

OPINION COLUMNIST ; Castro's presidency bid is a community triumph

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Author: Elaine Ayala; Staff Writer | Section: Metro | 728 Words

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Elaine Ayala Commentary So many remarkable moments stood out Saturday as Julián Castro made his case for becoming the next president of the United States. Pride, even more than the day's picture-perfect weather, drew more than 1,000 people to Plaza Guadalupe to witness that history.

A mother of three Pre-K 4 SA students testified to the tremendous impact that Castro initiative made on her children, and a first-generation college graduate, a daughter of an immigrant, spoke emotionally about how Café College, another Castro initiative, served as her greatest stepping stone.

James Talarico of Round Rock, the youngest current state lawmaker in the Texas Legislature, said that as a teacher at Rhodes Middle School, he hung a picture of Castro alongside other inspirational Latinos leaders, so his students could see them each day.

There was Ashwani Jain, who worked in the Obama administration, who revved up the crowd with a series of lines that began with "Julián believes" and ticked off a list. He believes in a free press, funding public schools, LGBTQ rights, universal gun background checks and climate change. He believes survivors of sexual assault and that families shouldn't be separated at the border.

There was State Rep. Diego Bernal, who warned all those who might doubt a Castro presidency is possible, that "If you don't respect us, you must expect us."

But for me, there were other moments and people, less noticeable perhaps, that summoned the lifetimes of political work that went into Castro's announcement, events at play long before he and his twin brother, U.S. Rep. Joaquin Castro, were born.

There was Irma Mireles, the Castro campaign volunteer dutifully issuing press credentials.

In the 1970s, she was a member of the Raza Unida Party that pressed for political self-determination for Mexican-Americans. Its members organized to put up candidates in towns where Latino majorities then held few elected offices.

Mireles filed for office, spent about \$100 on cards that said she was running for the San Antonio River Authority and got elected.

Mario Compean, who also was in the crowd on Saturday, ran for governor in the last breaths of the Raza Unida Party. They sowed seeds few believed would ever grow.

We can only imagine their emotions of taking in the day's events, how they must be feeling about what was once seemingly impossible or about those among them who didn't live to see this moment in American history.

Daniel Meza was there, as was Mireles' husband Miguel Berry. Rosie Castro noticed others from that storied past: Linda Valdez Cantu, Anna Riojas, Sylvia Gonzalez and Benny Solis. Mireles spotted Rogelio "Smiley" Riojas and Eduardo Garza, too.

In introducing his mother, Joaquin Castro said he often jokes that "of all the people in our family, the one best qualified to serve in public office, doesn't."

When she strolled confidentially to the podium to introduce her son as a candidate for president, she was interrupted by a voice that pierced the public-address system's power. "We love you, Rosie," it said.

The glorious day that took a half-century was her moment, too, and she came to it with grace and generosity.

"This community has raised up Julián and Joaquín," she said, "and we really thank you for that" - then described him as a son of San Antonio, of Texas, of the West Side and of this country.

I'm not a mother, but I can only imagine how a heart could actually burst with pride.

And it was another woman, María Antonietta Berriozábal, the first Mexican-American woman to serve on City Council and who came so close to winning a mayoral bid, found other words to describe the feelings wafting over Plaza Guadalupe.

"Look what an immigrant brought to this country," she said, tears welling in her eyes. No one else who has ever run for president has ever evoked a refugee from the Mexican Revolution in announcing his presidency, she said.

Those words are worth remembering.

"When my grandmother got here almost 100 years ago," the candidate said, "I'm sure she never could have imagined that just two generations later, one of her grandsons would be serving as a member of the United States Congress and the other would be standing with you here today to say these words: 'I am a candidate for president of the United States of America.'"

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Schools' safety eyed in Austin

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AUSTIN - State Rep. James Talarico remembers teaching in San Antonio and feeling that some of his sixth-grade students needed more adults watching out for their well-being, but there weren't enough services.

"Personally speaking, I had a lot of students who slipped from my fingers," said Talarico, a former teacher. "It's more than political . it's personal to me."

Talarico - a Democrat from suburban Austin who wants school districts to hire four counselors for every security guard - is one of several lawmakers proposing bills to make schools safer in light of the prevalence of school shootings.

After a student opened fire inside Santa Fe High in May, killing eight students and two teachers and wounding 13 others, lawmakers say they are committed to improving school safety this year.

Here are five things to know about school safety improvements that will be considered by the Legislature in the coming weeks:

1. GOP legislators are unlikely to approve gun control

While some students clamor at the state and national levels for gun control measures and universal background checks, Texas Republican lawmakers - who control both chambers and the governor's office - have signaled they have little appetite for new restrictions.

One measure considered by lawmakers is a "red flag" law that would allow families and law enforcement to seek a court order to temporarily take firearms away from those found by a judge to be a danger to themselves or others. Nine states have passed red flag laws since a shooting a year ago today in Parkland, Fla., that left 17 students and staff dead. Now, 14 states have red flag laws and more states are expected to follow in the coming months, according to the Associated Press.

2. Instead, Texas' response focuses on security

Expect lawmakers to emphasize "hardening" schools, a new term that refers to making our schools more difficult targets with measures like installing security equipment such as metal detectors and security cameras, and building vestibules to keep people from entering school buildings without approval.

It also includes adding law enforcement, school resource officers or teachers with firearms to both deter possible shooters and to react quickly during a crisis.

The Senate wants to spend \$100 million on school safety and hardening over the next two years, according to budget documents. For example, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has said he is interested in helping schools to limit the number of campus entrances.

Dr. Robert Long III, a principal at Wells Middle School in Spring ISD, said parents in his district want a mix of physical improvements to make campuses more secure and a focus on mental health. Students at his school only wear clear backpacks and soon will walk through metal detectors on campus. Should something happen, Long said he can lockdown the building and make school announcements from his cellphone.

3. Some say arming teachers would help

Arming more teachers is one of the most divisive issues in the school safety debate. Some say it makes sense in rural school districts where it can take police longer to respond to a school shooting, while others say that puts too much responsibility on teachers.

Teachers already can choose from one of two programs allowing them to carry guns on campus. One is a marshal program that trains teachers to become an additional layer of security on campus in the event of an active shooter situation.

To participate, teachers must have a license to carry a handgun and undergo an 80-hour training course that includes improving security on campus, use of force, active shooter response and weapon proficiency.

Another, referred to as the guardian program, lets school staff with a handgun carry license bring a weapon on campus.

School boards can dictate how the program would work in their schools, such as how much additional training staff should have and how the weapons should be stored on campus. Expect some lawmakers to talk about how to increase participation in these programs.

4. Others say the focus should be on mental health

Long, a seven-year principal in the Houston area, said hardening helps keep schools safe, but it's even more important to build a school culture that makes students feel comfortable communicating with their teachers and school staff about potential dangers.

"That always trumps any kind of hardening mechanism that you ever have," said Long, who sits on the board of directors of the Texas School Safety Center.

He said he's looking for the state to find sustained funding specifically to add counselors trained in mental health and on the effects of trauma.

Lawmakers and advocates agree mental health has to be part of the equation to make schools safer. For some, that means making sure school counselors have time to talk to students about their well-being instead of being bogged down with administrative work or giving state exams.

The House proposes spending \$109 million on school safety this year, \$54 million specifically for schools, much of it aimed at improving mental health services. Funds include \$20 million to pay for programs addressing mental health and school cultures across Texas, and \$10 million for services like mental health first aid.

The House plan, according to budget documents, also includes \$10 million in matching grants for school hardening.

The Senate has its own mental health plan that would assemble a consortium to leverage the expertise of professionals at a dozen universities and a handful of Texas mental institutions to suggest ways to improve care.

5. School counselors say lawmakers need to go further

School counselors are worried that lawmakers could focus more on school hardening than on ensuring schools have counselors with enough time with students, according to Jan Friese, executive director of the Texas Counseling Association.

Texas averages one counselor for every 469 students, she said, although that varies widely by school. The American School Counselors Association recommends a ratio of one counselor for every 250 students. The nation

averaged a 1-464 ratio in the 2015-16 school year, according the latest data available in the group.

The association is pushing several bills, including one to ensure every school has a counselor. Given several schools often share counselors, "You have to hope the kiddo has a crisis when the counselor is on the campus," she said.

"The school counselor is not just there for hugs and kisses but to support the academic, social and emotional development of all students," Friese said.

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Texas seeing jump in teachers leaving jobs

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AUSTIN - While most educators begin the school year amid the heat of summer, Desirae Jackson taught her fifth-grade math class in San Antonio for the first time during the chill of February after another teacher abruptly quit to change careers.

She said she devised creative math games, reached out to parents and played with kids during recess to smooth out a hectic transition months before the year's annual state exams.

"They were sad that he left," said Jackson, 25, now in her second year of teaching at Bellaire Elementary in Harlandale Independent School District. "It hurts my heart for them to leave after kids have fallen in love with them."

This school year in Texas, playing catch-up in the classroom has become more common as state education officials have cited at least 220 teachers for leaving their jobs mid-school year and breaking their contracts, putting the teachers at risk of temporarily losing their licenses.

Poor school management and an emphasis on standardized testing are two major complaints that spur teachers to leave, said educators gathered at a recent Texas AFT union rally at the Texas Capitol. Several teachers said they had colleagues who left midyear to take jobs at universities, pursue advanced degrees or retire.

The Texas Education Agency opens a "contract abandonment" case every time a school district files a complaint about a teacher leaving his or her contract early. So far in the 2018-2019 school year, the state has opened more cases of teacher abandonment than in any year since 2014.

This year's spike of teachers breaking their contracts is a 68 percent increase over the past year, when the state opened 131 cases of teacher abandonment. Texas opened 198 cases in the 2015-16 school year.

What's unknown is the number of teachers who quit the classroom to take a promotion elsewhere in their schools or districts, left because of a medical condition or moved for a spouse's new job or other reasons acceptable under Texas law.

The number of contract abandonment cases hints at a trend that teachers and education groups say they've noticed in recent years: teacher turnover is continuing to creep up as more teachers call it quits.

'Tough job'

A look at more than a dozen cases shows that educators left their positions for a mix of reasons. Some left for higher salaries or better jobs. Others cited reasons such as mental health or the declining health of a relative. In several cases, teachers resigned just before the beginning of the school year, although state law requires that they give at least 45 days' notice before the first day of school if they plan to leave.

In one case, a special education prekindergarten teacher in Woodville ISD in Southeast Texas was looking for a better-paying position within the district to help cover private school tuition for her son with dyslexia, according to state records. When she didn't get the jobs she applied for, she took a position as a speech pathologist at a rehabilitation center at the beginning of the school year.

One in 10 teachers quit teaching in Texas schools after their first year, according to state records. Five years after earning their teaching certificate, 3 in 10 teachers are either no longer in the profession or have left the state.

While the number of teachers leaving midyear is up, the vast majority of teachers stay on the job throughout the year. Texas is home to more than 358,000 teachers, with less than 1 percent of them accused of abandoning their contracts in any given year.

Most teachers who abandon their contracts do so at the beginning of the school year, said Paul Tapp, managing attorney for the Association of Texas Professional Educators who has represented teachers for more than 20 years. He said teachers deal with more negativity now than they did decades ago - from politicians, the media and even some parents.

"'Our public schools are failing.' 'Teachers are failing.' It's been repeated so many times, it's just gotten to be a truism," Tapp said. "We've seen a lot of longtime educators just basically say, 'I don't enjoy it anymore. It's a tough job. It's always a tough job. I don't get the satisfaction I used to get out of it anymore. I'm leaving the profession.'"

State rules generally allow teachers to terminate their contracts at least 45 days before the beginning of a school year. Those who break their contract outside of that 45-day window without good cause or approval of the school board could face a suspension of their teaching license for up to one year. Good cause includes serious illness or health condition of the teacher or a family member, relocating to a new city for a spouse's job, or a significant change requiring the teacher to devote more time to the family than the job allows.

Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat and former teacher, speculates the uptick may stem from increased expectations for student performance on end-of-year standardized tests and pay that lags behind the national average.

"Expecting more and giving less is difficult in any profession, especially a profession that is as difficult as teaching," said Talarico, who taught in middle school from 2011 to 2013.

The average salary for a Texas teacher is \$54,122, according to the TEA. Nationally, teachers average \$60,483, according to a survey by the National Education Association.

Texas lawmakers say it's a priority this year to increase pay for teachers, although they are haggling over how much. The Texas Senate passed a bill giving teachers and school librarians a \$5,000-across-the-board raise at a cost of nearly \$4 billion over the next two years. The House is expected to vote Wednesday on a \$9 billion plan that changes how the state funds education - although school districts would decide for themselves whether to offer raises to teachers and school staff.

More people are calling the help line at the Texas State Teachers Association asking whether they can leave their jobs early, said Clay Robison, spokesman for the association, which represents 68,000 educators. "The vast majority do step back from the brink, though, after they vent," Robison said.

'No different'

They ask about the consequences, he said. Some have asked if a diagnosis of anxiety or depression is enough for good cause, Robison said. (The answer is yes, in some cases). Others told people at the call center that they planned to resign after new administrators came in.

"Most people in their jobs have a frustration now and then, and teachers are no different. But it's a lot easier to deal with that frustration, say, if you're being paid \$70,000 or \$80,000 a year rather than if you're paid \$35,000 or \$40,000, and we can't help but think that pay is an underlying factor in all of this. Not the only factor," Robison said.

Contested cases are heard by an administrative law judge. The state could not provide data on how many cases were dismissed as of press time.

Paul Cobler contributed to this report.

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ERCOT drawing heat over grid's 'criminal' failure

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Gov. Greg Abbott and lawmakers on both sides of the aisle expressed outrage as the Texas power grid collapsed amid severe winter weather this week, leaving millions without electricity.

"A state that prides itself on energy production left millions of its citizens to freeze in the dark. It's not just incompetent; it's criminal," state Rep. James Talarico, a Round Rock Democrat, said on Twitter.

"The Texas Legislature must hold hearings, demand answers, and ensure this never happens again. I've been without power and heat for 30 hours. I just got enough cell signal to send this tweet. This is not a natural disaster - it's years of underinvestment, deregulation, and neglect. Texas: your government failed you."

Abbott announced Tuesday morning that reforming the Electric Reliability Council of Texas, the agency that operates the state's power grid, will now be an emergency item this legislative session. The declaration allows lawmakers to pick up the issue almost immediately upon their return to Austin.

"The Electric Reliability Council of Texas has been anything but reliable over the past 48 hours," Abbott said. "Far too many Texans are without power and heat for their homes as our state faces freezing temperatures and severe winter weather. This is unacceptable."

Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, called on the chamber's state affairs and energy resources committees to hold a joint hearing on Feb. 25 to review the statewide outages.

"We must cut through the finger-pointing and hear directly from stakeholders about the factors that contributed to generation staying down at a time when families needed it most, what our state can do to correct these issues, and what steps regulators and grid operators are taking to safeguard our electric grid," Phelan said in a news release.

Here's what other elected officials were saying:

Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick:

"I share the frustration of every Texan regarding the loss of power during this winter storm," Patrick said in a Tuesday afternoon release. "Millions of people without power during this arctic blast is life-threatening and unacceptable. We must get to the bottom of this to be sure we are better prepared even if an unprecedented weather event happens again. The Senate Business and Commerce Committee is moving forward with hearings to get answers to our questions."

State Rep. Chris Paddie, R-Marshall, and chair of the House state affairs committee:

"The statewide blackouts raise questions about the reliability of our electric grid and its ability to withstand extreme weather events in the future," he said in a news release.

State Rep. Chris Turner, D-Grand Prairie, and chair of the House Democratic Caucus:

"First time I'm able to rejoin this website in 24 hours due to power outages and zero cell service. I'll echo what many others have said: the widespread power outages in Texas represent a catastrophic failure of leadership," Turner tweeted on Tuesday. "The #txlege must pull no punches as it conducts a top to bottom investigation into

how this happened. Every aspect of the public and private sector connected to the electric market in Texas needs to be investigated - we need answers, accountability & corrective action."

Texas Land Commissioner George P. Bush:

"If the last few days have proven anything, it's that we need oil & gas," Bush tweeted . "Relying solely on renewable energy would be catastrophic. Many of these sources have proven to be unreliable. We must move towards an all encompassing approach to energy."

State Sen. Paul Bettencourt, R-Houston:

"Bettencourt Home at day break in H-town! Hadn't seen this since 1989, but the difference is 15 minutes later we lost power and outages are ongoing in a large swath of Houston," Bettencourt wrote in a lengthy Facebook post . "On the public policy front, we must have a base load energy policy in Texas. Because of subsidies, Renewable Energy gets a lot of attention, but the market forces that are subsidized discount the ability for any base load plant, coal, gas, or nuclear to be built economically."

State Rep. Terry Canales, D-Edinburg:

"Never thought I would have to ask myself if California has a better electric grid than TX. In the energy Capital of the US, how the hell have we failed so many people in this state?" Canales asked Monday.

State Rep. Drew Darby, R-San Angelo:

"Many of you have reached out to me voicing your frustration with the ongoing power outages during these extreme weather conditions, and I share your frustrations. The planned, limited 'rolling outages' to conserve power turned into hours and even days of power loss for millions of Texans. Customers are displaced and this is unacceptable. ... The power disruptions are due to an overloaded power grid, fuel shortages after generators froze or failed, and inadequate planning during this once-in-a-lifetime weather event. It is overwhelmingly evident that our power grid was unprepared."

San Antonio Mayor Ron Nirenberg:

"Like so many San Antonians, I've been without reliable power since ERCOT, the state entity that manages Texas's main power grid, mandated planned blackouts," Nirenberg tweeted . "Further complicating this issue, these outages have hardly been 'rolling' as Texas power plants have been unable to generate enough power to meet our needs. Every major Texas city is going without tonight, and I share your frustration with the timing of these outages. ERCOT needs to answer for how millions were forced to weather the cold in this manner."

Houston Mayor Sylvester Turner:

"The City does not control the Texas Power Grid," he tweeted Tuesday morning. "We do not oversee ERCOT which manages and serves as the traffic cop for the electric grid. That is the Governor and the State of Texas. I know people are angry and frustrated. So am I."

Austin Mayor Steve Adler:

"So many cold and without power, people in danger and everybody frustrated, including me," Adler tweeted . "The Electric Reliability Council of Texas (ERCOT) has to explain how millions of Texans are without power. 'Rolling' outages are not that. There must be systemic changes. This is happening every ten years and there's got to be a better plan."

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Lawmaker offers a prayer that shines on all

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Author: Nancy Preyor-Johnson; Staff Writer | Section: Editorial | 689 Words

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nancy M. preyor-johnson Commentary Easter has always been a time of celebration in my family - Mass, Easter egg hunts, barbecue and, yes, cascarones. As I get older, I try to reflect less on the festivities and more on the mystery of faith and what it means in my life.

I was baptized and raised Catholic, and I am a member of a Christian church. I am not religious; some days I pray more than others, and I should read the Bible more. But I am faithful.

Since the COVID-19 pandemic began, I stopped going to church in person and started watching it online. I have friends, relatives and associates of different faiths and no faith. I understand that for most of us, faith is a complex, evolving personal journey.

But state Rep. James Talarico's powerful invocation March 24 in the Texas House, which sounded in the chamber and echoed through the Twitterverse and beyond, took me to church.

Like many, I first watched the video because it was the catalyst of a heated Twitter controversy after former state Rep. Jonathan Stickland lashed out, calling his prayer blasphemous.

It's Stickland's fundamentalist take on faith that pushes people away from church; a new Gallup poll published Monday found religious membership in the U.S. has fallen to just 47 percent among those surveyed - less than half of the adult population for the first time since Gallup began asking more than 80 years ago.

Talarico's prayer - what he describes as "a radical love for the oppressed, the hungry, the homeless, and the sick" - is what my God and faith are all about.

In this Easter season, after the dark year we've experienced, I hope people of all faiths or no faith find renewal, comfort and light in his words of inclusivity, love and hope.

"Holy Mystery, you have so many names," Talarico's prayer begins. "The Torah calls you creator, the Quran calls you peace. The Gita calls you destroyer, the Dharma calls you truth, and the first epistle of John calls you perhaps the most beautiful name of all: love."

In his prayer, Talarico speaks of a barefoot rabbi who embodied a perfect love, a crucified carpenter who "gave only two commandments: love God and love thy neighbor, because there is no love of God without love of neighbor."

Grandson of a Baptist preacher, Talarico's upbringing and life experiences shaped his faith. He grew up dreaming of becoming a preacher and memorizing Scripture for fun. He grew up in Round Rock, going to nearby St. Andrew's Presbyterian Church, where he is still active. He taught sixth graders at Rhodes Middle School on the West Side of San Antonio.

Beyond poetic words, his prayer encourages action and inspires commitment.

"The Word of God is love. Let us not be hearers of your word, but doers of your word- in our families, in our communities and in this chamber," he prayed. "Not just with prayers, but with policies. Not just personal love, but political love. Because democracy is not just a constitution; democracy is a covenant."

He calls on us to love: "Help us love, not just in word, but in action, help us honor, not just the name of Jesus, but the way of Jesus, help us free the oppressed, feed the hungry, house the homeless, heal the sick, release the prisoner, welcome the stranger, forgive the enemy and, above all, protect your creation. The Word of God is love"

At 31 and Texas' youngest legislator, he unapologetically focuses on the most vulnerable - children, prisoners and LGBTQ+.

"There's a famous gospel hymn called 'His eye is on the sparrow,' that comes from the book of Matthew, based on the idea of keeping His eye on the sparrow, which is the smallest weakest bird," he said. "That's my take on policymaking."

Talarico crafted his prayer trying to speak to the time but also be timeless, keeping in mind that our state, nation and world need hope and light.

People listened. Democrats and Republicans, young, old, religious and nonreligious are still commenting and sharing his prayer. Many reached out to thank him for his prayer, his acceptance and love.

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Special session on juvenile prisons sought

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Texas' youth prison system urgently needs money to crawl out of its growing crisis, in which children are at times locked in cells 23 hours a day and nearly half of detained youth have been on suicide watch, the agency's director has told lawmakers.

The Texas Juvenile Justice Department -- currently under federal investigation for an alleged pattern of abuse and mistreatment -- is severely understaffed, with agency officials saying last month that it is nearing systemic collapse. After the Texas Tribune reported on dire conditions inside the state's five youth prisons, the Texas House Juvenile Justice and Family Issues Committee called a legislative hearing last week to look for possible solutions.

"I think we can all agree this is cruel and unusual," said state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, citing reports of children using water bottles as makeshift toilets while stuck in their cells and routinely hurting themselves to get attention from staff. "Is there anything between now and next (legislative) session that's going to solve this?"

Talarico and 33 other House Democrats sent Gov. Greg Abbott a letter last week asking him to bring lawmakers together immediately in a special legislative session to address the emergency. Abbott's office did not respond to questions about the letter.

TJJD sounded the alarm last month, when interim director Shandra Carter stopped accepting newly sentenced kids from county detention centers. The agency can't guarantee the safety of the fewer than 600 youth already in its care, she said, because it can't keep people on the job. Last year, the turnover rate for detention officers hit more than 70 percent, and most new hires quit within six months.

More than 160 children were waiting to be transferred from also understaffed county detention centers to the state's five juvenile prisons, Carter told the committee at the hearing. For many children, the wait, which in some cases has been as long as three months, means more time in lockup since they are unable to begin and complete required programming.

"At the rate that I am recruiting and retaining staff, that waitlist will continue to grow," Carter said. "With what we have in front of us, I think a further increase would help us stabilize quicker and absorb that waitlist."

Last month, TJJD was able to make permanent an emergency 15 percent raise for officers by postponing reentry programs and using savings from unfilled positions. Carter said the new pay, bringing starting salaries up to \$41,700, has shown promise, with more people applying for jobs. She said money isn't the only solution to the department's chronic problems, but it is the necessary first step.

"Our exit interviews are really clear. It's overwhelmingly pay and difficulty of the work is the reason that people are leaving, and this prevents us from stabilizing," Carter told lawmakers. "I can't even guarantee they're going to get a bathroom break on their shift."

A spokesperson for Abbott, who alone can call lawmakers to the Texas Capitol outside of regular legislative sessions every two years, has said he will support TJJD's request to increase salaries next session. The legislative session begins in January, and any budget decisions would largely not take effect until next September.

Talarico said more immediate action is needed.

In his letter to Abbott, he said a special legislative session must include measures to close "failed facilities" and restore and increase funding for anti-violence and rehabilitation programs. He also called for increasing salaries, prioritizing diverting children from incarceration and providing alternatives for children in suicidal crises or with other mental health emergencies.

"Waiting until the next session is a death sentence for incarcerated children," the letter read.

Juvenile justice advocates have long urged closing state prisons and instead putting necessary mental health and rehabilitative resources into local communities. Others have proposed building smaller facilities closer to urban centers, which have larger labor pools than the rural areas where most prisons are located.

For state Rep. Gene Wu, a Houston Democrat who has long worked in juvenile justice, frustration with the state's juvenile justice system comes from "getting the same answers and dealing with the same issues again and again and again, and there never seems to be any resolution."

TJJD has been plagued by sexual abuse and mistreatment scandals for more than a decade.

In recent years, counties have shifted more toward keeping children closer to home and sending fewer to the state prisons, shrinking the population from thousands to fewer than 600. But the ones left often are the most difficult to manage because of violent behavior, severe mental health needs or both.

Aside from funding, Wu is pushing for sending even fewer kids to state facilities. A juvenile must have been found to have committed a felony to go to TJJD, but Wu said many smaller counties still send children to state prisons for low-level, nonviolent felonies.

While the majority of new admissions to TJJD last year were for violent offenses, 10 percent were for unauthorized use of a vehicle or possession of a controlled substance, according to data from Texas Appleseed, a social justice advocacy organization.

"Maybe we should ... talk about not sending state jail felonies to TJJD," he said in the hearing. "It seems like joyriding in a car seems like a bad offense to be sent to a state prison."

Disclosure: Texas Appleseed has been a financial supporter of the Texas Tribune. Financial supporters play no role in the Tribune's journalism.

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Dems calling for \$15K teacher pay raise

January 25, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)

Author: Edward McKinley; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 668 Words

Page: A003

[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas House Democrats unveiled a proposal Tuesday for a \$15,000 pay raise for public school teachers, using at least \$20 billion of the tens of billions of unallocated funds available to the Legislature this session.

"Hoarding this surplus while educators and children are suffering is immoral, and it's also bad business," said Rep. James Talarico, a Williamson County Democrat who filed the legislation, noting that education investment is valuable for the future of the state.

"We as Democrats are putting this forward as our proposal, but we hope this is the beginning of a conversation" with Republicans, he said. Talarico said he's discussed the idea with House Speaker Dade Phelan, R-Beaumont, but would not say where the speaker stood on it. A spokeswoman for Phelan declined to comment.

Teacher salaries in Texas trail the national average by about \$6,000, according to the most recent figures from the National Education Association labor union. Labor market economists have suggested that raising pay is the most direct way to boost retention and teacher recruitment.

Lawmakers have at least \$32 billion in additional funds to work with this year, thanks to federal pandemic funds and from high inflation and energy prices. Republican leaders in the House and Senate are already proposing to set aside \$15 billion of that to trim homeowners' property tax bills, as well as another \$4.6 billion for border security over two years. They have also discussed investments in infrastructure and public employee retirement benefits.

Like other states, Texas is grappling with a massive teacher shortage. Surveys and polls among teachers show widespread job dissatisfaction, with many teachers feeling underpaid, underappreciated and overworked.

A 2018 online survey of educators by the Texas State Teacher's Association, a chapter of the NEA, found that about 39 percent of respondents said they needed second jobs during the school year to supplement their salaries; 56 percent said they had summer jobs when school is not in session.

A former teacher himself, Talarico said he used to have colleagues who drove Uber at night or donated blood plasma to make extra cash.

Last year, Gov. Greg Abbott started a task force comprised of education experts, teachers and administrators to issue recommendations about how to fix the problem. The group is expected to issue a report next month.

Plopping a thick stack of white papers on the podium, its side riddled with earmarks, Rep. Trey Martinez Fischer invoked the adage that budgets are "moral documents," their line items having very real impact on people's lives.

"Every term that I have been here, there has been no shortage of good ideas -- there has always been a shortage of revenue," he said, adding that shouldn't be an excuse this year.

Rep. Gina Hinojosa, an Austin Democrat and former member of the Austin ISD board, said her son is in fifth grade and wasn't assigned a teacher because of staff shortages. His class was instead lumped into two already full classes.

"The teachers and parents are holding on, hoping against hope that help is coming," Hinojosa said.

A poll released Tuesday by the Charles Butt Foundation, a nonprofit that supports public education, found increased concerns among Texans about school safety, likely driven by the mass shooting last year at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde; about a third of parents who responded named school safety as a top issue in their communities. The survey also found strong support among Texans for public education generally -- and there was a lot of evidence that Texans are sympathetic to the plight of public school teachers.

Nearly three-fourths said that teachers are undervalued in society today, and two-thirds said teachers are overworked. Nearly 90 percent of parents said they were very or somewhat satisfied with the education their children receive in public schools. The same proportion of respondents said they supported teacher pay raises.

The poll was conducted in September and included 1,211 Texas adults, 340 of them parents of children of schooling age. The margin of error for the full sample was 3.7 percent, and among just the parents, it was 6.4 percent.

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Parents blast use of child restraints

January 31, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)

Author: Edward McKinley; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 823 Words

Page: A003

[OpenURL Link](#)

A bipartisan group of Texas House members is pursuing legislation to apply stricter oversight and enhanced transparency into the use of physical restraints against children in the state's public schools.

Last year, Hearst Newspapers published an investigation documenting how -- in Texas and around the country -- school staff members are able to restrain students or seclude them alone in small rooms, leading to abuse and discrimination. Parents are not always told when their children are punished, and the students are often children with special needs, sometimes with disabilities that make it harder for them to communicate their distress.

In Fort Worth in 2021, Xavier Hernandez died after staff members immobilized him on the floor at a school for students with disabilities. "I hurt," he said, and staff adjusted his position because it was "a little awkward." Shortly after, his lips changed color and he lost consciousness. He was pronounced dead hours later.

Parents from around the state appeared Monday morning at the Texas Capitol to share personal stories of how their children have been harmed by being physically restrained at school.

Among them was Jeanna TenBrink, from the Houston area. Her daughter, Leah, has special needs and is mostly nonspeaking. In middle school, Leah began returning from school with cuts, bruises and even bite marks. TenBrink learned that her daughter was being routinely restrained and even confined in a dark bathroom at school where she was physically abused at times by other students.

TenBrink said she had to fight with the school administration to find out what was going on, and finally obtained a video of her daughter being restrained. She said she felt the school administration and staff have been able to evade accountability for what happened to Leah. Two teachers who she said harmed Leah by physically restraining her are still employed, she said.

"So the cycle will continue," TenBrink said.

The Texas Education Agency regulates physical restraints at schools. Restraints are allowed in "emergency" situations where people or property could be harmed. The restraint is only supposed to last as long as the emergency, the school officials are limited to using "reasonable force" and the safety of all students is to be protected.

Schools are supposed to record each instance of restraints being used, but TEA only reviews the data every six years.

The agency requires a number of staff at each campus to be trained on how to safely restrain students, although other people can administer restraints if they undergo training afterward. Physical holds that intentionally inflict pain as a deterrent, known as "aversive techniques," are banned by TEA, but they are allowed in emergencies, and advocates say they happen too frequently.

The policy changes being pushed include: stricter rules surrounding the use of physical restraints, empowering the state's Child Protective Services to investigate any harmful use of physical restraints at school, and requiring schools to set up video cameras and make footage available to parents upon request.

Another parent, Thelma Lira, said her son, Damien, was abused in his special education class. He was repeatedly

physically restrained in an unsafe way, she said, but the state's Child Protective Services said it didn't have the authority to classify what happened as abuse.

A theme from several parents at the press conference was concern that schools didn't tell them what was happening with their kids, that they instead only found out about their children being restrained after repeated incidents. Special needs children are particularly vulnerable to this, they said, because they may struggle to communicate what's going on.

"I wish my son had the ability to tell me with his own voice what was happening to him, but he simply couldn't," Lira said. "But I am his voice now."

The parents were joined at the press conference by several lawmakers: Reps. Mary González, John Busey and James Talarico, all Democrats, and Republican Rep. Lacey Hull of Houston. Hull has introduced legislation that would ban children from being handcuffed at school.

The Legislature will spend much of its time and energy this session making decisions about how to spend the historic, \$30-some billion surplus available to the state, and rightly so, Busey said. But the issues of parents and children, such as that of physical restraints, shouldn't slip through the cracks.

"We can't hear story after story and not feel a responsibility to do something," González said.

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Three proposals aim to bolster Texas' religious freedoms

February 8, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)
Author: Taylor Goldenstein; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 642 Words
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[OpenURL Link](#)

Democratic State Rep. Salman Bhojani, one of the state's first Muslim lawmakers, on Tuesday unveiled bipartisan legislation that he says will make it easier for Texans, and especially non-Christians, to exercise their faith.

Joined by state Rep. Jacey Jetton, a Republican from Richmond, Bhojani described three bills that will clarify that all faith leaders can officiate marriages, stop state-mandated testing on religious holidays and expand the list of optional state holidays.

"Religious freedom is one of the most important and fundamental rights guaranteed to us by our Constitution," Bhojani said. "It's more than just the right to worship; it's the right to dignity and autonomy for every person."

Jetton, who is Christian, said the bills are steps toward improving religious freedom in Texas. Jetton and Rep. Charles Cunningham, R-Humble, were the only Republicans present at Tuesday's presser.

The optional holiday and marriage bills, spearheaded by state Reps. Joe Moody and James Talarico respectively, were attempted in the last legislative session and passed out of the Texas House, but they failed to gain traction in the more conservative Senate.

"A lot of these did pass through the House overwhelmingly with both parties involved, so I appreciate Rep. Bhojani for bringing us together today," Jetton said. "I'm very interested in making sure this happens."

Bhojani said Tuesday he is hopeful that he's accumulated more support since then.

"I've had great conversations with senators across the aisle," he said, pointing out that Democratic Sen. José Menéndez was present at the news conference. "I look forward to championing this and having a partner in the Senate because this is an important issue, and it's bipartisan; that's what I really love about it."

Rabbi Kelly Levy, of Congregation Beth Israel, a Reform synagogue in Austin, spoke about how growing up in San Antonio, she remembers feeling left out at Christmas time and angry that she had to fight for an excused absence when tests fell over the Jewish High Holy Days.

"I now know what it's like to explain repeatedly why my 6-year-old missed school for the High Holy Days and why it is in fact an excused absence," Levy said. "We cannot continue to allow our students of multifaith backgrounds to feel othered anymore in this state."

House Bill 1883 would forbid the State Board of Education from giving tests on a religious holy day, and House Bill 1882 would add to the list of optional state holidays to include: All Saints Day, Diwali, Eid al-Adha, Eid al-Fitr, Passover, Vaisakhi and Vesak. Currently, only Rosh Hashanah, Yom Kippur and Good Friday are included.

State law already allows Christian ministers, Jewish rabbis and "a person who is an officer of a religious organization and who is authorized by the organization" to officiate a marriage ceremony.

But Alejandrina Guzman, Bhojani's legislative director, said House Bill 1882 removes references to any one faith leader and instead broadens the language of the law to make it clear it applies to all faith leaders.

The way the law is written now, with some explicitly mentioned and others implied, has sometimes caused

confusion and led some to assume they weren't permitted, Guzman said.

State Rep. Suleman Lalani, D-Sugar Land, who joined Bhojani in making history this year as the first two Muslims to be sworn in to the Texas Legislature, was among those who showed their support for the bill package Tuesday.

"I'm very proud of what Texas has done, but we have a long way to go," Lalani said. "We're here to show that when we stand united, we can do a lot of things. Together we can make Texas land of the free and home of all faiths."

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Speaker fills education panel with past school voucher opponents

February 9, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)
Author: Jasper Scherer; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 466 Words
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[OpenURL Link](#)

Amid a conservative push for private school vouchers, Texas House Speaker Dade Phelan on Wednesday stocked the committee that will set K-12 policies this session full of lawmakers who have opposed using taxpayer money for private education.

Phelan, a Beaumont Republican who decides the makeup of every committee in the lower chamber, appointed state Rep. Brad Buckley, R-Killeen, to chair the House Public Education Committee. Buckley replaces state Rep. Harold Dutton, the Houston Democrat who was Phelan's surprise pick to chair the panel in 2021.

Dutton will remain one of the group's 13 members, and one of nine -- Buckley included -- who voted to ban private school vouchers last session.

Among those who joined Dutton and Buckley in 2021 were Republican state Reps. Steve Allison of San Antonio, Cody Harris of Palestine and Ken King of Canadian. Democrats Alma Allen of Houston and Oscar Longoria of Mission, along with Austin Reps. Gina Hinojosa and James Talarico, also voted for the ban, which ultimately passed the House by a 115-29 margin.

Two of the new members appointed to the committee Wednesday, state Reps. Cole Hefner of Mount Pleasant and Matt Schaefer of Tyler, have been supportive of voucher programs in the past. A third member, state Rep. Brian Harrison, R-Midlothian, is an outspoken proponent of the idea.

King, who represents a 19-county district that includes the Texas Panhandle and South Plains, made clear at a recent Texas Tribune event that he remains opposed to voucher-type measures.

"If I have anything to say about it, it's dead on arrival," King said. "It's horrible for rural Texas. It's horrible for all of Texas."

Despite Buckley's past votes, some voucher proponents hailed his appointment as a positive development for the movement. Texas Republican Party Chair Matt Rinaldi tweeted that Buckley "could be the most school choice friendly Pub Ed chair in over a decade."

Using the label of "school choice," conservatives are making another push for a voucher program this session after years of failed votes. The movement has gained momentum since last year when Gov. Greg Abbott threw his support behind a voucher-type program while campaigning for re-election.

Critics, including Democrats and many rural Republicans, argue that vouchers will divert critical funding from public schools.

The Texas Public Policy Foundation, an influential conservative think tank that backs private school vouchers, said Buckley "will be an excellent chair for the House Public Education Committee, and we look forward to working with them this legislative session."

"This is an important first step in ensuring that Texans have a system that respects the parent and ensures transparency and a high-quality education on school campuses," Mandy Drogin, campaign director for TPPF's education-focused Next Generation Texas initiative, said in a statement.

- **Citation (apa Style)**

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'It's about saving lives'

March 23, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)
Author: Emilie Eaton; Staff Writer | Section: A | 804 Words
Page: A001
[OpenURL Link](#)

Hundreds of people die every year from taking drugs laced with fentanyl.

There's a simple, inexpensive way to prevent such overdoses: small paper test strips that detect the presence of fentanyl, a synthetic opioid 50 times more powerful than heroin.

The catch is that the strips are illegal in Texas. But that could soon change.

A bill to legalize the use, possession and distribution of fentanyl test strips has drawn bipartisan support in the Legislature, and the state Health Committee voted Monday to forward the bill to the full chamber for approval.

At a committee hearing, several policy experts testified in favor of legalizing the strips, which are now banned as drug paraphernalia.

"Fentanyl test strips are a low-cost method of helping prevent drug overdoses and reducing harm," said Sarah Reyes, a policy analyst at the Texas Center for Justice and Equity, a nonprofit that seeks to end mass incarceration. "They provide people who use drugs and communities important information about fentanyl in their drug supply so they can make an informed decision about their usage."

There are two types of fentanyl: illicitly manufactured fentanyl and pharmaceutical fentanyl, which is prescribed by doctors to treat severe pain.

Most fentanyl-related deaths are linked to the illicit form. Illegal drug manufacturers often add fentanyl to other drugs because it's cheaper and it gives users a more powerful high with a smaller dose of the underlying drug.

Many times, criminal organizations put fentanyl in fake pills made to look like legitimate prescription drugs such as Oxycontin or Xanax, so users may not even know what they are taking.

Deaths from accidental overdoses of synthetic opioids have risen sharply in Texas, from 304 in 2018 to 1,692 in 2021, according to preliminary data from the Texas Department of State Health Services. That's a 456 percent increase.

Through August of 2022, there were 842 such deaths.

A majority of those who died were between 18 and 44 years old, the data shows.

Legislators have introduced more than a dozen bills to create an exemption for fentanyl test strips in the state's drug paraphernalia law.

One of those bills, HB 362, has bipartisan support. It was written by Rep. Tom Oliverson, R-Cypress; Rep. Donna Howard, D-Austin; Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock; Rep. Sheryl Cole, D-Austin; and Rep. Teresa Leo Wilson, R-Galveston.

Gov. Greg Abbott said last year that he supports decriminalizing fentanyl test strips, reversing his previous opposition to the idea.

Oliverson, a physician, said during a House committee hearing last week on HB 362 that test strips can make the difference between "life and death."

"A majority of these folks succumbing to fentanyl overdoses do not realize that they're taking fentanyl," he said. "Maybe they have chronic pain. Maybe they're having difficulty getting in to see their pain doctor. Maybe they are just experimenting as a college kid with a quote 'party drug' for the first time recreationally."

Fentanyl test strips are thin strips of paper, similar to those in instant COVID tests. People can test a drug they intend to consume by mixing a small sample with water and immersing one end of the strip in the solution. Colored lines on the strip indicate whether the mixture is positive or negative for fentanyl. The result is available within a few minutes.

In states where the strips are legal, people can buy them over the counter or on the Internet. Harm reduction teams -- and sometimes bars and clubs -- often distribute them for free.

Those opposed to legalization of the test kits say they facilitate drug abuse.

Cate Graziani, co-executive director of the Texas Harm Reduction Alliance, which promotes public health policies that minimize the health consequences of drug use and other risky behavior, encouraged legislators to legalize strips that test for other substances, as well.

She said her staff is seeing an increase in overdose deaths involving xylazine, an animal tranquilizer that traffickers add to drugs to cut costs and increase highs, much as they do with fentanyl.

"Our goal is to keep people alive, and we want more tools to do that," Graziani said.

She encouraged legislators to "get ahead of the crisis, so we're not here a year from now or five years from now."

Claudia Delfin, assistant director of the Corazón Harm Reduction team in San Antonio, said fentanyl test strips would be a great tool for her team to use to encourage drug users to receive additional services.

The Corazón team provides outreach at 35 locations around Bexar County. It also operates a drop-in center downtown, where clients can exchange dirty syringes for clean ones, receive wound care, and be referred to detox and substance abuse treatments services.

"It's about saving lives," Delfin said. "I'm for this bill because I know these fentanyl test strips do work."

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Yes, House Bill 900 is a book ban

March 26, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)
Author: Nancy M. Preyor-Johnson | Section: A | 800 Words
Page: A013
[OpenURL Link](#)

During a Texas House of Representatives public education committee hearing Tuesday that went past midnight, Rep. Jared Patterson, R-Frisco, said his legislation, House Bill 900, isn't a book ban. Nonsense. It absolutely is.

Patterson warned potential readers about sexually explicit content. Then, he condemned the book "Gender Queer" for graphic illustrations he deemed shocking.

The book is written for teenagers and young adults, so it's unlikely it was in elementary school libraries.

While Patterson's bill seeks to further codify rules for library books, oversight of school library books should be at the school district level and include a fair process with parental input.

Some who testified for the bill read excerpts from books that might make school boys and girls blush. Or would they?

School boys and girls are exposed to so much more outside of books. The internet and music offer no shortage of images and descriptions of sexual acts. So, hopefully, those parents and lawmakers clutching their pearls over library books will make time and expend the energy to monitor their children's phone and computer usage.

Patterson calls his bill the READER (Restricting Explicit and Adult-Designated Educational Resources) Act. During the hearing, he disputed that it's a book ban. But his bill would certainly set the stage for one. It would establish "a mandatory library standard," requiring private book vendors to set ratings for sexually relevant and sexually explicit school books so that school districts could more easily censor them.

As if it was something to be proud of, Patterson detailed how he helped ban books in his home district, using ample resources and an "army of concerned moms and teachers" over four months to get an additional 26 books they deemed sexually explicit removed from library shelves.

Frisco ISD Associate Deputy Superintendent Wes Cunningham, who said he supports the bill, was offended by Patterson's criticism of the school district not doing enough to censor books.

To defend the district's censorship measures, he detailed how his district twice updated its policies, creating an expedited review for alleged obscene content in books, so far banning 80 books this school year from district libraries. As if it was something to be proud of.

Instead of "protecting" students from books through government overreach, lawmakers and schools should invest their energy into protecting students from school shootings, illiteracy, inequitable school funding, unmet mental health needs and disingenuous lawmakers who use them as political pawns.

Patterson's bill, a GOP-led House priority, is part of a nationwide GOP crackdown of books in school libraries. Many of the books deemed offensive include LGBTQ issues or themes of racism.

State Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, said he was worried the language of the bill wouldn't require books to be evaluated as a whole.

That it was so broad, it would ban the Bible (which he noted the bill exempts) and classics, including: "Lonesome

Dove," "The 12th Night," "Midsummer Night's Dream," "Romeo and Juliet," "Of Mice and Men," "Lady Chatterley's Lover," "Ulysses," "Jane Eyre," "The Canterbury Tales," and "I Know Why the Caged Bird Sings."

Banning books isn't new. This latest iteration of attacks on school library books in Texas began in 2021 when former State Rep. Matt Krause, R-Fort Worth, opened an investigation into the books that school districts offer in their libraries, including novels about race and explorations of sexuality. He didn't call it a ban, he called it a list, but it was absolutely a ban. And its implications were far reaching.

PEN America, a free-speech nonprofit, found that Texas schools had banned 801 books, more than any other state in the country, between July 2021 and June 2022. Again, nothing to be proud of.

According to an August 2022 Express-News investigation, North East ISD reviewed the most books in Texas in a five-year period, with 431 titles challenged.

Why isn't our focus on inspiring a love of reading? On ensuring children feel loved and that they see themselves in books and life? On guaranteeing schools are safe places to learn? School libraries should be diverse, inclusive places that welcome young people of all backgrounds.

As a former teacher, parent and step-grandparent, I understand the desire to protect children. But if parents are so concerned about sexually explicit material, they should monitor their children's library book choices (and their music and internet use, too).

Lawmakers should back off. Banning books, censorship, flirts with authoritarianism and can't be further from the small government and freedom touted by the members of the Texas GOP pushing this bill.

During Tuesday night's hearing, an award-winning school librarian from Austin testified that her greatest fear concerning the bill was it would "get in the way of kids reading."

That should be what we all fear.

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House budget has \$17B to cut taxes

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Author: Jasper Scherer; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 1210 Words
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Texas House lawmakers have voted to spend upward of \$17 billion to buy down school property taxes, overruling objections from Democrats who tried to redirect some of the tax relief to provide a bigger boost to public school funding.

The tax cut package, drawn from the state's overflowing coffers, was one of the biggest items in the House's proposed \$303 billion state budget, which passed 136-10 on Thursday after lawmakers spent most of the day deliberating over hundreds of proposed tweaks. Eight Democrats and two hard-line conservatives voted against it.

The spending plan now heads to the Senate, where lawmakers have introduced a clashing property tax plan. Budget writers from the two chambers will likely end up ironing out their differences on tax cuts -- and most other parts of the budget -- in closed-door negotiations near the end of the legislative session in late May.

For now, the House-approved plan reduces the average school tax rate by 15 cents per \$100 of a home's assessed value, setting aside \$12 billion to essentially replace school districts' lost revenue. An additional \$5.3 billion will fund property tax relief adopted in 2019, amounting to an additional 10-cent rate cut, according to House leaders.

House Speaker Dade Phelan said the package would provide "the largest property tax cut in Texas history" and praised House members for "being wise stewards of taxpayer dollars" in adopting the budget.

Democrats condemned the Republican majority for shooting down several of their amendments Thursday aimed at pumping more money into public schools.

While Republicans noted that the budget provides a \$5 billion increase in general revenue funding for the Foundation School Program, the state's main source of public education spending, Democrats countered that the bump would still leave schools well short of the per-student funding needed to keep pace with inflation.

Here's a look at some winners and losers from Thursday's marathon round of budget haggling.

Winner: University systems

House lawmakers set aside \$3.5 billion for a new endowment that would fund research projects at four Texas university systems.

The fund, which would be formally known as the Texas University Fund, aims to support the state's public institutions that don't benefit from an existing trove of more than \$30 billion, which can be accessed only by the University of Texas and Texas A&M systems.

The new fund would be divided among the University of Houston, Texas Tech, Texas State and University of North Texas systems, which could use the money to pay for private or federal research projects.

The idea received initial approval earlier this week from the Senate Finance Committee, which voted 17-0 to advance legislation that lays out how the endowment would operate. Under the Senate plan, most of the fund's payout every two years would be distributed using fixed ratios: one-third to UH, one-third to Texas Tech, and the remaining third split between Texas State and UNT.

A smaller share would be doled out based on the number of research projects attracted and doctoral degrees awarded by each system.

Loser: Whistleblowers who sued Ken Paxton

One question mark was whether lawmakers would fund the \$3.3 million settlement between Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton and four of his former top aides. The aides claim Paxton fired them for reporting that he took bribes from a friend and campaign donor and abused the power of his office. The Justice Department is investigating the accusations. Paxton has denied all wrongdoing.

No payment was approved as part of the House budget Thursday. While there's still time for lawmakers to amend the budget, the vote this week sent a strong signal that there is little appetite for it among members of the lower chamber.

Phelan had said earlier this year that he does see the settlement as a proper use of taxpayer dollars, even as the whistleblowers' attorneys have criticized that approach.

"When Texas lawmakers passed the Whistleblower Act in 1983, they made a promise to public employees that the state would compensate them for lost wages if they are fired because they report corruption," said T.J. Turner, an attorney who represents Blake Brickman, former deputy attorney general for policy and strategy initiative.

"Now the Legislature is breaking its promise and turning its back on these whistleblowers. This will ultimately cost the taxpayers more money because they will have to pay Paxton's outside counsel to defend the suit."

An amendment to the budget proposed by state Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, would have redirected to the whistleblowers all but \$1 of Paxton's nearly \$150,000 annual salary over the next two years for a total of about \$300,000.

"Paxton needs to be held accountable for his corruption," Talarico said in a statement. "The attorney general used his office to benefit his campaign donors -- he should pay the price for his actions."

The amendment never saw the light of the star-studded chandeliers on the House floor.

Winner: Texas' commercial space industry

Tucked into the House budget is \$350 million to create a Texas Space Commission, which would "provide financial services to support aerospace-related development" in Texas, according to legislation laying out the proposal. That includes "capitalizing, underwriting, leasing, selling or securing funding for aerospace-related infrastructure."

The measure is being carried by the chief budget writers in each chamber, state Rep. Greg Bonnen of Friendswood and state Sen. Joan Huffman of Houston. Their legislation would also set up a research fund -- with authority to accept private donations -- to make grants to businesses and nonprofits for the "development of emerging technologies," workforce training and other uses related to space exploration.

The idea has the support of Gov. Greg Abbott, who called on lawmakers to fund the commission in his proposed two-year budget.

"With companies seeking to expand space travel in coming years, continued development of the space industry in the state will ensure Texas remains at the forefront not only in the United States, but the entire world," Abbott wrote. "Due to increased competition from other states and internationally, further planning and coordination is needed to keep Texas at the cutting edge."

Winner: Alternatives to abortion program

The House also approved an \$80 million increase for the state's Alternatives to Abortion program, which funds crisis pregnancy centers, or facilities that aim to discourage women from getting abortions.

Several Democrats spoke against the increase, saying the program lacks meaningful accountability and oversight and doesn't provide the health care assistance that Republicans are claiming.

The Republican-controlled Legislature, which passed the nation's strictest anti-abortion law in 2021, has dramatically scaled up funding for the program in recent years.

Citing an increase in demand after the state banned virtually all abortions, the House also approved redirecting \$25 million from Medicaid client services to the Alternatives to Abortion program for the current budget cycle.

Taylor Goldenstein contributed to this report.

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GOP bills tout Christianity in schools to deter violence

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Author: Edward McKinley; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 913 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas Republicans have batted down efforts to restrict access to firearms in response to the Uvalde school massacre of last year, and some are now making the case that introducing more Christianity in public education could help to reduce the risk of future mass shootings.

Bills have advanced in the Legislature to require the Ten Commandments to be displayed in each classroom, create periods of prayer or Bible study at schools and allow chaplains to be hired as school employees.

As part of the chaplain bill, school safety and security funds could be used to hire members of the clergy instead of paying for security cameras, physical barriers, security officers and active shooter plans.

It's left open what roles or jobs the chaplains could do, but part of the pitch from proponents of the bill has been that there are not enough mental health counselors at public schools.

On Tuesday morning in the House, the Public Education Committee held a hearing for the Ten Commandments bill, which has also already been passed by the Senate and has a strong chance of becoming law.

Timothy Barton, president of the Christian-conservative group Wallbuilders, was invited by the committee to testify. He said the world is experiencing moral decay, including crime and violence in schools, and the situation calls for a return to the Ten Commandments as "the basis of morals of all Western civilization."

He went on to say that displaying the religious text in classrooms could deter mass shootings.

"If we had more people following the Ten Commandments, we would solve as many of the issues we are seeing today. It was not so long ago we saw a shooter going to a Christian school in Nashville, and this shooter shot up the Christian school," Barton said. "If more students were learning things like, 'don't kill other people,' the world would be a far better place."

After 19 children and two teachers were killed in Uvalde last year, there were widespread calls for the Legislature to address gun violence.

Although Democrats -- as well as the families of the Uvalde victims -- have argued gun control measures would be the most effective way to stop future shootings, Gov. Greg Abbott and other Republicans have instead laid groundwork to spend up to \$1 billion on measures to make schools more secure or to protect the mental health of schoolchildren.

Civil liberty groups and public education advocacy groups have opposed the bills bringing more religion into schools, saying they violate the Constitution and push Christianity on kids.

"Every time on this committee that we tried to teach students values like empathy, or kindness, we're told we can't, because that's the parent's role. Every time on this committee that we tried to teach basic sex education to keep our kids safe, we're told that's the parent's role. But now you're putting religious commandments -- literal commandments -- in our classrooms, and you're saying that's the state's role," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, during the hearing.

"Instead of living out the way of Jesus, we're instead imposing our beliefs on other people. Instead of leading by

example, we're leading by mandates. I am very offended by this piece of legislation."

In legislative hearings, State Board of Education member Julie Pickren, R-Manvel, espoused placing chaplains on campus as a way to address stress and violence.

Pickren, who served as a trustee at Alvin Independent School District until 2021, said the district saw 'incredible' results when it allowed pastors and youth pastors in the community to come to school and interact with students.

"The data that came afterwards was incredible. We saw decreased violence on our campuses. We saw increased test scores," she said. "We can see a benefit of chaplains steering children on a path that will lead to success basically."

It's unusual, although not unheard of, for members of the State Board of Education to testify for particular bills, as the members are independently elected. Pickren was not authorized to speak for the full board, so she said she was speaking on her own behalf. However, she did not mention during either her House or Senate testimony that she is a board member of the National School Chaplain Association, the main professional group pushing the bill.

In a phone interview Tuesday, Pickren said it doesn't make sense that the Texas Capitol, prisons and even airports have chaplains, but schools do not. She said chaplains could help make schools safer, including reducing the risk of mass shootings.

"Chaplains and their training, they are trained for active shooters. That's part of a chaplain's training. Also part of a chaplain's training is risk assessment. It would be a great benefit to our schools in the school safety and the mental health piece," she said.

The bill does not include any certification process for chaplains, so such trainings would not be required. Pickren said it would be a step up from the status quo regardless, where schoolchildren often don't have access to mental health resources. She said chaplains are "trained to see every child," which could help them reach kids who have been exposed to trauma or who are more likely to commit violent acts.

"Generally from studies that we have, children that are hidden like that, children that don't want to be seen, those are the children that experience the most amount of trauma in their life," she said.

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'Christmas tree' education bills reveal big divide between Texas Senate, House

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Author: Edward McKinley; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 711 Words

Page: A003

[OpenURL Link](#)

Christmas came early in the Texas Legislature on Tuesday night, but nobody seems to be feeling the holiday cheer.

A bill can become what's known as a "Christmas tree bill" if it attracts a large number of amendments, which are often only loosely related to the underlying policy, hanging off of it like holiday ornaments.

In both the House and Senate on Tuesday night, as lawmakers stared down a midnight deadline, major education bills in each chamber transformed into Christmas trees -- illustrating a deep and growing divide between the two chambers over contentious school choice legislation. That divide has the potential to torpedo a number of more popular education reform policies.

In the House, a Senate bill to give teachers raises was tacked with additional policies raising per-student school funding, increasing fine arts funding and setting a \$15-an-hour minimum wage for school bus drivers, among others. In the Senate, a House school finance bill was saddled with a school voucher program making public education funds available for private school tuition.

Then, Senators added more than a dozen of their own priorities.

As Texas grapples with an exodus of teachers due to low pay and low morale in the profession, and school districts face a \$2 billion state funding deficit for special education services, Republicans in the Senate have thus far only been willing to consider widespread school finance reforms if they include vouchers -- a controversial provision that has never won majority support in the House despite more than two decades of efforts.

Tuesday night represented a high point in tensions between the two chambers on the subject. The bills are now inevitably headed for conference committees where lawmakers from each chamber will be forced to work together directly, so loading up each bill with policies basically gives each side extra poker chips to play with.

Rep. Harold Dutton, a Houston Democrat and a longtime leader on education policy, seemed to speak for the House when he expressed his frustration with the Senate on Tuesday night.

"This is a bicameral Legislature. Not a unicameral Legislature. And so that means they ought to recognize there is a House of Representatives here that plays a part in whatever we do in this state," he said. "I don't believe the Senate respects us. And as I told you before: When they don't respect us, they ought to expect us."

Across the building about an hour later, Sen. Nathan Johnson echoed Dutton's concerns.

"When you take something that you can't pass and put it on something that you should pass, it borders on spiteful. We're weighing down something uncontroversial with something so controversial," the Dallas Democrat said.

"The education savings accounts are likely to kill this whole bill."

The practice of packing popular, necessary bills with more controversial measures is known as "hostage-taking," and it's a common tactic late in the legislative session.

"I have all the confidence in our friends in the House to continue to deliberate the wise policy behind education freedom. I think it's extremely appropriate to connect all of these subjects together that are not separate and

disparate," said Sen. Brandon Creighton, a Conroe Republican who authored the Senate's voucher proposal.

Vouchers have been among the most contentious political fights of the session, as it splits House Republicans, where a number of rural members routinely join Democrats to block the bills.

The policy is a top priority of Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick and Gov. Greg Abbott, who has toured the state and delivered speeches at private schools calling for it.

A key House committee appeared set to advance a version of a voucher policy, although more limited than the one passed by the Senate, when the governor preempted it. Abbott said it didn't go far enough, that he would veto it if passes and that he plans to call lawmakers for a special session if they don't pass a program for which many of the state's 5.5 million public schoolchildren are eligible.

"I hope you'd agree that it's unconscionable during the worst teacher shortage the state has ever seen that the Senate would hold hostage pay raises for teachers to pass their voucher program," said Rep. James Talarico, D-Austin, on the House floor Tuesday night.

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Kaur overcame unfair attacks on her career

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Author: gilbert garcia | Section: A | 812 Words

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[OpenURL Link](#)

In the final weeks of Mario Bravo's desperate bid to hold on to a City Council seat that was slipping away from him, he and his followers went on the attack against Sukh Kaur.

Bravo put out a mailer in which he lauded himself as "our neighborhood champion" and blasted Kaur, an education consultant and first-time council candidate, for "owning a business that profits from opening charter schools, which drain money from San Antonio public schools."

The charter school issue wasn't the only one targeted by Bravo. His litany of attacks also included the assertion that Kaur "tried to reduce public safety" by backing Proposition A, a proposed charter amendment designed to expand the city's cite-and-release program and decriminalize abortion and small-scale marijuana possession.

Bravo's denunciation of Prop A set up an odd dynamic, given that many of his most ardent supporters were reform-minded progressives strongly in favor of the ballot proposition.

But ultimately it all came down to charter schools. In the five weeks between the May 6 general election -- in which Kaur surprised political observers by finishing eight percentage points ahead of Bravo -- and the June 10 runoff, Bravo loyalists repeatedly took to social media and blasted Kaur as a puppet of the charter industrial complex.

They suggested that there was something sinister about the \$8,600 in advertising help Kaur received from the Charter Schools Now political action committee.

They argued that her values were all wrong for District 1. They contended that, if elected, she would damage the already fragile state of traditional public schools in our community.

Ultimately, these campaign attacks failed. Kaur ousted Bravo in commanding fashion, receiving more than 59 percent of the vote.

But cynical scare tactics like this shouldn't be allowed to go unchallenged. Particularly in a case like this one, where you sense that Bravo acolytes will try to keep the issue alive during Kaur's council tenure.

The first point to consider is the fundamental irrelevance of the issue in this particular race.

City Council members have no power or influence on school funding or education policies. They have no say in whether or not a charter school receives authorization from the state.

Making this a central issue in a San Antonio City Council campaign is a little like judging a school board candidate by their position on the Iran nuclear agreement.

Second, it's worth remembering that former Councilman Rey Saldaña spent nearly three years of his council tenure working as the chief engagement officer for the KIPP charter-school organization.

I'm sure my memory is failing me, but I don't recall either Bravo or his foot soldiers attacking Saldaña or implying that Saldaña's connection with charter schools would lead to the ruination of this city.

By the same token, Democratic state Rep. Barbara Gervin-Hawkins founded and ran a charter school (the George

Gervin Academy). Unlike Kaur on the City Council, Gervin-Hawkins actually holds an elected position that gives her some influence over public-school funding. And Gervin-Hawkins has never received the kind of criticism on this issue that Kaur recently experienced.

Finally, let's consider the role of Charter Schools Now. Some of Bravo's most vehement cheerleaders insisted that the PAC's advertising on behalf of Kaur offered evidence that she was a stealth right-winger bent on destroying traditional public schools.

It's true that the majority of campaign contributions from Charter Schools Now have gone to Republican lawmakers. But they have also made donations to several Democrats with a strong record of support for public schools, including Trey Martinez Fischer, Senfronia Thompson, Carol Alvarado and James Talarico.

(Talarico's commitment to public education has been evident since he began his career by teaching on the West Side of San Antonio at Rhodes Middle School.)

Because charter schools have been expanding at a rapid rate in recent years, it's perfectly reasonable to worry about the way they're pulling revenue away from traditional public schools.

Ultimately, however, the problem is not the existence of charter schools, but the shortcomings of the school-funding system in Texas. If traditional public schools got the kind of revenue they deserved, there would be less reason to fear the effects of charter schools.

There's a place in our school system for free, all-admission public charters that try innovative approaches and serve students who are at-risk or have special needs. That's why Saldaña wanted to work for KIPP and why Gervin-Hawkins established the Gervin Academy, which initially served exclusively as a refuge for high-school dropouts.

Kaur served as a public-school teacher in Houston. She's a product of the Teach for America program. She received graduate degrees in Educational Entrepreneurship and Educational Leadership.

She has dedicated her career to improving education outcomes. We shouldn't let anemic school-funding policies or disingenuous municipal politics skew that fact.

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Set of new laws pass under the radar

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Author: Jasper Scherer; Austin Bureau | Section: A | 1254 Words

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This year's state legislative sessions have been dominated by headlines about private school vouchers, property taxes, transgender rights and the impeachment of now-suspended Attorney General Ken Paxton.

But beyond the few dozen measures that attracted the most attention and controversy, lawmakers sent more than 1,200 bills to Gov. Greg Abbott's desk, the vast majority of them approved with bipartisan support. They also signed off on a \$321 billion spending plan for the next two years, funding new laws aimed at shoring up the state's water supply, buying up more land for public parks and other under-the-radar measures.

Here are five key bills that largely escaped notice as they made their way to the governor's desk.

Consumer data privacy (HB 4)

A priority of House Speaker Dade Phelan, House Bill 4 requires businesses to get consent from consumers before processing or selling their sensitive personal data. They also have to disclose what type of data they are collecting and what it's being used for, including whether it's being sold to third parties or used for targeted advertising. In those cases, companies will have to let users opt out and "clearly disclose" how to do so.

The bill makes Texas the latest state to pass a wide-ranging data privacy law this year, as federal protections remain stalled in Congress. Experts say Texas' law goes further than some others, applying to a broader scope of businesses.

Under the law, most of which takes effect in September 2024, consumers will also get to confirm whether a business is processing their personal data, correct "inaccuracies" in the data and have it deleted. Businesses are given 45 to 90 days to comply with most types of requests.

State Rep. Giovanni Capriglione, the Southlake Republican who authored the bill, said it will protect Texans from "unscrupulous data brokers and bad actors online," by limiting the collection of sensitive data like genetic or biometric information that can be used to uniquely identify consumers.

Itemized hospital billing (SB 490)

Under Senate Bill 490, hospitals will have to provide patients with an itemized bill before collecting payment -- allowing them to see what they're being charged for and avoid being accidentally overcharged, supporters say.

The invoice will have to list each medical service provided, along with the cost and a "plain language description of the service." Patients are already legally entitled to an itemized breakdown upon request, though they often have to jump through bureaucratic hoops, the law's supporters argue.

"Medical bills are confusing enough," said state Sen. Bryan Hughes, a Mineola Republican who authored the legislation. "Rather than getting a bill that just says 'balance due,' this bill says you get an itemized bill. It's pretty straightforward, not a radical concept."

The bill sailed through both chambers with bipartisan support, meeting resistance only from hospital groups seeking procedural tweaks. It takes effect Sept. 1.

Permitting delays (HB 14)

In a bid to speed up housing construction and other development, lawmakers passed a bill that will let builders hire third parties to handle their permitting paperwork and inspections if cities or counties fail to meet certain deadlines.

The measure was a priority of developers who have long grumbled about delays in getting local planning officials to sign off on their projects. Under the new law, which kicks in when a city or county blows a state-imposed deadline by 15 days, builders can turn to permit staff and inspectors employed by other local governments or any licensed engineer in the state.

Supporters say the new workaround will lower housing prices, particularly in Texas' fast-growing metro areas where developers have struggled to keep pace with demand.

"Every hitch and delay in the development process, from reviews to supply chain to available labor to financing to inspections, adds to the final cost of housing," said state Rep. Cody Harris, a Palestine Republican and author of the bill.

Critics say the bill treats single-family homes the same as large commercial projects, which involve a more onerous review process. Local officials say they're already using third parties to work through backlogs and argue that the bill should have clarified what happens if a third-party reviewer runs afoul of permitting regulations.

Property tax breaks for child care facilities (SB 1145, SJR 64)

Lawmakers are still deadlocked over how to deliver \$12 billion in property tax cuts. But during the spring session, both chambers came together on less-noticed legislation that, pending voter approval, will allow cities and counties to exempt child care facilities from paying from property taxes.

The proposal takes aim at a widespread staffing crisis among Texas' child care centers, many of which have seen employees leave the profession for better-paying industries. Some 21 percent of the state's child care providers shuttered from the start of the COVID-19 pandemic through September 2021, according to the Texas-based nonprofit group Children at Risk.

State Rep. James Talarico, the Austin Democrat who carried the bill in the House, said the exemptions will also make child care more affordable.

"Rent and property taxes are the biggest cost drivers for childcare centers," he tweeted. "As operating costs increase, centers are forced to increase their prices. Our bill cuts property taxes for childcare centers, reducing costs for the families they serve."

The bill gives local officials the option to offer full or partial exemptions, though they must shave off at least 50 percent of the property's appraised value. Also included is a provision that requires landlords who rent to child care providers to pass any savings from the exemption on to the tenant.

The measure would take effect Jan. 1 if Texas voters approve it on the statewide ballot in November.

Electric rate hikes (HB 2555)

HB 2555 establishes a new way for electric utilities to apply for rate hikes if they go toward improving the resiliency of the poles and wires they use to transmit electricity.

Supporters say the change will encourage better preparation for storms by allowing utilities to secure approval from the state Public Utility Commission up front, rather than having to recover costs later on under the existing process.

Houston city officials and other opponents argue the new process diverts oversight away from cities, who for years

have negotiated settlements with utilities over proposed rate hikes, securing lower costs for residents and businesses if they can show the increases are excessive.

Tina Paez, director of Houston's Administration and Regulatory Affairs Department, said the PUC-centered process does not allow city officials to challenge rate increases. Paez also noted that the bill doesn't set any deadline for a follow-up review of "estimated" costs, which she argued will reduce the odds of ratepayers getting refunded for excessive charges.

State Rep. Will Metcalf, a Conroe Republican and the bill author, said it "establishes that the right venue for approval of a utilitywide resilience plan is at the PUC, not at hundreds or thousands of individual cities." He disputed Paez's contention that cities would be unable to challenge utility rate hikes.

"Those cities are able to participate in the PUC process, just like they do with other utility matters," Metcalf said.

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Letter opposes chaplains in Texas schools

August 27, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)
Author: Jack Jenkins; Religion News Service | Section: F | 683 Words
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[OpenURL Link](#)

More than 100 chaplains signed a letter urging local Texas school boards to vote against putting chaplains in public schools, calling efforts to enlist religious counselors in public classrooms "harmful" to students and families.

The letter comes just days before a bill allowing public schools to hire school chaplains becomes law in Texas, the first state in the country to pass such a measure. The legislation, which had been pushed by activists associated with Christian nationalism, gives the state's nearly 1,200 school boards until March 1 of next year to vote on whether to employ chaplains.

The letter was organized by the Baptist Joint Committee for Religious Liberty and Interfaith Alliance as well as local advocacy group Texas Impact.

The chaplains who signed the letter, released recently, bemoaned the lack of standards for potential school chaplains aside from background checks, contrasting it with the extensive training required for health care and military chaplains.

"Because of our training and experience, we know that chaplains are not a replacement for school counselors or safety measures in our public schools, and we urge you to reject this flawed policy option: It is harmful to our public schools and the students and families they serve," the letter read.

While chaplains who operate in multifaith environments are generally barred from proselytizing, the Texas bill, SB 763, outlined no such condition, leaving each school district to answer the question on its own.

"There is no requirement in this law that the chaplains refrain from proselytizing while at schools or that they serve students from different religious backgrounds," reads the letter.

Signers of the letter are members of an array of Christian denominations, including the Presbyterian Church (USA), United Methodist Church, Disciples of Christ and Seventh-day Adventist. Some are part of the Cooperative Baptist Fellowship. Several other signers identified as Jewish, Buddhist or Unitarian Universalist.

"Texas Impact's member faith traditions recognize the unique value of chaplains in some of life's most challenging situations, and that's why they insist on rigorous training and oversight of chaplains under their commission," the Rev. Franz Schemmel, Texas Impact board president and pastor at Messiah Lutheran Church in Weatherford, said in a news release.

Last month, another letter sent to school boards by the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Texas, Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation raised similar concerns about the bill, which they called unconstitutional.

Besides leading to "religious proselytization and coercion of students," that letter charged, chaplains "are generally affiliated with specific religious denominations and traditions. In deciding which chaplains to hire or accept as volunteers, schools will inherently give preference to particular denominations, violating the 'clearest command' of the Establishment Clause: '(O)ne religious denomination cannot be officially preferred over another.'"

As SB 763 made its way through the Texas Legislature in May, state Rep. James Talarico, a Presbyterian-minister-in-training, repeatedly challenged the bill and linked it to Christian nationalism. He also expressed concern about the

bill's champions: the National School Chaplain Association, an arm of a Christian missionary organization that has previously expressed a desire to convert students and school officials to Christianity.

Julie Pickren, a member of the NSCA's board who was elected to the Texas State Board of Education last November, appeared in a video on social media, since deleted, in which she celebrated the idea of chaplains proselytizing to school children.

"There are children who need chaplains. For the pastors in here, you already know: We have a whole generation of children that have never stepped foot one day inside of a church," Pickren said in the video.

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No place for chaplains in public schools

September 24, 2023 | San Antonio Express-News (TX)

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[OpenURL Link](#)

Texas lawmakers don't trust teachers with history and other subjects, but apparently they trust unlicensed, untrained, unregulated religious chaplains with students. What could go wrong?

This past summer, lawmakers passed Senate Bill 763, which requires all school boards to vote by March 1 on whether they will approve having chaplains in schools, either on staff or as volunteers. Trustees of the Georgetown Independent School District, north of Austin, recently voted to accept chaplains as volunteers.

Obviously, this raises myriad questions around injecting religion into public schools, chaplain training as compared with counselors, and how a chaplain of one faith could equally serve students of all faiths, let alone those who might be atheists. School board trustees far and wide should take a hard pass on this ill-conceived idea, which will open districts to litigation. Beyond this, there are huge concerns around a lack of funding and a lack of training.

Locally, Northeast ISD Board trustees Marsha Landry and Steve Hilliard added a discussion regarding chaplains to the district's Sept. 11 agenda. Although most people who spoke during public comments, including some chaplains and a University of Texas at San Antonio school counseling professor, opposed chaplains in NEISD schools, conservative trustees are supportive.

Landry, for example, said "this is a great opportunity to bring some spiritual guidance into the schools."

Talk about big government. Let's keep spiritual guidance in places of worship and allow families to make those decisions.

Making this idea even worse is that funding for chaplains comes from the Texas school safety allotment, which is already too meager.

Even with a \$33 billion surplus this past session, Texas lawmakers only increased the school safety allotment by 28 cents per student -- from \$9.72 to \$10 -- and gave each campus \$15,000. This is nowhere close to expected costs for armed officers, surveillance and fencing.

A lack of training

Anyone can be a chaplain. While a public school counselor must earn a master's degree and teach in a classroom for two years, a public school chaplain has no such requirements.

The law, authored by state Sen. Mayes Middleton, a Republican from Galveston who has dismissed the separation of church and state, is explicitly clear on this point. From the law's first paragraph: a "chaplain employed or volunteering under this chapter is not required to be certified by the State Board for Educator Certification."

What's particularly frustrating is there is an incredible need for licensed and trained counselors in public schools. Texas ranked 41st in youth mental health in a 2022 Hopeful Futures Campaign mental health report card. It has one school counselor for every 423 students when the recommended ratio is one for 250 students.

Some school districts may be tempted to use volunteer chaplains as a way to address this gap. But students can't simply pray away trauma, mental health conditions, test anxiety, bullying, special education needs and other complex challenges.

And then there is the question of just why chaplains will be in schools.

During the legislative session, the Oklahoma-based National School Chaplain Association, or NSCA, lobbied for this law. According to its website, the NSCA "was established to promote school chaplains as legitimate and necessary members of a school staff through national standards for school chaplains."

Its vision is "to equip schools and chaplains to serve the spiritual needs of PK-12 students, staff, and their families."

The National School Chaplain Association is a subsidiary of Texas-based Mission Generation, and during the summer, Rocky Malloy, the head of Mission Generation and the NSCA, told lawmakers: "Chaplains have no other agenda other than to be present in relationships, care for individuals and to make sure everybody on campus is seen and heard."

But archived versions of Mission Generation's website from last year, reported by Religion News Service, highlight much different language: "We influence those in education until the saving grace of Jesus becomes well-known, and students develop a personal relationship with Him."

Malloy is a self-described drug-smuggling ex-pirate. He has said he was sentenced to life in prison in Mexico, but was released after 72 hours thanks to divine intervention. Now, he is influencing Texas education.

Texas Board of Education member Julie Pickren, who received a \$5,000 political donation from Middleton, is a member of the NSCA board. And the NSCA offers an eight-week online course to certify public school chaplains for about \$3,000.

Hypocrisy on display

Texas Gov. Greg Abbott and lawmakers such as Middleton rail against public schools as sources of indoctrination, which brings a certain layer of hypocrisy to the effort to place chaplains in public schools.

Because this law is vague, school boards will need to establish qualifications and requirements for chaplains.

The only rule regarding chaplains -- that they get background checks, including for sexual offenders -- exists because state Rep. James Talarico, D-Round Rock, a former teacher, pushed it as an amendment.

Talarico's other amendments -- to define chaplains; that chaplains come from an organization endorsed by the Department of Defense, the Texas Department of Criminal Justice or the Federal Bureau of Prisons; to require school chaplains respect the free exercise of religion; to prevent chaplains from imposing their beliefs on students; to respect the diversity of a school community; and to require parental consent before children can meet with chaplains -- all failed.

School districts that approve chaplains may face legal challenges. In June, the American Civil Liberties Union, the ACLU of Texas and others, including the Americans United for Separation of Church and State and the Freedom From Religion Foundation, sent a letter to Texas public school districts, deeming the new law unconstitutional.

Last month, more than 100 chaplains signed a letter urging Texas school boards to vote against putting chaplains in public schools, calling the measure "harmful" and pointing out that "there is no requirement in this law that the chaplains refrain from proselytizing while at schools or that they serve students from different religious backgrounds."

Does this serve all of Texas' 5.6 million students? That the question must be asked is reason enough for districts to reject chaplains in public schools.

- **Citation (apa Style)**

No place for chaplains in public schools. (2023, September 24). *San Antonio Express-News (TX)*, p. A016. Available from NewsBank: Access World News – Historical and Current: <https://infoweb.newsbank.com/apps/news/document-view?p=WORLDNEWS&docref=news/1943A58D12C29CC0>.

4th special session ends with items on table

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The Texas Legislature left Austin on Tuesday without raising teacher pay, improving school safety or launching private school vouchers, capping its fourth special session without consensus on several priority items.

Gov. Greg Abbott has not said whether he will call lawmakers back for a fifth round of overtime or turn his efforts toward the Republican primaries, where he already has begun targeting GOP lawmakers who opposed his priority voucher bill.

The conclusion of the latest session came with both Republican-led chambers largely immobilized by feuding between their two leaders, House Speaker Dade Phelan and Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick, the Senate's presiding officer. Phelan gavelled out Tuesday afternoon without taking up a pair of bills passed by the upper chamber Friday, including a proposal to spend \$800 million on a range of school safety measures.

Phelan, R-Beaumont, already had hinted he would not take any action on the school safety bill, slamming Patrick and the Senate on Friday for ignoring the House's own proposal and instead offering "an entirely new bill with only five days left of session -- knowing full well there is not enough time to get it passed and sent to the Governor's desk."

Patrick, speaking at a news conference shortly after the session ended, said Phelan had plenty of time to pass school safety and other bills. He speculated that Phelan had purposely avoided having enough House members in the chamber to conduct business because he feared that someone could call a vote to remove him as speaker.

"This is dysfunctional, whether it's negligence, stupidity, not thinking clearly or just trying to save his seat," Patrick said, adding that the legislative process was "broken" and Phelan was "just flat-out impossible to work with."

Also left undone was the Senate's 11th-hour bid to set earlier deadlines for the courts to resolve long-shot election lawsuits that threaten to delay cost-of-living increases for retired teachers and billions of dollars in property tax relief that Texas voters overwhelmingly approved last month.

Though none of the challenges are expected to succeed, they could temporarily block the changes voters agreed to, which also include the creation of billion-dollar funds to expand state parks and improve Texas' water infrastructure passed by the Legislature earlier this year.

The lawsuits seek to toss the results of all 14 constitutional amendment elections, alleging without any evidence that the Nov. 7 contests used "substandard voting systems" that produced "illegal votes."

Patrick said the failed bill was an "insurance policy" that would have prevented the ballot measures from stalling because "we don't know what the judge is going to rule." He compared the situation to when he recently recovered from a bout of pneumonia.

"He said, 'Dan, you're in great health. You're good to go,'" Patrick said. "But I didn't cancel my life insurance policy the next day, because we never know when that day will come."

The end of the monthlong session Tuesday also marked the official demise of school voucher legislation that would allow parents to access public funds to send their kids to private schools. A coalition of Democrats and mostly rural Republicans in the House teamed up last month to thwart the proposal, defying months of negotiations and political

threats from Abbott.

Patrick said GOP primary voters should pressure their House members to not reelect Phelan as the House speaker. As long as Phelan is leading the House, Patrick said the school voucher legislation will remain dead.

Phelan, in a statement released shortly after the House adjourned, suggested the House could be finished for the year, saying he was "proud of what we've done in 2023."

He pointed to a pair of border and immigration bills passed last month -- the only legislation to reach Abbott's desk from the latest session -- that included a sweeping measure allowing the state to remove people from the country who are suspected of crossing the border illegally. Lawmakers also agreed to pump \$1.5 billion into the state's effort to build a border wall.

The death of school vouchers, meanwhile, ensured the same fate for billions of dollars in new public education funding, teacher pay raises, reforms to the A-F school rating system and other provisions included in a wide-ranging school funding bill. Pro-voucher lawmakers folded all the items together in an unsuccessful bid to win over Republican voucher holdouts.

A trio of Democratic lawmakers -- state Reps. Trey Martinez Fischer, James Talarico and Gina Hinojosa -- accused Abbott of holding school funding hostage in exchange for vouchers, and said they "stand ready to pass a clean school finance bill that actually helps our students, teachers, and public schools once the Governor decides to take action."

Jeremy Wallace contributed to this report.

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