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## *The 86th Legislative Session Look-Back*

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## The 86th Legislative Session Look-Back

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In the inaugural volume of the *Texas Education Review* (*TxE*), the first editorial board assembled a “Time Capsule” issue to understand the political landscape of Texas educational research and policy (Editorial Board, 2013). In doing so, the founding *TxE* board members laid the foundation of their vision for the journal to be a “significant resource” of research “focused on specific critical issues in education” that account for the historical, physical, and geographic contexts of the UT College of Education (Editorial Board, 2013, p. 2). The publication covered Texas politics, bilingual education, teacher quality, higher education, and racial inequities in schools, among other priorities for educational research.

Wisely, the volume began with the perspectives of major educational policy advocates and state legislators at the time. State legislatures govern educational issues from school finance and teacher certification to high school graduation requirements and investments in higher education (Aycock, 2013; Horsford, Scott, & Anderson, 2019). The Texas State Legislature is an essential governmental entity to education policy whose innerworkings go overlooked in research on public K-12 education and higher education (McLendon & Cohen-Vogel, 2008; McLendon, Heller, & Young, 2005). Now, six years after the inaugural volume of *TxE*, this critical issue allows researchers, policy analysts, advocates, and practitioners to look back and assess the victories—and future challenges—to public education. As the old adage goes, we must look back to move forward. In the spirit of the founding vision for *TxE*, this critical issue presents perspectives from educational researchers, advocates, and legislators on the most pressing contemporary issues in educational policy from the past legislative session.

During the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session, several contemporary political battles in education policy rose to the fore. School finance, a relentless thorn in the side of state lawmakers and education advocates alike, received substantial and serious attention for the first time in over 30 years. Teachers made their compensation plans a significant finance and policy conversation and signaled their growing power in the state political landscape through teachers’ unions and advocacy, as Chevalier and González explore in this issue. Policymakers also considered legislation that invested in and expanded access to public higher education, although racial disparities in the state’s investment in institutions and students persist.

Here, I present the background that contextualizes the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session and how educational researchers and advocates move forward. In the pieces included in this volume, the contributing authors offer their unique perspectives on educational policy and advocacy, drawing from their experiences during the legislative session and professional expertise. Together, these pieces provide readers with a review of the achievements and challenges in state education policy, as well as future directions for research, policy, and educational advocacy.

### Background of 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session

Texas entered the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session with several educational issues at the fore: school finance and tax reform, teacher compensation, and higher education investments and outcomes. Events from the previous legislative session set the stage for these issues.

During the previous legislative session in 2017 (85<sup>th</sup> Legislature), the House of Representatives spearheaded significant changes to the school finance system. Rep. Dan Huberty of Houston, Chairman of the House Public Education Committee, authored House Bill 21, the most comprehensive school finance bill of that session. The bill contained new investments for schools and adjustments to the school funding formula, including the addition of a new per-pupil funding allotment for students with dyslexia. The allotment imposed an additional per-pupil funding calculation for students identified with dyslexia—a worthy yet limited investment in Texas students. Simultaneously, the Texas Senate launched a serious battle over vouchers and increased funding for charter schools. Perhaps more memorably to the general public, Senate leadership also prioritized controversial social legislation that restricted public bathroom access for people identifying as transgender (e.g. the “bathroom bill,” or Senate Bill 6), as well as aggressive immigration-related policies that supported statewide immigration enforcement efforts (e.g. Senate Bill 4). These issues took up all the air in the room, and efforts to advance school finance fumbled as the Legislature passed what many considered a diluted version of HB 21 into law. In the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislature two years later, policymakers and educational advocates sought to revive their more ambitious efforts.

The Texas Governor named tax reform as an emergency item at the start of the 86<sup>th</sup> session in January of 2019. Texas schools are funded in large part by local taxes (Alemán, 2007; Hobby & Walker, 1991; Villanueva, 2018), not state funds. Many advocates for public education have long stressed the need for the state to invest more money in public education (Villanueva & Lavine, 2018), while more conservative lawmakers cited rising property taxes as a deal-breaker to additional school funding without property tax reform (Ramsey, 2019). Tax reform became the central concern for many lawmakers while school finance reform progressed through the legislature.

While the resulting school finance bill (House Bill 3) included new investments in Texas schools and educators, accompanying legislation (Senate Bill 2) also imposed restrictive limitations on local municipalities’ abilities to set their local tax rates. The future of local city, county, and municipal funding—which directly affects public schools—remains uncertain in light of these new changes. As the articles contained in this issue discuss, the fight for funding and resources in education dictated much of the educational priorities of the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session.

### **Major Educational Policies and Priorities in this Issue**

The articles contributed to this critical issue outline the political landscape for public education advocacy in Texas, urgent policy priorities, and new directions for achieving them. At their core, the pieces herein highlight the tension between state government and local needs in education.

First, Morgan Craven, Director of National Policy for educational research and advocacy organization IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association) discusses the disconnect between educational advocates engaged in state policy and the communities most affected by public education in Texas—students of color, low income students, linguistically and culturally diverse students, and students with disabilities. In review of the notable achievements of the 86<sup>th</sup> Session, Craven also questions how educational achievements fell short due to lack of representation and considers how new, more representative, more community-grounded coalitions for educational policy can be cultivated for the benefit of Texas students. In doing so, Craven charts a new way forward for racial equity in educational policy research and advocacy.

Next, authors Chevalier and House Representative Mary González identify a groundswell of educators in the Texas political landscape. They argue that teachers' and educators' renewed power in state politics helped turn the tides in formerly intractable legislative battles over school funding and teacher pay and compensation during the 86<sup>th</sup> Legislative Session. The authors spotlight educators' rising political power while simultaneously illuminating the barriers that educators face to entering state office as elected officials themselves.

Finally, Ashley Williams, Policy Analyst of the Texas think tank, Center for Public Policy Priorities, reviews the legislative achievements and remaining challenges in Texas public higher education. Despite new state investments, legislation to expand affordability, access, and post-graduation opportunities to Texas students fell short. Failed state attempts to secure free-college, increased student aid, and other student supports most heavily affect Black and Brown Texans seeking higher education opportunities. Williams argues that racial inequities in higher education will continue to grow without serious state investments toward enhancing college affordability and expanding postsecondary access.

Texas State Senator, Donna Howard, wrote in the inaugural issue of *TxEdu*, “There is no reason we cannot have both educated children and a healthy economy, and citizens must loudly and clearly convey this to lawmakers” (Howard, 2013, p. 24). Despite the ostensible gains for public education in the latest legislative session, inequities in education continue to demand the attention of educators, researchers, and policymakers. The authors in this issue urge the readership of *TxEdu*—a community of public education researchers, advocates, and practitioners—to cultivate new and better ways to be both louder and clearer in the movement to make public education more equitable and representative across race, gender, class, and cultural experiences of the people it benefits.

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