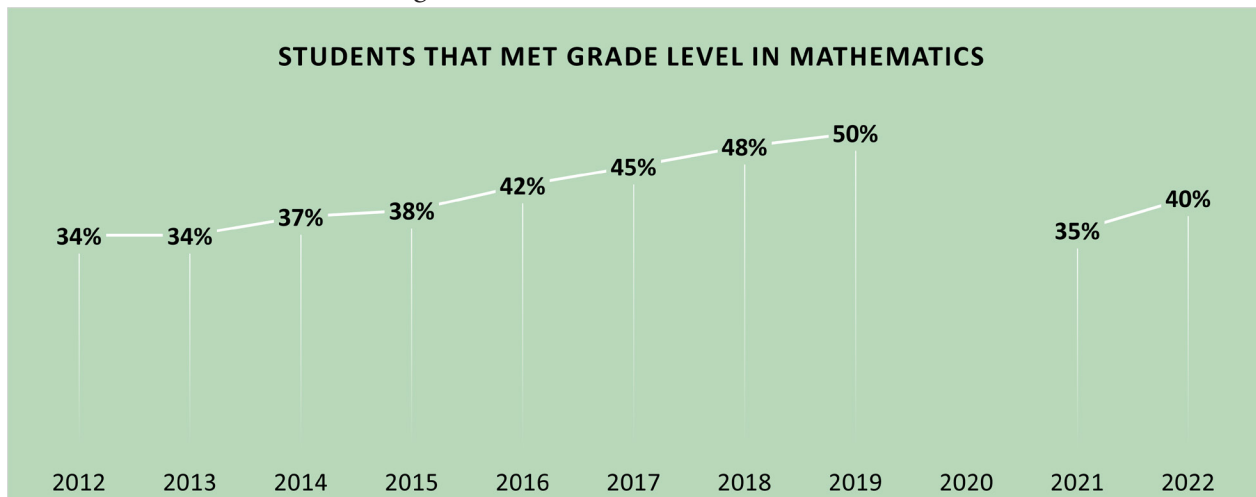
Education is the foundation of a child’s life. A quality education has amazing potential to lift children out of poverty, develop crucial social skills, and set them up for future success in all aspects of life. This potential is a result of the robust ecosystem a school environment provides which not only includes high quality education, but the incorporation of essential support services that ensure a child’s ability to learn is maximized.

On an average year, schools manage unexpected challenges every day and find effective solutions to quickly implement. Unfortunately, COVID-19 created numerous unique challenges for school districts that resulted in long-term learning disruptions. One of the most obvious challenges was the sudden and long-term closures of schools, which required children to participate in virtual schooling and resulted in learning gaps, disconnection from peers and teachers, inequities in technology access, and an uptick in enrollment loss.

In addition to new obstacles keeping children from learning (virtual or otherwise), the pandemic exacerbated many of factors outside of the classroom that impact a child’s ability to learn. Many families experienced new social stressors including loss of income, housing instability, and childcare coverage for kids that were now at home. Mental health needs rose due to these additional stressors as well as the overall human experience of living through a pandemic. Disruption of in-person school impacted access to school nutrition programs, mental health services, and special education accommodations. When children experience a once in a lifetime pandemic that is compounded by hardships like poverty or a mental health crisis, they will ultimately face worse outcomes in school and learn less than their peers.

These disruptions not only impacted an individual’s ability to learn, but also created significant disruption in the system. In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, schools did not administer the STAAR test in the 2019-2020 school year. Texas was one of the few states to administer standardized tests to students for the 2020-2021 school year. The 2021 State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) results released in June showed the number of students not meeting grade level standards increase across almost every grade level and subject area. Out of the nearly 8,000 Texas public schools evaluated, 27% experienced a decrease in academic performance between academic years 2018-19 and 2020-21.<sup>2</sup> Per the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the number of 3-8 grade students not meeting grade level increased from 2019 across all

Fig. 1. STAAR Math Scores 2012-2022



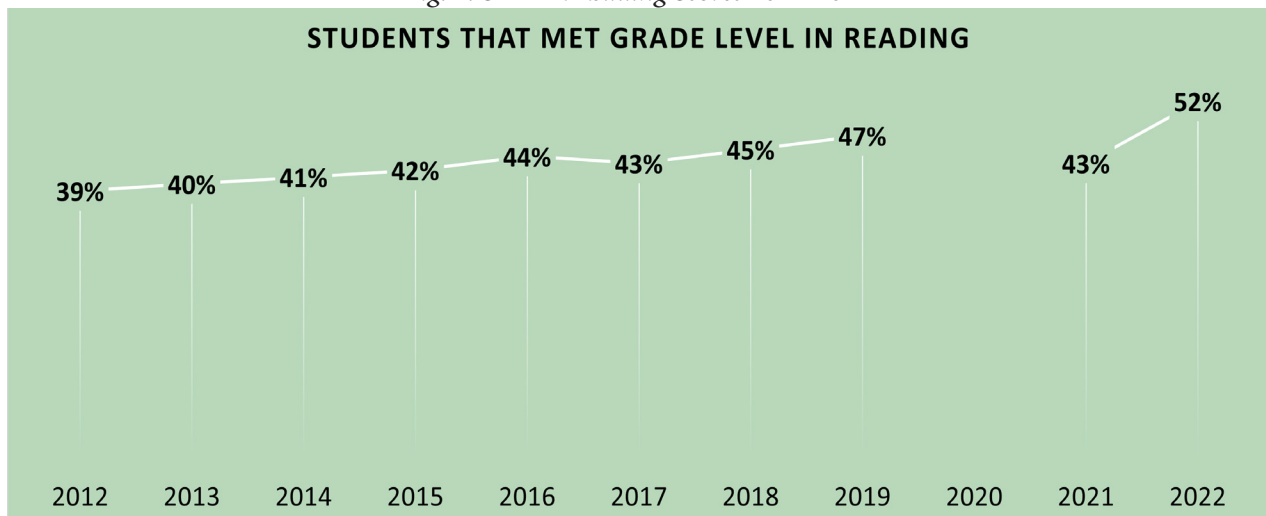
subject areas and grade levels except English I and II. For example, in 2021, 35% of children met grade level in mathematics compared to 50% in 2019.<sup>33</sup>

In 2022, schools demonstrated impressive resilience and we saw reading scores rise back to 2019 levels or higher. Though higher than 2021, math scores still remain low. 55% of eighth grade students met expectations in 2019 compared to 38% in 2022.

The impact of COVID-19 on STAAR scores was particularly pronounced for vulnerable students. Economically disadvantaged (ED) students, for example, dropped to 23% meeting grade level in math compared to 52% of not ED students in 2021. Similarly, Hispanic and Black students continued to perform 20+ percentage points lower than White and Asian students with their reading and math proficiencies dropping as low as 32% and 20%, respectively. While these disparities existed before COVID-19, the drop in scores hits these groups the hardest. Policymakers cannot ignore the reality that only one in five economically disadvantaged students and one in four Hispanic students are meeting annual expectations in math.

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Fig. 2. STAAR Reading Scores 2012-2022

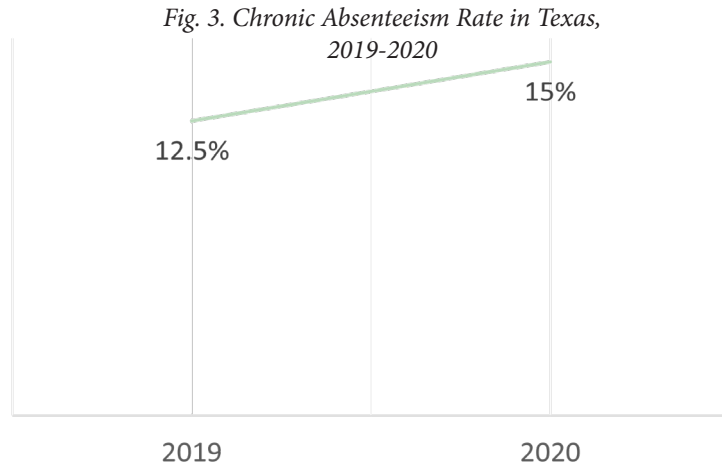


STAAR results are critically important to school funding, teacher compensation, and administration priorities. As students continue to recuperate learning loss, we must ensure schools with larger populations of disadvantaged and minority students are not penalized for testing results that were notably outside of their control. As later sections will show, these students were most impacted by the pandemic in all facets of life, not just in their STAAR testing capabilities.

## Chronic Absenteeism

Chronic absenteeism is a strong indicator for a variety of student outcomes. A student who is chronically absent any year between eighth and twelfth grade is seven times more likely to drop out of school, with absences in ninth grade predicting 77% of dropouts.<sup>3</sup> Missing an excessive amount of school days hinders the ability of a student to get the most out of their education and decreases the likelihood that a student will graduate on time.<sup>4</sup> Absences can also indicate performance outside of the K-12 system, as only 11% of chronically absent students make it to their second year of college.<sup>5</sup>

Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, chronic absenteeism was a huge problem in Texas schools, with 12.5% of students missing one-tenth or more of their instruction in 2019.<sup>6</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic has only exacerbated this issue nationwide, with data suggesting that rates of chronic absenteeism have as much as tripled over the course of the pandemic due to increased family instability, illness and quarantines.<sup>7</sup>



Since 2019, there has been a 10% increase in chronic absenteeism. In the 2020-21 school year nearly 760,000 students, 15% of Texas students, missed at least one-tenth of their instruction. Sixty-four (64%) of campuses had a decrease in percent overall enrollment from academic years 2018-19 to 2020-21 and 4% of campuses had a significant decrease in enrollment (31% or more decrease from the previous year – that’s one standard deviation below the average aggregate change of all campuses evaluated).<sup>8</sup>

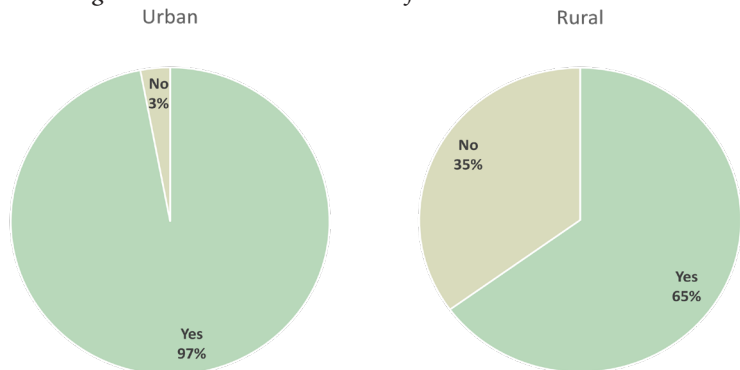
Failing to address the issue of chronic absenteeism in the wake of COVID-19 will have significant and disproportionate negative effects on students across the state. Texas does not currently define chronic absenteeism, which hinders the ability of policymakers and advocates to collect adequate data, thus making it difficult to pinpoint the exact extent of the problem.

Texas must establish an official definition of chronic absenteeism as "a student missing 10% of school time" so that precise data can be collected and used to focus interventions where they are most needed. The largest difference between chronic absenteeism rates is not between states, but between schools within districts, without proper data, it will be more difficult to identify the schools that are struggling the most, which in turn makes it hard to implement changes that benefit students.<sup>9</sup> By better standardizing this data, students' and schools' needs can be identified quickly, strategies can be developed, and students can be better supported.

## The Widening Digital Divide

The quick shift to virtual learning at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic was a promising indicator of the adaptability of education technology to overcome an unparalleled challenge. However, virtual education yielded mixed results and highlighted inequities between different student demographics shining a spotlight on the “digital divide.”

Fig. 4. Urban vs. Rural Percent of Residents with Broadband





The digital divide is the "economic, educational, and social inequalities between those who have computers and online access and those who do not."<sup>10</sup> Although most schools were already aware of the how the digital divide was impacting students educational experience, the removal of in-person technology supports due to schools closing compounded this inequity.

Texas is home to almost one million rural students, and over three million economically disadvantaged students, all of whom have a higher likelihood of not having broadband access.<sup>11</sup> According to the FCC, 97% of Americans in urban areas have access to high-speed internet, but in rural areas, that number falls to 65%.<sup>12</sup> In fact, Texas' rural population represents approximately 90% of all Texans without broadband access.<sup>13</sup>

Economic status is also a major factor, with 23.7% of economically disadvantaged eighth-graders not having a desktop or laptop computer, and 7% of economically disadvantaged eighth-graders not having home internet access. Comparatively, only 1.6% of students that are not economically disadvantaged lack broadband.<sup>14</sup>

In 2021, H.B. 5 was passed in Texas to expand broadband service in underserved areas. Recognizing that broadband is not to be considered a luxury, but an "essential tool for business, education, and healthcare." The bill requires the state to create and maintain a broadband access map, which will identify areas of Texas that are lacking internet access. These areas can then be targeted for support/funding to build the infrastructure necessary to deploy broadband.<sup>15</sup> The passage of this bill is a step in the right direction for closing the digital divide in Texas, but more work needs to be done. The disparity gap in access to technology is wide and will continue to grow without significant investment. Additionally, attention must be paid to the learning loss that has already occurred due to lack of equitable access to technology tools, and evaluations should be adapted for students who have been impacted by this divide.

## **Special Education**

For students with special learning needs, the COVID-19 pandemic was even devastating. Many of these students struggled with a lack of routine, virtual instruction that could not accommodate their needs, and the isolating effects of the pandemic. Ninety-three percent of students with disabilities report missing milestones that their non-disabled peers met, for example, reading emotions or code-switching.<sup>16</sup> Children with certain disabilities were also put at a disadvantage since online platforms were not conducive to those with visual impairments or those who are hard of hearing. For some, learning disabilities became apparent while receiving virtual instruction, but they struggled to get diagnosed. These delays resulted in even greater learning loss and frustrations.

When COVID-19 brought in-person schooling to a halt, many students stopped receiving the services or plans within their Individual Education Plan (IEP). These services, mandated under the Individuals with Disabilities act, include important face-to-face therapies. Early in the pandemic, a nation-wide survey from ParentsTogether reported that only 1 in 5 children with IEPs were receiving all of the services they were entitled to. This was made worse with 39% of parents of special education students reporting that they received no support in administering these services or maintaining remote learning for their child, despite additional concerns or needs. Special education students were nearly twice as likely to be participating in "little to no remote learning" as their general education peers, signifying the extent to which this lack of service or support impacted the child's ability to learn.<sup>17</sup>

School districts reported that providing these accommodations or additional services, or working with families to meet those needs, was an ongoing difficulty during remote learning. A national survey from the American Institute of Research found that the majority of schools reported having difficulty in complying with IDEA requirements and providing supports to students with disabilities, such as in providing hands-on services, appropriate instructional accommodations, and engaging families and social service partners.<sup>18</sup> While service accommodations were lacking across all districts, higher-poverty districts were significantly less able to provide additional or alternative services to their students with disabilities in comparison to low-poverty districts.<sup>19</sup>

These problems in administering necessary and required accommodations to students with disabilities has led to drastic negative effects on their school-based outcomes. A study from the Center for Reinventing Public Education affirmed this, and found that students with disabilities experienced notably higher rates of course failure, absenteeism, and incomplete assignments during the pandemic.<sup>20</sup> The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates found that 86% of parents reported their children with disabilities experiencing learning loss, regression, or slower than expected progress toward learning goals.<sup>21</sup> Students with disabilities also faced significant decline in mental health outcomes with the switch to remote learning, such as increased rates of anxiety or depression.<sup>22</sup>

Texas lawmakers and educators are well aware of the impact that the COVID-19 pandemic had on its students with disabilities. There have been steps taken at school, district, and state-wide levels in effort to stop these disparities from getting worse, and in hopes of reversing some of the widened damage that has been done during the past few years.

The passage of Senate Bill 89, otherwise known as the COVID-19 Special Education Recovery Act, is an important step forward in addressing this learning loss. This bill mandates that a student's Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee undertake a review determining if that student is entitled to compensatory services, such as additional schooling or therapies, due to school closures and lost service hours from the pandemic. This committee includes the parents, general and special education teachers, and school administration that engages with the student.<sup>23</sup>

The Supplemental Special Education Services are another effort made by the state to better support families of children with disabilities. These \$1,500 one-time grants are offered for parents/caregivers of special education students enrolled in K-12 public education that have been impacted by COVID-19 school closures. The funds are only eligible for use on services or resources that have been approved by TEA, and are intended to replace those that were offered at school prior to the pandemic. However, while this is a positive step, experts point out that this sum may not be enough for many families, and that finding these services on their own is an additional burden in itself.<sup>24</sup>

At a district level, some districts prioritized getting special education students back to in-person learning as soon as possible due to the disparate effect of remote learning for this population. Some Texas school districts, such as Fort Bend ISD and Conroe ISD, invited students with the most significant needs back to

"86% of parents reported their children with disabilities experiencing learning losses, regression, or slower than expected progress towards learning goals."

school in advance of other students to ensure their access to adequate learning environments.<sup>25,26</sup> This may have been an important step in preventing widening gaps. Commerce ISD found success in having strong and active relationships with its families, strong community partnerships, effective and creative methods of communication, and maintaining procedural compliance regarding IEPs.<sup>27</sup>

## **Teacher Workforce**

The United States workforce was already shifting prior to COVID-19, but was accelerated by the pandemic. Texas was already struggling with a significant teacher shortage with teacher attrition rates remaining at an exceedingly high average of 9.99% when the national average is 8%.<sup>28</sup>

Although the roots of the problem existed prior to 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated the levels of stress and burn-out that teachers experience in the current educational landscape. Classrooms have been subject to political pressure, the prohibition of mask mandates contrary to CDC recommendations, and 139,000 COVID-19 cases among school employees according to TEA data.<sup>29</sup> Rural schools and schools serving disadvantaged students are seeing the greatest impact of these teacher shortages which continue to contribute to the inequities these communities experience.

The combination of work conditions and lack of adequate compensation have led to a post-pandemic increase in the number of teachers who said they have considered leaving the profession in the past year, from 58% to 68%.<sup>30</sup> Low pay combined with a high stress environment creates less of an incentive for teachers to stay in the field for a long time. According to the Texas State Teachers Association, around one-third of new teachers in Texas leave the profession within five years.<sup>31</sup>

The most commonly proposed solution to this problem is to raise teacher pay to at least the national average by increasing funding for public education. There will undoubtedly be lingering problems or questions concerning the amount of responsibility that teachers must shoulder, but simple economic reasoning would suggest that wage increases will fill positions and help retain teachers in the long run so that the best educators remain in the workforce longer. Federal programs for college loan forgiveness could encourage more teachers to enter the field. More unorthodox methods for teacher retention are being tried as well, for example, Jasper ISD will opt for a four-day week in the 2022-23 school year in an effort to lower costs and improve the well-being of educators. This change will not necessitate lengthening the school year, and is favored by 64% of parents/staff and 84% of educators.<sup>32</sup> Reforms like this show that outside-the-box solutions may be necessary to try to fight the staff shortages.

## Recommendations

### ***Chronic Absenteeism***

- Establish an official definition of chronic absenteeism in the Texas Education Code (missing 10% of school days) so that precise datasets can be collected and used to focus on areas with particularly high absence rates.
- Add chronic absenteeism to the “at risk” category to better support students who are chronically absent and therefore at risk of dropping out.
- Require TEA report chronic absenteeism to increase transparency and facilitate targeted improvement of student supports

### ***Digital Divide***

- **Expand Federal Funding:** Utilize federal funding to bridge the affordability and racial gap by providing access vouchers for equipment and service costs for families of students currently eligible for free and reduced-price lunch or other low-income criteria. In return, districts should submit sustainability plans to ensure the longevity of the devices as the federal funding was a one-time grant.
- **Redefine Coverage:** What has been acceptable as “coverage” before COVID-19 was revealed to leave serious gaps in actual impacts on learners and their communities.
- **Employment Benefit:** As more and more employers go to remote or flexible work environments, providing internet access as an employment benefit could go far to support families that may be struggling with access and connectivity issues.

### ***Special Education***

- Expand research on how the pandemic impacted children in special education academically, but also developmentally, socially, and emotionally.
- Continue to provide full funding for SB 89, COVID-19 Special Education Recovery Act, to ensure it is having its intended effects and the pandemic learning loss within special education is not long-lasting.

### ***Teacher Workforce***

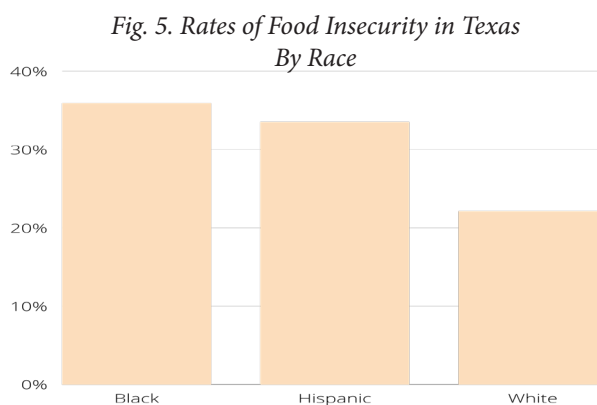
- Ensure teachers receive competitive pay and benefits through their entire teaching career. Texas ranks second to last in retirement benefits offered to new teachers. To retain experienced, passionate teachers, it must be financially reasonable to remain in the field.
- Protect teacher time to prepare and take breaks. Teachers face higher than average burn out rates partially attributed to the demands on their profession on personal time. Initiatives designed to promote student outcomes often come at the expense of teacher time. Ensuring that time allotted for planning is protected would increase work-life balance and overall retention.

# Health & Well-Being

COVID-19 shone a bright light on the role schools play as part of the social safety net. Along with providing children with high-quality educational opportunities, schools also support children through wrap around support services such as preventative health screenings, access to food (such as free breakfast, free/reduced lunch) and mental health support. These services play an essential role in a child's ability to learn. With the arrival of the pandemic, school districts struggled to continue to provide the same levels of support outside of a school setting.

## Nutrition

Research has clearly linked the relationship between nutrition and engaged learning.<sup>34</sup> Students who have access to nutritional meals are found to have increased attendance, class participation, and grades. Students who attend school without proper nutrition are less likely to succeed compared to their peers who have access to nutritional meals. For example, studies have found that students with iron and vitamin deficiencies have lower concentration and mental reasoning. Students who eat nutrient-rich meals spend more time in the classroom, and thus learn more than students who eat more sugar and higher-fat foods, who are more likely to skip school. With 1.4 million Texas households facing food insecurity, nutritional meal programs offered by schools are imperative for students.<sup>35</sup> During the 2018-2019 school year, 60.6% of students in public schools relied on free and reduced meals.<sup>36</sup>



The COVID-19 pandemic put many families at an elevated risk of food insecurity due to job loss, school closures, and inflation. From 2018 to June 2021, food insecurity in Texas nearly doubled, increasing from 13% to 22%. The rates of pandemic food insecurity are higher for Black (35.9%) and Hispanic (33.5%) Texans compared to White Texans (22.1%). Food insecurity is higher for households with children (32.8%) than all households (28.8%).<sup>37</sup> Food insecurity was addressed with school districts holding drive-by distribution of meals, as many schools transitioned to a virtual environment to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Even though school districts across Texas found creative solutions to distribute food to students during the pandemic, there was a decrease in the number of students who used free and reduced meal programs in the 2020-21 school year. For example, Houston Independent School District would serve an average of 250,000 meals to students each day.<sup>38</sup> During the pandemic, only 30,000 meals would be distributed.<sup>39</sup> This came as Texas families faced the highest rates of food insecurity because of the pandemic, at approximately 27%. This rate was doubled pre-pandemic levels, according to Feeding Texas. The decrease in meals distributed by schools could be attributed to a range of external factors, such as families' lack of transportation to food distribution sites and arranging time in a busy workday.

Certain practices by school districts proved to be successful in allowing families to receive meals while also taking COVID-19 precautions into account. In Pasadena ISD, where 82% of students rely on free and re-



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students access to nutritional meals outside of school hours. This program is beneficial for students who qualify for free and reduced lunch, as it allows a nutritional evening meal to be covered by the school. Approaches that were used during the pandemic that increased access to food, such as universal free meals for students and funding to cover meals during the summer, should continue, even as students return to in-person settings. Sustaining steady sources of nutrition through school meals will allow students to learn to the best of their ability.

duced lunch meals, district officials created a curbside pick-up program for breakfast and lunch that allowed minimal contact while also adding a meal pick-up program on the weekends, allowing greater flexibility for families to pick up meals.<sup>40</sup> Similar to Pasadena ISD, McAllen ISD created a grab-and-go system for food distribution as well as a “McDash” program. This program directly delivered food to student households, allowing families who had trouble accessing food distribution sites a way to receive meals.

To continue to improve children’s ability to learn, attention towards increased access to nutritional meals should be emphasized. Breakfast in Classroom (BIC) programs are found to be successful in allowing students to all eat together and the chance to eat breakfast while school starts. Afterschool meals also give

### **Preventative Screenings**

The Texas Health and Safety Code requires schools and licensed childcare facilities to screen children for vision, hearing, and spinal problems. Many other schools also offer heart screenings for school athletes. These preventative screening services are essential to ensure that children are healthy and able to learn and provide a much-needed bridge for services that many children would never receive.

Hearing screening, especially at an early age, provides the opportunity to detect a student’s hearing loss or previously unrecognized hearing loss and intervene to limit further loss and improve learning.<sup>41</sup> Vision impairments and uncorrected vision problems can hinder child development, lead to behavior problems in the classroom, interfere with early literacy and learning, and lead to permanent vision loss.<sup>42</sup>

Schools are most often the first place these issues are identified and may be one of the only opportunities for identification among children who are low-income or lack a medical home. COVID-19 and the move to virtual education made these screenings difficult to perform and, often, resulted in cases being missed.

As schools stabilize and return to the new normal, special consideration will need to be given to how schools can address these gaps in preventative screenings and ensure that all students have the opportunity to get caught up. Failure to do so may result in undetected hearing or vision impairments that can greatly impact the course of a child’s education.

### **Childhood Immunizations**

The development of vaccines is one of the most significant public health achievements of the 20th century. From the time they are born, children receive immunizations to protect them from infectious diseases that

could have lifelong consequences or lead to death. School vaccine requirements often serve as a safety net for children who have not received their recommended immunizations prior to entering school. They also help protect Texas school children from preventable diseases, to ensure they are healthy and ready to learn.

Texas trend data shows that immunization rates are decreasing, while exemptions are increasing. Conscientious exemptions allow children to still attend school without completed vaccinations.<sup>43</sup> With COVID-19, social distancing measures were implemented that reduced children's access to childhood vaccine check-ups, further reducing the rate of children with fully updated vaccinations.

The decreasing childhood vaccination rate combined with the lower than expected COVID-19 vaccination rates continues to put schools at an increased risk of infectious disease outbreaks and disruptions to education. During the 2021-2022 school year with the return of in-person learning, over 45 school districts had temporary shutdowns due to COVID-19 outbreaks among staff and students.<sup>44</sup> These shutdowns put significant pressure on school districts and families while continuing to create learning.

With these declines and the continued presence of COVID-19, schools will have to continue to be diligent as they navigate potential disruptions to the school year. Learning on the lessons learned from COVID-19, districts and schools should consider creating response plans should COVID-19 or other infectious diseases cause significant disruption. Districts should also explore opportunities to partner with clinics to host on site, low/no cost clinics to support an increase in immunizations rates.

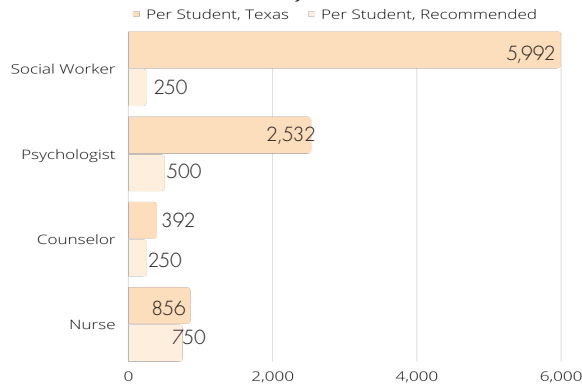
## ***Mental Health***

As schools continue to adapt to the changes brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, the importance of school as an in-person medium becomes ever clearer. Undoubtedly, school is essential for students to learn, socialize, and much more. Aside from these benefits, however, schools also play an important role in providing mental health support and resources. These resources are vital to many of the student body to ensure academic success. As vital as these resources are, it is estimated that “approximately one in six school-aged youth experiences impairments in life functioning... due to mental illness.” In fact, excluding the student's home “schools are the most likely place where mental health concerns will be detected.”<sup>45</sup>

Due to the pandemic, the CDC has found that “mental health-related visits to a large sampling of emergency rooms in 47 states increased 24% among children ages 5 to 11 and 31% for those 12 to 17 compared to 2019.”<sup>46</sup> Even more concerning, “the suicide rate for those ages 10 to 24 rose by more than 57 percent from 2007 to 2018.”<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, COVID-19 has provided us with a unique opportunity to make a change for the better. Now that COVID-19 relief funding has and is being made available to schools it is important to look at what policies have best helped schools increase their student body's overall mental health.

Federal grants totaling \$1 billion have been approved and are “aimed at improving access to school mental health services, which schools could use for expenses including hiring additional counselors, psychologists, and social workers.”<sup>48</sup> However, addressing mental health needs of students also requires sustainable, long-term funding. Medical experts support the continued funding of programs like the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium which include telemedicine services to schools.<sup>49</sup> Considering the nationwide shortage of mental health professionals, telemedicine services to allow more flexibility for mental health practitioners to provide their patients with quality time and attention. Additionally, mentorship programs have also shown promise in improving mental health outcomes. For example, Project MALES (Mentoring

Fig. 6. Student Per Mental Health Staff Member, Texas vs. Industry Recommendation



to Achieve Latino Educational Success) in Austin aims to support young men through a mid-level behavioral intervention. Using this “role-model” type program has allowed these young men to better connect with each other, while also training important emotional and communicative skills through interacting in a group-based setting. Mentor staff was mainly composed of “paid doctoral students and undergraduate volunteers who receive stipends and take a two-semester class to prepare them to mentor the middle school and high school boys.”<sup>50</sup> Sanger ISD uses a unique model based on “a holistic approach, beefing up its own resources and partnering with the community.”<sup>51</sup> Working around the

lack of dedicated state funding for mental health in schools, the Director of Student Intervention turned to faith-based organizations and grants to fund the mental health department for the students at Linda Tutt High School.

Overall, children and adolescents are facing mental health challenges at alarming rates. Districts and individuals given the proper freedoms have shown they can act independently and creatively to solve these problems. Nevertheless, to make long-term advancements proper staff and funding are needed.

# Recommendations

## **Nutrition**

- Expand the Community Eligibility Provision for high-poverty U.S. schools and schools districts to serve school breakfast and lunch at no cost to all enrolled students by lowering the eligibility threshold for CEP from 40 percent to 25 percent, expanding automatic enrollment in the program, and increasing program funding. By doing so, lawmakers could strengthen CEP and help provide free school meals to an additional 9 million kids.
- Establish standard emergency preparedness pivot plans for nutritional services to quickly respond to any future situation that requires a return to virtual at-home learning.

## **Preventative Screenings:**

- Establish catch-up clinics to identify children who were missed due to COVID virtual learning.
- Perform outreach to families who missed scheduled hearing/vision screenings due to virtual learning.

## **Childhood Immunizations:**

- Explore offering onsite low/no cost immunization clinics for students, staff and the community.
- Develop a district and school based response plan should COVID-19 or other infectious disease cause future disruption for in-person learning.
- Reestablish strategic Texas Vaccines for Children sites that closed due to COVID-19, but that were effective previously to improve childhood and COVID-19 vaccination rates.

## **Mental Health**

- Set required ratios for counsellors and mental health professionals per student in public schools. During the last year 73% of Texas youth with depression did not receive treatment.<sup>52</sup> School-Based Health Centers increase the proportion of students who receive mental health services, but these centers are currently unevenly distributed around the state, leaving many students without access to care.
- Provide long-term funding for schools to establish school-based health centers that include mental health services.
- Sustainably fund school mental health services: 78% of Texas school districts plan to spend federal ESSR funds on Mental and Physical Health with mental health professional being the second most commonly reported staffing category.<sup>53</sup> When these funds run out, Texas must support schools and increase mental health services for students with sustainable funding.

## Poverty & Pandemic

Living in poverty can have profound influence on a student’s ability to learn. Research shows that poverty impacts a child’s health, home life, schooling, and neighborhood, all of which contribute to poor learning outcomes compared to students who grow up in higher socio-economic households.<sup>54</sup> The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated many of these challenges. A survey of Tarrant County found that, “households earning below the Federal Poverty Level were nearly three times as likely to experience a high effect of COVID-19.”<sup>55</sup>

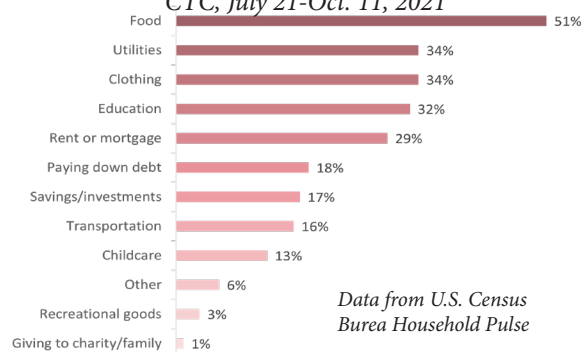
**19 %**  
of Texas children live  
in poverty.

Neuroscience research shows that growing up in poverty influences a child’s brain development. When compared to children from families of middle socio-economic status (SES), children from low SES performed worse on tasks testing working memory and cognitive control. This has ramifications both for children’s ability to retain information they learn and to regulate their behavior. Working memory is “the ability to hold the present context or goals of a complex task in mind requires working memory,” while cognitive control system “plays a crucial role in monitoring for conflict between the individual’s responses and the desired response and summoning additional attention when needed.”<sup>56</sup>

The COVID pandemic presented a perfect storm for children in poverty: no access to school services, extreme job instability for parents, and limited to no access to child care. In other words, we should have expected extreme increases in child poverty rates, but that didn’t happen. Child poverty in the United States remained consistent through the COVID-19 pandemic thanks to the various federal programs benefitting them and their families, specifically the Expanded Child Tax Credit.

Due to the tax requirements, the traditional Child Tax Credit excludes the lowest income families who could benefit the most, and the credit is paid out once a year instead of in regular, dependable deposits. Parents deserve the resources to meet the challenges being thrown their way. Helping parents pay for healthy food, school supplies, and emergencies through funding can be pursued both at the state and national levels and would greatly help to address the housing instability crisis that is inhibiting children achieving their potential in school.

Fig. 7. How Texas Families Spent Their Expanded CTC, July 21-Oct. 11, 2021



In 2021, the majority of families, including 93% of low-income families spent the CTC on necessities such as groceries, utilities, housing, and/or school expenses.<sup>57</sup> As families continue struggle as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Expanded CTC offered a lifeline for parents to support their children and families. Allowing the credit to expire in January of 2022 ignores the continuing hardship parents face.



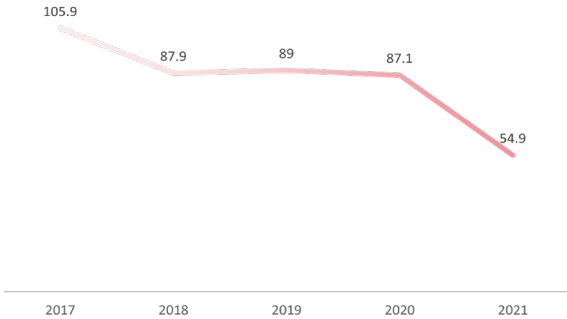
# Child Care

As the COVID relief dollars expire, low income families in Texas will continue to face difficult realities exacerbated by the pandemic. One of these challenges that effects both our parents and our students is the lack of quality, affordable child care. High-quality early childhood education (ECE) has been shown to act as a buffer against adverse experiences, especially for children from low-income backgrounds. In fact, early education programs have shown to reduce, and in some cases eliminate, the income based cognitive gaps we see in elementary school children.<sup>58</sup>

Unfortunately, high quality child care is not a reality for many Texas parents, especially those in low income communities. Despite American Rescue Plan Act funding and other efforts by the Texas Workforce Commission, Texas lost 21% of its child care providers from March 2020 to September 2021 turning 242 communities into child care deserts.<sup>59</sup>

As we recover from the pandemic, Texas needs to recognize the critical importance of accessible, high-quality child care to children and the workforce. Parents of young children can't return to work without child care and our most vulnerable children are missing out on critical brain development that will set them behind their more affluent peers. The state should create a consistent funding stream which could be used to build a trained, compensated ECE workforce and expand access to affordable, quality care.

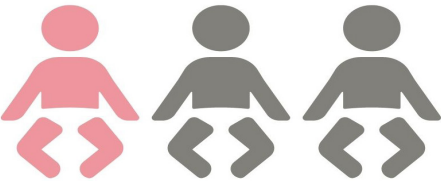
Fig. 8. Child Care Seats Per 100 Children of Working Parents in Texas



# Housing Insecurity

The pandemic also increased levels of housing insecurity and mobility among students. Changes in parental employment or loss of existing housing added additional complications to the disrupted learning environment of 2020 and 2021. In Texas, the problem of housing insecurity impacts a significant population of students.

Fig. 9. Families with children made up 30% of the homeless population in 2020



Before COVID-19, Texas was below the national average for homelessness. However, between 2019 and 2020 Texas was one of the states with the biggest increases in homelessness with an increase of 5.3%.<sup>60</sup> Furthermore, in 2020, “families with children made up about 30% of the total homeless population.”<sup>61</sup> Aside from homelessness, in a study by The Hope Center, it was found that 55% of Texas higher education students reported being housing insecure in the fall of 2020.<sup>62</sup> One of the exacerbating factors was the sharp rise in evictions during COVID-19. For example, in Houston during the initial impact of the pandemic, evictions were down from the average. Currently, as federal and state housing provisions expire but the economic consequences of the pandemic continue, evictions are rising. From January to May of 2022, every month has reported above-average eviction rates: the highest being in March with filings 80% over the

average.<sup>63</sup> Households with children are over twice as likely to report being behind on their rent or mortgage payments as those without.<sup>64</sup>

Obviously, housing does not affect students in a vacuum. Housing insecurity impacts students' attendance, ability to pay attention, and attachment to their school and community. Virtual learning further compounded the struggles of housing insecure students because it was even more challenging for schools to identify these students and connect them with services and resources. In a nationwide survey, it was reported that there was a “28% decrease in the number of identified homeless students in the fall of 2020 compared to the fall of 2019.”<sup>65</sup>

At a state level, Texas should incorporate new eviction regulation legislation in order to protect Texas families and students and should sponsor state-funded outreach programs in order to better service households in eviction prevention.

# Recommendations

## ***Social Safety Net Programs***

- Reinstating the Expanded Child Tax Credit so parents can continue affording food, school supplies, and other basic needs while inflation hits record highs.
- Expanding school nutrition programs so that all students have access to the nutritious meals needed to learn and thrive in the classroom.
- Facilitating benefit uptake through agency communication. Currently, families must apply for separate benefits (SNAP, Child Care Scholarship, etc.) despite qualifying through the same criteria. Through intra-agency communication, Texas could streamline the process so families could enroll in multiple programs with fewer applications.
- Allowing for telephonic signature for SNAP and other benefits. Currently, if someone calls to enroll in SNAP, they must follow up with a digital signature or appear in person to verify their identity and receive benefits. To avoid losing people to the logistics of that step, Texas should create the necessary protocol to allow people to verify their identities over the phone.

## ***Child Care***

- Creating a state funding stream for quality early childhood education (ECE) so that parents can rely on child care and get back to work. Currently, Texas does not allocate state money to child care, relying solely on the Federal Child Care and Development Block Grant. By creating a consistent state funding stream, Texas could invest additional money in child care infrastructure to rebuild post-pandemic.
- Supporting and building an educated, experienced, and adequately compensated early childhood education workforce through a statewide articulation framework. A statewide articulation framework facilitates stacking credentials and higher education credits so educators can continue pursuing higher education in the ECE field.

## ***Housing Insecurity***

- Investing in school social workers who often identify resources for students and families and, ideally, identify early risk factors of housing instability.
- Disincentivizing evicting tenants through policies like increased notice requirements, higher costs for eviction filing, and expanded rights to representation for those facing eviction proceedings.

# Conclusion

As children head back to the classroom and policy makers to their offices, lessons learned from the past two years should be top of mind. COVID-19 highlighted the essential roles schools play in the overall well-being of a child and the community where that child lives. An increasingly large burden has been placed on schools to address the expanding needs of our children without the addition of significant resources. All children regardless of their parent's income, race, ethnicity, education, or immigration status deserve to be healthy and ready to learn. Additional efforts are needed to identify the most effective strategies for districts to address future situations that would require a quick pivot to at-home learning. To get involved in these efforts visit [childrenatrisk.org/advocacy](https://childrenatrisk.org/advocacy). You can also sign up for our newsletters and advocacy alerts [here](#).

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# children at Risk

*CHILDREN AT RISK's mission is to serve as a catalyst for change to improve the quality of life for children through strategic research, public policy analysis, education, collaboration, and advocacy.*

CHILDREN AT RISK is a research and advocacy nonprofit leading the way in improving the quality of life for Texas's children. CHILDREN AT RISK considers the whole child by tracking issues in children's health, safety, education, and economic security. Committed to action beyond the data, CHILDREN AT RISK drives evidence-based change by speaking out on behalf of children. For more information, visit [childrenatrisk.org](http://childrenatrisk.org).

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