

07/11/2025

children atRisk

89TH TEXAS LEGISLATIVE SESSION REPORT

Wins and Missed Opportunities for Children

introduction And Background	4
Early Childhood Education	6
Child Care Deserts	7
Funding	7
Access	7
Pre-K	8
Data And Systems	9
Missed Opportunities In Early Childhood Education	9
Public Education	10
Funding	11
Attendance	12
Other Issues In Public Education	12
Missed Opportunities In Public Education	13
Higher Education	14
Access	15
Pathways	16
Career Readiness	17
Missed Opportunities In Higher Education	18
Economic & Workforce Development	18
Economic Development	19
Workforce Development	19
Missed Opportunities In Economic & Workforce Development	20
Physical & Mental Health	21
School Health	22
Access	23
Rural Health	23
Prenatal-3 & Maternal Health	23
Food & Nutrition	25
Missed Opportunities In Physical And Mental Health	26
Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice	27

Child Welfare.....	28
Juvenile Justice	30
Missed Opportunities In Child Welfare & Juvenile Justice	31
Human Trafficking And Child Safety.....	32
Bills Related To Human Trafficking That Passed Into Law.....	33
Prevention Of Human Trafficking	33
Regulation Of Imbs.....	33
Prosecution Of Trafficking-Related Crimes	34
Supports For Human Trafficking Survivors	35
Bills Related To Child Safety That Passed Into Law	36
Child Safety: Artificial Intelligence (Ai)/ (Csam)	36
Prevention Of Family Violence	36
Procedural Protections For Crime Victims.....	37
Other Bills That Became Law Addressing Child Safety	37
Missed Opportunities In Human Trafficking And Child Safety	39
Summary And Conclusion	39

WRITTEN & PRODUCED BY:

Mandi Kimball, *Chief Government Affairs Officer*

Kim Kofron, *Senior Director of Education*

Caroline Roberts, *General Counsel & Senior Director of Public Policy*

Miranda Johnson, *Project Coordinator*

Garrett Makosky, *Fellow*

Caila Foley, *Fellow*

Rebecca George, *Fellow*

Mariana Nino De Rivera, *Fellow*

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Executive Summary: 89th Texas Legislature Delivers Historic Wins for Children and Families

The 89th Texas Legislature marked a watershed moment for early childhood education, child protection, and workforce development in Texas, delivering unprecedented investments and reforms while leaving critical gaps in support for the most vulnerable families around housing, food security, and mental health supports.

Historic Child Care Investment

Facing a crisis where Texas lost nearly 75,000 child care seats in just one year and saw family child care providers decline by 24% from 2019-2024, the Legislature responded with groundbreaking action. For the first time in state history, Texas allocated \$100 million in unspent TANF dollars to the Child Care Scholarship program—a system previously supported solely by the Child Care Development Block Grant. With nearly 94,000 children on the waiting list, this investment represents a critical first step toward stabilizing a sector essential to Texas's working families and economic vitality.

Key legislation strengthened the child care infrastructure:

- **SB 599** clarified local regulations for family child care homes
- **HB 2294** empowered Local Workforce Boards to target child care deserts
- **SB 462** prioritized access for children of early childhood educators

Education Transformation and School Choice

The Legislature approved a sweeping \$9.5 billion education package, including \$8.5 billion for public schools and \$1 billion to launch Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) beginning in the 2026-2027 school year. While ESAs dominated debate, lawmakers also prioritized teacher pay increases, expanded pre-k eligibility to children of public school teachers, special education, career and technical education, and school safety. New funding models for virtual learning, bilingual education, and adult learners reflect Texas's push toward more flexible, inclusive education systems.

Child Safety and Anti-Trafficking Measures

Legislators demonstrated strong commitment to protecting Texas children from exploitation and abuse. **HB 451** established groundbreaking protections by requiring screening for risk of commercial sexual exploitation among systems-involved children—those we know are most vulnerable. The Legislature also tackled human trafficking at its roots with **SB 2167**, targeting illicit massage businesses that serve as fronts for trafficking operations. Multiple bills addressing AI-generated Child Sexual Abuse Material (CSAM) positioned Texas as a leader in combating emerging digital threats to child safety.

Workforce Development and Career Readiness

Recognizing the connection between education and economic opportunity, the Legislature prioritized workforce development initiatives. **SB 1143** exemplified this focus on career readiness, ensuring Texas students have pathways to meaningful employment and that employers have access to skilled workers for the state's growing economy.

Missed Opportunities for Vulnerable Families

Despite these significant achievements, the Legislature fell short in addressing the needs of Texas's most vulnerable children and families. Critical gaps remain in support for:

- Families experiencing homelessness
- Children facing food insecurity, particularly during summer months when school meals are unavailable
- Youth and families struggling with mental health challenges

These missed opportunities represent urgent priorities that demand attention in future legislative sessions.

Looking Forward

While the 89th Legislature achieved historic victories in early childhood education, child protection, and workforce development, the unfinished work of supporting vulnerable populations highlights the need for continued advocacy and investment. As Texas implements these transformative policies, sustained focus on

both the successes achieved and the gaps that remain will be essential to ensure every Texas child has access to quality education, safety, and the resources needed to thrive

EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

Background and Highlights

The Texas Senate and House of Representatives prioritized early care and education before the 2025 Texas Legislature even started. Interim charges in both chambers opened the door for child care providers, stakeholders, businesses and employers, parents, and advocates to share firsthand the challenges facing families with young children and the child care professionals who support them.

In 2023, child care providers braced for a financial cliff as COVID relief funds came to an end. At the same time, many families could not access child care, hindering their ability to participate in the workforce. From 2019 to 2024, the number of family child care providers declined by 24%. By December 2024, nearly 95,000 children were on the Texas Workforce Commission's Child Care Scholarship waiting list. Child care providers continued to face financial strain due to inadequate reimbursement rates and unreliable funding streams. In total, between September 2024 and September 2025, Texas experienced a net loss of nearly 75,000 child care seats.

Thanks to the tireless efforts of early childhood legislative champions in the Texas Senate and House, child care providers, stakeholders, and advocates across Texas, the 89th Legislative Session delivered historic wins for early childhood education. Chief among them was the appropriation of \$100 million in the state budget for the Child Care Scholarship (CCS) program, marking the first time in Texas history that state has allocated additional funds in unspent TANF dollars to child care, a system previously supported solely through Child Care Development Block Grant dollars. Special thanks go to Representative Walle for his leadership throughout the appropriations process.

In addition to this major investment, several key bills passed to strengthen the system. SB 599 (West) clarified local regulations on family child care homes. HB 2294 (Thompson) gives Local Workforce Development Boards the authority to

target child care deserts where working parents actually live. SB 462 (Kolkhorst) prioritizes access to child care for the children of early childhood educators who meet income eligibility requirements. Together, these legislative gains contribute to building a more stable, equitable, and effective child care system for Texas families and communities.

BILLS RELATED TO EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Child Care Deserts

SB 599 (West/Davis et al.) restricts local governments and municipalities from imposing additional health and safety standards on Family Child Care Home Providers. Local governments cannot create an ordinance, order, or other measure that further regulates the health and safety of a day-care or family home licensed under the Human Resources Code. Child care homes and family homes now must only meet the facility and capacity standards set by the state.

HB 2294 (Thompson et al./Zaffirini) allows local workforce development boards to pay Texas Rising Star (TRS) Program childcare providers the maximum rate for their quality rating, even if the provider's listed rates are lower, as long as it does not lower the Texas Workforce Commission's (TWC) goal for the average number of children served each day through subsidized child care in that area. This helps maintain childcare access for disadvantaged families by addressing the problem of high-quality providers in low-income areas who, limited by lower market rates, receive smaller reimbursements and risk shutting down.

Funding

SB1 Senate Bill 1, the State's budget for the upcoming biennium, includes an historic \$100 million allocation for the Child Care Services program at the Texas Workforce Commission. Funded through unspent TANF dollars, this investment will expand access to child care scholarships for low-income working families and help address the current waiting list of approximately 95,000 children.

Access

SB 462 (Kolkhorst/Harris Davila et al.) requires the Texas Workforce Commission to establish a priority position on their waiting lists for the children of child care

workers. A child-care worker is defined as any employee of a licensed child care facility that works at least 25 hours each week. This bill increases the accessibility of affordable child care for child care workers and aims to reduce turnover rates in the industry.

SB 1265 (Alvarado/Harris Davila et al.) requires the Texas Workforce Commission to display a link on their website that provides child care resources for employers across the state, demonstrating the various methods for offering child care benefits to their employees. This link will connect to a webpage that includes information on child care assistance, available tax credits, dependent care saving accounts, and other relevant information. The website must also include a disclaimer that employers are not required to implement any of the policies listed. This bill aims to retain parents in the workforce and improve the economic stability of families.

HB 4529 (Hefner/Hancock) exempts child-care facilities that operate on a military base or who serve military families from needing a state license to operate. Instead, these providers must obtain a certificate to operate from the United States Department of Defense.

Pre-K

HB 2 House Bill 2, authored by Rep. Buckley, introduces significant reforms to Texas school funding. It adopts recommendations from the Texas Commission on Special Education Funding to better align funding with the intensity of services provided and waives certification fees to help address teacher shortages. The bill also enhances early learning by expanding pre-k eligibility to children of public school teachers and increasing the Early Education Allotment (EEA) by \$90 million. While the EEA allocation now prioritizes pre-k attendance, HB 2 does not resolve the state's partial funding of full-day pre-k. Additionally, the bill works to address some of the administrative roadblocks to form pre-k partnerships and expands access to pre-k by ensuring children of teachers are eligible to participate in the school district they work in. It also imposes new restrictions on tuition-based pre-k and pre-k classroom expansion, requiring verification from designated intermediary organizations starting in the 2027-2028 school year. These changes will require careful observation to assess their impact on access and funding for early childhood education.

HB 2310 (Ordaz et al./Parker) requires the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) and the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to work together to develop and implement a strategic plan for improving early learning and educational opportunities for young children with

disabilities or developmental delays regardless of if the child is in child care or pre-kindergarten classrooms in a school district. Through this coordinated effort, the bill seeks to close gaps and ensure that information and resources effectively reach the children who need them.

Data and Systems

HB 3963 (Capriglione et al./Paxton) will establish an early childhood workgroup and an early childhood integrated data system. The goal is to enhance data sharing across state agencies and early childhood programs to more easily identify gaps in service and coordinate needs among agencies.

Multiple agencies oversee and govern child care in Texas, and these agencies may not always align around definitions and policies. **HB 4903 (Harris Davila et al./Birdwell)** creates the Quad-Agency Child Care Initiative Commission, which includes the Texas Workforce Commission, the Department of Family and Protective Services, the Health and Human Services Commission, and the Texas Education Agency. Together, the agencies are tasked with coordinating initiatives and streamlining policies related to child care, improving the overall quality of care and enhancing efficiency.

Additionally, **HB 117 (Schoolcraft/Campbell)** establishes a task force on the governance of early childhood education (ECE) and child care. The task force will include teachers, child-care providers, representatives of relevant government agencies, and other stakeholders. The commission shall examine current ECE and child-care systems and make recommendations to the governor and state agencies to improve participant engagement and operational efficiency to increase accessibility and kindergarten readiness.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

To increase the number of child care facilities capable of taking disabled children, **HB 175 (González, Mary et al.)**, would have created optional certifications for child care centers to increase their rating, training, and ability to support disabled children. Child care centers that underwent this training could have applied for additional funding through grants.

Current Child Care Deserts are calculated based on child care programs' capacity, not the actual enrollment of child care programs throughout the state.

HB 2271 (Walle) would have required child care programs to report their enrollment data to Texas Workforce Commission, allowing families the information they need to find child care, and providing policymakers with a better understanding of the actual child care supply statewide.

HB 2652 (Ordaz et al.) aimed to create a certified caregiver pilot program in the Borderplex region to address the need for child care during non traditional hours. The program would have provided after-hours child care for 30 eligible single working parents for six months. .

PUBLIC EDUCATION

Background and Highlights

Governor Greg Abbott and leadership of the Texas Senate and House of Representatives made Education Savings Accounts (ESAs) a central focus of the 89th Texas Legislature. Lawmakers in both chambers spent considerable time debating how to increase funding for public schools and also establish a new ESA program to support private and alternative education options. The Legislature ultimately approved a sweeping education budget that included an \$8.5 billion investment in public schools and \$1 billion to launch the ESA program. While ESAs are set to roll out in the 2026–2027 school year, many program details and implementation rules remain unresolved. Ongoing oversight and monitoring of program implementation and fiscal implications will be critical.

In addition to ESAs, lawmakers prioritized funding for teacher pay, school operations, pre-K expansion, special education, career and technical education, and school safety. The session also introduced new funding models for virtual learning, bilingual education, and adult learners—reflecting a broader push toward flexible, inclusive education systems.

Beyond funding, the Legislature addressed key issues such as chronic absenteeism, student discipline, and teacher certification. However, several promising proposals fell short. Missed opportunities included bills that would have expanded after-school enrichment, implemented stronger chronic absenteeism prevention measures, and supported classroom behavioral management training. Collectively, these efforts highlighted persistent gaps in Texas' education system—gaps that will require renewed focus in future legislative sessions.

BILLS RELATED TO PUBLIC EDUCATION THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Funding

HB 2 (Buckley et al./Creighton) was an \$8.5 billion comprehensive school finance bill the Legislature approved. The bill increases the basic allotment per student by \$55, provides a \$45 per student allotment for increasing salaries for non-administrative staff, \$4.2 billion for teacher raises, and a \$1.3 billion allotment for “basic costs” to help districts with expenses such as utilities and transportation. Other initiatives funded include prek-K, early literacy, CTE expansion, special education, school safety and teacher preparation.

The school choice bill **SB 2 (Creighton et al./Buckley et al.)** creates a universal Education Savings Account (ESA) program. This allocates \$1 billion for the 2026–2027 biennium to fund various academic expenses such as technology, tutoring, private tuition for schools or childcare providers, online programs, transportation, and homeschool expenses. The program gives priority to students moving from public to private schools and limits funding for those who do not have disabilities or are above the 500% poverty level to 20% of the funding. Families will receive between \$10,300–\$10,900 per year per child. Children with disabilities are eligible for up to \$30,000 in additional money, and home-schoolers can receive \$2,000 per year. It is unclear how much the program costs will increase after the 2026–2027 budget cycle; lawmakers will likely make this decision in future legislative sessions.

SB 569 (Bettencourt et al./Bell et al.) permits school districts and charter schools to directly offer hybrid and virtual courses. The bill ties school funding to average daily attendance rather than course completion. This is significant for students with complex needs that limit them from attending traditional schools; this change will also give school districts flexibility to access advanced courses and enable flexible learning models that promote work-based learning and apprenticeships.

SB 2185 (Hinojosa, A./Dutton) allows Texas school districts to receive funding for bilingual education even if they lack certified bilingual teachers as long as schools offer TEA-approved alternative language education methods. The bill limits total funding to \$10 million every two years and permits districts to use the funds towards teacher salaries, instructional materials, and other supplies required for quality instruction. This bill is an effort to meet the needs of emergent bilingual language learners at schools where there is a shortage of certified bilingual teachers.

SB 260 (Huffman/Bonnen) raises school safety allotments. Funding is increased from \$10 to \$20 per student in average daily attendance and from \$15,000 to

\$33,540 per campus. This bill aims to support school safety requirements and ensure students have safe educational settings.

SB 1490 (Bettencourt/Gerdes et al.) increases the calculated average daily attendance rate for adult high school programs, correcting an omission in previous legislation that led to funding shortfalls. By raising the share of average daily attendance funding for students enrolled for shorter periods, the bill creates an incentive to continue serving adult learners, even if those students are only enrolled for a portion of the school year.

Attendance

SB 991 (Bettencourt/González, M et al.) defines a chronically absent student as a student who is absent from school for more than 10 percent of the academic year or a 30 day enrollment period. The bill also requires schools to report the number of chronically absent students and make that data publicly available. This is a significant step towards identifying at-risk students who are in need of additional support.

SB 207 (Paxton et al./Leo Wilson) requires school districts to excuse student absences for appointments with mental health care professionals, provided the student returns to school on the same day. This allows students to access critical mental health care without facing unexcused absences, supporting their emotional well-being and academic attendance.

HB 367 (Rosenthal et al./Menéndez) simplifies the process for excusing a student from attending school due to a serious or life-threatening illness or related treatment. The bill requires school districts to use a standardized form for a physician's certification, and districts cannot demand additional documentation. This update supports students by ensuring that those facing medical crises can maintain their education without penalty.

Other Issues in Public Education

School Discipline: HB 6 (Leach et al./Perry) revises disciplinary processes in schools with the aim of addressing student misconduct and disruptive behavior. Under the bill, out-of-school suspensions are expanded to a maximum of three school days, while in-school suspensions are expanded to a maximum of ten school days. The legislation permits out-of-school suspension for students in grades below third grade. The bill also requires the creation of a "return to class plan" before the student is integrated into the classroom that is intended to improve and

document a student's behavior. Additionally, it authorizes school districts to place expelled students in either virtual or in-person Disciplinary Alternative Education Programs (DAEPs) or Juvenile Justice Alternative Education Programs (JJAEPs).

Temporary Educator Certificate: HB 1178 (Cunningham et al./Campbell) creates a temporary educator certificate for out-of-state certified teachers. The certificate is non-renewable and is available to applicants who hold a valid, non-temporary teaching credential from another U.S. state and a bachelor's degree from an accredited institution. By creating faster pathways to credentials, lawmakers have taken a significant step toward addressing the teacher shortage in Texas.

IEP: HB 1188 (Manuel et al./Zaffirini) requires school districts, at the first individualized education program meeting, to provide the families of students with intellectual disabilities or developmental delays information about services and public benefits provided by the local intellectual and developmental disability authority. This bill aims to accelerate access to critical support services and improve the long-term outcomes for students with disabilities.

Personal Communication Devices: HB 1481 (Fairly et al./Creighton) requires school districts to implement a written policy that prohibits students from using a personal communication device (such as phones, smartwatches, or tablets) during the school day. The plan must include disciplinary measures for violations. This bill provides school districts some flexibility in establishing and implementing a policy that determines if phones can be used during non-instructional time and lowest or non-cost storage options for devices. By restricting these devices, this bill seeks to promote a more focused and engaging academic environment.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN PUBLIC EDUCATION

HB 1405 (Reynolds et al.) aimed to strengthen measures to combat bullying and cyberbullying in Texas public schools by implementing prevention and mediation strategies. It would have mandated that school districts adopt detailed policies prohibiting bullying and retaliation, requiring prompt reporting and notification of incidents, and establishing thorough investigation procedures. The bill also emphasized supportive measures for students affected by bullying, ensuring their continued access to educational programs without punitive consequences.

HB 1579 (Guerra et al.) sought to establish the Texas State Seal of Bilingualism and Biliteracy for public high school students, providing official recognition for those who achieve high proficiency in English and another language. By requiring the Texas Education Agency to create this seal, the bill aimed to incentivize bilingual

education and ensure that students' bilingual skills are acknowledged on their diplomas and transcripts.

HB 1773 (Bhojani et al.) would have allowed the board of trustees in certain Texas school districts to create a nonvoting student trustee position on their boards. The student trustee would have had the opportunity to attend and participate in open meetings, but would not have been counted towards a quorum or the outcome of votes.

HB 3672 (Ashby) aimed to establish an extracurricular community education grant program in Texas to support educational initiatives outside regular school hours. This sought to enhance student academic performance, reduce truancy, and improve mental health by providing grants to organizations for programs that promote learning and enrichment activities including arts, technology, literacy, and health.

SB 570 (Bettencourt et al./Allen) would have mandated that schools in Texas develop and implement an attendance policy aimed at preventing truancy. This would have included informing parents about absences, facilitating meetings between parents and school officials for at-risk students, and allowing for follow-up actions (such as home visits) if necessary.

HB 222 (Talarico et al.) would have allowed public school districts to use school safety allotments towards classroom behavioral management training for educators.

HIGHER EDUCATION

Background and Highlights

The 89th Legislative Session focused on expanding access to higher education and strengthening career pathways for Texas students, particularly those facing barriers to traditional college entry. With increasing emphasis on workforce development and the rising costs of higher education, lawmakers prioritized initiatives that bridge the gap between education and employment while supporting underserved populations.

The legislature made significant progress in expanding access through multiple pathways. Lawmakers reduced the academic fresh start waiting period from ten to five years, created the Building Better Futures program for students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, and made nontraditional students like homeschoolers eligible for TEXAS grants. The session also established Free College

Application Week to eliminate application fee barriers and required public higher education systems to offer affordable competency-based bachelor's degrees capped at \$10,000.

Career readiness received substantial attention through enhanced career and technical education programs, expanded dual credit access for P-TECH and R-PEP students, and the creation of the Applied Sciences Pathway program allowing high school students to earn skilled labor certificates. However, a critical missed opportunity was failing to address student homelessness, with approximately 8% of undergraduates and 5% of graduate students experiencing housing insecurity, including those with nowhere to live during academic breaks and former foster youth lacking support systems.

BILLS RELATED TO HIGHER EDUCATION THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Access

Some adult learners seeking a college education struggle to find admission at a college due to coursework and GPA from many years prior. Currently, Texas allows students to seek an academic fresh start and waive their academic record from more than ten years ago. To further support growing learners in the admissions process, **SB 365 (Eckhardt et al./Howard et al.)** makes applicants eligible for an academic fresh start after 5 years.

SB 530 (Sparks/Shofner) aligns state law with changes in federal regulations so that postsecondary institutions in Texas can utilize and maximize financial aid programs. Institutions now have the flexibility to use any nationally recognized accreditor, which supports their ability to maintain the credentials required to participate in federal financial aid programs.

SB 1409 (Parker/Johnson) provides a statutory framework for educational institutions to offer health benefits to enrolled students and their families. This bill is a move towards addressing the burden of rising health care costs that many students face and as a result, aims to increase access to care and support students' wellbeing.

SB 2231 (Hinojosa, A./Wilson) designates the second week in October as Free College Application Week for all public colleges and universities in Texas, allowing individuals to apply for undergraduate admission without paying an application fee. This bill aims to remove financial burdens that often discourage prospective students from applying to college and to encourage broader participation in higher education.

For students with intellectual and developmental disabilities, **HB 2081 (Bucy et al./Menéndez)** establishes the Building Better Futures program to provide education and occupational skills training at public and private institutions of higher education. The program funds eligible institutions through a competitive process to enhance employment and independence outcomes for participants, expanding opportunities for students with developmental disabilities and addressing critical gaps in access to higher education.

Pathways

SB 1786 (Creighton/Van Deaver et al.) enhances the alignment between college programs and workforce demands by ensuring institutions offer pathways to high-wage, in-demand jobs. The bill improves the efficiency of career and technical education (CTE) grant funding, expands access to dual credit and industry-recognized certifications, and helps high school students earn valuable credentials before graduation. Additionally, it strengthens the state's data infrastructure to better align community college offerings with regional labor market needs.

HB 3041 (Paul et al./Middleton) aims to create easier pathways to college for nontraditional secondary school students (such as homeschooled students) by making them eligible for a TEXAS grant and other state funded scholarships. For the purposes of admissions, the bill allows universities to assign a class rank for students who have completed a nontraditional secondary education based on standardized test scores.

HB 4848 (Harris Davila et al./Hinojosa, A.) requires each public higher education system in Texas to offer at least one competency-based bachelor's degree in a high-demand field, with approval from the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB). The bill also states the competency-based degree program cost can not exceed \$10,000 for an enrolled student beginning in 2027-2028. THECB will adjust the cost limit for the preceding academic year by the rate of inflation. This is intended to increase access to affordable and flexible degree pathways.

HB 20 (Gates et al./Schwertner) creates the Applied Sciences Pathway program. This program forms partnerships between high schools and institutions of higher education to allow high school students to enroll in a certificate program for skilled labor. This bill would decrease the barriers to finding training and employment in a field of skilled labor and would help combat the state's workforce shortages in these professions.

Career Readiness

H.B 120 (Bell et al./Schwertner) seeks to strengthen college and career readiness in Texas high schools by expanding access to career-focused training and improving the monitoring of student outcomes. The bill includes several key provisions related to career and technical education (CTE), including expanded eligibility for the Financial Aid for Swift Transfer (FAST) program and increased allotments under the Foundation School Program (FSP). It also extends eligibility for free dual-credit coursework to students enrolled in Pathways in Technology Early College High School (P-TECH) and Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP) programs.

HB 120 also authorizes school districts to use FSP funding to provide advising support to graduates—within two years of completing high school—as they pursue a certificate, degree, or vocational training program at a public institution. It also directs the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to establish a statewide career readiness goal and requires school districts to develop and report on their own College, Career, and Military Readiness (CCMR) plans.

HB 3800 (Orr et al./Sparks) requires the Texas Workforce Commission to create an advisory board, whose goal is to develop a resource guide that supports collaboration between health care providers and institutions of higher education to address local health care workforce needs. Board members will consist of representatives from various educational institutions and health care professionals.

HB 2856 (Howard et al./Zaffirini) requires the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to study the feasibility of creating regional online portals to help students at colleges and universities secure clinical rotation placements at health care facilities. By conducting this study, the bill aims to address Texas's lack of centralized system for coordinating clinical training placements and reduce delays in student training.

HB 322 (Guillen/Zaffirini) permits schools to use Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grant funds to purchase, implement, and maintain technology tools such as virtual reality training systems and design software. This update is intended to help schools provide high-quality training and better prepare students for future careers.

SB 1401 (West/Davis et al.) establishes a Texan Mental Health Profession Pipeline Program, with the goal of creating a clear, guided pathway for public junior college students to be able to easily transfer into Bachelor-degree seeking programs and complete the required certifications and licensures. It outlines the details of the program and requirements of participating institutions. This program

aims to increase the number of mental health professionals, addressing shortages across the state.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN HIGHER EDUCATION

Unfortunately approximately 8% of undergraduates and 5% of graduate students are experiencing homelessness, and some college students have no place to live during winter, spring, and summer breaks. **HB 1784 (Bucy et al.)** would have created a definition for students experiencing homelessness and required that higher education institutions provide a liaison for students who are homeless (in addition to former foster youth). The bill also would have expanded eligibility for temporary housing between terms to students experiencing homelessness and prioritized access to student housing for those youth.

ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

Background and Highlights

Texas continues to face significant workforce challenges, particularly in rural communities and specialized industries, while opportunity youth aged 16-24 who are neither employed nor in school represent nearly half a million young Texans—a substantial untapped resource for the state's economy. The 89th Legislative Session focused on targeted workforce development initiatives designed to address these gaps while supporting vulnerable populations in accessing employment opportunities.

The legislature made meaningful progress through several key initiatives. The Texas Workforce Commission and its 28 Local Workforce Boards were tasked with improving transparency and efficiency around spending and activities related to opportunity youth and defining goals, objectives, and performance measures for these youth in all 28 strategic plans. Lawmakers extended Jobs and Education for Texans grants to juvenile justice agencies, established a Rural Workforce Development Grant Program, and strengthened apprenticeship programs by removing federal approval requirements. The session also created specialized programs including a forensic analyst apprenticeship pilot and expanded rural economic development assistance by increasing population thresholds from 75,000 to 200,000 residents. Additionally, the legislature addressed employment barriers for formerly incarcerated individuals by allowing occupational licenses to be issued before release.

However, the legislature missed opportunities such as failing to establish workplace soft skills training programs, not removing physical address requirements for driver's licenses that burden homeless individuals seeking employment, and not codifying a definition of "Opportunity Youth" - hampering coordinated services for young people who are neither employed nor in school.

BILLS RELATED TO ECONOMIC AND WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Economic Development

HB 2765 (Guillen/Blanco) increases the maximum population threshold for counties eligible to receive financial assistance through the Rural Economic Development and Investment Program from 75,000 to 200,000 residents. By broadening eligibility for financial assistance, this bill aims to support economic growth and infrastructure development in more rural communities.

Workforce Development

SB 2448 (Sparks/Ashby et al.) establishes the Rural Workforce Development Grant Program, which will award grants to nonprofit organizations to provide technical assistance to rural public schools and higher education institutions. The goal is to better align workforce training and education programs with industry needs in areas like agriculture, health care, and technology. The bill aims to expand access to training, help young people develop skills that are in demand, and create pathways to careers.

SB 1143 (Blanco/Talarico) strengthens fiscal transparency, mandates strategic planning, and enhances workforce productivity and community engagement for Local Workforce Development Boards—ultimately connecting more disconnected young Texans to meaningful careers. It requires that Local Workforce Development Boards (LWDBs) report on expenditures of federal WIOA funds and activities related to youth and young adults 14-24 and requires that LWDBs include goals, objectives, and performance measures for these young people in their strategic plans. This is a shift towards getting more youth and young adults into career or education pathways and building a stronger, better-prepared workforce.

HB 3260 (Bell, K. et al./Hancock) strengthens the Texas Industry-Recognized Apprenticeship Programs Grant Program (IRAP) by removing reliance on U.S.

Department of Labor approvals to certify training programs. This bill encourages employers to contribute to the expansion of the state's skilled labor force and allows for more efficient use of the IRAP program. For individuals seeking skilled trade opportunities, this is an important step towards broadening access to flexible apprenticeships and supporting economic mobility for young Texans entering high-demand trades.

To fight the shortage of forensic science professionals in the state, **SB 1620 (Huffman/Bonnen)** establishes the Texas forensic analyst apprenticeship pilot program. Through this bill, the Texas Forensic Science commission can contract with crime laboratories to create and manage apprenticeships for prospective forensic scientists.

Opportunity for work after incarceration improves employment outcomes and reduces recidivism for incarcerated individuals, but current inmates struggle to obtain occupational licenses to use once released. **SB 1080 (West/Cook et al.)** allows the Department of Criminal Justice to issue licenses to incarcerated applicants before they are released if they complete the necessary educational program. The bill also permits licensing authorities to grant a provisional license of up to 12 months to an applicant convicted of an offense.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN ECONOMIC & WORKFORCE DEVELOPMENT

HB 406 (Ordaz) would have required that local workforce development boards were notified when a municipality enters into, amends, or renews an economic development effort agreement. Local Workforce Development Boards, when notified of economic development projects that generate job creation early, can better prepare their local community to fill workforce needs by providing resources such as transportation, child care, and upskilling.

HB 1147 (Gómez et al.) would have established a pilot program through the Texas Workforce Commission aimed at enhancing workplace soft skills among participants. The program would have included a six-week training course covering essential topics such as workplace ethics, effective communication, leadership, organizational skills, and time management. A report would have been submitted by December 1, 2026, evaluating the effectiveness of the program to determine if the pilot program should be expanded statewide.

HB 1042 (Bhojani, et al.) makes a physical address *not* a requirement for receiving a driver's license or personal identification certificate, and requires that homeless individuals who request a birth record do not pay a fee. This policy change would ease the burdens on individuals experiencing homelessness when applying for a

job, obtaining housing, or seeking other steps necessary to meet their basic needs.

HB 3844 (Villalobos) would have codified a statutory definition of "Opportunity Youth" as individuals aged 16-26 who are neither employed nor enrolled in educational programs. This legislation addresses a critical gap in service delivery by establishing uniform terminology for a vulnerable population that often falls between traditional youth and adult service categories. By creating a standardized definition of opportunity youth, this bill would facilitate better coordination among agencies and programs while enhancing their ability to deliver targeted services.

PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH

Background and Highlights

Health and mental health issues remained persistent challenges for Texas lawmakers during the 89th Legislative Session, as Texas continues to rank last in healthcare coverage and mental health access. Despite these ongoing challenges, the 89th Legislative Session produced incremental progress in several key areas affecting children and families. The legislature addressed school health and safety, passing measures that expanded physical education requirements for middle schoolers, excused absences for students' mental health appointments, and created cardiac emergency response plans. Recognizing the growing concerns about student health and nutrition, lawmakers prohibited harmful food additives in school meals, strengthened nutrition standards across public schools, and enhanced protections around recess and physical education.

The session also addressed gaps in early childhood and maternal health. New legislation extended insurance enrollment deadlines for newborns, added Duchenne muscular dystrophy to required newborn screenings, and made lactation consulting a covered Medicaid benefit for new mothers. Rural healthcare received attention through the establishment of a dedicated state office for rural hospital finance and strategic planning, while access improvements included expedited credentialing for healthcare providers and restrictions on AI-driven insurance claim denials.

However, significant shortfalls and missed opportunities remain. Infant and maternal health outcomes continue to lag behind national averages. Black mothers are even more likely to experience negative outcomes and are 2.5 times

more likely to die from pregnancy and childbirth than white women. Critical proposals that could have dramatically expanded healthcare access—including streamlined Medicaid enrollment for children, enhanced maternal health workforce development, and increased school counseling services—failed to advance. With Texas maintaining the highest number of uninsured children in the nation, these missed opportunities underscore the ongoing need for more comprehensive health policy reform in future sessions.

BILLS RELATED TO PHYSICAL & MENTAL HEALTH THAT PASSED INTO LAW

School Health

SB 1316 (Cook/Cunningham et al.) adds E-cigarettes to the previously established ban on cigarette and tobacco product advertising within 1,000 feet of schools and churches.

HB 1586 (Hull et al./Kolkhorst) changed the school immunization exemption process, requiring the Department of State Health Services to publish a simple blank affidavit as a template for parents to use. Exemption rates and data availability will need to be closely monitored to determine the impact this bill will have on school and community health and whether rates of infectious disease amongst children begin to rise.

SB 25 (Kolkhorst/Hull et al.) adds physical education and nutrition curriculum requirements for school districts and charter schools to promote healthy living in Texas. Physical education requirements for students in grades 6–8 were expanded from 4 to 6 semesters and must now include a minimum of 30 minutes of physical activity each day, and schools are prohibited from withholding recess as a penalty for academic performance or behavior through grade 8. Additionally, the bill establishes the Texas Nutrition Advisory Committee to provide guidance and recommendations on health and nutrition issues.

SB 865 (Alvarado/Leach) establishes the requirement that specific school staff (including school nurses, athletic coaches, band directors, etc.) are CPR certified. It also requires school districts or private schools to create a cardiac emergency response plan.

SB 2398 (Campbell et al./Cunningham) requires the Texas Education Agency to compile and publish a list of academic nonmedical accommodations for students after receiving a concussion, as well as implementation policies.

HB 3062 (Guerra et al./Zaffirini) requires institutions of higher education to provide poisoning and fentanyl prevention education during students' first semester. This bill provides students with potentially life-saving information and contributes to the effort to reduce drug-related harm on college campuses.

Access

HB 3151 (Hull/Cook) establishes an easier route for expedited credentialing of new health care centers or providers who are added to a Federally Qualified Health Center (FQHC). It makes providers in a contract with a Medicaid managed health care organization eligible for this expedited credentialing and outlines the requirements for eligibility.

SB 815 (Schwertner/Spiller) disallows insurance claim denial decisions to be made with any use of AI or automated decision systems. It additionally permits the Commissioner to audit or inspect utilization review agents' methods at any point to enforce this law.

Rural Health

Rural hospitals in Texas face financial instability, limiting access to essential healthcare services and placing some facilities at risk of closure. **HB 18 (VanDeaver et al./Perry)** seeks to strengthen and sustain rural hospitals in Texas by allocating over \$200 million to establish a State Office of Rural Hospital Finance within the Health and Human Services Commission. The bill requires the development of a statewide strategic plan that includes a rural hospital needs assessment and financial vulnerability index and provides targeted grant programs to improve the financial stability of rural hospitals. The bill promotes workforce development, especially for nurses and OB-GYNs, through the Texas Rural Hospital Officers Academy, enhances telehealth services for pediatric mental health care, and implements cost-based reimbursement rates for rural hospitals participating in Medicaid.

Prenatal-3 & Maternal Health

HB 37 (Plesa et al./Huffman) requires that hospitals provide bereavement care for families in the cases of fetal demise, neonatal death, or stillbirth, with the goal of aiding families in the grieving and recovery process. It establishes a perinatal bereavement care initiative administered and established by the Department of

State Health Services (DSHS), and a perinatal bereavement care hospital recognition program.

Newborns are currently falling through cracks in the system of auto- and manual enrollment in Medicaid. **HB 3940 (Johnson et al./Paxton)** requires that written information and reminders are provided to parents of newborns and healthcare providers on the newborn child's Medicaid right. These materials should inform parents that the mother's Medicaid number is acceptable for claims and reimbursements until the child receives their own Medicaid number. This bill ensures the hospital and parents are aware of Medicaid enrollment options, helping caregivers to secure healthcare for children during the extremely important and vulnerable first checkups post-birth.

SB 31 (Hughes) further defines and clarifies the medical emergency exceptions within Texas abortion laws to guarantee that women with serious pregnancy complications can receive prompt and appropriate care.

SB 896 (Blanco/Cole) extends the deadline for enrollment of a newborn in a private insurance plan from 31 days to 61 days, allowing parents more time to enroll their newborns. This extended deadline affords a larger grace period for parents during a critical time for a newborn's health.

SB 1044 (Parker/Capriglione et al.) adds Duchenne muscular dystrophy (DMD) to the list of diseases and disorders for which newborn screening is required. This eliminates late diagnoses and helps patient families make earlier and better-informed medical decisions.

It's often difficult for new mothers to find affordable and accessible professional support in feeding their newborns. **HB 136 (Hull et al./Alvarado)** states that lactation consulting is now a benefit for women who are recipients of Medicaid. Lactation consultants can also now be reimbursed for providing their services to a recipient of Medicaid, recognizing them as healthcare providers, and making support for new mothers more accessible.

HB 713 (Howard et al./Cook) selectively removes misconduct reporting requirements when health care professionals are collecting and analyzing data for the Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee. This streamlines data collection and analysis, allowing analysts to work faster to provide more up to date data on maternal health outcomes.

Food & Nutrition

HB 26 (Hull et al./Kolkhorst) allows Medicaid managed care organizations to provide nutrition counseling and instruction services. A Pilot Program will be set up to give additional nutrition support services to certain pregnant recipients with chronic illness that could lead to a high-risk pregnancy or birth complications (gestational diabetes, hypertension, and obesity). These services will help additional populations suffering from diet-related chronic disease and other health conditions.

Pertaining to nutrition, **SB 314 (Hughes/Harris Davila)** prohibits public school districts participating in free or reduced-price meal programs from serving foods containing specific additives linked to health and behavioral issues in children (such as artificial dyes and brominated vegetable oil). This bill is a large step forward in protecting children reliant on school meals from potential long-term health concerns and ensuring healthier meal options.

SB 541 (Kolkhorst/Hull) streamlines regulations for producers of cottage food—low risk food items produced in someone’s home or at a non-profit, instead of a commercial kitchen. The bill prohibits local governments from requiring producers to obtain a license or permit. By removing these barriers, cottage food providers can more easily contribute to addressing local food shortages.

Mental Health

SB 2069 (Zaffirini/Vo et al.) strives to work toward implementing a statewide psychiatric bed registry for inpatient psychiatric treatment. A work group, consisting of industry and healthcare experts, will be formed to conduct a feasibility study and produce a written report that summarizes the study’s results.

SB 646 (West/Davis et al.) amends the Education Code and the 2015 mental health professional loan repayment program. There is an ongoing shortage of mental health professionals in the State of Texas, particularly in schools. In an effort to combat this shortage, much of the mental health professional loan repayment program is updated to broaden the range of mental health professionals eligible and increasing amounts of repayment, including school counselors with a master’s degree. It broadens the scope of the definition of “mental health professional,” increases the caps for loan repayment assistance granted to individuals, and includes specific additional monetary awards for rural and bilingual mental health professionals, extending eligibility for repayment assistance to include those providing mental health services in public schools across the State.

Texas's 9-8-8 crisis contact centers remain a critical health care resource for individuals experiencing a mental health crisis; however, an increased demand for crisis centers and limited federal funding have made it necessary to find alternative funding mechanisms. **HB 5342 (Landgraf et al./Menéndez)** creates a the 988 Suicide and Crisis Lifeline Trust Fund to support the operation of Texas's 988 crisis contact centers. It also directs the Human Services Commission to study the feasibility of establishing a service fee on telecommunication services to provide additional funding for the 9-8-8 system.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN PHYSICAL AND MENTAL HEALTH

Texas unfortunately has the highest number of uninsured children in the United States. Many of these children qualify but are not enrolled in the benefits that could greatly improve their current and future health. **HB 321 (Bucy et al.)** proposed an “express lane” option for insuring children under Medicaid, where the Health and Human Services Commission would evaluate SNAP data when determining a child's eligibility for coverage under the Childhood Health Insurance Program (CHIP) and a child's eligibility for Medicaid benefits. This bill would have eased administrative burdens, increased government efficiency, and improved health outcomes for Texas children most in need.

Residents in rural areas and communities of color face difficulties in obtaining maternal health care and experience disproportionately negative outcomes. The perinatal health of both the child and mother could be vastly improved by expanding access to maternal health care. **HB 514 (Lalani, et al.)** proposed the creation of a maternal health care workforce campaign, with the goal of increasing maternal healthcare access for rural and underserved areas.

HB 3339 (Ward Johnson et al.) sought to address the disproportionate rates of maternal morbidity and mortality among black women by creating a study and recommendations on the issue, jointly undertaken by the Texas Maternal Mortality and Morbidity Review Committee and the DSHS.

HB 1122 (Lopez, J.) would have required Texas school districts to increase the employment of certified school counselors, especially in districts with large student populations. The bill proposed phased thresholds for the minimum number of students per counselor, gradually decreasing the student-counselor ratio, and provided state aid to help districts finance these counseling positions.

HB 1201 (Manuel) proposed a pilot program to provide Medicaid coverage for doula services. This aimed to increase support for women and families through pregnancy, childbirth, and the postpartum period.

HB 2880 (Thompson) attempted to establish an “Advancing Wellness and Resiliency in Education” (AWARE) designation for school district campuses that complied with an outlined list of mental/behavioral health and well-being intervention and support resources and programs provided for students and families. Compliant school district campuses would receive the designation beginning in the 2025-2026 school year.

HB 2849 (Allen, et al.) would have standardized outdoor recess playtime across Texas schools as a way of combating childhood obesity with constructive, age-appropriate outdoor playtime.

CHILD WELFARE & JUVENILE JUSTICE

Background and Highlights

The Texas Department of Family and Protective Services continues to struggle to place all of the children in the foster care system in need, and the children without placement (CWOP) crisis remains a persistent concern in Texas. Despite these ongoing challenges, the 89th Legislative Session produced meaningful reforms focused on oversight, accountability, and placement improvements. The legislature strengthened protections for children in care by mandating that courts cannot dismiss cases while children remain missing from substitute care providers and requiring DFPS to track suicide attempts among youth in state conservatorship. Lawmakers also improved transparency in child abuse investigations by requiring medical information be shared with parents and ensuring physicians conducting forensic analyses have no prior involvement in cases.

To address the placement crisis, the session streamlined regulatory requirements for foster care contractors, removed unnecessary licensing barriers preventing relatives from serving as caregivers, and established a rural community-based foster care pilot program. The legislature also enhanced DFPS authority to reclaim case management from underperforming contractors and improved life skills training for foster youth aging out of care.

A critical missed opportunity was the failure to pass legislation that would have improved academic and behavioral supports for children in juvenile justice facilities and safety protections for some of the state's most vulnerable youth.

BILLS RELATED TO CHILD WELFARE & JUVENILE JUSTICE THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Child Welfare

Due to inconsistency across the state on the criteria and practices of child protective investigations, **HB 140 (Noble, Kolkherst)** establishes the child protective investigations advisory committee. This committee will research and make recommendations on the standards and best practices for investigations, as well as identify current barriers to consistent and effective investigations.

Previously, former Texan foster youth qualified for tuition and fee exemptions for higher education under their 25th birthday. To increase the accessibility of higher education to this group, **HB 1211 (Lujan, Menendez)** increases the age to 27 years.

Many young adults who leave the foster care system lack the necessary information to enter fair housing agreements, navigate car ownership, avoid scams, and access government resources. **HB 4655 (Hull/West)** improves foster child life-skills training to include these and other important skills they would otherwise need. This bill seeks to improve the financial and health outcomes of foster care youth.

In cases of suspected child abuse or neglect, DFPS can order an expert forensic analysis to assist their assessment. **HB 2071 (Hull et al./Kolkhorst)** improves transparency of this process by requiring that all medical information, tests, and analyses from the processes be released to the parent or guardian of the child, as well as their attorney. Parents are also able to seek a second opinion from a different healthcare professional. Lastly, the bill establishes that the physicians running the analysis must have no previous involvement in reviewing the case.

Previously, foster children who went missing from their substitute care provider could also be dismissed from DFPS, leaving them without connections to resources, services, or a caretaker. **SB 2165 (Parker/Johnson)** requires that if a child subject to a suit affecting the parent-child relationship goes missing from the state's substitute care provider, the court must schedule a new dismissal date at least 180 days after the last dismissal date. The court may not dismiss the suit while the child is still missing.

The Department of Family Services has been struggling to place all children who come into state conservatorship, resulting in the children without placement (CWOP) crisis. **HB 2789 (Frank et al./Sparks)** streamlines and simplifies the regulatory requirements for foster care contractors with the hopes of increasing the number of contractors available in the state.

HB 2809 (Rose et al./Johnson) amends the Department of Family and Protective Services' annual report on child protection to include the number of children who attempted suicide while in the managing conservatorship of the department. It also expands the definition of "significant change in medical condition" to include a suicide attempt.

Before the commencement of an adversary hearing, **SB 1141 (Miles/Campos et al.)** requires the court to confirm with the alleged perpetrator that, before being interviewed, DFPS informed them of their rights concerning the interview. This includes their right to record the interview, request an administrative review of the findings, and—when first contacted following the beginning of the investigation—receive information about the investigative process and their rights within it.

HB 116 (Dutton et al./Kolkhorst) ensures that families stay together by protecting parental rights unless there is a clear threat to the child's safety, even if the parent fails to complete the entirety of the court ordered services. This bill seeks to ensure that families are not separated due to small discrepancies in compliance.

HB 4129 (Davis, A. et al./Paxton) requires the Department of Family and Protective Services to implement formal measures to evaluate and assist the performance of Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs), including quality improvement plans and financial interventions.

SB 1398 (Kolkhorst) strengthens oversight of community-based care by requiring the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) to conduct annual performance reviews of Single Source Continuum Contractors (SSCCs) and establishing community advisory committees in catchment areas. The bill expands community-based care by transferring family preservation services to SSCCs and broadens the definition and eligibility criteria for those services under the DFPS pilot program. It also limits the use of temporary emergency placements by requiring DFPS to report all attempted placements and the reasons they were deemed inappropriate before temporary emergency supervision can be ordered.

SB 1589 (Hancock/Orr) gives the Department of Family and Protective Services (DFPS) authority to reclaim case management authority and functions for any or all cases from single source continuum contractors (SSCCs) or transfer it to another SSCC. This is a useful accountability measure that ensures DFPS can intervene when an SSCC is not meeting the needs of children in care.

HB 694 (Gervin-Hawkins et al./Cook) shortens the timeframe that the Department of Family and Protective Services has to notify involved parties of a change in the placement or health of a child under the conservatorship of DFPS. The bill also adds the parents' attorney to the list of individuals that must be promptly notified.

HB 694 aims to give all relevant parties expedient information on a child's well-being and ensure legal representatives are promptly and directly given information concerning the case.

Temporary caretakers of a child under a parental child safety placement agreement have had difficulties registering children in their care for school. **SB 226 (West/Bernal)** codifies the process of officiating and submitting a child's new address and obtaining an admission into school. This bill will prevent a pause of a child's education during the process of temporary placement.

SB 513 (Sparks/Craddick) requires the Departments of Family and Protective Services to develop a rural Community-Based foster care pilot program.

HB 5394 (Rose/West) prohibits single-source continuum providers and child-placing agencies from enforcing additional policies or procedures on relative and designated caregivers beyond those established by law or by the Department of Family and Protective Services or Health and Human Services Commission. The bill aims to reduce unnecessary licensing barriers that prevent relatives from serving as foster caregivers, thus increasing kinship placements and helping more children remain with family members.

SB 2032 (Paxton/Aicha) extends the length of time by which a single source continuum contractor must give notice to DFPS before terminating their contract to a minimum of 180 days. Similarly, DFPS must provide notice at least 180 days before terminating their contract. This bill also grants DFPS the ability to enter into a contract with another provider to assume the contract without following proposal, bidding, or evaluation requirements. This bill allows for better preparation and more efficient transitions between contractors in the instance that DFPS or a previous contractor terminates their agreement.

SB 2034 (Paxton/Davis) codifies the process for the court to appoint a receiver of a single-source continuum contract. The court can do so if the current contract holder fails to satisfy a corrective action plan or quality improvement plan, informs DFPS their plan to cease operations within 60 days of the end date, or cannot meet the financial obligations of their contract. The court can also appoint a receiver if there is immediate danger to children under the conservatorship.

Juvenile Justice

SB 2776 (Hinojosa, A./Lujan et al.) permits the Texas Juvenile Justice Department to disclose information concerning a person committed to the department, including personally identifiable information. They can do so if that person has

been discharged, is over 18, and has consented to the disclosure of information. This bill is intended to support TJJD's credible messenger program, which brings former TJJD incarcerated individuals to share stories and support with the currently incarcerated.

SB 1728 (Perry/Lalani et al.) updates the Education Code to authorize the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC) to extend Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grants to the Texas Juvenile Justice Department (TJJD), juvenile boards, and juvenile probation departments. The bill aims to support the successful reintegration of individuals in the juvenile justice system by easing the start-up costs of new career and technical education programs, helping them gain the skills and education necessary for productive community reentry.

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN CHILD WELFARE & JUVENILE JUSTICE

To improve child safety and government oversight at residential child detention facilities contracted with the state, **HB 3120 (Kitzman et al./Huffman)** would have required the operator of these facilities to run background checks and obtain the criminal history of its employees. Operators would be required to cooperate with local government officials to ensure the health and safety of those residing in the facilities.

Managed assigned counsel programs represent low-income individuals in court who would otherwise be unable to afford legal representation. Currently, these programs are not able to access the confidential records of juveniles in the court system, which inhibits juveniles from receiving adequate legal support. **HB 4885 (Moody/Zaffirini)** would have permitted the disclosure of juvenile records to the program in order to streamline the subsequent provision of counsel to oversee their case.

HB 31 (Thompson) proposed sweeping revisions to juvenile justice facilities to improve the academic, mental, and physical well-being of children in those facilities. The bill would have implemented an annual force audit to combat the excessive use of force against children, restrict the use of solitary confinement, and require the court to provide a rational basis considering the well-being of the child to transfer them from a juvenile court to a district or criminal court.

HB 1822 (Bowers et al.) would have allowed the juvenile court to retain jurisdiction over a juvenile if the court has been delayed and to seal the juvenile's record if the child has not committed certain felony offenses and is otherwise eligible. This change would have minimized the impact of the justice system on these children and allowed them to move forward with their lives.

HB 215 (Guillen, et al.) would have amended the Family Code in order to give a designated caregiver eligibility for support and benefits on behalf of a child placed with them on behalf of the DFPS. This financial support would enable those such as kinship caregivers to continue providing a safe and stable placement for children.

HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CHILD SAFETY

Background and Highlights

Human trafficking remains a critical threat, with research showing that the number of illicit massage businesses—fronts for human trafficking and prostitution—have more than tripled in the past 8 years. The rise of artificial intelligence has created new dangers for children, as perpetrators increasingly use AI to generate child sexual abuse material. Against this backdrop of evolving threats and persistent vulnerabilities, the 89th Legislative Session focused on comprehensive reforms spanning prevention, prosecution, survivor support, and emerging digital safety concerns.

The Texas Legislature made significant strides in prevention and identification, requiring all foster care and juvenile justice involved children to be screened for risk of commercial sexual exploitation and mandating human trafficking training for first responders and medical staff. Lawmakers also strengthened regulation of illicit massage businesses (IMBs) by allowing local county and district attorneys to collect penalty fees, preventing establishments under investigation from obtaining new licenses, and expanding disqualifying offenses for massage practitioners.

On the prosecution front, the session enhanced the Attorney General's authority to pursue trafficking cases when local prosecutors fail to act and elevated all human trafficking offenses to first-degree felonies. The legislature also updated laws to make it easier to prosecute those who force children into prostitution, regardless of whether sexual acts occur. Critical survivor protections expanded access to record nondisclosure orders and restitution for tattoo removal and mental health services, while new evidence rules protect trafficking victims from having their sexual history used against them in court.

Recognizing emerging digital threats, lawmakers criminalized AI-generated child sexual abuse material and required age verification systems for websites creating

artificial sexual content. The session also addressed school safety through new active shooter response requirements following the Uvalde tragedy and improved coordination with the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children.

However, missed opportunities included failing to require sex offender registration for educators who engage in improper relationships with students and not mandating parental notification when school employees face criminal charges, leaving gaps in child protection that future sessions must address.

BILLS RELATED TO HUMAN TRAFFICKING THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Prevention of Human Trafficking

HB 451 (Thompson et al./Paxton) requires that all foster care and juvenile justice involved children are screened for risk of commercial sexual exploitation using the Child Sexual Exploitation Identification tool, or the “CSE-IT”. If a child does score moderate or clear concern, the Governor’s Child Sex Trafficking Team has established Commercially Sexually Exploited Youth (CSEY) advocacy teams across the state that provide preventative services. This bill will allow Texas to identify those children most at risk of sexual exploitation and provide them with the support they need.

HB 742 and 754 (Thompson et al./Parker) requires all first responders and medical assistants at healthcare facilities to complete a training course on identifying and assisting victims of human trafficking. The bill also requires that each medical facility display a sign that shares signs of human trafficking and contact information for government agencies that combat trafficking. The sign also displays a notice that hospital employees are protected against retaliation or discipline for reporting in good faith a suspected act of human trafficking.

HB 2000 (Ashby, Nichols) requires an individual convicted of child grooming to register as a sex offender. Also known as Audrii’s Law, named in memory of 11-year-old Audrii Cunningham, this bill will reinforce protections for children all over Texas.

Regulation of IMBs

When the state investigates a massage establishment for trafficking, the state will often temporarily revoke its license and prevent them from operating. However, the state could not prevent the suspected establishments from seeking a new

license at a new location and continuing their operations. **SB 2167 (Paxton/Bumgarner et al.)** remedies this by freezing an establishment's ability to obtain a license while under investigation. Additionally, the bill allows for local government attorneys to collect penalty fees through civil suits for violations of Chapter 455 of the Texas Occupations Code. These penalty fees would return back to the locality and must be used for anti-human trafficking purposes.

SB 703 (Zaffirini/McLaughlin) bars anyone who has committed certain sexual offenses, such as as invasive video recording, indecency with a child, and sexual abuse, and sexual assault, from obtaining a massage establishment, school, or therapist license. The bill similarly expands the offenses that require the state to revoke these massage licenses if someone commits these crimes.

HB 1732 (Hernandez et al./Zaffirini) similarly tightens rules for massage therapy licenses by banning individuals with convictions or guilty pleas for human trafficking or sexual offenses from keeping or obtaining a license.

Prosecution of trafficking-Related Crimes

HB 45 (Hull et al./Huffman) grants the attorney general jurisdiction to prosecute trafficking offenses if the local prosecutorial agency has not taken steps to do so after 180 days. When a law enforcement agency submits a report stating there is probable cause to believe that an individual engaged in human trafficking to a local prosecuting attorney, HB 45 requires that those law enforcement agencies submit a copy of the report to the attorney general. By request of the attorney general, a prosecuting attorney or law enforcement agency must also provide all requested information concerning the case. A local prosecuting attorney may file a motion objecting to the attorney general's involvement, wherein the court will hold a hearing to determine who will represent the prosecution.

HB 1776 (Thompson et al./Huffman) makes sweeping efforts to combat human trafficking and child sexual abuse material. This includes the creation of a statewide repository to collect and analyze trafficking data, required human trafficking training for piercing and tattoo studios, and the stronger charges against continuous offenses of prostitution. Lastly, it raises the legal penalty for the possession of sexual visual depictions of a child to a first-degree felony.

HB 2761 (Johnson et al./Parker) updates the Penal Code to make it easier to prosecute people for trafficking or forcing children or disabled individuals into prostitution, even if no sexual act happens or the victim lacks the mental capacity to knowingly consent. This is an important step towards enhancing protections for vulnerable populations and holding perpetrators accountable.

SB 1212 (Paxton/Kerwin et al.) raises all offenses of human trafficking under Section 20A.02(a), Penal Code to a first-degree felony.

HB 2073 (Hull/Huffman) increases the criminal penalty for violating court orders in cases involving family violence, child abuse or neglect, sexual assault or abuse, indecent assault, stalking, or trafficking. This bill is intended to protect victims by strengthening enforcement measures and deterring future harm.

Supports for Human Trafficking Survivors

SB 958 (Parker/Thompson et al.) expands the eligibility of victims of trafficking or compelling prostitution to obtain an order of nondisclosure for their criminal records. Under this bill, victims can qualify for nondisclosure for all prostitution related offenses and misdemeanor offenses of drug use and possession, trespass, public intoxication, tampering with government records, and theft. Improved access to orders of nondisclosure of criminal history will help trafficking victims obtain employment, housing, and other resources, allowing victims to move forward with their lives and achieve independence and empowerment.

SB 1804 (Alvarado/Thompson et al.) allows victims of trafficking to seek restitution for removal of tattoos the victim received under force or coercion during their trafficking. This bill also expands access to restitution to medical, psychiatric, and psychological care under Article 42.0372(a) to victims of all ages; previously, restitution was available only to victims under 18 years of age. A defendant found guilty of human trafficking will pay out this restitution.

As an expansion to Rule 412, which prohibits the introduction of evidence regarding a victim's past sexual behavior or reputation, **SB 535 (Huffman/Capriglione)** applies these protections to children and victims of human trafficking. The prior sexual history and behavior of a child who is a victim of sexual abuse or trafficking is inadmissible in court unless the evidence is necessary or related to the proceedings and outweighs the risk of unfair prejudice against the victim.

HB 1422 (Hull/Huffman) allows victims of sexual abuse to have forensic DNA testing for a sexual assault without submitting a report to law enforcement. This will further empower survivors and encourage the reporting of sexual assaults. The bill also increases the penalty against certain sex crimes. It establishes continuous sexual assault—2 or more acts of sexual abuse against 2 or more people over 30 days—as a first degree felony. Additionally, it increases penalties for sexual abuse against minors or at a postsecondary educational institution.

To efficiently and adequately provide financial assistance to the victims of crimes, the Office of the Attorney General must have access to information relating to the crime and victim. Previously, this information was public and could be requested by uninvolved parties. **HB 2355 (Fairly/Parker)** makes the report given to the Office of the Attorney General confidential to safeguard the personal information of victims.

BILLS RELATED TO CHILD SAFETY THAT PASSED INTO LAW

Child Safety: Artificial Intelligence (AI)/ (CSAM)

To protect children and prevent the spread of child sexual abuse material brought about by the increased use and access to artificial intelligence, **SB 20 (Flores et al./Capriglione)** criminalizes the possession or promotion of obscene visual material depicting a minor, including animations and depictions generated using artificial intelligence. It also criminalizes the use of visual material containing a child to train an AI platform to create child sexual abuse material.

SB 1621 (Huffman et al./Fairly) prohibits the intentional or knowing possession or accessing with intent to view sexually explicit content depicting a minor that was computer or AI generated. Violation of this statute can range from a third to a first degree felony, and the severity of sentencing increases depending on the age of the child depicted, the amount of material possessed, and if the suspect was an employee of a child-care facility, residential treatment center, shelter, or otherwise receives funds from the State to care for children. This bill will help Texas prevent the spread of sexual content involving minors.

HB 581 (González, M. et al./Hughes) protects minors from viewing artificial sexual material by requiring that AI platform operators utilize an age verification system ensuring that any image used to create graphic material is of an adult and that any viewer of that material is also 18 or over. If certain sections of this bill are violated, the penalty will be \$10,000 per day the entity violates the age verification requirements. This bill addresses the problem of AI generated child sexual abuse material at the platform level, requiring that the entities that are profiting from this emerging technology are also implementing safeguards.

Prevention of Family Violence

HB 2492 (Bowers et al./Hinojosa, J.) mandates that individuals arrested for family violence offenses remain in custody for four hours after posting bond if there is

probable cause that the violence will continue. Unlike previous legislation, which gave arresting agency heads discretion to hold such individuals for up to four hours, this bill mandates the holding period. This measure aims to safeguard children by allowing caregivers or authorities adequate time to implement protective measures.

Procedural Protections for Crime Victims

SB 761 (Hinojosa, J./Thompson et al.) strengthens the rights and protections of crime victims, with specific provisions for children who are victims of sexual assault or other offenses involving family violence. It establishes clear, timely deadlines for notifying victims of court proceedings and mandates that an advocate from a sexual assault program be made available during forensic medical exams and investigative interviews, providing critical support to child victims. Additionally, this bill allows victims and/or their guardians to assert rights individually or through an attorney, ensuring children's interests are represented during sensitive procedures.

SB 836 (Paxton/Hull et al.) establishes provisions to protect the privacy and emotional well-being of victims of sex crimes. During court proceedings, certain types of evidence—such as medical records, videos, and recordings—will be placed under a sealed protective order and only provided to necessary parties. The bill also prevents the broadcasting of the case without victim consent. Lastly, it allows victims to use pseudonyms in public records.

SB 1019 (Huffman/Hull) updates the Family Code to clarify when hearsay statements from a child or person with a disability (who is the alleged victim of certain sexual, assaultive, or trafficking offenses) can be admitted as evidence in juvenile delinquency hearings. The bill also aligns the definition of "person with a disability" with the Penal Code to ensure consistency and clarify the use of outcry testimony in these cases.

OTHER BILLS THAT BECAME LAW ADDRESSING CHILD SAFETY

HB 3153 (Kerwin/Kolkhorst) closes gaps in child safety by requiring criminal background checks and employment verification for individuals working with children at certain facilities, including juvenile detention centers, homeless shelters, and residential treatment centers. The bill would prohibit these facilities from employing individuals with histories of abuse, neglect, or criminal behavior. Additionally, it mandates training for employees, volunteers, and contractors who have direct contact with children on recognizing signs of physical and sexual abuse.

HB 166 (Capriglione/Hancock) expands protection for children, elderly, and disabled individuals by including fentanyl and its derivatives along with other controlled substances in the law that penalizes reckless exposure. This aims to help address the fentanyl crisis, holding caregivers and other individuals accountable for endangering vulnerable populations.

Following the tragic events in Uvalde, the legislature passed **HB 33 (McLaughlin et al./Flores)**, which implements new safety and security requirements related to active shooter events in K-12 schools. HB 33 establishes preventative and responsive measures in the case of an active shooting event by requiring public school districts to conduct security audits of facilities for emergency response preparedness, and requires that emergency services personnel and law enforcement attend additional emergency response training. It also requires the development of guides for emergency response to a mass shooting and assessments for evaluating that response. Law enforcement agencies must submit a report following a mass shooting to the Texas Division of Emergency Management, and their response will be evaluated. The Division, in partnership with the Health and Human Services Commission and the Department of State Health Services, must develop a mental health resources plan aimed at addressing the needs of emergency and enforcement staff, and must distribute this plan to each local emergency management director in the state.

HB 908 (Spiller et al./Zaffirini) updates existing law to require law enforcement agencies to notify the National Center for Missing and Exploited Children (NCMEC) within two hours of receiving a report. The bill aims to strengthen child recovery efforts by improving coordination between law enforcement and national resources. By centralizing reports, law enforcement across jurisdictions and even state lines could work together more efficiently. This bill would also improve data and reporting to better reflect real time information on those children who have gone missing.

Modeled after the federal Speak Out Act of 2022, **SB 835 (Paxton/Leach et al.)** prohibits perpetrators of child sexual abuse, assault, trafficking, or prostitution from entering into nondisclosure agreements with their victim that would bar that victim from disclosing the sexual acts that occurred. The bill permits confidentiality agreements for other provisions of the legal settlement, but these agreements cannot include terms preventing a victim from communicating about sexual acts committed against them

MISSED OPPORTUNITIES IN HUMAN TRAFFICKING AND CHILD SAFETY

SB 1278 (Parker/Thompson et al.) would have established an affirmative defense for survivors of human trafficking who commit crimes while being coerced, threatened, or acting under duress by their traffickers. The defense did not apply if the coercion would not have caused a reasonable person to commit the crime or if the victim was simply given an opportunity rather than being forced to engage in the criminal conduct.

HB 380 (Guillen et al.) proposed adding the offense of “improper relationship between educator and student” to the list of convictions that require sex offender registration.

HB 1551 (Hickland) would have required school districts to inform parents or guardians within two school days of learning about any criminal charges filed against a school employee. The notice would have to include the employee’s name, role, length of employment, the specific charge, and whether the employee remains employed; however, schools would be prohibited from disclosing the alleged victim’s identity.

HB 324 (Johnson et al.) would have expanded the definition of sexual assault to include acts where the perpetrator should have known the victim to be unable to consent and codifies situations that constitute sexual assault, such as when one party is impaired by drugs or alcohol or the victim is unaware the sexual assault is occurring.

HB 186 (Patterson et al./Hinojosa, A.) would have prohibited anyone under the age of 18 from creating an account on social media. It requires the user to verify that they are 18 years or older before allowing them to create an account. The bill also mandates that a social media platform must delete a child’s (anyone under the age of 18) account within 10 days of the parent/guardian requesting the deletion.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

The 89th Texas Legislature delivered noteworthy victories for Texas children and families, demonstrating our state’s commitment to early childhood education, child safety, and workforce development. From groundbreaking investments in child care to initiatives that connect education with economic opportunity, this session demonstrated what is possible when leaders prioritize the wellbeing of our youngest Texans. These achievements represent more than policy wins—they are

investments in Texas's future, ensuring more children have access to quality care, education, and the safe environments they need to thrive.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the lawmakers, legislative staff, advocates, providers, parents, and community members who made these accomplishments possible. Thank you for believing in the promise of every Texas child and for your extraordinary work during the 89th Texas Legislative Session.