



Input on the State of Public Education

Regarding technology, safety, and enrollment trends

May 11, 2026

The **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** offers the following input on the **State of Public Education**:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony on the interim charge related to the current state of public education in Texas. We appreciate the Legislature's commitment to examining the public education system and seeking ways to improve academic outcomes, fully fund and protect our public school system, and ensure healthier, happier, better prepared students. ATPE shares these goals and looks forward to collaborating with this committee in the 90th legislative session to ensure these outcomes.

Shifting Enrollment

Enrollment trends are a critical component of the "state of education" in Texas, particularly as they relate to the stability of the school finance system. While statewide enrollment has plateaued or declined slightly in recent years, the causes of these shifts are complex and uneven across regions. Declining birth rates; significant shifts in intra-state, inter-state, and international mobility; and a long-term decoupling of incentives to create new supply with no mechanisms to account or align for shifts in demand at the state policy level all contribute to current patterns. In many cases, districts are not experiencing a loss of demand for public education but rather a redistribution of students driven by external factors.

As the Legislature examines enrollment, it is essential to do our best to distinguish between structural, long-term patterns versus shorter-term trends or policy-driven shifts. For example, Texas continued to experience overall population growth, even as school-age enrollment has fluctuated. This creates tension between current enrollment data and future demographic projections. **Decisions made today based on short-term declines, such as reducing capacity, closing campuses, or consolidating programs, may have long-lasting consequences if enrollment rebounds or shifts geographically.** Within the context of maintaining a stable and effective school finance system, excessive reductions in capacity, which turn out to be premature, could undermine the ability of districts to respond to future growth and could destabilize both funding and staffing.

The House charge also directs attention to improving efficiency in district operations. **While we understand the desire to streamline statutory and regulatory provisions, we urge**

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caution in equating efficiency with rapid “right-sizing” based solely on current enrollment. Legislative decisions have caused districts to significantly deplete fund balances that otherwise could have been used to thoughtfully realign spending to match enrollment shifts over time without dramatic single-year swings. Public schools are long-term investments, and decisions about facilities, staffing, and programming should be guided by multi-year trend data and forward-looking projections. Efficiency should not come at the expense of access to educational opportunities, particularly in rural and high-growth areas where enrollment patterns may shift quickly. True efficiency is achieved when districts are able to plan strategically, maintain appropriate capacity, and deliver high-quality instruction without constant disruption.

From an educator perspective, enrollment fluctuations have direct implications for working conditions and, ultimately, student outcomes. Staffing instability driven by shifting enrollment can lead to increased class sizes, teacher reassignments, and reductions in specialized programs. These disruptions make it more difficult to recruit and retain educators and can negatively impact the consistency and quality of instruction. As the Legislature considers ways to sustain and expand high-performing schools, it is important to recognize that stability in staffing and resources is a key component of academic success. It should also not go unnoticed that the key underlying factor in the models used to transition underperforming schools to high-performing schools is a dramatic increase in resource availability and allocation to those schools.

School Safety

School safety is inextricably linked to the current state of our public education system, and we appreciate its inclusion in this charge. The Legislature has made significant strides in recent years with regard to school safety, including setting statewide standards, providing new funding, and creating a new centralized state-level support structure housed in the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Since these changes were made, we have consistently received two areas of feedback from the field. First, the cost of school safety mandates continues to exceed the funding provided. Second, the most glaring current need with regard to school safety is in the area of student mental health. Because both school hardening/security and student mental health fall under the single safety allotment, which does not fully cover the cost of hardening/security, student mental health initiatives—which can help identify and dramatically mitigate eminent and future potential threats before they manifest—often go entirely unfunded. Therefore, **ATPE respectfully requests that student mental health be given its own allotment separate from current school safety funding.** Districts should be given flexibility within broad parameters to determine how to best use this allotment to respond to the mental health needs of their students.

Technology and Academic Outcomes

This Legislature has taken an important step forward in examining the relationship between technology and learning by removing cell phones from the classroom. As we will speak more about in testimony about HB 1481, this has resulted in overwhelmingly positive feedback from our members with regard to how the ban has improved student focus, attention, and

relationships. We are thankful for the Legislature's leadership and bold thinking in taking this step, and we look forward to seeing data on how this has impacted student outcomes.

Moving forward, a growing body of evidence is uncovering the benefits of physical real-world learning modalities such as handwriting, paper books, and in-person unassisted collaboration on learning compared with digital alternatives. We are finding that thousands of years of human evolution have wired us to learn best when we merge audiovisual input with kinesthetic input that we can only get from deep interaction with the physical world. At the same time, we are learning that the rise in the use of EdTech has been accompanied by a generational decrease in functional memory, attention span, and general cognition. Most notably, the time of adoption, which has not been uniform across states or countries, seems to mirror a predictable rate of decline in these cognitive markers following the adoption. While limited structured use of digital tools may support learning, academic research shows that excessive screen time in early childhood in particular is linked to attention difficulties, weaker language development, and poorer sleep and social outcomes. Studies have also found that increased screen exposure can reduce meaningful interaction with teachers and peers, which is critical for early learning and brain development.

In contrast, writing by hand has been shown to improve memory, comprehension, and fine motor skills, helping students to build a stronger academic foundation. Constant access to devices has been shown to increase distraction and limit opportunities for deep thinking and collaboration. By prioritizing traditional learning methods in the early grades, schools can strengthen literacy, numeracy, and critical thinking skills, as well as foster social skills in our learners. In addition to improving student learning outcomes, well-structured policies will also reduce the significant expense that devices and technology contracts have come to represent for local districts and charters, as well as address the growing concern among parents about their children's data privacy. **We encourage the Legislature to expand of the work of HB 1481 by developing state policy on screen time, particularly for prekindergarten through eighth grade students.**

Artificial Intelligence

Artificial intelligence is currently a matter of discourse across practically all areas of public policy, and public education is no different in that regard. For many policymakers, this quickly leads to a conversation revolving around AI literacy. However, AI by design is lowering the technical proficiency bar in regard to the ability to effectively use technological tools with relative ease and little specialized skill—so much so that programing may not even be a viable profession by the time today's middle schoolers graduate from high school. This is not to say there is nothing to teach with regard to effectively engaging AI to perform tasks; however, it will not likely take 12 years to acquire those particular skills. On the other hand, the impact of AI on the labor market is rapidly and dramatically shifting the skills students will need to be successful in the future, especially in the near term. More than ever, students must develop broadly applicable cognitive skills: resilience, adaptability, problem solving, and strong cross-discipline critical thinking and reasoning skills so they can thrive in a world defined by rapid change. In addition to the points above, early research is showing strong findings that

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significant exposure to AI carries risks to cognitive skills. These risks may be particularly significant for young learners. Much like the conversation above on EdTech generally, researchers are finding that replacing cognitive load with AI results in decreases across a range of cognitive markers associated with intelligence. For adults who have already developed their neural pathways, this shows up as atrophy, but for students who have not yet even fully developed these cognitive abilities, they may simply not fully develop—a far more severe result. The most likely path to best prepare students to be successful will focus on early development of strong cognitive skills, including the those mentioned above, followed by training on how to verify accuracy and bias, building skills to bolster resilience against the addictive nature and mental health detriments of omnipresent AI-driven algorithms, and age-appropriate introduction to direct responsible use of AI.

After years of framing schools as engines of workforce development aimed at preparing students to be successful at pursuing a known set of employment and higher education goals, this will require shifting focus to programs proven to develop resilience, adaptivity and creativity, essentially educating for change and broad cognitive development instead of educating for narrow and specific known skillsets. This is a significant change. Achieving this change means that schools will need targeted funding to train both educators and students.

From a policy perspective, in addition to funding, schools will need the Legislature to act with urgency to provide a framework that provide strong guardrails to protect students while providing educators as a group the flexibility to respond to changing workforce demands as AI has the potential to significantly reshape, and even hollow out, parts of the current labor market. The pace of these changes will likely outpace the legislative cycle, and what constitutes valuable work is already shifting. In order to avoid investing time and resources in skills that may soon become obsolete, we must empower districts with greater local control so they can adapt quickly and respond to the evolving workforce needs in their communities.

Finally, as you examine emerging challenges and opportunities, including the role of technology and artificial intelligence, it is important to consider how these innovations intersect with enrollment and capacity planning. Technology may offer opportunities to expand access or improve efficiency, but it cannot replace the need for thoughtful, community-based planning and adequate physical and human infrastructure. Investments in innovation should complement, not substitute or overwhelm, strong and stable public school systems.

In closing, we encourage the Legislature to view shifting enrollment not as a standalone issue but as a central factor in understanding the overall state of education in Texas. A data-driven, forward-looking approach grounded in demographic projections, regional variation, and the realities faced by educators will be essential to maintaining a stable school finance system and ensuring that all students have access to high-quality public education.

Thank you for your attention to these important issues and for your continued support of Texas public schools. For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or government@atpe.org.

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