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**TEXAS CRIMINAL  
JUSTICE COALITION**

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**WRITTEN TESTIMONY**

**SUBMITTED BY ALCIA CASTILLO  
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**ON**

**THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY  
LEGISLATIVE APPROPRIATIONS REQUEST  
FOR FISCAL YEARS 2022-2023**

**TO**

**THE LEGISLATIVE BUDGET BOARD**

**NOVEMBER 25, 2020**

Dear Members of the Legislative Budget Board:

My name is Alycia Castillo; I am a Policy Analyst for the Texas Criminal Justice Coalition. Thank you for this opportunity to provide written comment with respect to the Legislative Appropriations Request for the Texas Education Agency (TEA), as well as a review of how the Agency plans to allocate funding over the next biennium.

The Texas Criminal Justice Coalition has been closely monitoring the juvenile justice system in Texas for years and, as an organization, we analyze systems that intersect with juvenile justice and promote a community-based system of care that safely reduces justice system involvement while addressing the root causes of crime, increasing public safety, and saving taxpayers money.

### **Supporting TEA's Exceptional Item Request: Necessary, but Not Enough**

COVID-19 has created a disruption in the lives of Texas children and families. The National Association of School Psychologists estimates that the pandemic will result in an overall [doubling or tripling of students](#) who show challenges at school. In the face of this unparalleled global upheaval, students will need significantly greater investments in mental health support services; as they continue to reenter classrooms, their trauma, social-emotional regression, and educational regressions will require care and attention. Students of color are especially likely to experience [physical and mental health disparities](#) post-COVID and will be best served by personnel uniquely equipped (with culturally responsive, trauma-informed methods) to assist with challenges that will arise.

Teachers and administrators are not immune to the difficulties posed by COVID-19 and the current social climate. In the past, they have long [reported feeling undervalued, overworked, and underpaid](#). **It would be irresponsible to ask these personnel, who are specifically tasked with the challenge of educating children during a global health crisis, to enter roles that are not within their training or responsibility.** Mental health practitioners, social workers, counselors, and restorative justice coordinators are all distinct, integral roles and should be funded as such to avoid placing undue burden and stress on Texas teachers.

TCJC supports the Texas Education Agency's exceptional item that seeks to address the widening achievement gaps due to historic challenges and inequities in Texas schools. We recognize, however, that additional measures are needed to ensure that schools and their personnel are able to meet the rising needs presented by COVID-19, and to prevent over-reliance on exclusionary punishment for behaviors that may arise when students readjust to the classroom after nearly a year of traumatic events.

### **Recommendations**

- **Build upon TEA's exceptional item request regarding "Ensuring Equitable Opportunities through Targeted Supports" and provide TEA with funding and direction to offer support to address arising needs after a difficult year.** Addressing the negative social and emotional effects of the pandemic on student learning will complement and enhance the other interventions included in TEA's exceptional item request. District leaders, support staff, and educators need the tools to ensure the transition to learning readiness following 2020.

- **Leverage existing and future federal COVID-19 relief funds that become available to support student mental health and supportive school climate strategies.** The Coronavirus Aid, Relief and Economic Security (CARES) Act includes funding to address the impact of COVID-19 on K-12 education, including providing mental health services and social-emotional support. The Legislature should explore ways to maximize both existing funding and any future federal funding that becomes available to help advance efforts to address student mental health and supportive school climates, including strategies addressed in the recommendations below.

Funding through Project School Emergency Response to Violence (SERV) is an additional feature of the CARES Act that must be leveraged to respond to the increased mental health needs of youth. Research historically and consistently supports the idea that [safe school environments are created by ensuring that each student is adequately supported](#). On the other hand, increased facility safety and emergency response have little effect on the outcome of things like violence in schools, substance use, and bullying; in many cases, they [increase harm and harsh, exclusionary measures](#) for students of color disproportionate to their white peers. Schools should be safe, supportive environments for all students. This moment presents an opportunity to restructure supports to be most aligned with [evidence-based, proven strategies for student success](#).

- **Prioritize students' mental health and enhance school climate by both continuing to fund and narrowing the allowable uses of School Safety Allotment (SSA) funds in the 2022-23 biennium.** During Texas' 2019 session, the Legislature rose to meet another tragedy facing Texas students. In response to the school shooting at Santa Fe High School, policymakers passed SB 11, establishing the SSA and campus-based, multi-tiered Safe and Supportive Schools Programs (SSSPs). SB 11 appropriated funds for the SSA to offset district costs related to facility safety or student mental health. Today, as students face a new crisis with COVID-19, they need a response to match. **The Texas Legislature should continue to fund the SSA over the biennium and include a budget rider requiring districts to use 100 percent of the allotment to support SSSP components that center a positive school climate, social and emotional aspects of student learning, and behavioral and mental health.**

The allotment should not go towards hardening and monitoring strategies (like policing and surveillance), which are more likely to widen disparities in exclusionary student discipline actions and negatively impact school climate. Students of color will be especially vulnerable as they reenter campuses, many of which will place them near law enforcement for the first time since the death of George Floyd and the consequent national examination of violence between law enforcement and people of color. Schools must be equipped to help and support these students in their success.

Again, allocating funding toward mental health and school climate strategies rather than further distancing students from learning environments at a time when they are likely to need additional academic instruction and social-emotional supports will be essential to mitigating additional trauma. In tandem, the Legislature should direct the creation of district plans beyond the SB 11 plans and prioritize the allotment of full-time employees toward mental health support, such as social workers, Communities In Schools personnel and restorative justice coordinators, and district-wide training for culturally inclusive, trauma-informed care and positive school climate building.