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# PUBLIC POLICY FOR A MORE GLOBALLY COMPETITIVE TEXAS

## **IMPROVING MATH AND READING READINESS IN TEXAS SCHOOLS TODAY IS CRITICAL TO SUPPORT THE WORKFORCE OF THE FUTURE**

Texas is experiencing significant challenges in math and reading readiness for kindergarten - 5th grade students that will ultimately impact their ability to successfully pursue opportunities after high school. On the 2024 STAAR tests, just 47% of students across all grades and subjects performed on grade level, with economically disadvantaged students performing even lower with 36% on grade level.

Early math and literacy skills are predictive of future academic and career success, yet only 46% of 3rd graders met grade-level standards in reading, and only 43% did so in math. While Texas has made more progress than many other states in addressing the learning gaps exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, we still have a ways to go. If we do not better prepare students for future postsecondary success, we will be challenged to meet projected workforce needs and remain globally competitive as it is estimated that 63% of jobs in Texas will require a postsecondary credential by 2031.<sup>1</sup>



## Importance of Strong Early Academic Foundations

Early literacy and numeracy are critical for long-term success. “Students transition from learning to read to reading to learn in 3rd grade and comprehending written materials is critical to the education process in the grades that follow across all subject areas,” noted Gabe Grantham, Policy Advisor at Texas 2036 and former teacher. Students who do not meet grade level reading expectations by 3rd grade are four times more likely to not graduate from high school on time<sup>2</sup> and significantly less likely to complete a two-year or four-year college degree according to Texas Education Agency data.

Additionally, students who do not master foundational math skills in the lower grades are less equipped for STEM career pathways. For example, successful completion of Algebra 1 in 8th grade is the leading indicator of postsecondary success and enrollment in STEM fields of study according to research by the Dana Center at the University of Texas at Austin. The future Texas economy will require a skilled, qualified STEM workforce as these jobs are projected to grow 18% by 2031.<sup>3</sup> The current lack of proficiency in foundational math threatens our ability to meet this future demand and limits Texas student’s access to lucrative STEM careers.

## Bold Action is Required to Accelerate Learning

According to an analysis by the Commit Partnership, only 1 in 5 (18%) of students who were behind in reading in 3rd grade in 2019 caught up by 6th grade, and for math, the recovery rate is even lower with roughly 1 in 10 (13%) able to catch up during the same time period.

These rates emphasize the importance of prioritizing effective instruction and support in early elementary education as a key strategy for improving student outcomes and access to future opportunities. Investing in strong math and reading foundations, especially before the critical milestone of 3rd grade, will reduce the need for costly remediation efforts later and better equip Texas students to meet the demands of a highly skilled workforce, ensuring the state’s long-term economic growth and competitiveness.

## Opportunities to Improve Math and Reading Outcomes

The Texas Legislature has made strides in supporting early learning with notable investments including House Bill 3 (86R) and most recently, House Bill 1605 (88R). Robust implementation of HB 1605 will ensure Texas school districts have access to rigorous and on-grade-level instructional materials, reduce the burden on teachers, and provide parents with increased visibility into what their students are learning. Building upon this momentum, the following opportunities offer a roadmap to incrementally improve student outcomes.<sup>4</sup>

### 1. Expand Early Education Allotment

Early childhood education plays a pivotal role in readiness for elementary school. The Early Education Allotment in the state budget is currently based on enrollment by students in kindergarten to 3rd grade only, but this funding is utilized to serve early learning for younger students that are eligible for pre-kindergarten (PreK). Texas should expand the Early Education Allotment so that 3- and 4-year-old PreK students also generate the funding weight.



In addition to better funding Pre-K, expanding this allotment will free up resources to support evidence-based acceleration strategies prior to 3rd grade. This would increase the number of students who are kindergarten-ready, particularly benefiting economically disadvantaged children, who are nearly twice as likely to be ready for school if they attend Pre-K according to TEA data. To sustain these results, it is critical that this is followed up by high-quality instruction in the subsequent early elementary grades.

## **2. Strengthen Progress Monitoring & Intervention**

Texas currently lacks comprehensive data on academic growth before 3rd grade, leading to a reactive approach to support struggling students. Implementing universal evidence-based screening and diagnostic tools for both reading and math in the early grades would allow teachers to identify learning gaps sooner, provide targeted interventions, and ensure parents have an accurate understanding of their child's progress. Additionally, data literacy training for educators to inform classroom instruction would better equip them to support accelerated learning and resources to enhance parental engagement would empower families to supplement this with at-home learning.

## **3. Invest in Teacher Development and Coaching**

Effective teaching is central to improving student outcomes. However, many Texas teachers lack deep pedagogical knowledge, particularly in math. Only 36% of elementary and middle school principals in Texas report that all or almost all their math teachers demonstrate deep knowledge of math pedagogy, and only 41% have a deep knowledge of math.<sup>5</sup> Expanding access to high-quality professional development, such as the Math Academies, could significantly enhance instructional quality. The state should identify opportunities to scale math academies and incentivize participation, pending the TEA's efficacy study.

Additionally, Texas should consider utilizing instructional coaching models aligned to implementation of high-quality instructional materials to improve classroom practices, particularly in underperforming campuses and to better support on-boarding the many uncertified teachers that are hired in Texas public schools without having prior classroom experience due to the state's teacher shortage. Research suggests that the difference in the quality of instruction between teachers with instructional coaches and those without was equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to 10 years of experience.<sup>6</sup>

## **4. Provide Extended Learning Opportunities**

Adjusting the Additional Days School Year (ADSY) program to allow for more flexible schedules, such as reducing the base calendar requirement from 180 to 175 days, could enable more school districts to provide extended learning opportunities. This would help close achievement gaps early and prevent learning loss, especially for students who are significantly behind. According to TEA data, campuses utilizing ADSY days to increase learning time outpaced the state average change in students' scoring approaches expectations or better on STAAR tests by 8 percentage points in both math and reading language arts (RLA).<sup>7</sup>



Improving K-5th grade math and reading readiness is crucial for the state's economic future. Early investments in foundational skills, combined with stronger progress monitoring, teacher support, and targeted interventions, can significantly improve student outcomes. By adopting these evidence-based policies, Texas can ensure that more students are prepared to be successful in the workforce of the future and Texas remains globally competitive.

**For questions or additional information, please contact  
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1. Carnevale, A.P (2022). [After Everything: Projections of Jobs, Education, and Training Requirements through 2031](#).
  2. Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2012). Double Jeopardy: How Third-Grade Reading Skills and Poverty Influence High School Graduation.
  3. Carnevale, A.P (2022).
  4. These recommendations have been developed with valuable input from our partners the Commit Partnership, Early Matters Texas, Philanthropy Advocates, and Texas 2036.
  5. RAND (Feb 2024). [Elementary and Middle School Opportunity Structures That Factor into Students' Math Learning: Findings from the American Mathematics Educator Study](#).
  6. Kraft, M.A., and Blazar, D. (2018). [Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale: Can personalized training become standard practice?](#)
  7. [TEA ADSY Deep Dive](#)

