

Temple Emanu-El Advocacy Statement for School Finance Reform

Introduction

The advocacy team is seeking approval from the Board of Trustees to educate Texas legislators and advocate for significant increases in state funding for public education from pre-k through 12th grade. Funding alone will not fix our public school deficits; the funding must be strategically allocated in ways to ensure that all Texas children are afforded an opportunity to have a quality public education that will prepare them for college or career after high school graduation.

Overview

Following the close of the 2017 Legislative Session, the statutorily created Texas Commission on Public School Finance (the Commission) studied the public school finance system including, the relationship between state and local funding, and recommended policy changes in financing education to adjust for student demographics and geographic diversity in the state.¹ The Commission issued its report in December 2018 and made findings and recommendations to improve the public financing of education and “more importantly, its resulting educational outcomes for Texas’ 5.4 million students.” Among those findings are:

- 59% of Texas public school enrollment is considered economically disadvantaged, an increase from 44% two decades ago; and 19% of pre-k-12th graders are considered English language learners.
- 6 in 10 third-graders in 2018 failed to meet the end of year reading proficiency standard; and STAAR results in later grades show similar testing outcomes.
- Proficiency rates on STAAR assessments for low-income and English language learner students across all grades and subjects now only equal 36% and 24%, respectively - achievement that is roughly just one-third to one-half of their non-low income English speaking peers.
- Only 1 in 6 high school graduates have college-ready SAT/ACT scores.
- 28% of Texas’ high school graduates attain a post-graduate credential within six years of graduation. If this continues, Texas will be unable to meet the state’s goal that by 2030
- 60% of adults ages 25-34 will have a post-secondary credential. This 60% figure is important because it aligns with numerous studies showing that at least 60% of jobs will require some kind of post-secondary education.
- Teacher compensation is insufficient to attract and retain the best educators and incentivize them to work in the schools with the greatest needs.
- The current system for funding public education is complicated and hasn’t tracked the costs of education and demographic changes in the state.²

The Governor, in his State of the State address on February 5, 2019, declared that increased targeted funding for our schools is his number one priority and listed it as an emergency legislative matter. He specifically stated that Texas needs to recruit the “best and brightest” teachers to educate our students, and that such teachers should be able to earn a six-figure salary. In his address, he lauded DISD’s innovative programs for teacher compensation and stated it should be a model for our state. The Lieutenant Governor and the Speaker of the House are all aligned in fixing² our education funding and improving student academic outcomes. However, it is not clear what actions the Legislature will take as to the Commission’s recommendations.

Our Values

Historically, the Reform Movement and Temple have been major supporters of our public school system, in keeping with the values laid out by Maimonides who wrote that “any city that does not have a school in it shall be cut off [all contact] until they find a teacher for the children” (Hilchot Talmud Torah 2:1). Endemic to our tradition is the importance of educating children. Temple has exhibited this value through operating its own early childhood education program, its religious school, and through its work with other organizations that support public education.³

Many of the private schools in our area charge tuition rates almost three times the amount budgeted per student in DISD; and the private schools are mostly educating the most privileged among us, and have smaller class sizes. Advocating for the Legislature to significantly increase funding for our public schools, especially for those students who are economically disadvantaged and/or English language learners, is imperative and comports with our Jewish values of the importance of educating children.

The Commission’s Recommendations

The Commission formulated an integrated set of recommendations to improve public education in our state. Summarized below are some of its recommendations:

- Much greater spending on early literacy pre-k through third grade to boost third-grade reading proficiency, especially for English language learners and low income students⁴;
- Greater funding for school districts that adopt and phase-in a “multiple measure teacher evaluation system”;
- Significant salary increases for higher performing teachers; and salary boosts for the strongest teachers accepting assignments in lower performing schools;
- Funding for a school district’s optional extension of the school year to help prevent academic losses over the summer for students below sixth grade;
- Greater school funding allotments equitably distributed for school district programs that lead high school graduates to achieve post-graduate credentials within six years of high school graduation⁵; and
- Reformation of the property tax recapture formulations and general property tax relief.

The Commission’s recommended actions will need specific legislation to implement them. A number of bills have been filed, but it is expected that the Education Committees of both the House and Senate will consolidate bills and draft an omnibus school finance bill.

Our Advocacy

Temple’s advocacy team would like to support and advocate for the adoption of the Commission’s recommendations. We have confidence that the commission members had the expertise to properly assess the issues and impediments to our current educational funding system, and listed concrete steps to improve education outcomes for Texas students and adequately fund them.

While we expect that there may be opposition to some of the recommendations from different interest groups, we believe that the Commission’s recommendations address the entire ecosystem surrounding public education, from revenue generation and property tax relief to structural proposals to address local control and failing schools. We believe that support for the Commission’s recommendations fully reflect our Jewish values.

RAC-TX And Other Advocacy Organizations

We also believe that Temple should join with the Texas Religious Action Center (RAC-TX) and other like-minded organizations to advance the recommendations of the Commission, recognizing that our advocacy efforts will be more powerful when we add our voices to the efforts of other Reform Jews in the state and alongside other proper partners. In this connection, RAC-TX has identified public school financing as its top priority this session, and we have been in discussions with them on the issues. RAC-TX is organizing an “advocacy day” at the Capitol for March 25-26th and we are planning to join them.

In addition, there are other nonprofit organizations such as the Commit Partnership and InvestEd Texas that have a keen interest in public school excellence and finance reform. Commit made a presentation to the advocacy team on January 15th on the compelling need to improve public education and reform school finance mechanisms.

Conclusions

We believe our support of the Commission’s recommendations will help:

- Assure that every child in Texas has an equal opportunity to participate in the prosperity of Texas through access to an equitably funded, quality education;
- Assure that tax dollars are spent most efficiently; and
- Solve the underlying structural flaws of our current finance and revenue systems

We believe that our advocacy along with RAC-TX and other strategic partners in support of these goals will give Temple a genuine opportunity to influence public policy consistent with our Jewish values.

ENDNOTES

¹ The Commission was bi-partisan and composed of 13 members: six legislators (two of whom were chairs of the Education Committees of the House and Senate, and four were Education Committee members), a former legislator, a superintendent of schools, a school district CFO, an elected member of the State Board of Education, a teacher, the CEO of the Commit Partnership (a Dallas nonprofit), and a former Texas Supreme Court Justice who chaired the Commission.

² It should be noted that the Commission recognized that children from wealthier households compare well to similarly situated peers in other states. But the majority of Texas children in public schools are low income; and the learning gaps between them and their wealthier peers are so wide, that significant and strategic interventions are needed, if Texas is going to have a viable pipeline of college and career ready students to fill its future employment needs.

³ Temple, through Faith in Texas, has been a member of the “Strong Schools Strong Dallas” coalition. The coalition led support for the DISD tax ratification election that was approved by voters this past November.

⁴ While not requiring school districts to offer full-day pre-k for its low income and English language learners, it is well established that high quality pre-k programs are effective in closing achievement gaps for low income students and students whose native language is not English.

⁵ Equitable distribution of allotments means that schools serving students with greater educational needs would receive greater funding

