

Penta Policy Insiders

Texas Insights Review Series

K-12 Education

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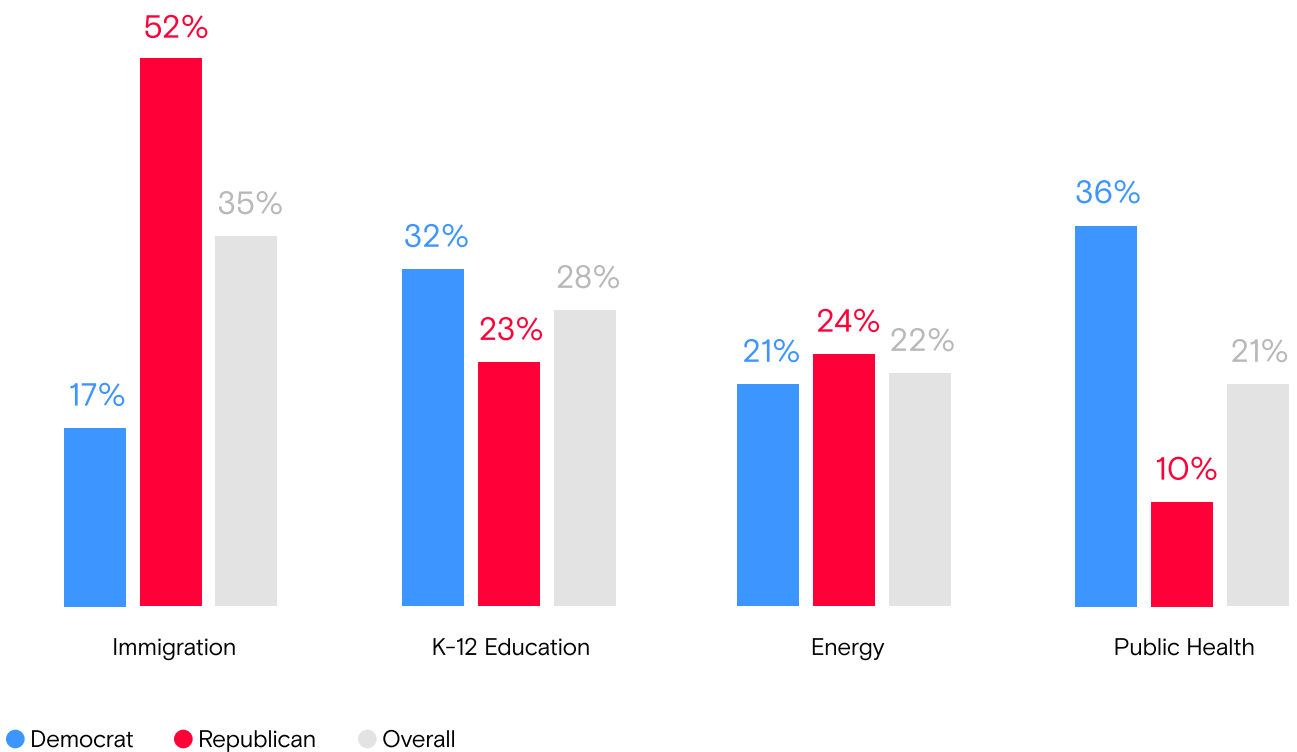
Executive summary

We are excited to share our findings from this year's Texas Insights Review. From September to December 2022, we surveyed and spoke with almost 300 state and local policymakers in Texas to understand their policy priorities as well as the top issues policy staff are facing across communities in the state.

Texas policy leaders we spoke to say immigration is a top challenge, with 35 percent of policy staff across both parties saying it is a main priority, particularly in relation to the state's labor force. When speaking on immigration, policy staff express viewpoints that vary across party lines. Democrats convey a need for increased legal pathways for immigrant workers in order to address the state's labor shortage, while Republicans emphasize the importance of curbing illegal immigration into the state. Improving K-12 education is also a top priority for Texas policy staff, with leaders citing the state's teacher shortage and school safety to be top concerns. Energy and public health are other issues at the forefront policy objectives for Democratic and Republican policy leaders we interviewed in the state.

This report is the second in a series that examines Texas policymakers' top policy priorities of 2022. This review examines K-12 education in the state.

Top policy priorities in Texas



Texas deep dive

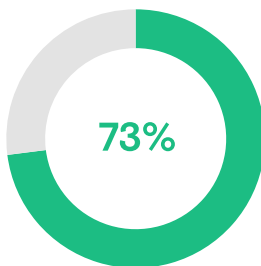
K-12 education

Texas policymakers reveal that K-12 education is a main priority. Policy leaders acknowledge the state's teacher shortage is a contributing factor to their concerns about the K-12 education system, with 73 percent of staff across both aisles agreeing that the shortage needs to be addressed. Reports show that despite efforts to employ more teachers in 2023, such as increasing salaries for top teachers, the state is finding it challenging to fill vacant positions.^{1,2} Policy leaders across both aisles agree that in order to improve K-12 education outcomes, more teachers need to rejoin the workforce.

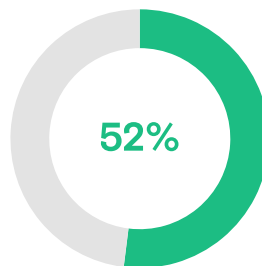
Policy leaders – 52 percent – also say when it comes to improving education in Texas, increased public investment is critical to bolstering education outcomes and protecting student safety. This emphasis on student safety comes as the Uvalde shooting reignited concerns over the safety of students across the state, with policy staff saying increased public funding is crucial to ensuring schools are safe.³ Furthermore, Republicans highlight the importance of public investment in education in relation to strengthening the state's school voucher program. Republican policy leaders view increased voucher options as a way to give families more choices regarding their children's education.⁴

Top K-12 education priorities

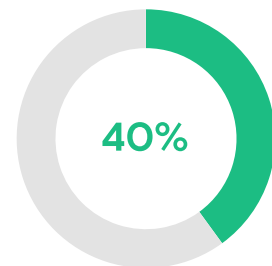
Which of the following do you view as the most pressing issues in regard to education in your state?



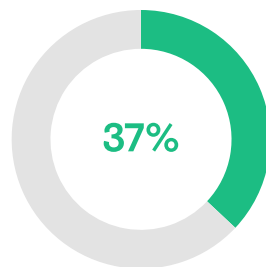
Teacher shortages



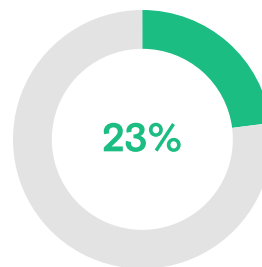
Funding



Education equity



The achievement gap



School infrastructure

Education funding and safety are top priorities

Texas policymakers outline a myriad of education priorities, from improving student safety to bolstering investment into K-12 education. Democrat policymakers specifically emphasize the importance of keeping the state's political matters out of the classroom, and 40 percent of policymakers on both sides of the aisle support enhanced equity when it comes to education.

Texas's teacher shortage

Seventy-three percent of policymakers in Texas say teacher shortages are a primary concern when it comes to education. Policy leaders detail a variety of factors that may be influencing the state's teacher shortages, such as the lack of paraprofessionals in the field or poor compensation. Some Democrat policymakers suggest that the shortage of educators is due to the increased politicization of the field.



The shortage that we're seeing on the public school side is probably not so much educators. We probably have more people in the classroom than we ever have had historically, all right, but it's maybe **not a lot of the paraprofessionals**. Even out in my former district, I mean, we can't buy enough bus drivers to get our kids to the schools, okay? **If you're a kindergarten teacher, you really need those two paraprofessionals in the classroom with you to help you with these young kids, and so instead of having two, you have one. Instead of having one, you have none.**

Executive Administrator, Texas Executive Branch, R



What we're finding is that teachers who have been in the field for a while, **salary obviously is always up there**, But it's not the number one reason that they leave the profession, but younger people who are just coming in, it's one of the top two. So **the compensation aspect is pretty significant.**

President of Department, Texas Executive Branch, R



We obviously have educators leaving the profession at record rates. We've politicized their work to a degree that frankly makes it not fun. I have long been of the opinion I have never met an educator who does a better job because we'll pay them more. Educators only want to make a difference or primarily want to make a difference in the world, in the community, in a child's life.

Mayor Pro Temp, Texas State Municipality, D

Education funding and safety are top priorities

Texas policymakers outline a myriad of education priorities, from improving student safety to bolstering investment into K-12 education. Democrat policymakers specifically emphasize the importance of keeping the state's political matters out of the classroom, and 40 percent of policymakers on both sides of the aisle support enhanced equity when it comes to education.



We need to do a better job of protecting our schools and protecting our kids and our teachers so that the environment is safe for them to learn. I mean, I don't know what the answer is... but you see what happened in Uvalde. There was a hallway full of police officers, and nobody went in. They did not have the equipment.

Chief of Staff, Texas State Municipality, R



What I've noticed over the last at least 10 years, maybe longer, is that **the conservative nature of the Texas state legislature has led to reassigning some of the state funding that usually goes to public education into more private education** through supportive charter schools. And I think that takes money out of the public education system.

Councilmen, Texas State Municipality, D



I hope for a more for equitable and accessible public education system with appropriate freedoms for teachers and less political influence.

Mayor Pro Temp, Texas State Municipality, D



Are vouchers the solution to better education?

Texas policymakers are split across parties on whether or not school vouchers are the solution to improving the state's K-12 education system.



I personally do not like vouchers. I was a public school kid. But more than that, public education, I think, is one of those things that's very fundamentally core to our state, to our society... I see voucher programs, especially those that interact with private schools, private charters, religious charters, etc, as basically a de facto defunding of public education.

Legislative Director, Texas House of Representatives, D



Parent empowerment in education will be an important theme in the upcoming legislative session. Regardless of the terminology that is used, we have to remember that tax dollars are not the property of the state but of the taxpayers themselves. Many of these taxpayers are parents, and giving parents more options in educating their children will lead to better academic outcomes, a more prepared workforce, and a stronger Texas.

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, R



I do think that the solution is not vouchers. It's investing more in public schools. We just promised to make schools safer. And we put up fencing, and we're talking about all these things to make schools safer. But then you have teachers that can't even afford to buy supplies. And I mean, I feel like that's a nationwide issue.

Chief of Staff, Texas House of Representatives, D

Conclusion

Policymakers in Texas detail several challenges when it comes to the state's K-12 education system, ranging from a teacher shortage to disagreements about the efficacy of school voucher programs. Many Democrat policymakers believe increased public funding is vital to improving educational outcomes, while Republicans emphasize the state voucher system as a solution to providing Texas' students with a better education.

About Penta Policy Insiders

Penta Policy Insiders provides direct feedback from policymakers to government relations professionals, improving advocates' ability to understand, validate, and improve the efficiency and effectiveness of their engagement.

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Citations

1. <https://abcnews.go.com/US/map-shows-us-states-dealing-teaching-shortage-data/story?id=96752632>
2. <https://www.texastribune.org/2021/05/17/texas-teacher-salaries-coronavirus/>
3. <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/02/07/texas-legislature-ualde-training/>
4. <https://www.dallasnews.com/news/education/2023/03/21/how-texas-school-choice-bill-aims-to-sway-hesitant-republicans/>

Qualitative n: 33 | Quantitative n: 255

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