

# Delivering equitable education finance reform

## HB3 Texas



**StriveTogether**<sup>®</sup>  
Every child. Cradle to career.

**E3 ALLIANCE**  
EDUCATION EQUALS ECONOMICS

**commit!**  
Our Kids. Our Tomorrow.



**RGV FOCUS**  
a COLLABORATION with EDUCATE TEXAS

**UP**  
PARTNERSHIP  
unlocking potential together

**Cover photo:**  
*Texas State Capitol building in Austin, Texas.*

# forward

StriveTogether is a national movement with a clear purpose: helping every child succeed in school and in life, cradle to career, regardless of race, ethnicity, zip code or circumstance. Refusing to settle for a world where a child's potential is dictated by the conditions in which they are born, StriveTogether works with nearly 70 communities across the country to break down barriers, change systems and improve outcomes for as many families as possible.

Believing that policy, advocacy and mobilization are important levers of change, StriveTogether has invested in a number of communities to support initiatives designed to achieve more

equitable outcomes for youth. From financial resources to learning forums, the investments have catalyzed work across the country. And it is by focusing on states with multiple network members that StriveTogether has witnessed the most promising results.

In Texas, StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network members span the state — from Dallas to Austin, from San Antonio to the Rio Grande Valley. The following case study demonstrates the importance of engaging a broad coalition of stakeholders statewide and elevating the voices of community members as advocates with ownership of a collective policy agenda.

## overview

Since signing it into law in June 2019, Texas lawmakers, educators and policymakers have been working to implement one of the most sweeping pieces of education legislation in the state's history. Known as House Bill 3, the legislation significantly increases state funding for public education and distributes it more equitably, promising to vastly improve early childhood education, reward exceptional teachers, increase support for college and career readiness, and direct highly effective teachers toward the classrooms that need them most. With the law's passage, the state's share of total public education funding, among the lowest in the nation, jumped by \$6.5 billion every two years. Its share of pre-K-12 funding increasing from 38% to 45%.

Among those rolling up their sleeves to ensure the success of this massive initiative for a state that educates 10% of the nation's students were four StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network members — The Commit Partnership in Dallas, E3 Alliance in Austin serving Central Texas, RGV Focus in the Rio Grande Valley and UP Partnership serving Greater San Antonio. The leadership of The Commit Partnership, in particular, was crucial to helping get House Bill 3 through the 2019 legislative session. The Dallas-based collaborative has emerged as a highly influential, data-driven advocacy coalition leader that defines collective impact — and the principles of StriveTogether — at its best.



**POLICY WIN: TEXAS**

**\$6.5 billion**

AN INVESTMENT IN EDUCATION  
AND EDUCATORS





Today's Texas high school students are an integral part of the state's plan to ensure 60% of adults, 25-34 years old, hold a postsecondary credential by 2030.

## Case for School finance reform

It's hard to overstate the case for school finance reform in Texas — and the difficulty of carrying it out. Before the passage of HB3 in May 2019, much of the state funding formula had not been updated in 30 years, and prior changes had generally been made only to comply with court orders to improve equity. Texas educational outcomes were also continuing to suffer from the substantial funding cuts enacted in 2011. The National Education Association ranked Texas 37th among all states in education funding in 2017, even though the state had exceeded national averages in the percentage of children who were economically disadvantaged and/or learning the English language. Meanwhile, student outcomes were falling dramatically short of state goals: Only 22% of Texas eighth graders were achieving a postsecondary credential six years after their scheduled high school graduation, and postsecondary completion rates for students experiencing poverty stood at

just 12% — well below rates for the state overall and the state's goal of 60% of adults 25-34 holding a postsecondary credential by 2030.

All of this was happening at a time when the economy of the Lone Star State was growing exponentially, consistently leading the nation in job growth while heavily relying on imported talent educated elsewhere. The state's demographics were changing as well. Despite the booming economy, Texas youth experiencing poverty now account for the majority — 6 out of 10 — of public school students in Texas, and the state ranks 12th in the country in the percentage of students qualifying for free and reduced-priced meals. Texas also ranks second in the nation in the percentage of students who are English language learners (about 20%). Numbers like these, indicating low wages for the state's fastest-growing populations, underscored significant structural inequities that would keep the state from meeting its postsecondary goals and its workforce needs.

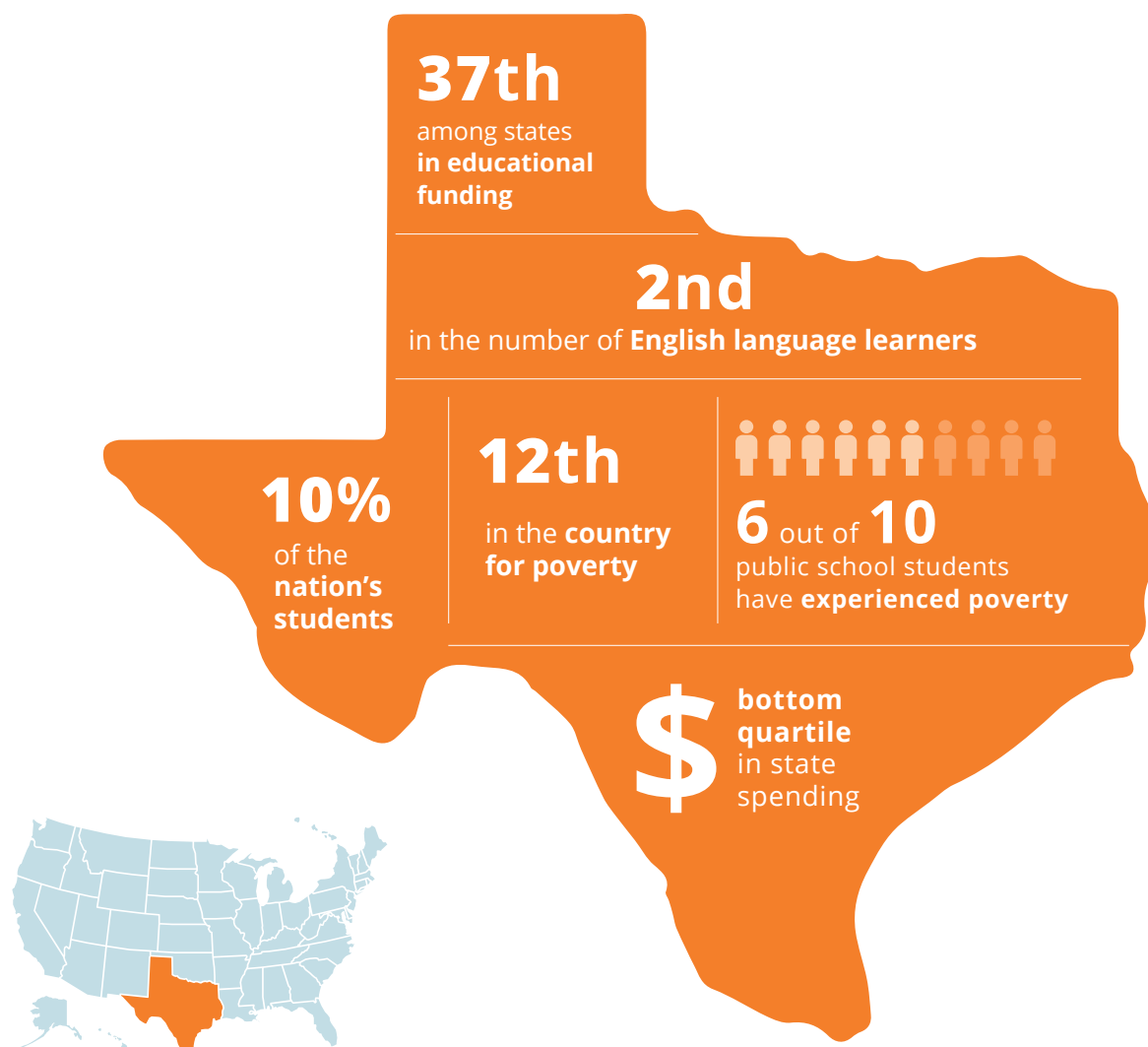


Advocates for school funding reform once again took up the charge in the 2017 legislative session (the Texas Legislature meets every two years). This session took place after the most recent Texas Supreme Court ruling found the state's financing system, while constitutional, was fundamentally flawed. Had it passed in 2017, **House Bill 21 would have increased state funding by \$1.5 billion and simplified some of the system's complex formulas. But the bill died when the Texas Senate instead cut the**

**proposed funding nearly in half and added a provision to fund controversial private school vouchers.** The contentious battle highlighted a perennial Texas problem: education advocates asking for as much unrestricted money as possible versus fiscal conservatives contending that increased investments would only be throwing good money after bad results. Fiscal conservatives were also demanding systemic disruption in the form of vouchers and the like.

## THE CASE FOR SCHOOL FINANCE REFORM

# Texas compared to other states



## INTRODUCTION

# the value of collaboration

### Start with data

The reform efforts of the 85th Legislature, however, were not made in vain. At the end of the session, Republican Gov. Greg Abbott created a bipartisan, 13-member committee known as the Texas Commission on Public School Finance to explore solutions throughout 2018. Abbott charged the group with drawing up a detailed report that would serve as a springboard for the next legislative session. Despite initial skepticism, the effort proved not to be another “blue ribbon committee” that served only to kick the can further down the road. Headed by former State Supreme Court Justice Scott Brister, the Commission also included the chairs and vice chairs of the House and Senate Education committees as well as a teacher, a superintendent and a school district CFO.

In evaluating its process, the Commission also made two critical, early decisions. First, it segmented its legislative charge into groups **focused on answering three important questions:**

1. What outcomes did the state desire?
2. What would effective strategies do to produce those outcomes cost?
3. What revenue sources would be needed?

Second, the Commission decided it would answer these questions by **bringing local, state and national quantitative and qualitative data to the table.**

### The Commit Partnership

Todd Williams, the CEO of The Commit Partnership, was asked to head up the outcomes group. A

former Goldman Sachs partner, Williams’ interest in public education stems from growing up in a low-income household and attending college through scholarships and Pell grants. He first became involved in public education through mentoring area high school students who had received college scholarships through his family foundation. Even the top graduates, Williams found, were often unprepared for college work, and the more he dug into the data, the more he appreciated the educational challenge facing both his community and the students growing up in circumstances like his.

Founded in 2011 as a small-budget “backbone” organization serving Dallas County, The Commit Partnership has grown to include a 60-member staff, supported 50/50 by regional and national funders. It brings together more than 200 partners from a variety of sectors to improve educational and workforce outcomes through a collaborative, data-driven approach. In Dallas, Commit has lent its efforts to a number of successful initiatives, including a system that identifies the most effective educators and pays them more to work in schools identified as failing by the state. Commit has also been a force behind the collaborative Dallas County Promise, which offers free tuition pathways to over 20,000 high school seniors annually while using robust data to support continuous improvement in the area’s school districts and institutions of higher education. The key to The Commit Partnership’s success, as with StriveTogether and all its network members, is the conviction that no one sector or entity can ensure equitable education alone.

### E3 Alliance

Another of the partners contributing to HB3’s success was the StriveTogether network member E3 Alliance (Education Equals Economics), which





The ethos of Texas is that we are **Number One** in all things good, so we chose to appeal to that pride and the sense that the American Dream should thrive in Texas.

——— Todd Williams, The Commit Partnership

supports several counties in Central Texas. Based in Austin, the organization is a partnership of higher education institutions, community organizations, nonprofits and school districts that work together to improve educational outcomes. Business and industry support the organization through financial and in-kind contributions so that it can provide educational institutions and other organizations with data, research, leadership training and professional development. E3 was a major contributor of data, particularly about early learning, that drove the Commission's work.

### RGV Focus

Along with their commitment to collaboration — and substantial resources for data collection and communications — Commit and E3 brought to the HB3 effort deep experience and connections

to the local and state business community, as well as policy know-how and strong relationships with state legislators and other officials. They received valuable behind-the-scenes support from RGV Focus, which works in partnership with school districts, philanthropies, workforce and community organizations to align cradle-to-career resources in the Rio Grande Valley. With its parent organization, Educate Texas, RGV Focus was able to leverage its strong statewide connections, particularly in rural areas, and its policy expertise in the state capitol.

The Commission's outcomes committee was tasked with deciding specifically what students (and educators) would be expected to achieve and by when. The goal setting was key because previous funding schemes in Texas had been designed with little grounding in how to reach desired

outcomes or determining which strategies were most effective in moving student achievement.

## Involve the business community

This being Texas, the Commission appealed to business, drawing a direct line from educational outcomes to desired workforce skills. They heeded state projections indicating that **Texas would have to add 4.5 million to 7.8 million jobs by 2036 for its unemployment rate to remain at historical levels given predicted population growth.** Achieving that, the Commission wrote, would take “transformational reforms that amount to more than a Band-Aid on top of a Band-Aid.” Instead, it would require an educational and property tax system fully aligned to the needs of all Texans to continue the prosperity that the state was accustomed to.

“The missing voice in public education has always been the business community,” Williams said, “and I’m a strong believer in never wasting a crisis. With others, we went to chambers of commerce throughout the state, talked to editorial boards, raised national examples and talked to

journalists. We had data on our current outcomes, where we were headed if we didn’t change our path, and what effective strategies could reverse the tide. We hammered home the fact that we ranked second in the number of ELL (English language learner) students and 12th in poverty while we concurrently ranked in the bottom quartile in state spending. The ethos of Texas is that we are Number One in all things good, so we chose to appeal to that pride and the sense that the American Dream should thrive in Texas.”

All in all, the Commission heard more than 80 hours of testimony from more than 155 stakeholders, including state officials, classroom educators, school district and campus leaders, parents, researchers, policy groups, government entities, nonprofits, charitable foundations and businesses. Through the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network, the partners connected with other organizations around the state, and The Commit Partnership provided them with supporting data. **“Data drove everything,”** said Libby McCabe, senior policy advisor at Commit.



**Data drove everything.**

Libby McCabe, The Commit Partnership



CRUCIAL TO SUCCESS

# reading proficiency



Children who are kindergarten ready are three times more likely to meet state standards for 3rd grade reading.

In its testimony to the Commission, The Commit Partnership took the state's goal of 60% post-secondary completion and looked backward through the complete educational pipeline. Among other things, the data showed that third-grade reading proficiency was absolutely crucial to student success: Students who are not reading by the third grade are three times more likely

to drop out of school than students who are. In Texas, only 40% of third graders in 2018 met state literacy standards, and the numbers were only declining in later years, with Texas ranking 46th in the U.S. in eighth-grade reading on the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) in 2019. Addressing early literacy was a fundamental strategy.

## Texas reading proficiency

**3x**

Students who are not reading by 3rd grade are 3x more likely to drop out of school than students who are

**40%**

of 3rd graders in 2018 met state literacy standards



Texas ranks 46th in 8th grade reading on the NAEP in 2019

Just over  
**50%**

of 3- and 4-year-old children collectively attend pre-K state-wide in Texas



Children who are kindergarten ready are 3x more likely to meet the 3rd grade state standards

## CRUCIAL TO SUCCESS

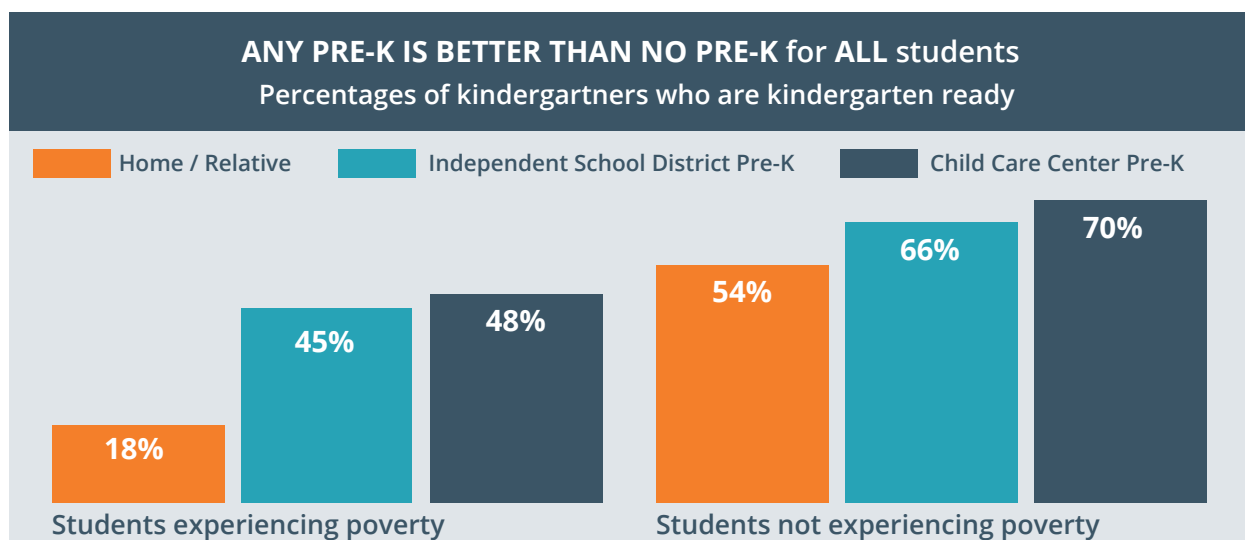
# kindergarten readiness

So what makes it most likely that students will achieve this important third-grade milestone? Kindergarten readiness. According to Early Matters, a childhood development research and advocacy coalition supported by Commit and E3, preparedness for kindergarten is more predictive of third-grade reading proficiency than family income or other demographic factors. Children who are kindergarten ready, research shows, are three times more likely to meet the third-grade state standard than those who are not.

Across Texas, half-day pre-K funding had been offered by the state to districts serving eligible students experiencing poverty and English learners for decades. But as E3 Alliance was able to show, pre-K quality varied widely by district under a system of voluntary standards, and Commission members were struck by the vast differences in programs and outcomes. There exists a huge divide between the qualifications required for child care providers and public school teachers. In Texas today, 87% of districts offer some sort of pre-K, and of those, 70% are full-day programs. Just over half of 3- and 4-year-old children collectively attend pre-K statewide with Texas only funding half-day programs. "It

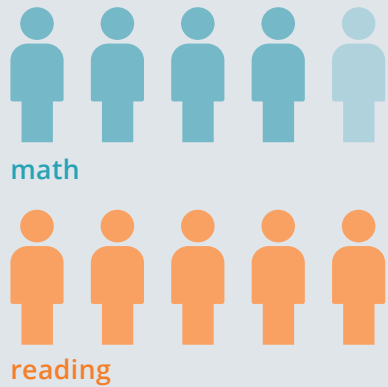
was absolutely all over the place," said E3 CEO Susan Dawson, an entrepreneur and former president of the Austin Chamber of Commerce. At the same time, she said, the partners had to convince legislators who didn't see the need for state support at all. "We heard a lot of 'I didn't go to pre-K, and I turned out fine.'"

E3 had been studying pre-K for a long time and benefited from exceptionally nuanced longitudinal data. It began to connect the dots between the type of pre-K that a child had experienced and that child's readiness for kindergarten. The data showed that overall, controlling for other factors, students who attended full-day pre-K and had smaller classes enjoyed better outcomes. But the problem in aligning numbers was getting data from pre-Ks that are private child care providers. "The systems don't talk to each other," Dawson said. So the Commission proposed giving all Texas students a secure ID number when they start pre-K so progress monitoring can continue through 12th grade, enabling researchers to ask more meaningful questions in an effort to continuously improve student success.





**Kindergarten readiness was more predictive of third-grade success than any demographic factor, including income status or ethnicity.**



Students are

**4.4– 5x**

more likely to pass the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STARR) in third grade if they were prepared for school in kindergarten

What the Commission proposed brought all these factors together. “We started appropriately framing pre-K as a potential critical strategy to improve third-grade reading,” Williams said. The state would allot new funding for third-grade reading for students experiencing poverty and English language learners, from kindergarten through third grade. Schools would enjoy full discretion on how to invest the money: They could put it into full-day pre-K, or they could invest in professional development for early childhood learning, expanded dual language programming, pilots for personalized learning, or a longer school day or school year. In return for the funds, all districts providing pre-K would be required to do so in a quality, full-day manner, with acceptable student-teacher ratios.

The Commission continually worked in a deeply collaborative way, committing to collecting as much data and hearing as many viewpoints as possible. “The first several months were presentations of data, data and more data, both state and national,” said Doug Killian, superintendent of Pflugerville Independent School District and a member of the outcomes committee. Compared to past efforts, he said, “we were more open to talking about everything, and it was more collaborative — at every level — with a variety of different perspectives. E3 and Commit were very driven



**HB3 prioritizes funding so every child is ready to learn.**



Data indicates that children who are kindergarten ready are three times more likely to meet the state's reading proficiency standards by third grade.

to finding workable solutions. You had strong individuals, with power to move things forward.”

## Teacher involvement

Crucially, teachers were involved in the crafting and advocacy of HB3 from the very start. **Teach Plus**, a statewide partner that trains teachers to be leaders, wrote detailed policy papers and held focus groups all over the state, deploying 50 teachers to interview 227 other teachers. They heard stories about staff shortages, educators lacking the tools and resources they need, crumbling facilities and supplies so lacking the teachers had to spend hundreds of dollars of their own money to provide their students with the basics. “One teacher said she was advised not to put push-pins in the wall because of the risk of asbestos exposure,” said Lindsay Sobel of Teach Plus.

Presentations starkly spelled out the severe challenges of teaching in the face of low compensation tied to seniority and not effectiveness. They presented surveys showing that only 4% of high school students wanted to be teachers, that

less than half of their parents wanted them to teach (down from 75% in years past), and that they were highly doubtful about their ability to support a family on a teacher’s salary, earn respect from society or get the professional development they needed. This information was presented against statistics showing the high degree of teacher turnover in public schools and the fact that students experiencing poverty are consistently the most likely to be taught by the least experienced teachers.

At the same time, the teachers saw districts that were investing in practices that worked. “We identified practices that data showed should be scaled,” Williams said, “and scaling was not possible under the current funding system.”

In particular, the Commission sought to scale up the progress made by Dallas ISD. The state’s second largest district, Dallas ISD has made great strides, in part, by vastly improving its principal and teacher evaluations and making effectiveness — rather than seniority — the basis for salary boosts. Salary incentives have also



allowed the district to move more of its effective educators to schools facing the most difficult challenges. “This brings equity to the process of compensation,” Williams said. “Who you teach matters; where you teach matters. You can give money to one high-performing teacher or several. You can recognize that teachers can succeed because of the work done behind them — that the fourth-grade teacher might be benefiting from the good work of the third-grade teacher who had those students before.”

Now, with a disproportionately high percentage of English language learners (44%) and students

experiencing poverty (87%), Dallas has increased achievement across all grades and subjects by 13 percentile points — about twice the growth rate of the state. And the number of students enrolled in schools rated “F” by the state has plunged from 19% to just 2%. Dallas is also becoming a more appealing place to teach: The district now retains over 90% of its more proficient teachers, with the most effective educators earning from \$80,000 to \$90,000 a year. Teachers who agree to work in high-needs schools can receive an additional \$8,000 to \$10,000 a year. Those were the kinds of statistics StriveTogether network members in Texas wanted to replicate statewide.

## SCALING SUCCESS

# Dallas Independent School District



### OPPORTUNITIES



**44%**

of students are English language learners



**87%**

of students have experienced poverty

### SUCCESS



**90%**

of proficient teachers retained

**\$80–90K**

earnings of effective educators

**+\$8–10K**

for teachers that work in high-needs schools

**13% ↑**

achievement increase across all grades & subjects

**2x**

the achievement growth rate of the state

CRUCIAL TO SUCCESS

# concentrated areas of need

## Students experiencing poverty

A key charge for the Commission was also to examine how the state funding formula affected economically disadvantaged students — the state's fastest growing population. As is the case in most states, Texas children who are eligible for free and reduced-price meals count as disadvantaged. But when the commissioners looked more carefully at the data, they saw concentrated areas of need — intensifying the demand for funding. "We went to the U.S. Census block data to judge the concentration of need," Killian said. That led to a recommendation for additional funding that is tiered as the need grows. **"Not all poverty is the same," Williams said. "You can range from all students qualifying for reduced lunch to all students qualifying for free lunch with concentrated poverty that has existed for generations."**

## English language learners

Another area of focus was the state's large and growing population of English language learners. **ELLs represent roughly one in five public school students in Texas**, and the current funding formula does not sufficiently support dual language instruction (an immersion program in which some of the students are native English speakers and others are not) despite compelling data that finds dual language learning is more effective than bilingual or other language-acquisition strategies. The Commission recommended that the state create an additional allotment for dual language learning, thus giving districts an incentive to implement a program that also serves to significantly reduce classroom segregation.

## Dyslexia and related disorders

The Commission also, for the first time, called for specific state support for students with dyslexia. In 2017–2018, **less than 2.5% of Texas students received services for dyslexia and related disorders**, even though dyslexia affects up to **10% of public school students nationally**. The commissioners reasoned that if districts received direct funding for dyslexia, more students would likely be identified with the condition. And, they argued, because undiagnosed dyslexia can lead to academic and behavioral problems, the cost of treating it would be offset by decreases in the costs of remediation and counseling down the road.

## Student need rather than cost of living

Overall, the Commission argued for allocating state funding based on student need rather than on differences in the cost of living, noting that the **school districts with the highest needs (such as Dallas and Austin) are often the same ones with the highest costs of living**. The commissioners also called for using current year property values, rather than past year values, to calculate the state funding and remove the inequity of fast-growing districts receiving higher funding per student. The previous system used property values from the previous year — a method that superintendents preferred because it gave them more predictability. "When property values rise, the state's share of public of public funding goes down," Killian said. "With some areas growing so fast, those changes can turn a budget."



In Texas, they asked: what outcomes do we want and what will data-proven strategies cost?

## INSIGHTS

# the commission report

### InvestEdTX


After a year of dedicated work, the Commission produced a **164-page report** that is remarkable for its cogence, clarity and precision. **It made 35 recommendations, carefully outlining the evidence and the rationale for each, and it produced dozens of data-packed appendices with visually compelling exhibits and charts.** By the time legislators, led by Education Chairmen Rep. Dan Huberty and Senator Larry Taylor, were ready to draft a bill in January 2019 — which they did with the input of the Commission and those who had presented testimony — much of their work had already been done. Meanwhile,

The Commit Partnership, Teach Plus, Early Matters, E3 and several other organizations and businesses united under a new coalition, called InvestEdTX and financially supported by StriveTogether, to help push for its passage.

### Outcomes-based funding

The issue of outcomes-based funding — whether for teacher compensation, third-grade reading or postsecondary readiness — was a key point of contention throughout the course of the legislation. In the Senate's own bill, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick initially pushed for \$5,000 permanent raises for all full-time teachers — an allotment that was





not tied to performance and that would have cost nearly half the money the state ended up allotting. Conservative business groups pushed for merit pay, but teachers opposed it because they didn't want to be judged by student scores on standardized tests.

## Compromise

In the end, the bill struck a compromise that satisfied both the teachers and the business groups: The law provides districts the option of seeking stipends ranging from \$3,000 to \$32,000 to reward the state's top-performing teachers if they develop an evaluation system, with increased funding allotted for teachers who agree to work on rural or low-income campuses. Districts will have discretion on how to evaluate these teachers, but they must use multiple measures (including those that gauge student growth) that are approved by both Texas Tech University and the state.

The outcomes controversy also played out during deliberations on state funding for third-grade reading. "It was easily the most inflammatory issue," Dawson said. "Teachers and districts and left-leaning legislators were very much against it. [Commit] was very much for. We [E3] were kind of in the middle." House Republicans wanted to make the equitable funding contingent upon schools increasing the number of third graders

reading on grade level, but Democrats argued that such a measure could reward affluent schools and punish low-income districts — not to mention place undue pressure on 9-year-olds.

Another proposed amendment, which was ultimately passed, created outcomes funding for every high school senior graduating without the need for remediation and enrolling in college, the military or achieving an industry certificate. "Ultimately third-grade reading outcomes funding was exchanged for a requirement that all K-3 teachers statewide demonstrate competency or receive training in the science of reading," Dawson said, "serving as one example of how the coalition avoided going up in flames."

The new law also provides Texans with property tax relief in that it reduces current tax rates rather than just limiting their future growth. Texas does not impose a state income tax and prides itself on being a business-friendly state, making revenue ideas, throughout the Commission deliberations and legislative process, contentious and few. Late in the session, some House leaders pushed a plan to increase the state sales tax rate by one cent to reduce school property taxes. But few except some supply-siders on the far right (who generally support taxing consumption over wealth) supported it, essentially making it dead upon arrival.

## INSIGHTS

# factors that led to success



## StriveTogether approach

Reflecting back on the legislative accomplishment, the partners cited a number of factors that allowed them to achieve what had been out of their reach before. Foremost was the StriveTogether collective impact approach. Said Libby McCabe, senior policy advisor at The Commit Partnership: "The collective impact model is what made this [coalition] so strong. The situation is typically a circular firing squad, where

everyone is fighting for their own piece instead of applying unified pressure to achieve the same outcomes. But in this case, in the campaign materials, podcasts, editorials, everything — we made sure everyone was aligned on the same message." The StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network also served to link many of the organizations that make up InvestEdTX, the umbrella coalition formed to provide input for the bill and advocate for its passage.



Under HB3, outcomes funding is tied to high school seniors graduating without the need for remediation and enrolling in college, entering the military or achieving an industry certificate.

The whole process has been an incredible affirmation that if you have a large problem to solve, and you have the tools and the data to help solve it, **you can come together across the aisle and get it done.**

——— Todd Williams, **The Commit Partnership**

## The Commit Partnership

By all accounts, the efforts of The Commit Partnership were pivotal. “Commit had a remarkable ability to coordinate things and collect and analyze research,” Doug Killian said. Said Susan Dawson: “Commit really did play the key role in convening the players and all the chambers [of commerce]. They understood the players, and Todd was able to communicate with policymakers at the highest levels. The individual players played different roles, but Commit helped organize our collective approach.” Overall, the lesson in effective state advocacy is the importance of coordinating strong, geographically diverse backbone organizations

to create a cohesive partnership with a deep reliance on data to be the effective voice of students.

## The Commission and data

The Commission was itself a groundbreaking enterprise, Dawson observes. “We all know that these sorts of commissions often just put an issue on the shelf and ignore it,” she said. “But this commission was absolutely committed to leveraging data, to being more strategic about investing in the outcomes that you want to see.

We [E3] had the data for a long time, but the Commission did a better job of highlighting it, and



# HB3 BILL SUMMARY

**Supports teachers and rewards excellence**

**Focuses on learning and improving student outcomes**

**Increases funding and equity**

**Reduces and reforms property taxes and recapture**

advertising it, so the Legislature could no longer ignore it. And [members] produced a substantial report that people actually read, using it as the blueprint for what HB3 would be.” Williams, too, speaks to the power of the data-driven process: “What was so important and reaffirming was to see legislators evaluating data, owning it and passionately communicating it to their constituencies. The whole process has been an incredible affirmation that if you have a large problem to solve, and you have the tools and the data to help solve it, you can come together across the aisle and get it done.”

## **The business community**

The buy-in of the business community was likewise another essential factor that set this effort apart. United Way executives, chamber presidents and corporate leaders testified before the Commission and legislative committees while also publishing op-eds and participating in policy discussions. “It’s easy to say that businesspeople are busy so to just tell them to say ‘rah rah’ [for the legislation] and let them go,” said Laura Koenig, senior director of community solutions for E3. “But we wanted critical thinkers. These are great minds, and we didn’t want to tell these business leaders what to say.” As an example, she said, E3 ghostwrote a letter on behalf of the business community in support of pre-K funding — only to have the industry representatives push

back, saying the original arguments had little to do with business. Business leaders scrapped the original letter, wrote their own and had 40 CEOs sign it. “It became the letter,” Koenig said, “and it looked nothing like the first draft.”

Koenig emphasized the importance of engaging business leaders in an effective, unique way. And The Commit Partnership understood that, too. Said McCabe: “We and our fellow partners continuously showed how [education funding] connected to workforce development and the economy ... we knew that you don’t spend money in Texas without showing how it helps business and the economy.”

## **Practitioners and stakeholders**

Both E3 and The Commit Partnership garner praise for the respect they have for practitioners (and all other stakeholders) and their deeply collaborative approach: “When someone comes in to improve public education, the immediate assumption is that we don’t know what we are doing,” Killian said. “But in this case, [Commit and E3] were doing it with us and not to us. When you don’t invite practitioners to the table, [reform efforts] never last. That’s probably the biggest difference from previous efforts. With them, it’s never an indictment of the way things are. It’s ‘how can we help you make things better?’”



## IMPLEMENTATION AND PROGRESS

# continued efforts

The efforts of the StriveTogether network members have hardly ended with the passage of HB3. In the months since passage and for the foreseeable future, The Commit Partnership is working with others to both protect HB3 funding in the face of significant fiscal pressure arising from the COVID-19 crisis while helping school districts implement key provisions of the new law.

### Texas Impact Network

On the implementation front (following the StriveTogether collective impact approach), partners including Commit, E3 and RGV Focus have formed the Texas Impact Network to help districts put into place specific HB3 provisions, including the teacher pay strategy. **Out of 1,100 districts in Texas (which range in size from 300 to 200,000 students), at least 800 have signed letters of intent to pursue teacher pay incentives.** “Good implementation is key to good policy,” Williams said. The Texas Impact Network is creating a framework for districts that includes measures of effectiveness and state quality standards that teachers can trust. According to Chris Coxon, managing director of programs for education policy and practice at the nonprofit Educate Texas, the plan builds off an existing joint venture between Commit and Educate Texas called Best in Class.

### Leveraging expertise

The organizations are also leveraging the expertise of backbone organizations like RGV Focus and UP Partnership in the San Antonio/Bexar County area to help other school districts

implement innovative strategies within HB3, such as performance-based funding for college and career readiness and an optional allotment for a longer school year. Recognizing the funding opportunities for districts, the Texas Impact Network is collaborating with school district CFOs and Bain Consulting to help them manage the overall process of change. “We will be focused on spreading best practices, evaluating promising efforts, gathering data and trying to learn from each other,” Williams said.

Meanwhile, the partners are not done with school finance legislation, especially in light of COVID-19. They are already seeking data to understand the impact of the virus on summer slide, especially given the inequities in remote learning resulting from inconsistent access to the internet and technology. It will also be critical for partners to frame the impact of previous budget cuts on Texas’s NAEP rankings as legislators evaluate new budget choices and the continued funding of the critical strategies in HB3. So while Teach Plus’s Sobel, for one, calls the 2019 law “absolutely remarkable, historical and very important,” she said there is much work to be done. “It’s not the finish line,” she said. “It’s the starting gate.”

It’s not the finish line. **It’s the starting gate.**

— Lindsey Sorbel, Teach Plus

## ABOUT STRIVETOGETHER

StriveTogether partners with nearly 70 communities across the country, providing coaching, resources and rigorous approaches to create opportunities and close gaps in education, housing and so much more. Together, the StriveTogether Cradle to Career Network impacts the lives of more than 12 million youth.



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