

Education:

Strengthening Texas Public Schools

August 2026



Top Line

- 1. Texas public schools serve about 5.5 million students across urban, suburban, and rural communities with widely different needs.**
- 2. Below-average per-student spending, rising operating costs, and workforce instability make it harder for districts to improve student outcomes.**
- 3. The 2025 Legislature added major targeted investments, but core operating support remains limited as Texas commits up to \$1 billion during the 2026–27 biennium to an education savings account program (commonly referred to as Vouchers) outside the public-school system, creating a new competing demand for state education dollars.**
- 4. Strengthening Texas public schools requires stable core funding, a qualified educator workforce, stronger reading and math instruction, fully funded services for high-need students, and clear accountability for every publicly funded education program.**

Texas public schools play a central role in the state’s workforce and economic future. Yet too many students are not meeting grade-level standards, districts across the state continue to face budget pressure, and nearly 12 percent of Texas teachers are uncertified. The 2025 Legislature approved investments in teacher pay, special education, school safety, and early reading and math, but the Basic Allotment rose by less than 1 percent after remaining unchanged since 2019, and much of the new funding is reserved for specific purposes. At the same time, Texas committed up to \$1 billion during the 2026–27 biennium to education savings accounts (or Vouchers) that

can pay for private-school tuition and other expenses outside the public-school system.

Strengthening public education will require stable operating funding, qualified educators, timely academic support, fully funded services for high-need students, and transparent oversight of every program supported by public dollars, including the new Vouchers program.

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Backup

1. Texas public schools serve over 5 million students across urban, suburban, and rural communities with widely different needs.

a. Texas operates a large and varied public school system.

- In 2024–25, Texas public schools enrolled about **5.5 million students** across more than **1,200 school districts and state-authorized charter schools** and nearly **9,200 campuses**. [1]
- Districts vary greatly in size and location. San Vicente ISD enrolled only **nine students**, while Houston ISD served more than **176,700 students across 274 campuses**. [1]
- Texas students also come from diverse backgrounds: Hispanic students represented **53.5 percent** of enrollment, followed by White students at **24.4 percent**, African American students at **12.8 percent**, Asian students at **5.6 percent**, and multiracial students at **3.3 percent**. [1]

b. A majority of students are economically disadvantaged, and many require language or disability services.

- About **3.3 million students, or 60.4 percent of statewide enrollment**, were classified as economically disadvantaged in 2024–25. [1]
- Texas schools also served about **1.3 million emergent bilingual students**, who are learning English while completing grade-level coursework. [1]
- The number of students receiving special education services increased from **498,320, or 9.2 percent of enrollment, in 2017–18 to 857,520, or 15.5 percent, in 2024–25**. [2]

- **One reason for the increase in special education was a change in how students with dyslexia are identified and served.** House Bill 3928 required dyslexia to be evaluated as a specific learning disability eligible for special education. The number of students receiving special education services for dyslexia increased from 28,819 in 2018–19 to 212,167 in 2024–25. [2]

c. Too many Texas students fall behind in reading and math long before graduation.

- In spring 2025, only **52 percent of third graders** met grade level in reading and **46 percent** met grade level in math. By eighth grade, only **58 percent** met grade level in reading and **51 percent** met grade level in math. [2]
- National results also show that Texas trails the public-school average in both fourth- and eighth-grade reading. Texas reading scores **declined** between 2022 and 2024, continuing a downward trend that began before the pandemic. [6][7]
- These results show that large shares of Texas students are not meeting grade-level reading and math standards before high school, limiting their preparation for advanced coursework, college, and career training. [2]

Table 1. Texas Reading Performance Compared with National and High-Performing State Benchmarks, 2024 [6]

Jurisdiction	4th-grade reading score	4th-grade reading proficient	8th-grade reading score	8th-grade reading proficient
Massachusetts	225	40%	268	40%
New Jersey	222	38%	266	38%
Colorado	221	36%	265	35%
National public average	214	30%	257	29%
Texas	212	28%	252	25%

d. High school completion and state readiness ratings do not tell the full story about academic preparation.

- The Texas Education Agency reported a **91 percent four-year graduation rate** for the Class of 2024. [2]
- In a separate measure covering 2024 annual graduates, **82 percent met at least one college, career, or military readiness indicator**. Because graduates receive credit for meeting any one of several academic, career, or military measures, **that figure does not show how many demonstrated academic readiness in both reading and mathematics**. [21][27]
- Among the same group of annual graduates, **57.4 percent met college-readiness criteria in both reading/language arts and mathematics**. When college preparation course credit was excluded, **only 34 percent met the criteria in both subjects**. [27]
- College preparation courses became an increasingly common route to being classified as college ready, rising from **3 percent of graduates in 2019 to about 20 percent in 2024**. Research cited by Rice University found that **students qualifying only through these courses had weaker college outcomes than students meeting other readiness indicators**, and TEA has begun strengthening the requirements for this pathway. [31]
- Together, these measures show that **Texas is graduating most students, but the state's headline readiness rates do not accurately show how many are academically prepared for college-level reading and mathematics**. Stronger academic preparation and readiness measures tied to postsecondary success are both needed.

e. Academic gaps are largest for students who need additional support.

- Across all subjects tested in 2025, **50 percent of Texas STAAR assessments met grade level**, compared with 39 percent for economically disadvantaged students, **31 percent** for current emergent bilingual students, **23 percent** for students receiving special education services, and **30 percent** for highly mobile students. [3]
- “Meets grade level” means that a student has demonstrated enough understanding of the material to be generally on track for the next grade or course. [34]
- These gaps show why districts need specialized staff, language services, tutoring, early intervention, and funding that reflects the different costs of serving students with different needs.

f. A significant number of campuses continue to receive low accountability ratings.

- Of the Texas campuses that received letter grades in 2025, most were rated A, B, or C. However, **905 campuses received a D and 386 received an F—1,291 campuses in total.** [32] This is about 14% of Texas public school campuses.
- Texas’s A–F ratings combine Student Achievement, School Progress, and Closing the Gaps, so they reflect current achievement, academic growth or performance compared with similar campuses, and differential results among student groups. **The underlying data are still needed to explain why a campus received its rating, where students are falling behind, and which student groups need additional support.** [32][33]

2. Below-average per-student spending, rising operating costs, and workforce instability make it harder for districts to improve student outcomes.

a. Texas school funding depends on state formulas, local property values, student attendance, and recapture.

- Texas uses the **Foundation School Program** to determine how much funding each district is entitled to receive. The formula starts with the Basic Allotment and adds funding for students and programs that cost more to serve, including special education, bilingual education, career and technical education, and students from low-income households. Districts receive this funding through a combination of state money and local property taxes. [10] [11]
- Because districts have very different property values, some can raise more local revenue than the state formula allows them to keep. Under **recapture**, commonly known as “Robin Hood,” those districts send the excess revenue to the state to help fund public education statewide. [10][11][19]
- **Much of the funding that districts receive through the state formula is based on Average Daily Attendance**, or the average number of students present each day, rather than the number enrolled. When attendance falls, funding can decline even though districts still must pay for teachers, buses, utilities, safety, specialized services, and building maintenance. [10][11]

b. Texas spends less per student than the national average, while core funding has not kept pace with rising costs.

- In 2024–25, Texas spent an estimated **\$12,815 per student on day-to-day school operations**, compared with a national average of **\$17,840**. This comparison does not include construction costs or interest on school debt. Texas ranked **46th in the nation**. [9]
- That is a difference of **\$5,025 per student, or about 28 percent**. Applied across approximately 5.5 million public-school students, the difference is equivalent to about **\$27.6 billion annually**. This is not a complete estimate of how much additional state funding Texas needs because the comparison includes state, local, and federal spending, and costs vary among states. [1][9]
- Before the 2025 legislative session, the Basic Allotment had remained at **\$6,160 per student in average daily attendance since 2019**, even as districts reported growing pressure from staffing and operating costs. [5][13][14][15]

Table 2. Spending on Day-to-Day School Operations Per Student Compared with the National Average and Selected States, 2024–25 [9]

Jurisdiction	Per-student spending	National rank	Difference compared with Texas
New York	\$32,370	1	\$19,555 more
New Jersey	\$28,779	4	\$15,964 more
Massachusetts	\$27,587	5	\$14,772 more
National average	\$17,840	N/A	\$5,025 more
Texas	\$12,815	46	N/A

- When districts cannot cover rising operating costs, they may reduce staff or programs, leave positions vacant, consolidate campuses, increase class sizes, or seek additional local revenue. [13] [14] [15]

c. **Teacher instability and growing special education needs place additional pressure on schools.**

- The share of Texas teachers without certification **increased from 3.2 percent in 2018–19 to 11.9 percent in 2024–25** and remained at **11.9 percent in 2025–26**. [12]
- **Teacher attrition was 12.1 percent in 2025–26—below its 2022–23 peak but still above its pre-pandemic level.** This requires districts to recruit and prepare replacements while trying to maintain stable instruction. [12]
- Texas served **857,520 students in special education in 2024–25, about 72 percent more than in 2017–18.** Serving more identified students increases demand for evaluations, specialized educators, therapies, transportation, and individualized services. [2]

d. **Districts are already showing signs of financial strain.**

- When a district adopts a **deficit budget**, it plans to spend more than it expects to receive and typically uses its fund balance, or reserves accumulated in prior years, to cover the difference. **This allows the district to keep paying its bills temporarily, but repeated deficits eventually require spending cuts, additional revenue, or both.** [15][26]
- Austin ISD adopted its 2025–26 budget with a **\$19.7 million deficit, its third consecutive deficit budget.** By April 2026, the district projected the shortfall would reach **\$49 million** and had voted to close 10 campuses for 2026–27. [15][35]
- San Antonio ISD reported a **\$46 million deficit** and identified **\$19.3 million in reductions**, including possible cuts to central-office, custodial, and teaching positions. The district had also eliminated more than 300 jobs and closed 15 campuses over the previous five years. [13]
- Cypress-Fairbanks ISD approved a \$1.25 billion budget with an **\$80 million deficit for 2026–27.** The district is considering a tax rate election and has warned that additional shortfalls could lead to **staff and program cuts, larger class sizes, and new extracurricular fees.** [14]
- These districts illustrate how continued funding shortfalls affect school operations: **reserves decline, positions and programs are cut, campuses close, and districts turn to voters for additional local revenue.** Targeted state funding helps, but districts still need flexible funding for staffing, transportation, utilities, insurance, safety, special education, and building maintenance. [13][14][15][35]

3. The 2025 Legislature added major targeted investments, but core operating support remains limited as Texas commits up to \$1 billion during the 2026–27 biennium to an education savings account program (aka Vouchers) outside the public-school system, creating a new competing demand for state education dollars.

a. House Bill 2 made important investments, but much of the funding is targeted rather than flexible.

- TEA reported that House Bill 2 added **\$8.5 billion for public education over the 2026–27 two-year budget period**, including **\$4.1 billion in new funding for the 2025–26 school year**. [2] This is a small step relative to the approximately \$27 billion annual spending difference between Texas and the national average noted above.
- The 2025–26 funding included **\$1.8 billion for teacher and staff pay raises and expansion of the Teacher Incentive Allotment**, \$659 million for district operating costs, \$454 million for early reading and math, \$200 million for special education reforms, and \$215 million for school safety. [2]
- The law effectively raised the Basic Allotment by **\$55, from \$6,160 to \$6,215—less than a 1 percent increase after six years without a change**. [5]
- The law also created a separate **\$106 allotment for each enrolled student**. Districts can use it for certain basic costs, including transportation, employee benefits, payroll taxes, retirement contributions, utilities, property and casualty insurance, and costs related to hiring retired teachers. [5]
- **These investments provide important support, but many of the new dollars are tied to particular employees, programs, or expenses. They do not give districts the same flexibility as a larger increase in general operating funding**. [2][5]

b. House Bill 2 also expanded teacher support and early academic interventions.

- The law created new teacher and support-staff retention allotments, expanded the Teacher Incentive Allotment, and invested in educator preparation, mentoring, and “Grow Your Own” pathways intended to recruit and retain more qualified teachers. [2] [5]
- Beginning in **2027–28**, students in kindergarten through third grade will take commissioner-approved assessments of foundational reading and math skills during the school year. These assessments are intended to identify specific

skills students have not mastered and monitor their progress earlier than the state's end-of-year assessment, which begins in third grade. [22]

- HB 2 also requires reading intervention for certain K–3 students who fall short on two consecutive early-literacy assessments, provides new funding for qualifying reading interventions and tutoring, expands educator training, and directs TEA to develop a list of high-impact tutoring providers. [5]
- **These changes are intended to identify and address learning gaps earlier, but their results will depend on implementation, staffing, and sustained support.**

c. Senate Bill 2 created a new \$1 billion education savings account program (also referred to as “Vouchers”) outside the public-school system.

- Texas Education Freedom Accounts, or TEFAs, are **state-funded accounts that can pay for private-school tuition and other approved education expenses.** Prior public-school attendance is not a general eligibility requirement. [20][25]
- **This means public funds can support students who are already attending private school or being homeschooled.** Because the program is funded with state revenue, it creates **a new competing demand for education dollars while public-school districts continue to face funding gaps.** [20][25]
- Public-school districts have long been responsible for evaluating some private-school and homeschooled students suspected of having disabilities. TEFA has created an additional reason for families to request evaluations because an individualized education program can qualify a participant for increased funding. By March 2026, districts had submitted nearly **2,100 evaluations for TEFA applicants.** HB 2 provides districts **\$1,000 for each completed initial evaluation**, while reported evaluation costs can exceed **\$5,000.** [17][36]

4. Strengthening Texas public schools requires stable funding, qualified educators, strong instruction, fully funded student services, and clear accountability.

Improving Texas public education is a complex challenge that will require extensive input from educators, families, researchers, and other experts,

along with careful analysis of costs and tradeoffs. The recommendations below identify several major improvements policymakers should consider.

a. Make core school funding more stable and responsive to district costs.

- Continue increasing the Basic Allotment and review it each biennium against **inflation and the actual cost of staffing, transportation, insurance, utilities, and other essential operations.** [5][9][28]
- Preserve additional funding for students who require more costly services, including special education, bilingual education, career and technical education, and additional support for students from low-income households. [1][2][5][28]
- Tie a larger share of core school funding to **enrollment rather than average daily attendance.** Districts should continue reporting attendance and addressing chronic absenteeism, but temporary absences should not reduce funding for staff, facilities, transportation, and specialized services that districts must continue providing. [10][11]

b. Strengthen teacher preparation, certification, and retention.

- Build on recent teacher-pay investments by improving **compensation, mentoring, preparation, and working conditions**, particularly in rural districts, high-need campuses, and hard-to-staff subjects. [2][5][37]
- Expand paid teacher residencies, Grow Your Own programs, and other pathways that allow prospective teachers to complete strong preparation and earn standard certification before or shortly after entering the classroom. [5][37]
- Publish annual data showing whether these investments reduce teacher attrition, fill vacancies, and lower the state's reliance on uncertified teachers. [12]

c. Identify and address reading and math gaps earlier.

- Fully implement strong early reading and math instruction, regular progress checks, and timely intervention in the elementary grades. [2][4][5][22]
- Use the new K–3 foundational reading and math assessments to identify specific skills that students have not mastered and provide support before they fall further behind. The assessments should guide instruction and intervention rather than merely repeat the state's end-of-year assessment. [22]

- Provide sustained funding for high-impact tutoring and small-group instruction, with priority given to students facing the largest academic gaps. [3][5]

d. Fully fund services for students with disabilities and other high-need students.

- Compare special education funding regularly with districts' actual costs for evaluations, specialized instruction, therapies, transportation, staffing, and legally required services. [2][5]
- Fully reimburse public-school districts for special education evaluations and **any other services they are legally required to provide** to students participating in Texas Education Freedom Accounts. The current \$1,000 evaluation payment may not cover the full cost of more complex evaluations. [17][36]
- Keep funding for special education, bilingual education, dyslexia, students from low-income households, and students who change schools frequently, targeted to the students and campuses with the greatest needs. [1][2][3][28]

e. Expand educational opportunity in rural and underserved communities.

- In 2023–24, **465 Texas school districts were classified as rural**. Rural districts can face particular challenges recruiting staff and providing specialized services across large geographic areas. [23][38]
- Expand support for regional education service centers and shared service arrangements that allow smaller districts to share counselors, nurses, special education support, technology services, professional development, purchasing, and administrative services. [24]
- A TEA review found that small rural school systems reported **the greatest average savings** from education service center services after accounting for differences in student needs. [24]
- Maintain funding adjustments for transportation and other fixed costs that smaller districts cannot spread across a large student population. [5][10][11]
- Expand broadband, virtual instruction, and distance-learning partnerships so rural students can access advanced courses, tutoring, teacher preparation programs, and career pathways that may not be available locally. [23][24]

f. Make accountability clear and consistent across publicly funded education programs, including Texas Education Freedom Accounts (Vouchers).

- Continue publishing public-school ratings alongside the underlying data on **student achievement, academic growth, graduation, college and career readiness, and gaps among student groups**. [32][33]
- Explain clearly how each measure affects a district or campus rating and identify changes to the accountability system that may affect comparisons across years. [33]
- **Monitor the Texas Education Freedom Account program before considering further expansion.** Fully implement the annual reporting required by law and publish the results in a clear, searchable format. Reports should show **applications and participation, prior public-school enrollment, program spending, administrative costs, student access, assessment results, and postsecondary outcomes** so lawmakers and taxpayers can evaluate the program’s accountability, academic performance, and use of public funds. [16][20][25]

Texas’s economic future depends on a strong public education system. The 2025 reforms made important investments in teachers, special education, school safety, and early reading and math, but districts continue to face operating pressure, teacher instability, and large academic achievement gaps. Closing those gaps will require stable core funding, qualified educators, early support for struggling students, fully funded services, and consistent accountability for every program receiving public dollars.

More Information

1. [Every Texan](#), *Pinching Pennies: Texas Is Shortchanging Its Students and Teachers* — This May 2026 report examines Texas school funding after the 2025 legislative session. It explains how the Basic Allotment, attendance-based funding, tax compression, recapture, and targeted allotments affect districts’ ability to cover operating costs. Its recommendations include adjusting the Basic Allotment for inflation, funding schools based on enrollment rather than attendance, and making the finance system more transparent and flexible. This is the analysis most closely aligned with the paper’s core funding argument.
2. [University of Houston Education Research Center](#), *The Texas Teacher Workforce* — This March 2026 report provides a detailed analysis of teacher certification, preparation routes, experience, pay, retention, and attrition from 2014–15 through 2024–25. It also examines whether students in schools serving higher shares of economically

disadvantaged students have equal access to experienced and certified teachers. It provides strong research support for the paper’s recommendations on certification, teacher preparation, compensation, and retention.

3. [Texas Education Agency](#), **2024 Comprehensive Biennial Report on Texas Public Schools** — This official report to the Legislature provides a broad review of student achievement, graduation and readiness, accountability ratings, district expenditures, staffing, charter schools, and the performance of students requiring additional support. It is primarily a statewide status report rather than a policy advocacy document, making it a useful neutral source for understanding the conditions the paper seeks to address.
4. [Texas Commission on Public School Finance](#), **Funding for Impact: Equitable Funding for Students Who Need It the Most** — Provides detailed recommendations for improving school funding, directing resources based on student needs, strengthening teacher compensation, improving early literacy, and connecting funding with student outcomes and accountability. The Commission was created specifically to recommend improvements to Texas’s public-school finance system, including adjustments for student demographics and geographic differences.

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