

2021 Legislative Session By The Issues

The 87th Legislative Session was a successful one for Raise Your Hand Texas. Here is a brief breakdown of what happened in each of the issue areas we focused on.

SCHOOL FUNDING — During the 2020 elections, many legislators committed to fully funding House Bill 3 (2019) and they made good on that promise during the 2021 legislative session. The Commissioner of Education also agreed to hold schools harmless for pandemic-related enrollment declines. Additionally, the federal government provided three separate rounds of federal stimulus funding for public education. These funds, totalling over \$19.2 billion for Texas, allow districts to implement health and safety measures including air quality improvements and provide resources to stem learning loss such as tutoring, after-school and extended-year programs. Unlike most states, Texas did not flow federal funds to schools immediately, and they supplanted Round 1, over \$1.1 billion. State leadership and members of the legislature held on to the funds from Round 2 and 3 for various reasons, including wanting to place additional restrictions on school use of these funds. In the end, efforts to put additional restrictions on the funding failed.

SCHOOL VOUCHERS — The House overwhelmingly voted to reject state funding for any form of voucher program during the state budget debate this session, 115-29. Rep. Able Herrero's amendment prohibited the state use of funds for vouchers, tax credit scholarships, or any similar program. There were several attempts to move legislation related to vouchers through the process. Early on in the session, HB 3 by Rep. Burrows related to the state's response to COVID, contained a pandemic voucher, but the language was removed from the bill prior to the committee hearing. SB 1716 by Sen. Taylor related to supplemental services for special education students also contained a provision that allowed parents to have individual accounts for private vendors and services. This provision was removed from the final legislation. SB 1968 by Sen. Bettencourt related to tax credit scholarships did receive a hearing in the Senate Education Committee and was voted from committee 7-4, but the bill was never debated on the Senate floor.

VIRTUAL AND REMOTE LEARNING — Raise Your Hand has followed the impact of virtual learning on students even prior to COVID-19. Our belief has always been that the most effective form of instruction is in-person instruction; however, the pandemic also highlighted the need for highly-effective, locally-developed remote learning policies. HB 1468 by Rep. Bell was the legislative vehicle Raise Your Hand supported this session to provide these services to our students. The bill allowed schools to provide remote instruction to students within their attendance zones ensuring students benefit from the in-person services they need to be successful. After the bill was voted from conference committee, it passed the Senate, but it never received a final vote in the House due to the end of the session. Raise Your Hand will continue to work during the interim to make sure schools are funded for and able to offer remote instruction.

ACCOUNTABILITY AND TESTING — There were several attempts this session to create an outcomes-based, or test-based, funding bonus. The language appeared in many different bills this session, including in the final Senate version of the school finance bill, HB 1525 by Rep. Huberty. But thanks to the efforts of public advocates across the state, members of the House rejected this policy, and the provision failed to pass in any form.

There were dozens of bills filed this session related to accountability and assessment, but only a few crossed the finish line. HB 764 by Rep. Krause, which did not pass despite the House voting 136-6 in favor, would have reduced the number of state assessments based on those only required by federal law. The Senate chose not to even hear the bill in committee. HB 999 by Rep. Bernal, which did pass, allows high school seniors this school year to use an Individualized Graduation Committee to graduate without having to pass the required End of Course exams. SB 1365 by Sen. Bettencourt also passed. This bill redefines when accountability sanctions can occur and the appeals process available to school districts.

Raise Your Hand will continue to monitor and work on the A-F accountability and assessment systems over the interim. Our public schools are being asked to do more than ever, but our A-F rating system is primarily based on one test given on one day. These ratings ignore other essential indicators of a quality education such as extracurricular activities, health and safety issues, and community, family, and student engagement.

CHARTER SCHOOLS — There were several pieces of legislation filed during the session related to charter schools. Raise Your Hand believes traditional school districts and charter schools need to be on a level playing field when it comes to funding, student admissions, and exclusions due to disciplinary issues. We supported HB 97 by Rep. Gina Hinojosa that would have prohibited a student's disciplinary history being used in a charter school's admission process. This bill failed to pass, but Raise Your Hand hopes to continue these important conversations during the interim.

SB 28 by Sen. Bettencourt also failed to pass this session. This bill would have clarified specific zoning, permitting, and land use regulations and fees for charter schools. The bill also would have restricted the powers of the State Board of Education related to the veto authority it has over new charter school applications. Raise Your Hand believes there should be additional oversight of elected officials on new charter applications and expansions to ensure public input and spending efficiency, not less. Raise Your Hand supported HB 618 by Rep. Dutton that provides charter schools equal access to the the Jobs and Education for Texans (JET) grant program, which provides grants to public schools to purchase equipment for use in career and technical education classes.

TEACHER PIPELINE — The impacts of COVID-19 on the teacher workforce will not be known for quite some time. Raise Your Hand will continue to support policies to help expand investment in strategies that cultivate a diverse teacher workforce and support research-based educator preparation programs that better prepare teachers to enter and stay in the profession. Prior to the legislative session, Raise Your Hand participated in a working group to review existing continuing education and professional development requirements. SB 1267 by Sen. Royce West implements many of those recommendations, including requiring SBEC to publish a clearinghouse of education training requirements.

An additional teacher workforce priority this session was to make sure our teachers had the resources and materials they will need moving forward for pandemic-related issues. The federal stimulus funds that will now flow to our schools will provide teachers with additional support, materials, and professional development.

WORKFORCE — We all know a strong economic recovery depends on a strong education recovery. This is why Raise Your Hand supported HB 3767 by Rep. Jim Murphy, which continues the collaborative work of the Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Texas Workforce Commission (TWC), and the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB) to identify statewide workforce goals. The bill also designates career pathways for occupations aligned with current workforce needs.

It is important, as we move forward in our recovery, that we continue supporting public schools the way they support our students, our families, and our communities. Because the future of Texas is in our public schools.