The State of Readiness

Are Texas students prepared for life after high school?

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GEORGE W. BUSH INSTITUTE

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Executive Summary

Texas is booming thanks to economic opportunities that draw people to the Lone Star State. But beneath this success lies concerning trends that call into question if Texas students are ready to compete in the Lone Star economy.

Readiness means that a student has the skills and knowledge to succeed in their next step, whether that is the next grade or life after high school.

Too many Texas students do not have the knowledge and skills to succeed in their next grade, much less in the workforce. This lack of readiness begins in the early grades, and students rarely catch up. Ninety–three percent of students who are not on grade level in third grade are still not on grade level by fifth grade.[1] During the 2021–2022 school year, no grade level was more than 60% ready for the next grade.[2]

Lack of readiness has life–long consequences. Between now and 2036, when the state will observe its bicentennial, over 70% of the jobs in Texas will require a postsecondary credential.[3] But far too few Texas students will possess those credentials.

- Only 22% of Texas eighth–graders currently earn a postsecondary degree or credential within six years of high school graduation.[4]

- 60% of Texas students do not do math on grade level and 48% do not read on grade level.[5]

- These results are even lower for children living in poverty and for our state's Black and Hispanic students.[6]

- Right now, each cohort of Texas eighth–graders stands to lose $104 billion in future earnings due to a lack of readiness for their futures.[7] Low–income students (60.7% of Texas' student population) will bear $67 billion of that loss.[8]
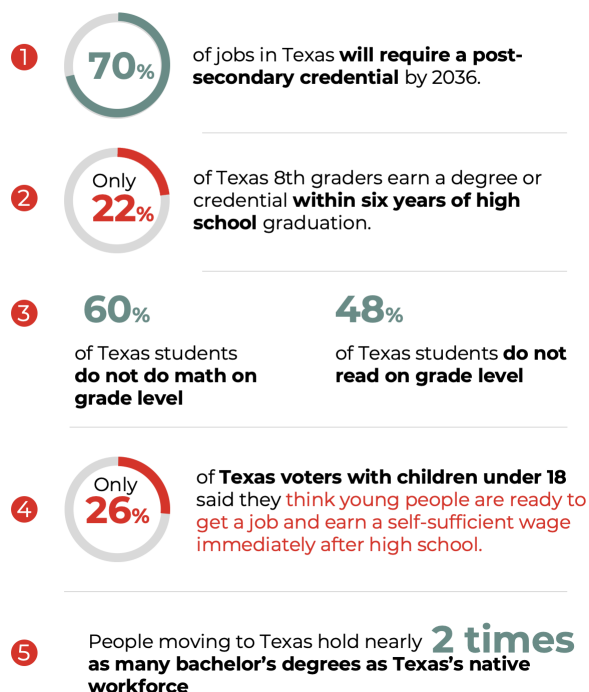
Public schools serve many functions — they are community hubs that serve families across our state with a range of activities and supports. But we cannot lose sight of their primary goal: to ensure that all young Texans are prepared for their next steps and economic well–being. Taxpayers invest more than $70B of Texas taxpayer money toward that goal each year.[9]

The stakes for our public investment are high, but the stakes for our shared future are even higher. Economic growth has for too long relied on attracting out–of–state talent.

To ensure future success, Texas must:

- **Commit to measurement and accountability.** The state should easure the performance of every student and hold school districts accountable for those results, regardless of a student's race, income or ability.

- **Enhance available workforce data.** Increase access to rigorous college and career education options to create more pathways for future prosperity.

- **Ensure student readiness.** When a student is deemed college, career or military ready, it should mean they are actually ready for college, career, or the military.

5 Fast Facts

1 **70%** of jobs in Texas **will require a post-secondary credential** by 2036.

2 Only **22%** of Texas 8th graders earn a degree or credential **within six years of high school** graduation.

3 **60%** of Texas students **do not do math on grade level**

48% of Texas students **do not read on grade level**

4 Only **26%** of **Texas voters with children under 18** said they think young people are ready to get a job and earn a self-sufficient wage immediately after high school.

5 People moving to Texas hold nearly **2 times** as many bachelor's degrees as Texas's native workforce

Texas cannot continue on a path of prosperity if its young people are relegated to second-class status, unable to compete in their own state and capitalize on the opportunities of tomorrow.

02
Readiness Matters

If Texas were a country, it would rank in the top 10 largest economies in the world.[10] Texas is also the top destination for companies relocating to the United States and leads the nation in job creation.[11] In 2021, Texas added almost 650,000 jobs and gained the most citizens of any state since 2010.[12]

And word is out. Far more people move into Texas than leave it for other states. In fact, Texas experienced a net migration of 230,961 people from other states between July 2021 and July 2022.[13]

Given this trajectory, our state's future seems very bright. But that bright future may not be accessible to everyone.

Today, those who move to Texas are better educated than those who grow up here, making Texas' children at risk of being left out of the state's future prosperity and relegated to second–class status behind their out–of–state peers.

To ensure a bright and prosperous future for our children, we must make sure they are ready for what's next.

Readiness means that a student has the skills and knowledge to succeed in their next step, whether that is the next grade or life after high school. Readiness looks like fourth–graders who can read well enough to access new concepts in science and social studies. It looks like high school students engaged in rigorous career education programs that will prepare them to access college and a career after graduation. It looks like college students who do not require remedial courses and can instead focus immediately on classes required by their academic or workforce program.

Readiness means choosing your own future

A two– or four–year degree has long been the path to a good job, and that is unlikely to change in the near term. Median earnings generally increase with every level of education.[14] But the workforce landscape is quickly changing, opening new paths to good careers for young people. And attitudes of young people around higher education are shifting as well.

College is increasingly not the preferred option for large groups of Texas students. Today, over half of Texans believe that students do not receive a good return on their investment in higher education.[15] Public university and community college enrollment has been flat or down from 2020 levels.[16] There is one notable exception: the Texas State Technical College (TSTC) System, which is focused on career preparation and credentials, has seen enrollment increase 40% over 2019 levels.[17]

This perception seems to be reflected, at least in part, in the Texas enrollment numbers. In 2020, the pandemic decline in higher education enrollment was twice as high for men (8.29%) as for women (3.44%).[18]

While 2– and 4–year degrees continue to provide access to greater lifetime earnings, schools and states need to offer students multiple pathways to meet their interests and ultimately attain a self–sustaining career.[19] **Schools must ensure that students are prepared for whatever path they choose to take after high school.** Whether it is enrolling in a 4–year university, entering an apprenticeship, or going to a trade school, a Texas public school student should be empowered to choose whatever path works best for them, with the reading and math skills needed to succeed in college or career.

Texas has a constitutional obligation to prepare students for life after high school

Texas has a constitutional obligation to provide a public education to all students, grounded in the belief that fostering a well-educated population is "essential to the preservation of liberty and the rights of the people."[20] **This constitutional obligation is encapsulated in the mission of Texas' public schools: preparing students for life after high school "to achieve their potential and fully participate now and in the future in the social, economic, and educational opportunities of our state and nation."**[21] This is commonly referred to as getting students college, career and military ready (CCMR).

Ensuring the college, career, and military readiness of Texas' students is spearheaded by the Tri–Agency Workforce Initiative, a collaboration among the Texas Education Agency, the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and the Texas Workforce Commission. House Bill 3767 (2021) requires the Tri–Agency Commissioners to develop goals for "the attainment of employment in jobs that pay a self–sufficient wage for all career education and training programs in the state."[22] A self–sufficient wage provides enough money to "meet a family's basic needs while also maintaining self–sufficiency" — in other words, ensuring they are free from needing government assistance.[23]

To meet this constitutional obligation and provide Texas students with the skills and credentials to earn sufficient wages to support their families after graduation, Texans invest more than $110 billion each year in a pre–Kindergarten to workforce pipeline.[24] This is a significant amount of taxpayer resources committed every year to ensure our children succeed.

Despite the constitutional and statutory obligation to graduate students ready for life after high school — and the significant investment of taxpayer resources in meeting them — **78% of Texas eighth–graders are not achieving college or career milestones within six years of high school graduation.**[25]

03
Data provides critical insights about readiness

If Texas wants its students to be ready for life after high school it has to take readiness in the younger grades seriously. Advancing students who are not on grade level will produce high school seniors who are not academically ready for life as adults. Today, the rate of readiness of Texas students peaks in kindergarten at 58% (see chart below).[26]

Texans know the readiness rates of students across grade levels because Texas is deeply committed to collecting data and measuring student outcomes. In Texas, we measure the performance of every student and hold school districts accountable for those results because every student — no matter their race or income — matters.

Texas is able to report to parents the academic performance of every child on a yearly basis and provide information on academic outcomes at the campus, district, and statewide levels. Data indicate which students are on track and who is falling behind— and we can break out that data by race, ethnicity, gender, and ability, allowing state and education leaders to identify and address equity issues.

Texas has several indicators that inform parents and policymakers whether students are on track for life after high school, including:

- the number of students who graduate high school prepared for college, a career or the military; and
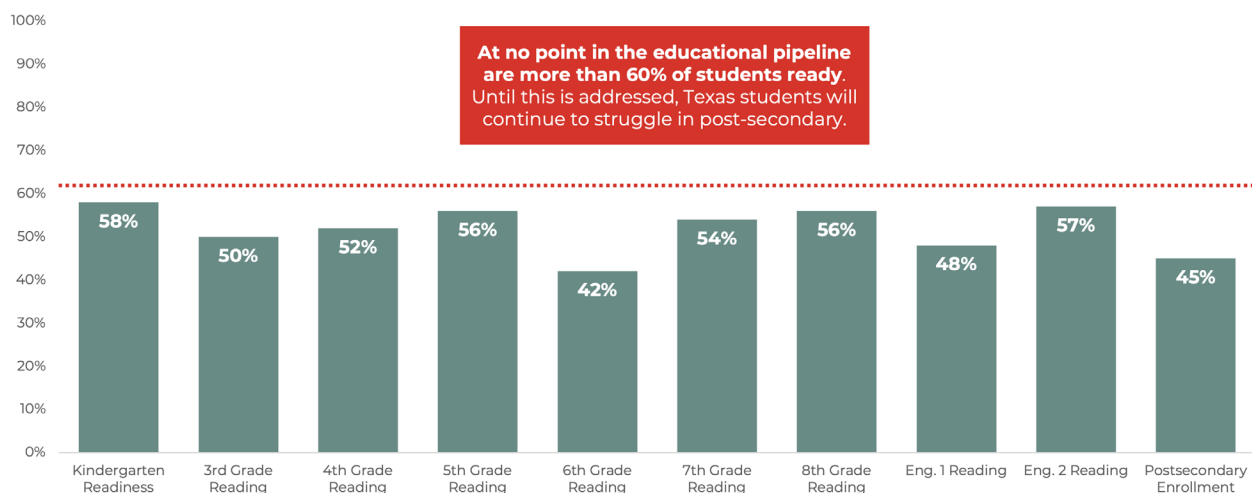
- student performance in four core subjects: reading, math, science and social studies as measured by the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR).

We can then compare these results with the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), often called "The Nation's Report Card," and other national exams to measure the readiness of Texas students relative to their peers in other states.

The data provided by these tools and indicators provide the basis for the academic accountability system (known as the A–F system), which measures the performance of Texas schools and school systems in ensuring student readiness.

The data provided by state and national assessments, along with Texas' academic accountability system, provide parents and caregivers with timely and actionable information about their child's educational progress. An analysis of statewide student performance provides policymakers with critical

Texas Readiness Levels Never Improve From Kindergarten Readiness Rates

At no point in the educational pipeline are more than 60% of students ready. Until this is addressed, Texas students will continue to struggle in post-secondary.

Category	Value
Kindergarten Readiness	58%
3rd Grade Reading	50%
4th Grade Reading	52%
5th Grade Reading	56%
6th Grade Reading	42%
7th Grade Reading	54%
8th Grade Reading	56%
Eng. 1 Reading	48%
Eng. 2 Reading	57%
Postsecondary Enrollment	45%

insights that guide the development of policies that address equity issues, improve student outcomes, and effectively and efficiently allocate taxpayer resources.

To understand and diagnose the issues in Texas' readiness, Texas has to commit to measuring student and district performance. Good policy is not possible without it.

Just as regular medical check–ups are necessary to prevent adverse health outcomes — and identify the correct treatment when something unexpected shows up — regularly measuring student performance is essential to promoting healthy student outcomes and readiness. Ignoring student performance risks allowing students to fall behind while much–needed resources and interventions remain unutilized.

But not all tests provide the data necessary to accurately, transparently and fairly measure student readiness. While national tests like NAEP and the SAT provide important context for Texas student performance, they do not measure individual student performance against Texas' academic standards.

The only truly transparent and accurate measures of an individual student's performance on state standards are annual state assessments in core subjects.

Annual tests in reading and math along with regular check–ups on science and social studies let educators know whether students are on track to be ready for adult life. Because every student in Texas takes the same exam, we can compare districts and schools to each other. Without state assessments, student progress is measured in averages and anecdotes. With them, we have clarity and transparency for families.

The academic accountability system allows the state to hold school districts accountable for how well they are preparing their students for life after high school and allows the state to intervene when a school system is chronically unable to academically equip students.

Without the information from the apples–to–apples comparison from the accountability system, Texas parents, students, and taxpayers would have no objective information on how their school district or campus is performing.

Data helped Texas officials make smart policy before

In the 1970s, data showed trends similar to those Texas is seeing today: students were not being prepared for life after high school. Survey data found that two–thirds of Texans with Spanish surnames were so academically unprepared that they were unable to function in society.[27] SAT scores were

in decline across demographic groups, with the average national score falling over 40 points from 1966 to 1980 on the SAT reading section.[28]

Percentage Passing Exit–Level TAAS

Texas Public Schools, 1996 Through 2001
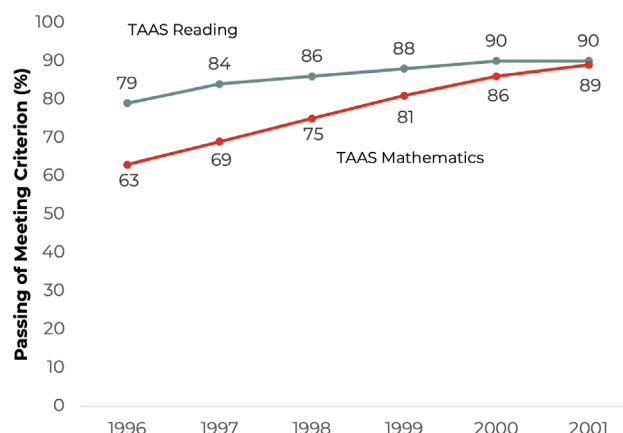
Starting in the mid–1980s, Texas led the way nationally on two key bipartisan efforts to improve student outcomes: standards–based reform and student data disaggregated by demographics including race, gender, and income. Texas began by establishing clear standards for what students should learn in each grade (referred to now as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills, or TEKS), then developed a statewide test to determine whether or not students learned the material associated with that grade standard.

For the first time, students were measured against specific benchmarks, and that performance was reported to the state.

Expectations were consistent, transparent, and rigorous for all students — a revolutionary concept. Test results were reported to the state and broken into groups by race, gender, and income. By the early 1990s, if a school district reported unacceptably and persistently low results, the state took action to improve the academic conditions of that school.

These efforts resulted in rapid improvements in student outcomes. Texas saw scores improve in core skills like using addition or subtraction — important mathematics concepts for all adults to understand — and scores continued to improve on subsequent assessments.

In 2001, 26% more students passed exit–level math tests and 11% more passed exit–level reading tests than they did in 1996 (see chart above).[29] These results were confirmed by Texas' performance on the NAEP.[30]

When standards slip, students suffer

Sadly, over time, Texas weakened its approach and lowered standards for its public education system, removing and relaxing passage requirements for lower grades and requiring high schoolers to pass fewer exit–level tests for high school graduation.

From the 2002–2003 to 2008–2009 school years, Texas required students to pass the third–grade reading exam to advance to fourth–grade. Over that time, Texas scores in fourth–grade reading saw a six–point increase in the percentage of students at the Basic level on the NAEP.

By 2009, Texas removed the third–grade passage requirement, which preceded a collapse in NAEP fourth–grade reading scores.[31] Subsequent eighth–grade NAEP reading scores showed a decline in both basic and proficient readers beginning in 2013–2014 — the exact year that the first cohort without a third–grade passage requirement was in eighth–grade — and eighth–grade reading scores have been in decline ever since.
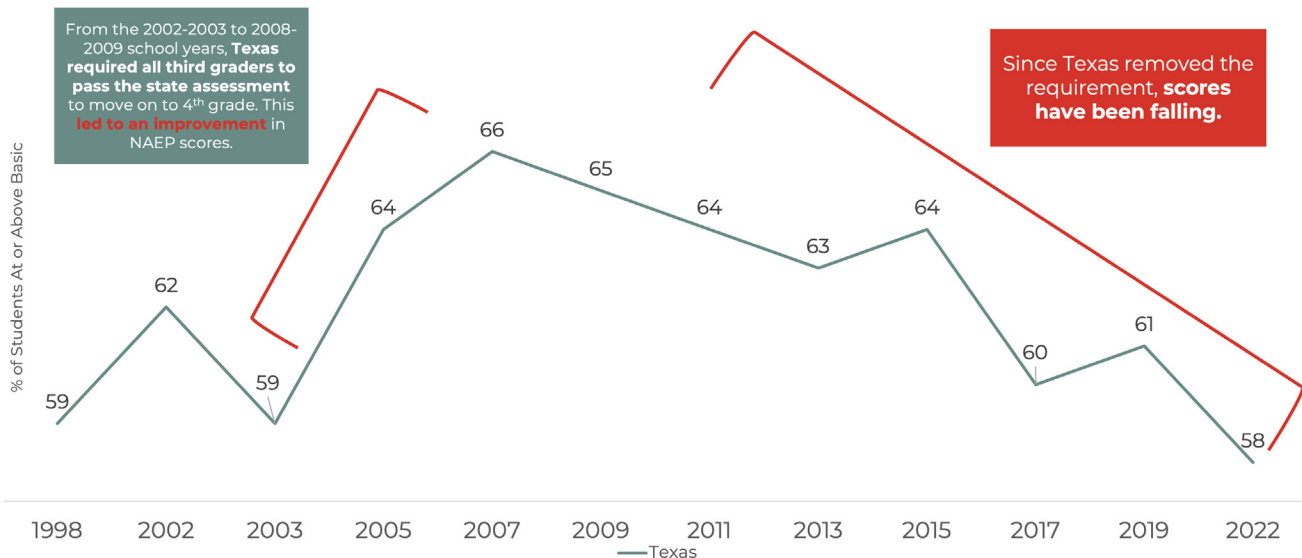
Over the same period, Mississippi increased its standards and required students to pass their third–grade reading assessment to move on to the next grade. As Texas' scores collapsed, Mississippi increased reading scores by over 20%, surpassing Texas and the national average scores.

It is worth noting that the cause of this decline has been the subject of speculation over the years. Some education advocates have suggested that the decline in Texas school performance is related to state budget cuts that went into effect for the 2011–2012 school year, but fourth–grade scores had been declining for five years prior to these cuts.

Another theory behind this decline related to textbook quality has been proposed. Around the 2010s, Texas changed its curriculum requirements, allowing districts to buy non–state approved curricula. Some posit this caused the score decline. It could be that the confluence of the removal of the third–grade passage requirement coupled with the decline in curricular quality worked together to drive down scores.

While more research is needed to understand this decline, it is clear that the solution that Mississippi implemented to raise reading scores is working significantly better than Texas' approach over past several years.[32]

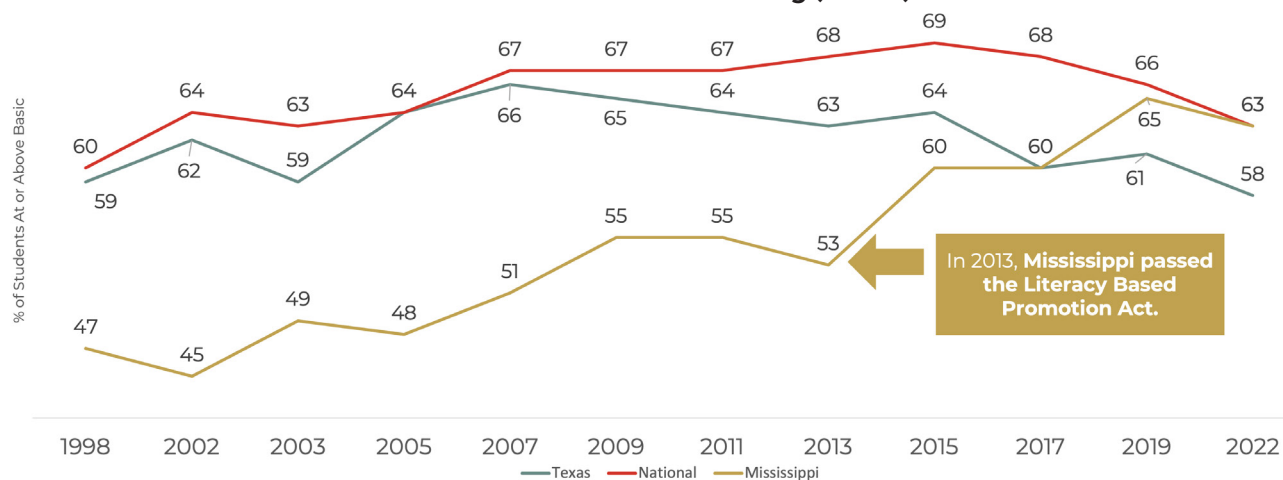## Percent of Texas 4th Graders At or Above Basic for Reading

From the 2002-2003 to 2008-2009 school years, **Texas required all third graders to pass the state assessment** to move on to 4th grade. This **led to an improvement** in NAEP scores.

Since Texas removed the requirement, **scores have been falling.**

% of Students At or Above Basic

59 — 62 — 59 — 64 — 66 — 65 — 64 — 63 — 64 — 60 — 61 — 58

1998 — 2002 — 2003 — 2005 — 2007 — 2009 — 2011 — 2013 — 2015 — 2017 — 2019 — 2022

— Texas

Percent of Texas 4th Graders at or above Basic for Reading (NAEP)

In 2011, **the first cohort of 4th Graders** without a 3rd grade passage requirement too the NAEP

Chart values (Texas 4th Graders): 59, 62, 59, 64, 66, 65, 64, 63, 64, 60, 61, 58

Years: 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022

Y-axis: % of Students At or Above Basic

Percent of Texas 8th Graders at or above Basic for Reading (NAEP)

For 8th Graders who were required to pass the third-grade assessment, **NAEP scores improved.**

The requirement was removed for the 2009-2010 3rd graders who would be in 8th grade in 2015

Chart values (Texas 8th Graders): 74, 73, 71, 69, 73, 73, 74, 76, 72, 71, 67, 66

Years: 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022

Y-axis: Percent At of Above Basic

Texas vs. Mississippi vs. National Percent of 4th Graders At or Above Basic for Reading (NAEP)

In 2013, **Mississippi passed the Literacy Based Promotion Act.**

Texas values: 59, 62, 59, 64, 66, 65, 64, 63, 64, 60, 61, 58

National values: 60, 64, 63, 64, 67, 67, 67, 64, 63, 68, 69, 68, 66, 63

Mississippi values: 47, 45, 49, 48, 51, 55, 55, 53, 60, 60, 65, 65, 63

Years: 1998, 2002, 2003, 2005, 2007, 2009, 2011, 2013, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022

Legend: Texas — National — Mississippi

Y-axis: % of Students At or Above Basic

Using data and collaboration to improve readiness

Developing effective efforts to improve educational outcomes for Texas students requires the guidance of timely and reliable data. The quantity and quality of available data can be expanded and improved through inter–agency collaboration and data sharing, as evidenced by the Tri–Agency Workforce Initiative. This data can, and should, be used to improve the state's Industry Based Certification list.

In 2021, House Bill 3767 (87R) formalized in statute the Tri–Agency Workforce Initiative (Tri–Agency), an effort begun by Governor Abbott in 2016 to improve collaboration among the Texas Education Agency, Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board and Texas Workforce Commission.

The commissioner of each of these agencies oversees state databases that house data related to workforce development goals by the three agencies; however, these are not interagency databases, which prevented ready access across the three agencies. HB 3767 removed interagency barriers by formalizing in statute the Tri–Agency partnership and set goals for the state's education and workforce systems.

Through the Tri–Agency's work towards "[designing] an integrated educational and workforce data infrastructure with a shared data governance policy," the TEA is able to access data necessary to determine whether adopted readiness indicators are resulting in improved college and career outcomes for Texas students.[33]

The Tri–Agency is also creating "publicly available and user–friendly data dashboards that report education and workforce outcomes data aligned to Tri–Agency priorities and disaggregated by income, race, ethnicity, gender, and region."[34] This level of transparency will help empower Texas parents and students to plan their education and career paths by showing available options with the greatest indicators of success best aligned with students' career goals.

One of the most common paths students take toward career readiness is the Industry–Based Certification (IBC). Texas has seen a considerable increase in the number of IBCs received by students — a 13 percentage point increase since 2018 — making this the fastest growing of the primary CCMR indicators.[35]

As Texas seeks to improve readiness, it should invest in high–quality pathways that increase career readiness. IBCs offer a good course forward toward addressing Texas' readiness needs if they provide students with a certification that can lead to a job.

A strong approach to IBCs requires that:

1. **IBCs are aligned with employer needs.** For IBCs to have any real value to students, they must certify competency in marketable, in–demand skills.

2. **IBCs indicate a mastery of skills.** Possession of an IBC should indicate that a student has successfully mastered the knowledge and skills required by an industry or occupation.

Alignment between IBCs and the labor market matters – without it, young people are set up to fail, holding valueless credentials. For example, in the 2021–2022 school year, 46,552 students were enrolled in a floral design class.[36] 3,759 of those students were enrolled in an advanced floral design course. However, labor market projections indicate that there will only be 41 total available floral designer jobs per year in Texas for the next decade.[37] Texas will designate many of those floral design students as career–ready – but the students will likely struggle to find a related job given the mismatch of supply and demand.

IBCs should also indicate a mastery of skills. This means that the student should have the appropriate amount of coursework, on–the–ground training options, and rigorous certification pathways that help to demonstrate mastery. A certification should be a capstone in an aligned series of courses that all work toward a high–wage and high–demand job.

Texas is working to make sure that students who receive an IBC do so at the end of a rigorous series of courses that relate to that certification. This work, taking place through the TEA rules process, is important to ensuring student readiness and should be continued over the next several years.

Ultimately, the type of seamless, interagency data access advanced by the Tri–Agency Workforce Initiative is particularly useful for strengthening the IBC list and ensuring it is aligned with employer needs and productive pathways toward college or career readiness. Higher education data allow TEA to monitor whether courses are helping students identify and qualify for postsecondary education opportunities in addition to providing them with in–demand skills.

Simultaneously, labor market data helps ensure that IBC programs are resulting in career success for students both in terms of higher rates of job attainment and better wage premiums. The three agencies are working together to tell parents, students, and taxpayers whether the current system of college, career, and military readiness in Texas K–12 schools is actually resulting in more graduates ready for life after high school.

04
What data tells us about student readiness

Texas evaluates whether or not students are on grade level each year in third- through eighth-grade and five times in high school using a standardized assessment called the State of Texas Assessment of Academic Readiness (STAAR). The STAAR exams measure students' knowledge on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), the state's academic standards. These standards are defined by the Texas State Board of Education in consultation with Texas educators, business leaders, and policymakers from across the state.

STAAR test questions are written every year by the Texas Education Agency in consultation with a diverse team of Texas teachers. A team of 16–20 educators reviews each question, making sure it measures a Texas academic standard for that grade in a fair and appropriate way.[38] **Each year, Texas teachers spend around 3,000 hours reviewing the exam.[39] After each exam, the questions are released, allowing parents and the public to review test materials.**

The STAAR provides insight into performance across grades and subject areas over time. Importantly, the STAAR exam is benchmarked against post-secondary readiness standards.[40] Success on the STAAR exam indicates whether a student is academically prepared for life after high school, underscoring its importance in understanding Texas' state of readiness.

Insights from 2022 STAAR math scores

Prior to 2020, Texas' STAAR math performance was low but increasing on a year-over-year basis. Learning loss as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic erased all of this increase. After this decline:

- 60% of all Texas students are not on grade level in math.[41]

- 75% of Black, 66% of Hispanic and 70% of economically disadvantaged students are not on grade level in math.[42]

- There is no grade level — from elementary to high school — with over 50% of students on track in math.[43]

While some Texas students have seen their math scores begin to recover, middle schoolers continue to see year-over-year declines (see chart on the next page).

- Only 38% of eighth-graders were on grade level in 2022, leaving over 260,000 eighth-graders behind with only four years to catch up before entering college or the workforce.[44]

- While other grades saw score improvements, 2022's sixth- and seventh-graders have experienced sustained year-over-year declines.

Percent of Students On Grade Level in Math (All Tested Grades)
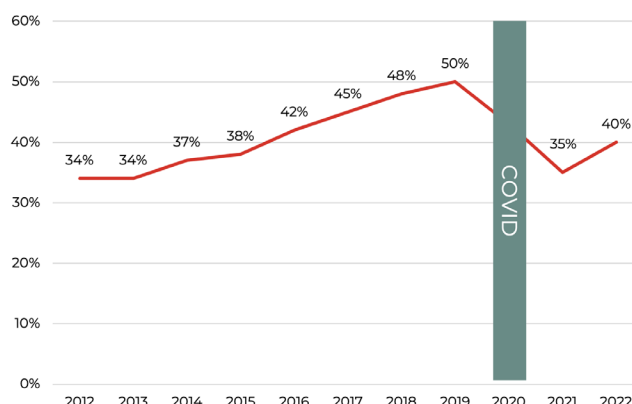
## Insights from 2022 STAAR reading scores

Texas reading scores saw relatively steady increases on a year-over-year basis from 2012 to 2019. While the pandemic set reading scores back to 2017 levels, students have recovered more than in math. Nearly half of Texas students cannot read on grade level, but the trend line is moving in the right direction.

Today, over 50% of Texas students are on grade level in reading for the first time since the STAAR was administered in 2012. While this news is encouraging, over 1.5 million third through tenth-grade students are still not at grade level in reading.[45]

- 48% of all Texas students are not on grade level in reading.[46]

- 60% of Black, 56% of Hispanic, and 59% of economically disadvantaged students are not on grade level in reading.[47]

- 44% of eighth–graders were not on grade level in 2022, leaving over 180,000 eighth–graders behind with only four years to catch up before entering college or the workforce.

Despite these disconcerting trends, there has been a 4% increase in students scoring masters grade level in reading since 2019.[48] A welcome sign of progress.

Percent of Students On Grade Level in Reading Language Arts (All Tested Grades)
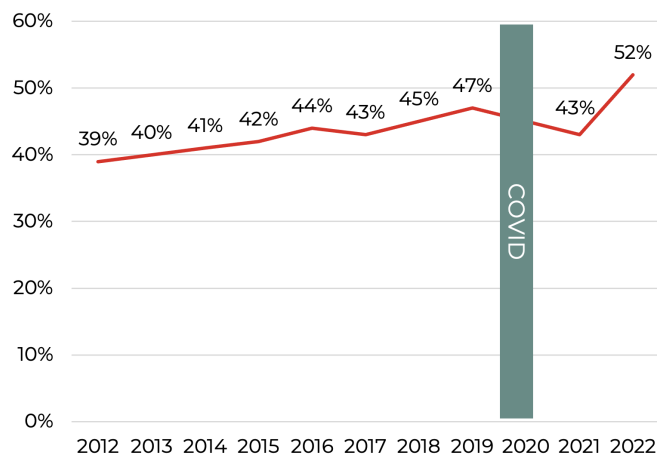
Current Middle Schoolers Face Alarming Declines in Cohort Math Scores Since 2019
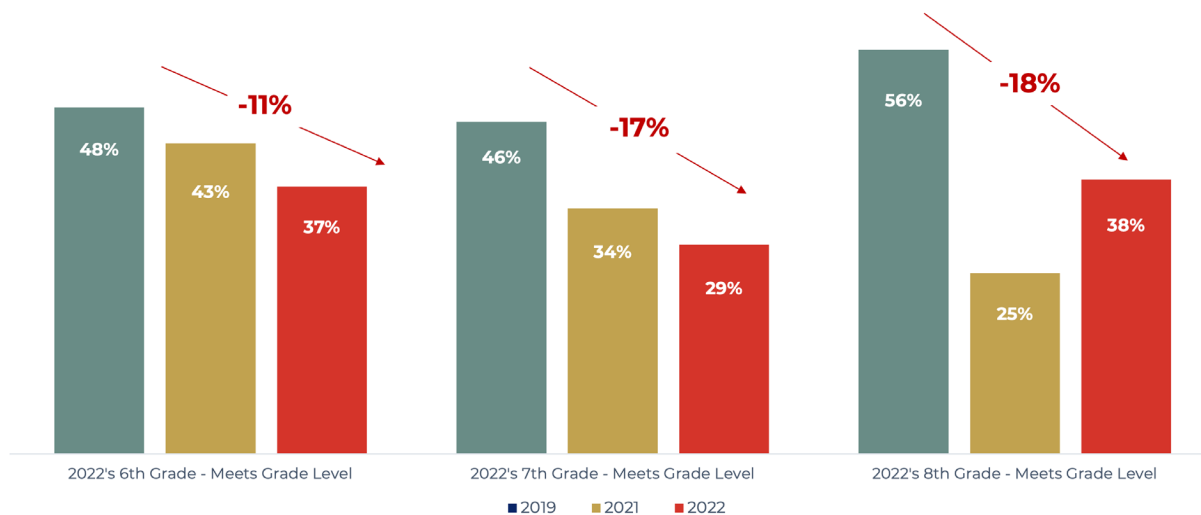
Texas' performance on the Nation's Report Card

Data available from STAAR tests indicate that too many Texas students are not achieving competency in math and reading. The Nation's Report Card (also known as NAEP), administered to samples of students in every state, allows comparisons across states. Recent NAEP scores confirm what the dropping STAAR scores suggest – far too many Texas students are falling behind their peers in other states.

- **Texas students lose a substantial amount of math proficiency between 4th and 8th grade.** While nationally the percentage of students proficient in math drops between the 4th and 8th grade as shown in the figure below, Texas has only recently experienced substantial losses in proficiency for its students in math. For example, as fourth–graders,

44% of the graduating class of 2023 was proficient in math. But only 30% of that same cohort of students tested at or above proficient in the eighth–grade — a 14 percentage–point drop.[49] This change in proficiency was the largest decrease of any state in the nation.[50] In comparison to the drops in proficiency for Texas cohorts shown below, the average drop nationally for the same cohorts was never more than 8%.
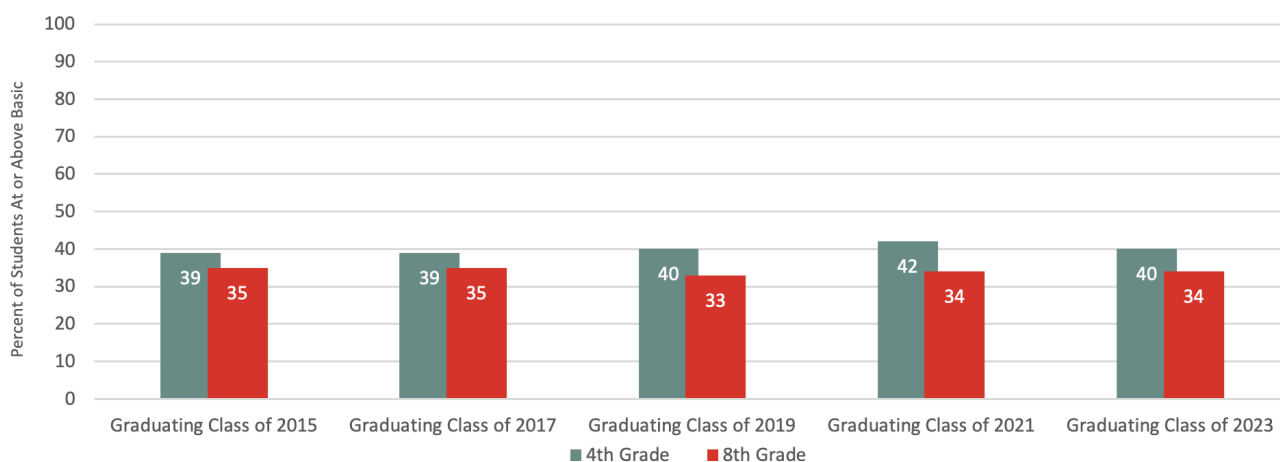
Texas ranks in the top half of the country on reading when you look at individual student groups, yet only 30% of Texas fourth–graders and 23% of eighth graders are proficient. While much of the country struggled with reading score improvement during the pandemic, Texas managed to hold performance relatively steady, resulting in an increased ranking for Texas relative to other states. Texas' eighth grade black and English learning (EL) students also showed statistically significant growth in 2022. While these are bright spots, there is still significant work to do. Texas cannot rest on relative rankings alone. Texas is ranked first in the nation for English Language learner reading proficiency with only 10% of English–learning eighth graders actually proficient in reading.[51]
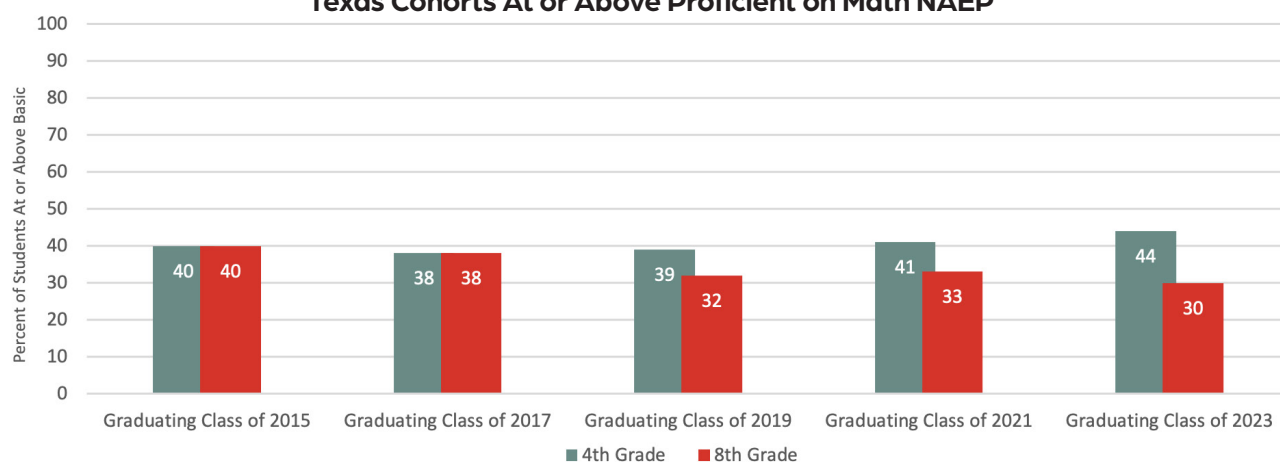
Texas scores have been declining for almost a decade. Texas scores on eighth–grade reading and math peaked in the early 2010s, and they have been consistently declining since that time (see charts below).[52] Every 10 points on the NAEP equates to roughly one grade level.[53] Since the early 2010s, Texas has lost almost one full grade level of learning in reading and almost two grade levels of learning in math among eighth–graders.[54]

National Cohorts At or Above Proficient on Math NAEP

	Graduating Class of 2015	Graduating Class of 2017	Graduating Class of 2019	Graduating Class of 2021	Graduating Class of 2023
4th Grade	39	39	40	42	40
8th Grade	35	35	33	34	34

Texas Cohorts At or Above Proficient on Math NAEP

	Graduating Class of 2015	Graduating Class of 2017	Graduating Class of 2019	Graduating Class of 2021	Graduating Class of 2023
4th Grade	40	38	39	41	44
8th Grade	40	38	32	33	30

Texas 8th Grade Reading

	2019 Rank (Scale Score)	2022 Rank (Scale Score)
ALL STUDENTS	**47th (256)**	**41st (255)**
Black	34th (238)	6th (247*)
White	40th (267)	40th (264)
Hispanic	34th (250)	26th (248)
English Learners	8th (227)	1st (239*)
Nat'l School Lunch Prog.	43rd (246)	22nd (248)
Students w/ Disabilities	33rd (224)	14th (228)

Texas 4th Grade Reading

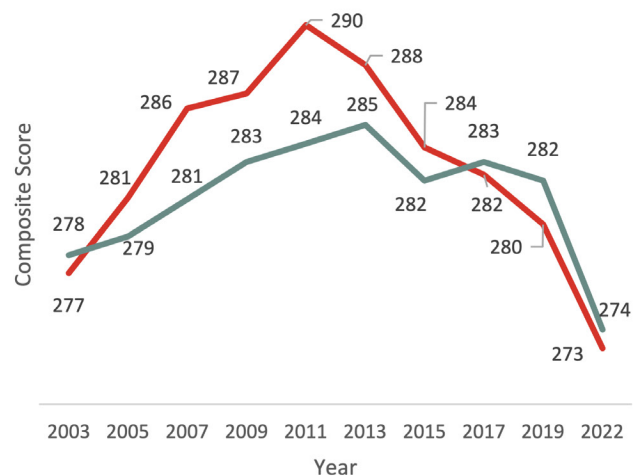|	2019 Rank (Scale Score)	2022 Rank (Scale Score)
ALL STUDENTS	**42nd (216)**	**33rd (214)**
Black	25th (205)	6th (204)
White	12th (232)	15th (228)
Hispanic	13th (208)	21st (205)
English Learners	14th (196)	4th (199)
Nat'l School Lunch Prog.	31st (206)	20th (202)
Students w/ Disabilities	30th (181)	17th (184)

* Statistically significant differences between 2019 & 2022 scale score
NOTE: Disability status of student, including those with 504 plans

Texas vs. National 8th Grade Reading NAEP Scores
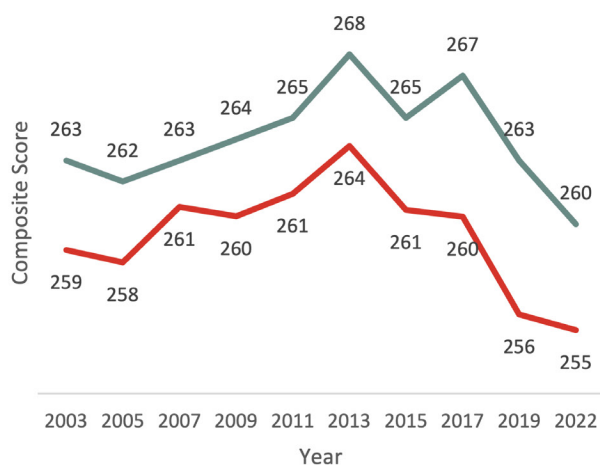
Texas vs. National 8th Grade Mathematics NAEP Scores

05
What data tells us about the readiness of Texas students

A lack of readiness can have life-long consequences for students. As they explore career pathways, students take specific exams – the SAT, the ACT, and the Texas Success Initiative (TSI) exam – that help inform what post-secondary options they pursue.

Because the students taking these tests perceive themselves as college–bound, the results tell an important readiness story — and a concerning one.

- The percentage of Texas students that were college ready according to their SAT or ACT score fell five percentage points, from 28% in 2018 to 23%, in 2022.[55]

- The percentage of Texas students who were college ready on the TSI — a test students commonly take to qualify for dual credit coursework and technical college course placement — fell seven percentage points, from 38% in 2018 to 31%, in 2021.[56]

These results are especially concerning when Texas students are compared to their national peers on the SAT.
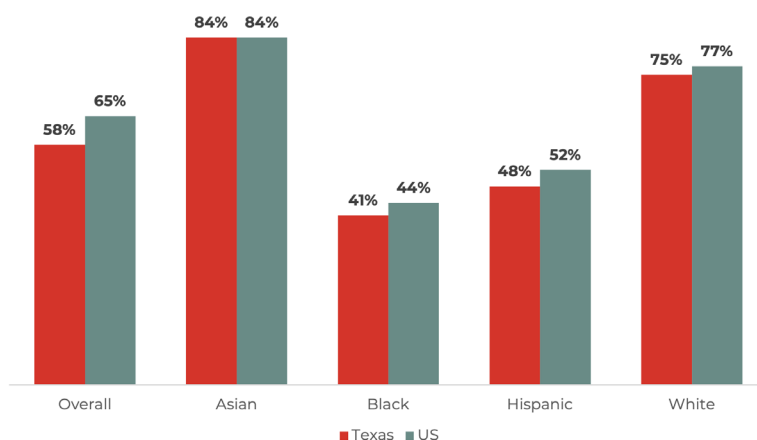
- Texas students consistently underperform the national average, including when looking at subgroup performance.[57]

- In math, Texas underperforms the national average in every subgroup.[58]

- In English and language arts, the percentage of Texas students who meet benchmarks is below the national average in every subgroup but one (Asian Americans in Texas perform at the same level as their national peers on the SAT English section, 84%).[59]

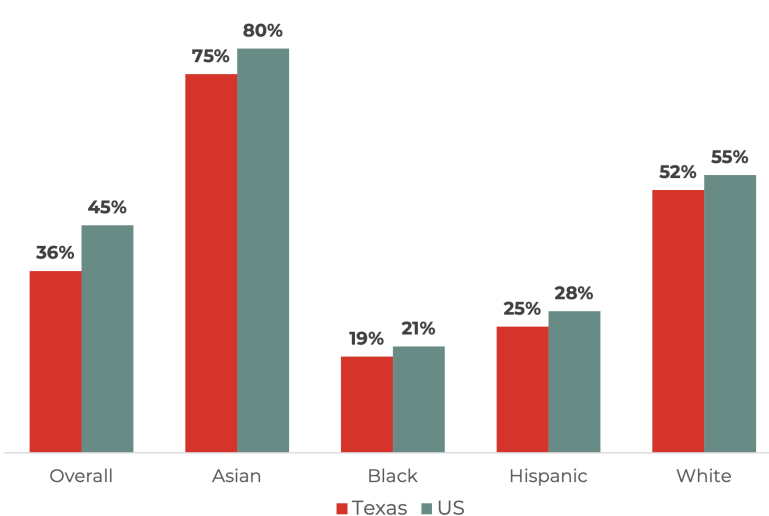## Too many Texas students are not graduating

While Texas often boasts about its 90% graduation rate, a closer look at the progress of eighth–grade cohorts through high school and beyond reveals concerning trends.[60]

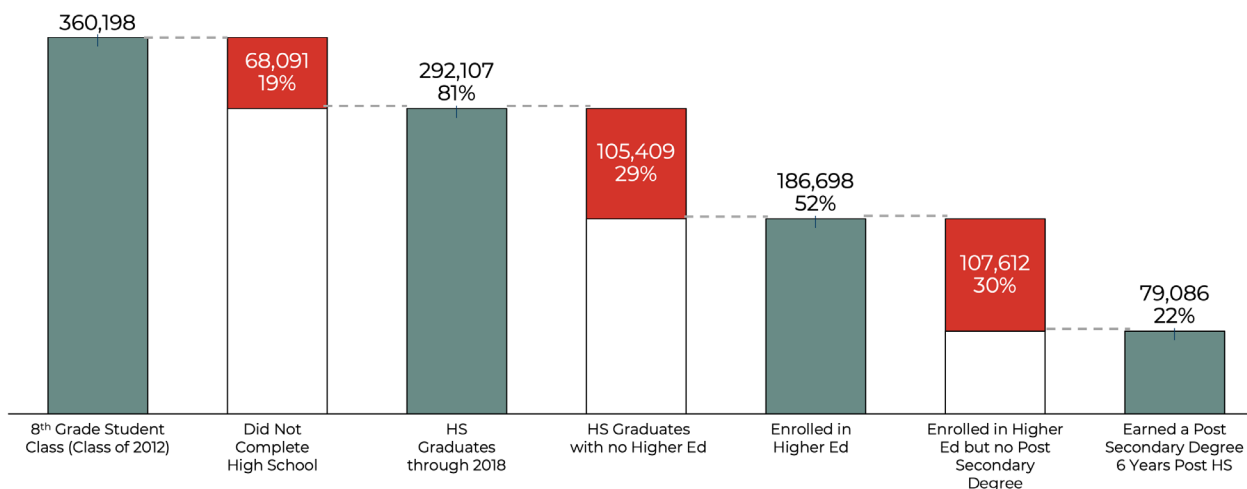- 19% of Texas eighth–graders do not graduate from a Texas public high school.

Texas v. National SAT Performance by Subgroup
% College Ready in English/Language Arts

	Texas	US
Overall	58%	65%
Asian	84%	84%
Black	41%	44%
Hispanic	48%	52%
White	75%	77%

■ Texas ■ US

Texas v. National SAT Performance by Subgroup
% College Ready in Math

	Texas	US
Overall	36%	45%
Asian	75%	80%
Black	19%	21%
Hispanic	25%	28%
White	52%	55%

■ Texas ■ US

THECB 8th Grade Cohort Pipeline to a Degree or Certificate, 2012 8th Graders through 2022

- 48% do not enroll in higher education.

- 78% do not receive a post–secondary degree or credential within six years of high school graduation.[61]

Underneath these dismal topline numbers lurk deep disparities for economically disadvantaged students — a category applicable to the majority of Texas students (60.2%).[62]

- 23% of economically disadvantaged Texas eighth–graders do not graduate from a Texas public high school.

- 57% do not enroll in higher education.

- 86% do not receive a post–secondary degree or credential within six years of high school graduation.[63]

Texas is struggling to get students through high school. Tens of thousands of eighth–graders are regularly lost from the system. Even among those eighth–graders who do make it through high school and are working toward post–secondary education, 30% do not complete a degree or certification.[64]

Failing to complete high school leaves too many young Texans facing an uncertain and risky economic reality unprepared to attain a post–secondary degree or credential and cut off from good–paying jobs as a result.

A high school diploma is not sufficient

Even for those students who do graduate, a high school diploma is no longer sufficient to access a good–paying job.

In 2011, 51% of all jobs in Texas that paid $65,000 or more were held by Texans with a high school diploma, GED, or below.[65] But by 2019, that number had dropped to just 11%.[66] In 2019, only 11% of high–paying jobs were held by Texans with a high school diploma, GED, or below.[67]

A high school diploma, by itself, is no longer the path to a prosperous future that it may have been for previous generations. As the Texas economy changes, the state needs to sharpen its focus on increasing student readiness for life after high school. Doing so requires more than a high school diploma.

Texas parents are worried

In a 2022 Texas 2036 survey of Texas parents, 65% of Texas parents said they are worried about whether their student is prepared for life after high school, with traditionally underserved demographics indicating much higher rates of concern. 86% of Texas families who speak Spanish at home are worried about their children not being prepared. 70% of special education and low–income families say they are concerned as well.

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Failure to act threatens Texans' future prosperity

Texas is at a crossroads

Texas legislators have faced big challenges in education before and responded with strong, evidenced–based policies that help students like Texas' 2019 school finance overhaul, known as House Bill 3 (86R).[68]

In crafting HB 3, the Legislature reviewed data provided by assessments to understand and define the problem faced by the state — namely, that Texas' academic performance on national and state assessments was in decline, and too few students were ready upon graduation for college or the workforce. Legislators then identified policy solutions: increased public education funding and an emphasis on proven, data–driven programs that focused on improving student outcomes.

For example, lawmakers in 2019 were able to accurately assess that Texas students were struggling to read by the end of third grade. With HB 3, the Legislature made structural improvements to reading instruction to address these issues, including providing targeted funding in the Early Education Allotment. The Early Education Allotment required all teachers to be trained on the Science of Teaching Reading; and raising pre–kindergarten standards.[69] In 2022, Texas saw its best third–grade reading scores since 2015 as a result, with over half of Texas third graders reading on grade level, despite the learning losses from the pandemic.[70]

Alarmingly, Texas lawmakers are being asked to do the opposite this session.

Instead of focusing on strategies to improve the readiness rates of young Texans, Texas lawmakers are being asked to roll back past progress and weaken how Texas measures readiness. Following this path would result in consequences for generations of Texans.

Without our state's assessment and accountability system, Texas parents and policymakers would be in the dark about student readiness as they progress through school. Lacking actionable data about student progress instead, Texas'

$70 billion public education system would be guided by anecdotes and averages rather than facts and data, leaving state leaders unable to see lingering disparities and serve the interests of every Texas child.[71]

Social and economic impacts

Lack of readiness has severe social and economic impacts, both on individuals and the state. Researchers have been able to link learning loss, as measured on NAEP, to state GDP and student lifetime earnings impacts, further demonstrating the real–world impacts of student readiness. In Texas, the impacts of COVID–19 on student readiness will mean students in Texas will see 4.9% lower lifetime earnings due to learning losses during the pandemic.[72]

Right now, each cohort of Texas eighth–graders stands to lose $104 billion in future earnings due to a lack of readiness for their futures.[73] Low–income students (60.7% of Texas' student population) will bear $67 billion of that loss.[74]

Learning losses from the pandemic will have a significant financial impact, lowering Texas's GDP by more than 1.6% during the 21st century. The total impact on Texas' economy would be the second–largest in the nation, amounting to nearly $940 billion.

Eighth–grade math scores are also linked to other important long–term social outcomes like higher high school graduation rates, higher college enrollment, lower rates of teen pregnancy, lower incarceration rates, and fewer violent crime arrests.[75]

We are just beginning to understand the social and economic implications of the pandemic, but the preliminary research is clear: without intervention, the decline in student academic outcomes in earlier grades will have long–term social and economic consequences for students who experienced Covid shutdowns over and above current readiness concerns.

Texas is importing talent to meet workforce needs

Texas has one of the most powerful economies in the United States, but native Texans are often left out of this growth. A veritable jobs factory, Texas leads the nation in job creation.[76] But this job growth is not being sustained by Texas talent. Instead, Texas is importing a significant portion of its talent from out–of–state.[77]

This is the result of economic reality: employers have no choice but to fill open positions with qualified employees, and if Texans do not have the qualifications employers need, they will have to recruit from out of state.

Population data bears this out. For the past decade, Texas has had an annual net migration of 214,000.[78] From 2020–2022, Texas saw an increase in migration to the state with the cumulative net migration reaching 639,314.[79] And these

individuals are better–educated than those born and raised in Texas, holding nearly twice as many bachelor's degrees than Texas's native workforce.[80]

Texas businesses deserve the opportunity to hire qualified Texas employees.

Failing to address this readiness gap could result in an economic future in which native Texans, unable to compete for good jobs, are relegated to second–class status in what will likely be one of the strongest economies in the world.

Texas strongly benefits from those moving here from other states and countries, but young people growing up in our state must be prepared to compete and succeed. A strong future in Texas depends on getting this right.

07

Improving student readiness to secure Texas' future prosperity

Texas will continue to be an economic powerhouse, both in our nation and the world. For Texas' children to have an opportunity to share in this prosperity, the state must make a focused effort to improve its approach to student readiness.

What Texas needs to do right now

As part of this focused effort, Texas must recommit to measuring readiness at every stage of a student's schooling. Texas must maintain its commitment to measuring student outcomes, in all grades and core subjects, on an annual basis if we truly want our students to be ready for life after high school.

A student might receive a carpentry certification, but if they cannot read the email telling them when to show up at a job site, that certification is not actually usable. And if they can't perform the math necessary to build — or manage their business — their career will be short–lived.

Texas must reject calls to dilute measurement at all stages of the student's education. Such efforts represent a significant threat to the college and career readiness of Texas students. We cannot afford to repeat past mistakes, the consequences of which we are still facing today.

Next steps toward improving student readiness

Commit to measurement and accountability
A statewide assessment system, like the STAAR exam, provides transparency and facilitates targeted interventions to improve student outcomes where help is needed. Data provided by such a system is critical to ensuring that Texas' 5.4 million students are on track to graduate ready for life after high school. Without this system, parents and taxpayers across the state do not how objective insight into how students and schools are performing.

Enhancing available workforce data
Texas must support the Tri–Agency Workforce Initiative by investing in data infrastructures and analysis that provide parents and policymakers with actionable information about employment opportunities both now and in the future. This data should be used to continue to improve the state's approach to Industry Based Certifications.

Ensuring student readiness
Every year, tens of thousands of Texas high school graduates are told they are "career ready" because they receive a certification in a career or technical skill. What these students and parents do not know is that many of the certifications they have received are meaningless, accruing no benefits other than to improve that school district's accountability score. This is not acceptable.

Texas must ensure that a student deemed college, career, or military ready is truly ready to compete and succeed in their chosen path. The TEA has revised the current approach to IBCs in their proposed changes to the A–F system. By 2026, in order for a student to receive credit for an IBC in the academic accountability system, they will need to take a series of career courses to receive a certification. This is a good start.

Texas must adopt a more rigorous approach to college and career readiness indicators that responds to the realities our students will be living in during the coming decades. This may require tough conversations with school and community leaders as the state does the difficult work of improving its public education system to serve the students of today and tomorrow. But Texas' students deserve nothing less.

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Appendix

Legislative Improvements to STAAR

The Texas Legislature has committed to updating and improving the STAAR exam, most recently with House Bill 3906 (86R), a bipartisan bill that received unanimous support in the House and the Senate.[81]

- With HB 3906, the Legislature took major steps toward improving the quality of STAAR test questions, ensuring that they more closely mirror 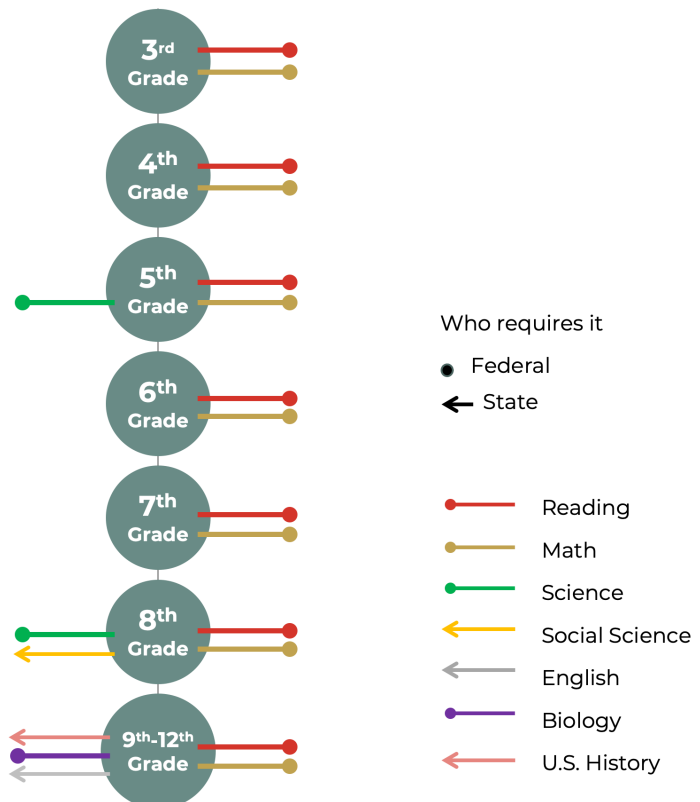the classroom experience by reducing the number of multiple–choice questions and integrating the writing assessment into other subjects.

- The state has invested $70 million into this redesign to make sure that the STAAR exam is the best test that it can be.

- Texas is currently piloting a program that would further reduce the footprint of the STAAR exam in Texas classrooms by shortening the exam and administering it in three smaller increments across the year.

- As a result of these changes, parents and teachers will have better and more regular information on student learning, addressing concerns about the adequacy of once–per–year reporting.

There are certain STAAR exams required at each grade

Who requires it

- Federal
- ← State

- Reading
- Math
- Science
- ← Social Science
- ← English
- Biology
- ← U.S. History

3rd Grade
4th Grade
5th Grade
6th Grade
7th Grade
8th Grade
9th–12th Grade

09
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