



Texas Insights Review

Published September 2021

Executive Summary

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic drastically altered the lifestyles of many Texans. From October through December 2020, we spoke with state and local policymakers across Texas to understand their COVID-19 responses and how the pandemic has affected the state.

This Review summarizes our findings on the top issues which have emerged due to COVID-19 and how the private sector has engaged with these issues, with strategies and examples for public-private sector partnership.

Gathering perspectives from over forty respondents, we uncovered some of the top issues, best advocacy tactics, and biggest challenges facing Texas in 2020. Texas policymakers' concerns about healthcare and education access stood out amid a full slate of policy priorities.



This Review Examines Three Policy Priorities



Public Health and Healthcare

- Faced with over 1.5 million reported COVID-19 cases in the state in 2020, Texas policymakers sought to bolster the statewide public health systems.
- Policymakers emphasized the need to set clear public health policies, effectively distribute PPE, administer tests and vaccines, and provide better healthcare access to uninsured Texans.



Supporting Education

- Texas policymakers prioritized safely reopening schools, supporting teachers, and providing equal access to online learning.
- The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated longstanding issues with the Texas public education system, including funding, equal opportunity, and school performance.



Public-Private Partnership and Advocacy

- To foster collaboration between the private and public sectors, businesses should invest in relationship building and bring an informed perspective to policy conversations.
- Examples of community engagement in Texas include working with policymakers to address local needs, producing PPE, and donating to the local community.

Public Health and Healthcare

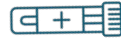
Bipartisan Priorities



PPE

“The most important priorities are ensuring the health or safety of all citizens. Making sure that people, our hospital systems, and front-line workers have the necessary equipment and materials that they need. And that information goes out to the public regarding health care.”

-Policy Advisor,
Executive Branch, R



Testing

“The immediate priorities are testing and PPE. Texas is unique, we’re a massive state and very decentralized... The cities are a little easier but serving the rural counties and providing healthcare was difficult. They’re doing mobile testing and now tests are easier.”

-Communications Director,
Legislature, R



Vaccinations

“One issue is vaccine prioritization. There are opportunities for the public or private sector to support that effort and sort out questions around a finite number of vaccines and the time it will take to push them out.”

-Municipal Deputy
Coordinator, I

Barriers to Success

● Failing Public Health Infrastructure

“The weakness of our public health system has been exposed. We have underfunded public health for such a long time. In Texas, there is this attitude of personal responsibility to take care of yourself and your family, and we as a state come in exceptionally low as far as the amount of support that we provide for public health infrastructure.”

-Chief of Staff, Legislature, D

● Misinformation

“Anti-maskers do not see this to be real threat. They just see it as a threat to their businesses. In Texas, you really have a fight between those who are science and healthcare based versus business based.”

-Chief of Staff, Legislature, D

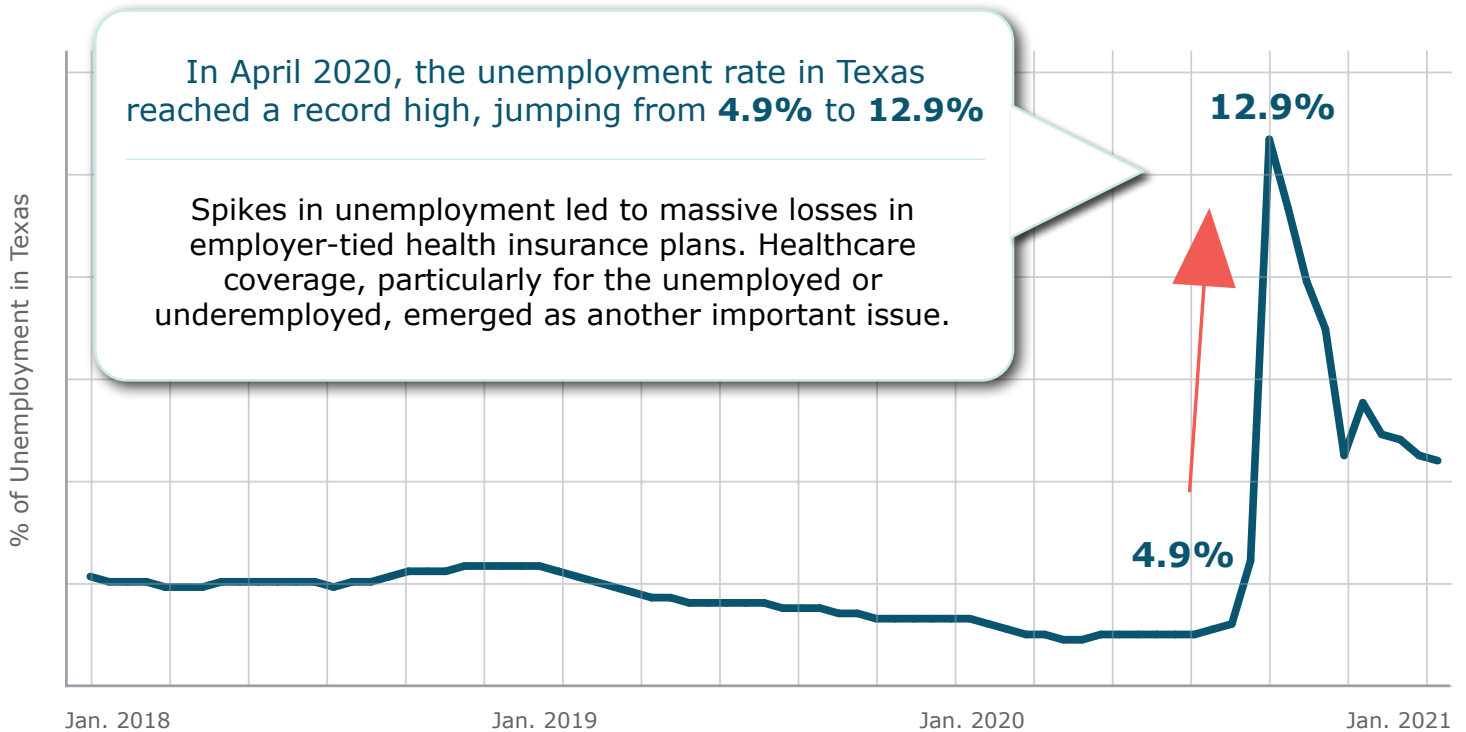
● Incohesive Strategy

“We ended up in this situation where the Governor’s orders technically have the force of law... We had businesses following dramatically different practices. Part of it was it wasn’t clear that the orders weren’t required, and there wasn’t a lot of proactive outreach to the business community to talk about how to do these things effectively.”

-Representative, D

Public Health and Healthcare

Texas Experienced a Massive Spike in Unemployment as a Result of COVID-19¹



In Response to Massive Losses of Insurance Benefits Due to Unemployment, Policymakers Advocated to Expand Access Through Existing Programs

*“Most important thing is taking the Medicaid expansion. Texas had not done that. And especially with how health care at this moment, insurance is tied to your job. **With so many people unemployed as a result of COVID lockdown procedures, you have all these people who no longer have insurance.** We would have been in a better place had we taken the Medicaid expansion.”*

-Chief Of Staff, Legislature, D

*“The expansion of access to healthcare. Medicaid expansion is a pretty easy short form. I don’t care what you call it in the end as long as more Texans have access to healthcare coverage. **We’ve been so much more vulnerable to COVID because of so many folks not having healthcare coverage at all.** That is the number one issue.”*

-Representative, D

1. U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics, Unemployment Rate in Texas

Education and Schools

While challenging schools to reopen quickly, policymakers encouraged its leadership to establish proper safety precautions and better support teachers.



Reopening Schools

*“The biggest challenge is being able to get kids back in school. **It’s incredibly important to have kids back in school as soon as possible.** The efforts in some cities in Texas, where they’re pulling kids out of school because of fear of the pandemic is not steeped in the science of the epidemic.”*

-University Vice Chancellor, R



Safety Precautions

*“If there is a majority of COVID-19 cases in the classroom, then the whole classroom should be sent home immediately. **There should be a protocol set in place for parents, especially in the low-income areas** who don’t have proper childcare, to stay at home, to have a plan where they can be taken care of and where the parents’ needs are being considered as well.”*

-Legislative Aide, D



Supporting Teachers

*“Teachers need a bigger slice of the pie, and not just with pay. With the healthcare system, for example, the state hasn’t contributed a higher dollar amount since its introduction in 2001. The burden, again, has been shifted to teachers. **With COVID we’re seeing the burden continually shift to them and they’re the ones who have to pay the consequences.**”*

-Legislative Director, R

Policymakers Prioritized Providing Equal Technological and Internet Access for All Students

*“Looking at how you address the digital divide. **Looking at how you make underserved people that might not have the access to resources for distance learning, and how do you bridge that gap.** For us, that is really critical on the part of reducing the constant stressors that impact those communities in a negative way. It’s time for them to really start taking a look at those issues.”*

-Municipal Deputy Coordinator, I

*“**The connectivity issue would be the first thing.** Making sure students could be connected, wherever they were, to their education, degree plans or their pathways. We’re looking for both the higher education and the K-12 education sector, just making sure students could be connected and have access to their educational learning models.”*

-Legislative Director, R

Education and Schools

COVID-19 Exacerbated Longstanding Inefficiencies in Texas' Public Education System



Funding

"A big question is how do you fund schools? Most of the time, it's based on attendance. We were able to take quick action when the Lieutenant Governor and the top political leadership came to an agreement that shifted the way they did funding structure. So that was a big topic of conversation for some time, and obviously, in the school community, people wanted to know, 'hey, we obviously can't offer services if we're not going to get funded pretty quickly.'"

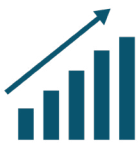
-Policy Analyst, Executive Branch, R



Equal Opportunity

"Start by making sure schools are at an equal level. In some areas, charter schools are way more enticing because the local public school is underfunded, doesn't have the best teachers or is a rundown-looking school, compared to this shiny new charter school. Parents are going to want to send their kids there. So we have a pretty big need here in Texas of upgrading our public schools, becoming more modern and not being stuck in fifty years ago."

-Chief of Staff, Legislature, D



School Performance

*"The other thing that is still rapping on people's minds is discussing how we are going to get school performance ratings? **What are we going to do if a school isn't performing well?** Are we going to be able to administer testing as required by federal and state law and **what are we going to do with schools that need additional support?** I think we're getting close to making a decision on that aspect as well. So that's a thing we've been responding to since COVID-19."*

-Policy Analyst, Executive Branch, R

Public-Private Partnership and Advocacy

Public-Private Partnership and Advocacy

When engaging with policymakers, advocates should prioritize clear communication and relationship building to create more effective and productive conversations.

Policymakers encourage companies to share their knowledge and have a voice in policy conversations

*“The key is them expressing opinions to our lawmakers. Our business community, large and small corporations, understand all the aspects of this more than most of us in government. It’s because they see the financial but also the personal effects of all of this. They see their employees struggling to deal with kids’ online learning, trying to survive that and still work and get everything in. They see their employees worrying about their parents or their loved one who has cancer, they’re concerned what this might do to them. Those things they see firsthand. They see the financial impacts of having the disease and what that does to them, plus the financial impacts of not being able to work when businesses are shut down. **So getting the business community involved and actually stating the impacts that they see is crucial to performing a good plan on how to combat both sides of this.**”*

-Municipal Treasurer, D



Invest in Longstanding Relationships

*“You don’t want to have to meet somebody that you’re going to be working with in a time of crisis. In emergency management, whether it’s corporate or otherwise, **a good partner is someone that is collaborating with you in peace time and building that relationship well in advance of a crisis.** During a crisis is not time for a relationship building, that’s time for executing at the speed of trust.”*

-Municipal Deputy Coordinator, I



Bring an Informed Perspective

*“Do your research, understand the issue, and be specific about what you would like from us, especially if you are asking us to introduce legislation. We represent 20 counties with 76 school districts. On those two sides alone, if each school district had one issue, we would have 76 issues to fix. We’re already having some base work done because we know where to start, especially on a research side. If it is legislation, it takes a huge load off of us if **we are able to hit the ground running because you’ve already started for us. That saves us a week of time.**”*

-Legislative Aide, R

Public-Private Partnership and Advocacy

Policymakers commend businesses that prioritize local engagement and step up in times of need.



*“Businesses owe investment in the communities they work in, financially, but also socially. This is where you choose to base your business, so **there needs to be an overall commitment to serving local people long-term.** It is also good for business, employing people in the area; everyone needs work.”*

-Communications Director, Legislature, R

Examples of Strong Community Engagement



Working with Policymakers to Address Local Needs

*“When this first started, we were having weekly calls with grocery supply companies. **We were having conference calls with all these companies, communicating those kinds of needs and what we can do together.** And then, on the following day, we would have conference calls with our communications supply carriers because we recognize the need that schools were not going to be back in session for a while. **The fact that a lot of students either didn’t have computers or a lot of areas don’t have Wi-Fi access and things like that, we were able to work with them and get a lot of that set up.**”*

-Municipal Coordinator, R



Producing PPE

*“A lot of manufacturing companies stepped up to increase their production of masks, ventilators, and PPE. A couple of our local vodka brewing companies stepped up to convert their production, instead of vodka, into hand sanitizer. Throughout the state, there’s been a huge boom in the manufacturing industry. They’re needing more workers, so **they’ve partnered with many of our higher education institutions wanting to speed up people coming through the pipeline to get the degrees or certificates they need to move into those manufacturing jobs.**”*

-Policy Advisor, Executive Branch, R



Donating to Local Communities

*“During the holiday season, you could easily do a canned food drive. **Giving back and making your presence known in the community while doing good, is a powerful piece.**”*

-Legislative Director, R

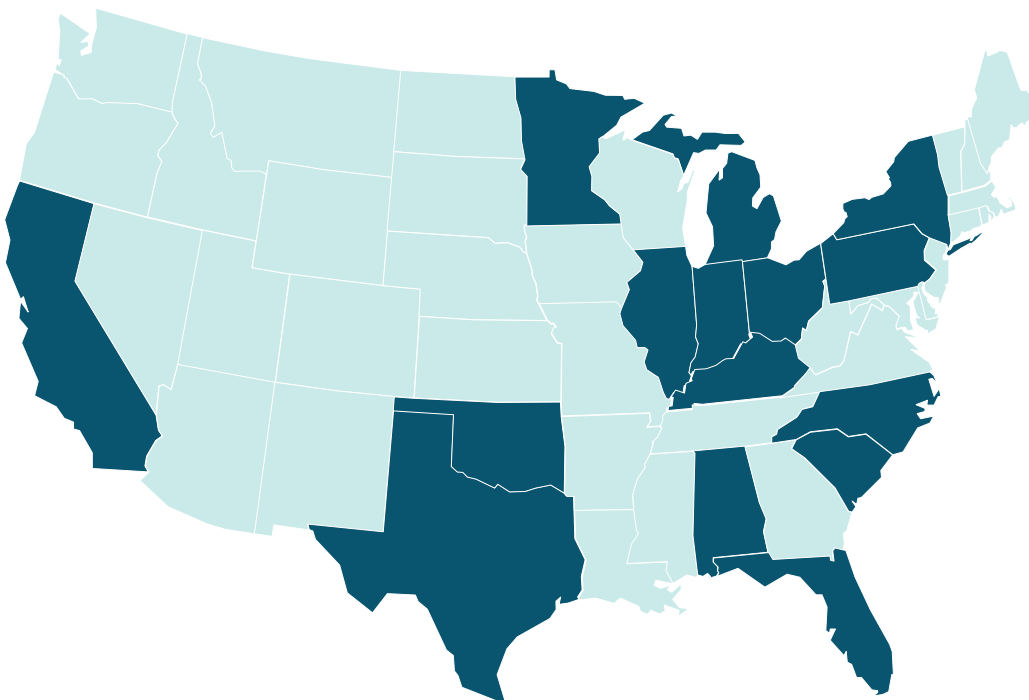
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States Insights Review**

States Insights Review

Ballast Research provides direct feedback from senior policymakers to government relations professionals, helping advocates make better use of policymakers' time and provide the resources most useful to those in government.



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