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Texas Legislature Fails to Address the Needs of Texas Students and Teachers

More Censorship and Little Action on Teacher Shortage or Bilingual Education

by *Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., and Paige Duggins-Clay, J.D.*

Texas lawmakers began the legislative session with expert advice in hand from several state plans to strengthen public education by expanding student learning, addressing the teacher shortage, and improving bilingual education. Instead, lawmakers spent hours in hearings and legislating on red-meat issues, including further classroom censorship. Expert recommendations from major state plans, including the Teacher Vacancy Task Force and Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan fell by the wayside.

Lawmakers Worsened Censorship of Library Books and Instructional Materials

Classroom censorship hurts student learning.

It stifles diverse and historically-marginalized perspectives, prevents youth from accessing inclusive and historically accurate books and instructional materials, and destabilizes culturally sustaining practices in public education. While students, schools and communities have successfully fought back against book bans and other anti-Black, anti-Latino and anti-LGBTQ+ actions at the local level (Serrano, 2023), Texas lawmakers continued on its harmful trajectory during the 2023 legislative session. New legislation requires state-mandated book censorship that further chills student and educator free and honest speech in lessons and classroom instruction, and substitutes religious advisors for certified school counselors.

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Save the Date

IDRA 50th Anniversary
Gala
Bold Legacy
Bright Future

November 2
2023
6 pm Cocktails
7 pm Dinner

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(Texas Legislature Fails to Address the Needs of Texas Students and Teachers, continued from Page 1)

Lawmakers passed House Bill 900, which creates an expansive and costly bureaucracy of book censorship at the state and local levels (Duggins-Clay, May 2023). It requires school libraries, private companies and the Texas Education Agency to assign ratings to books for inclusion of “prohibited concepts,” which are not clearly defined. Instead of promoting inquiry and free thought, the legislation props up deleterious local policies and practices resulting in thousands of books by or about Black, Latino, LGBTQ+ and other systemically-marginalized perspectives being banned from Texas schools. In July, two Texas bookstores and three national bookseller associations filed a lawsuit challenging the bill, arguing that the law violates the First and Fourteenth Amendments because of its vague, overbroad and discriminatory terms (Schneid, 2023).

HB 1605 institutes a state-approved instructional materials list that adds incentives to overly comply with existing classroom censorship law (Latham Sikes, March 2023a). Touted as the “high-quality instructional materials” bill, it standardizes and incentivizes pre-approved materials from specific curricula vendors. The measure unfortunately includes incentives to over-interpret 2021 censorship legislation that prohibits teaching of concepts related to race, gender, and truthful accounts of history that have led to widespread classroom censorship, weakened school curricula and increased discriminatory school-based incidents against students.

IDRA testified: “Texas should absolutely invest in high-quality instructional materials for school districts and classrooms, but the conditions upon those materials should not come at the cost of teachers’ ability to meet student needs, student opportunities to be inspired, or for students to

access accurate and honest curricula that reflect their realities” (Latham Sikes, March 2023a).

While this legislation will undoubtedly have grave consequences for student civil rights, IDRA and coalition partners successfully defended against other harmful censorship proposals, including multiple attempts to enact a Texas variation on “Don’t Say Gay” legislation (SB 8/HB 890) and efforts to further enshrine anti-democratic and biased principles into state curriculum standards. This included SB 1515, an effort to require the display of a version of the Ten Commandments in public school classrooms.

In addition, lawmakers failed to advance Senate Bill 13, an even more extreme book-banning bill that would have created local censorship councils to oversee school district library book inventories with subjective criteria. It would have eliminated legal protections against prosecution under state obscenity laws for materials that have scientific, educational or governmental value. (Duggins-Clay, March 2023)

Failure to Address Harms Caused by Censorship

In addition to doubling down on harmful censorship measures, the Texas Legislature failed to address the negative emotional, physical, social and educational impacts of censorship policies. Some educators hesitated to address identity-based bullying, inappropriately citing classroom censorship laws (Duggins-Clay, April 2023).

HB 4625, spearheaded by IDRA, would have instituted standards to prevent, track and remedy racial bullying and harassment (Duggins-Clay, April 2023). Students, families and educators traveled from Lubbock and the Rio Grande Valley to share their powerful stories of how censor-

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All Pianos Have Keys & Other Stories – Series Re-release

As we celebrate IDRA’s 50th anniversary this year, we are re-releasing chapters from our founder’s popular memoir, *All Pianos Have Keys and Other Stories*, that is now out of print. Watch our social media accounts and the webpage below for each new release.



Stories released to date:

- All Pianos Have Keys
- Silence of the Lambs
- The Epidemic that Never Was
- Jesus Christ Was Not Bilingual
- The Shape of the World
- One Minute of Silence
- Bilingual Onions
- My Side of the Story
- A Measure of Progress
- The Dining Room Table
- My School: Budget Monitoring At Its Best

<https://idra.news/AllPianosHaveKeys>

ship policies have created hostile environments and increased identity-based bullying and harassment (see video of IDRA’s news conference: <https://idra.news/EndIDbasedBullyingEvent>). However, the bill failed to advance.

Bullying and harassment, especially when unaddressed, along with the environment of classroom censorship, have detrimental effects on students and their sense of well-being. But the Legislature failed to meaningfully invest in school-based mental health resources, despite (cont. on Page 6)

The Intercultural Development Research Association (IDRA) is a non-profit organization with a 501(c)(3) tax exempt status. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

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Coalition in Georgia Pushes for Culturally Sustaining Education

by Thomas Marshall III, M.Ed.

Across the U.S. South, policymakers are creating roadblocks to culturally sustaining education. Students, families, educators and activists are always at the center of any movement building, and this is no different in the Georgia education space.

For the Georgia General Assembly session in early 2023, we drew upon last year's work and expanded our coalition, Georgia Coalition for Education Justice, the coalition founded by IDRA in 2022. This collective of students, educators, parents and other advocates is dedicated to advancing education justice for all children across the state.

This coalition originally was named: Georgia Coalition Against Classroom Censorship. We changed it this year to more intentionally reflect the affirmative nature of the coalition's values. The coalition focuses on school safety and discipline, culturally sustaining practices, opportunities for multilingual learners, and stopping public funds for private school vouchers.

During the recent session, coalition members organized and successfully fought back against voucher proposals and participated in a day of action to fairly fund Georgia schools. We helped block Georgia's "Don't Say Gay" censorship bill and held news conferences to push for bills critical to our policy priority areas. And, we continued to share our concerns with lawmakers about why the state needs to update funding weights for educating specific student groups (IDRA, 2023).

Culturally Sustaining Teach-Ins

We knew it would be crucial to engage with communities that had little experience in the policymaking process. We worked to inform people about the process and equip them with the knowledge and skills to sustain their advocacy. Everyone brings their own special, unique talents to this work, and helping them find places where they can thrive as advocates

is a valuable part of how we operated.

Throughout a politically turbulent session, there were bright spots. The coalition was a resource on teaching about race, ethnicity and culture through ethnic studies. IDRA Education Policy Fellows, Jonathan Peraza Campos, M.S., and Ruth Youn, each held training sessions on policies related to Central American studies, Asian American studies, and other curricula that is being left out of classrooms.

These activities culminated with a documentary screening and teach-in where we screened *Precious Knowledge*, a film recounting the struggle for liberated ethnic studies education in Arizona. This movie served as a framework for an engaging conversation with students, families and educators who want to advocate for schools where every child feels welcome.

Fighting Erasure of DEI in Georgia Educator Standards

After the Georgia General Assembly adjourned in March, the Georgia Professional Standards Commission proposed removing all language around diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) from teacher preparation standards. The commission is the governing body that determines what future teachers in Georgia will learn and the standards they are required to teach.

We condemned these changes, submitted letters and organized community members to advocate for equity in the classroom. IDRA and others testified against the proposed changes that will exacerbate recruitment and retention challenges facing the state, threaten access to federal funding, and hinder current and future teachers' ability to effectively instruct Georgia's diverse student populations (Arciaga, 2023; Peraza Campos, 2023). Ultimately, the commission voted to remove the DEI language in teacher preparation standards.

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Members of the Georgia Coalition for Education Justice hold news conference in the Georgia State Capitol.

See our newest **Classnotes** Podcast episode!



<https://idra.news/Pod235>

Lawmakers Refuse to Adopt School Vouchers, For Now

by Diana Long, M.Ed.

One of the primary concerns during the Texas legislative session was Governor Greg Abbott's pressure to pass private school vouchers by establishing education savings accounts. Proponents argued that vouchers would empower parents while ignoring all that parents and their children would lose. IDRA and other organizations and individuals expressed concerns about the negative impact vouchers would have on families, public schools and communities (IDRA, 2023; Latham Sikes, April 11, 2023a). Vouchers would divert crucial funds away from already underfunded public schools, exacerbating funding inequities and leaving some students without essential resources (PFPS, 2023).

IDRA calls such proposals part of the "Texas Three-Step" in which the state attempts to defund, demonize and privatize public education.

Backed by the Governor and Lt. Governor Dan Patrick, Senate Bill 8 by Sen. Brandon Creighton emerged as a highly prioritized bill during the session. This bill aimed to divert at least \$8,000 per participating student from public education funds to private accounts for parents to use for private schools or educational services. Ultimately, the Senate and House did not agree on private school vouchers, and the House did not advance SB 8.

As a last-ditch effort, the Senate stuck a voucher proposal onto HB 100, which primarily focused on increasing funding to public schools, including an increase to the basic allotment which would benefit teachers' pay and all students' per-pupil funding (Long, May 2023; Latham Sikes, May 2023). Ultimately, the House refused to move it forward, and the bill expired in the final days of the session.

Several other private voucher proposals passed the Senate and met their end in the House. Among these were ESAs for students with spe-

cial needs in HB 4340 and HB 3781 (Latham Sikes, April 12, 2023; Long, April 2023; Latham Sikes, April 11, 2023b).

Rather than creating vouchers for a few students, state leaders could have increased funding to serve all students.

While the 2023 legislative session was challenging, it also highlighted the power of collective action and the importance of remaining hopeful. Community members across Texas told lawmakers to keep public funding in public schools. Their success was a huge victory against the push to privatize public education.

Thankfully, a bipartisan group of lawmakers held firm against private school voucher bills, but the issue will likely return this fall during a special legislative session. Governor Abbott announced his plan to call another special session focused on vouchers. We encourage you to remain engaged and stay informed to advocate for equitable education in any upcoming special sessions and in local communities. Sign up for IDRA's alerts at <https://idra.news/SubscribeMe>.

As we move forward, IDRA is committed to ensuring that every child has access to an education that prepares them for a successful future. Together, we can build a more equitable education system that uplifts and empowers all students.

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Diana Long, M.Ed., was an IDRA Education Policy Fellow in 2022-23. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at contact@idra.org.

Major Changes Ahead for Texas Future College Students

by Steve Kemgang

The Texas legislative session introduced changes to college readiness and access for Texas students. While some measures will benefit high school and future college students with more resources, others compromised diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) programs that provide critical support systems for students to access and succeed in college.

Legislators Invested in Students' College Readiness and Access

State lawmakers heeded the recommendations of the Texas Commission on Community College Finance and passed House Bill 8 (Kemgang, March 20, 2023). A bipartisan proposal, this bill allots additional state funding for community colleges based on performance outcomes. The bill also establishes a dual credit scholarship program for high school students from low-income households. This will help reduce financial barriers for eligible high school students to earn college credits toward a future associate's or bachelor's degree upon high school graduation.

Research shows that such early access to advanced courses that confer college credit leads to increased graduation rates and college preparedness among students from low-income backgrounds and rural areas (Bojorquez, 2019; Bojorquez, 2018; Leflore, 2019).

Altogether, lawmakers voted to allocate \$42.9 billion toward Texas higher education. Unfortunately, part of that investment was dependent on passage of Senate Bill 17 that restricts DEI initiatives in public Texas universities, limit academic freedom, and institute a new tenure definition, review and dismissal framework (Adkison, 2023).

Some proposed bills would have reduced college readiness and access opportunities for Texas students of color and those from house-

holds with low incomes. IDRA and coalition partners successfully opposed HB 2615 (Kemgang, April 2023). Had it passed, it would have created vocational education pathways as an alternative option in high schools with severely reduced course requirements that would disqualify those students from college-ready milestones and consideration under the Top Ten Percent Plan. To date, only 53% of Texas students graduate college-ready overall (IDRA, 2023).

Legislators Attacked DEI in Texas Public Universities

College DEI initiatives provide important support mechanisms for historically marginalized students to access and succeed in college. They offer financial scholarships, targeted advising, internship and employment opportunities, and support for students' campus life.

SB 17 was both one of the most contentious bills this session and was strongly opposed by university students, faculty and education advocates. As proposed, it was designed to shut down DEI offices and policies in public colleges across the state. IDRA argued that this bill would compromise K-12 programs housed under DEI offices, which develop much-needed college access pipelines for students (Arsenis, et al., 2021).

The final version of the bill that was passed effectively defunds and prohibits DEI offices in all Texas public universities. Some initiatives are exempted, such as admissions, student organization activities and recruitment, and academic course instruction and research. And the bill requires a study every two years to monitor its overall effects on enrollment, retention and graduation of students by race, sex and ethnicity at various institutions (Kemgang, May 2023).

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IDRA Education Policy Fellow, Steve Kemgang, testifies before the Texas House Higher Education Committee for better access to dual credit courses.

(Texas Legislature Fails to Address the Needs of Texas Students and Teachers, continued from Page 2)

having a historic \$32.7 billion budget surplus. Half of all Texas schools do not have a counselor or other mental health professional on campus, leaving more than half a million Texas students without any mental health services in school (New & Hacker, 2022). Instead of investing in school-based mental and behavioral health professionals, the Texas Legislature passed SB 763, allowing religious chaplains to act as untrained school counselors to students.

Little Action to Address Teacher Shortage or Improve Bilingual Education

Lawmakers entered the session with recommendations to address teacher vacancies and improve and expand bilingual education. Both plans, authored by TEA, resulted from hours of stakeholder input over the prior year. But the vast majority of these plans' recommendations went ignored.

The Teacher Vacancy Task Force contained eight major recommendations to support the teacher workforce. While legislation concerning high-quality materials passed with censorship provisions (HB 1605), legislators left the remaining recommendations either without attention or subject to political deals that resulted in no action. These included opportunities to increase teacher pay, improve the teacher pipeline, expand training and mentorship, and incentivize acute shortage fields, such as bilingual and special education (Latham Sikes, March 2023b).

Similarly, the state's Emergent Bilingual Strategic Plan, developed as directed by the last session's SB 560 (TEA, Jan. 2023), contained eight legislative recommendations to improve and expand bilingual education in public schools.

Over a dozen bills advancing the plan recommendations were filed, but just a handful received a public hearing. Two progressed in the process but failed to become law. HB 2164, by Rep. Bobby Guerra, would have created a stronger monitoring system through TEA for quality bilingual/ESL programs and would have provided more training for all teachers and administrators to serve emergent bilingual students well (Piñón, 2023). The bill was passed by the Texas House but did not progress through the Senate.

SB 2497, by Sen. Mayes Middleton, would have enhanced data collection on bilingual programs in alternative language programs that operate without a certified bilingual education teacher, and it would have provided dual language immersion funding for verified programs (Latham Sikes, May 2023). However, in the final days of the legislative session, the bill was amended to allow limited bilingual education funding to be used outside of those programs, a measure IDRA and other bilingual education advocates opposed. It failed to pass the Texas House by a crucial deadline.

Ultimately, lawmakers took no meaningful action to enact the plan's recommendations. The one positive exception was increased tuition scholarships for aspiring bilingual, ESL and Spanish language teachers at specific universities.

Students, families, educators and community members advocated responses to the real challenges that deserve state action. While some lawmakers championed public school funding and equitable education for students, the session overall was marked by regressive policies that do little to address real concerns and in-

troduce new harms to students' learning and success.

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(Major Changes Ahead for Texas Future College Students, continued from Page 5)

Through concerted efforts with lawmakers, legislative staff, partnering organizations and coalition members, IDRA worked to ensure that all students have a fighting chance in accessing and succeeding in college. While much work lies ahead, the inspirational advocacy by students, families and community members demonstrates the need to continue advocating for the success of all students.

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Steve Kemgang was an IDRA Education Policy Fellow in 2022-23. Comments and questions may be directed to him via email at contact@idra.org.

Texas Prioritizes Hardening Measures Over Preventative Practices

by Alisha “Tuff” Tuff, M.Ed.

In the wake of the school shooting in Uvalde, Texas, the state legislature had a historic opportunity to support gun control and make significant investments to address youth mental health, support positive behavior interventions in schools, and strengthen student and family engagement. Instead, lawmakers prioritized legislation that mandates ineffective practices that negatively impact students, educators and families, including requiring the presence of police in schools and hardening measures.

Harmful Hardening and Policing Mandates

Following the Santa Fe and Sutherland Springs shootings in 2019, the Texas Legislature that year passed Senate Bill 11, which increased funding for school safety and security by establishing a school safety allotment. Unfortunately, the new funds could be used for such things as school-hardening equipment and hiring school-based police officers (Craven, 2019).

Since then, the youth mental health crisis has worsened (Abrams, 2023). Despite ample evidence of the importance of preventative practices, policymakers again turned to hardening school security and safety measures.

House Bill 3 passed by the Texas Legislature in 2023 requires schools to hire a police officer or another armed individual on every campus. This requirement creates a false sense of security. Research shows that the presence of armed security personnel does not prevent or deter targeted school violence (Craven, 2022; Drane, 2023; Duggins-Clay, March 27, 2023; Peterson, et al., 2021).

The bill also adds hardening, facilities and training standards and creates penalties for non-compliance – including the potential drastic assignment of a TEA-appointed conservator. While the bill does add a \$15,000 per campus allotment for safety-related expenses,

this modest appropriation is insufficient to meet the heightened requirements in the bill, let alone to invest in evidence-based preventative practices, such as mental health resources, positive school climate or positive behavior supports.

Missed Opportunity for Best Practices Data

Students and schools need the most up-to-date solutions that are evidence-based and age-appropriate to provide the best learning environment. HB 4449 by Rep. Reynolds would have established a task force to study and make recommendations for re-shaping Chapter 37 of the Education Code, which governs school discipline and safety in Texas (Tuff, April 2023). The bill failed to pass, missing an opportunity to provide critical data, analysis and proposals relating to the state of Texas schools’ discipline policies and practices.

New Protections for Student Civil Rights

Students thrive academically and socially when they can be themselves, where they are treated with dignity by those in authority, and where they are not subject to harmful discipline practices or behavioral interventions.

The Texas Legislature passed the “CROWN Act” (HB 567) by Rep. Rhetta Andrews Bowers that requires schools to eliminate discriminatory dress codes and grooming standards that restrict hairstyles and textures associated with one’s race (Tuff, March 2023). The bill empowers students to embrace their authentic selves and bring their culture into the class without being targeted, harassed or forced to sit out of special moments, such as graduation ceremonies or sports events.

In addition, Sen. Royce West’s “No Kids in Cuffs” bill (SB 133), prohibits school-based

police and other security personnel from using physical restraints, like handcuffs, tasers and chemical irritants (pepper spray) on elementary school students in all but the most extreme circumstances (Duggins-Clay, March 8, 2023). The bill protects students from harmful tactics that can cause pain, emotional distress and trauma. Such tactics disproportionately impact Black students and students with disabilities.

IDRA will continue to push for evidence-based school safety policies that create safe learning environments for all students. See IDRA’s issue brief, *What Safe Schools Should Look Like for Every Student – A Guide to Building Safe and Welcoming Schools and Rejecting Policies that Hurt Students*, by Morgan Craven, J.D., for more information (<https://idra.news/Safe-SchoolsIB>).

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Alisha “Tuff” Tuff, M.Ed., was an IDRA Education Policy Fellow in 2022-23. Comments and questions may be directed to her via email at contact@idra.org.

Focus: State Education Policy Impact

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Where Do We Go From Here?

Moving forward, the Georgia Education Justice Coalition will continue to work toward a just education system in Georgia, with a focus on community engagement. We will continue to hold space for our members and look forward to organizing with communities for more a equitable, just Georgia where every child is valued. Join IDRA's Southern Education Equity Network to connect with advocates across the U.S. South (<https://idraseen.org>).

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Thomas Marshall III, M.Ed., is IDRA's policy communications strategist. Comments and questions may be directed to him via e-mail at thomas.marshall@idra.org.

IDRA 50th Anniversary Snapshot

In March of 2009, some 20 parents gathered to explore forming their own community-based official PTA unit. Most were fluent only in Spanish, and all were low income. The schools their children attended were either academically challenged or feeders to low-achieving secondary schools.



Through a partnership between the community-based ARISE community centers and IDRA, the founding of the country's first PTA Comuntario (now called Education CAFE) demonstrates IDRA's Family Leadership in Education Model in action.



Today, IDRA is helping more communities start their own Education CAFEs to partner with school district leaders to monitor the academic success of their children and other neighborhood children. Education CAFEs have influenced district practices to prepare students for college, led their high schools to improve math instruction, formalized K-12 bilingual-biliterate programs, and more.

Learn more about IDRA's Education CAFEs: <https://idra.news/EdCAFew>

*achieving equal educational opportunity for every child
through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college*