

**August 13, 2024**

To: House Public Education Committee

Re: Interim Charge #4: Early Literacy & Numeracy Outcomes

Chairman Buckley and honorable members of the Committee,

The Commit Partnership, Texas 2036, and the 26 organizations undersigned thank you for the opportunity to provide written testimony regarding the Committee's interim charge related to foundational early literacy and numeracy outcomes. Given the importance of academic growth in the early grades for later student success, the recommendations considered by the Committee on this charge possess **enormous potential to improve student outcomes**, ultimately contributing to the development of a robust workforce and a prosperous Texas.

Over the past several sessions, the House Public Education Committee and the Texas Legislature have made significant steps to improve student outcomes by strategically investing in high-quality practices (e.g., HB 3, 86R; HB 1416, 88R). As a result of this work, Texas has seen academic growth relative to other states. Since 2019 Texas has moved up 9 spots in the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) rankings in 4th grade reading (from 42nd to 33rd). Texas' 8th grade reading and 8th grade math rankings have also increased by 5 and 7 spots respectively between 2019 and 2022.<sup>1</sup>

**While these performance improvements are a sign of progress, performing in the bottom half of the nation is unacceptable.** The recent STAAR results should serve as a clarion call for further action: on the 2024 STAAR, across all grades and subjects, just 47% of Texas students performed on grade level. These numbers were much worse for students experiencing economic disadvantage at just 36%.<sup>2</sup>

### THE IMPORTANCE OF STRONG ACADEMIC FOUNDATIONS

The investments in high-quality, data-proven strategies over the past few years are important to improving Texas' student outcomes over time. In order to effectuate the best use of teacher time and taxpayer resources and ensure sustained impact, **we must couple these with a strong commitment to early literacy and mathematics.** This is especially the case given that academic growth rates have comparatively slowed in the years following the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>3</sup> Without focusing on the early grades, STAAR outcomes could continue to languish or decline as evident in 2024 results.

Early academic progress is predictive of later opportunities and student performance. In particular, the data make it very clear that few things matter more to a child's future than their ability to read: students who learn to read by 3rd grade are four times more likely to graduate high school.<sup>4</sup> As students transition in 3rd grade from learning to read to reading to learn, early literacy proficiency becomes an essential building block for later academic and lifetime outcomes.

Texas has made great strides to support student outcomes through the passage of HB 1416, ensuring academically behind students receive learning acceleration supports after 3rd grade and SB 2124, ensuring more academically capable students are on track to complete advanced math in high school and postsecondary via completion of Algebra 1 in 8th grade. However, for these policies to ultimately reach their intended impact, additional supports are necessary in the early grades.

<sup>1</sup> [The Nation's Report Card](#)

<sup>2</sup> Commit, [Dallas County STAAR Dashboard](#)

<sup>3</sup> Curriculum Associates. (2024). [Student Growth in the Post-COVID Era](#)

<sup>4</sup> Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). [Early Warning! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters](#)

Foundational math skills subsequently unlock students’ ability to meaningfully engage with higher-level STEM coursework. STEM jobs are expected to grow nationally by 8% by 2029, outpacing total job growth, and will likely be held by workers with higher levels of educational and degree attainment.<sup>5</sup> As the future Texas economy relies on a skilled and qualified STEM workforce, a student’s inability to master math in the early grades substantially hinders their access to an increasingly critical and lucrative sector of Texas’ economy.

Data show that investment in these early grades is critical to a student’s long-term academic success. Specifically, of students who did not meet grade-level reading expectations in 3rd grade in 2019, only 1 in 5 (18%) caught up to perform at grade level in 3 years by 6th grade, and with respect to math roughly 1 in 10 (13%) caught up over the same time period.<sup>6</sup> **In light of this trend, this year’s STAAR results are particularly concerning.** Despite literacy scores rebounding post-COVID, currently just 46% of all 3rd grade students and 36% of those experiencing economic disadvantage are on grade-level in reading – both indicators dropping 2% points from 2023.<sup>7</sup> Texas also saw similar declines in 3rd grade math performance, where overall subject-specific proficiency rates remain far below pre-pandemic levels: currently just 43% of all 3rd graders and 30% of those experiencing economic disadvantage are meeting grade level standards.

**These data strongly underscore the need for an increased focus on effective instruction and support prior to 3rd grade as a critical component to any strategy designed to improve student outcomes and opportunities.** Early investments and focus in a child’s academic career not only provide students with a strong academic foundation, but also save the state and families expensive remediation and acceleration efforts later on.

**OPPORTUNITIES TO IMPROVE EARLY LITERACY & EARLY NUMERACY**

With nearly 1.8 million PK-3 students enrolled in Texas public schools, the steps the legislature takes to address the lack of literacy and math proficiency in the state will have wide-reaching impact and generational effects.<sup>8</sup> As the Committee evaluates opportunities for the upcoming legislative session, we respectfully request that the following evidence-based policy recommendations are taken into consideration:

Context	Recommendation
<p>Getting students on track academically by 3rd grade begins early. For example, eligible TX students who attend PreK are nearly 2x more likely to be Kindergarten Ready than peers who do not attend, emphasizing the importance of students’ participation in quality early learning programming. This boost must be followed by high-quality instruction in Kindergarten through 3rd grade to sustain these results.</p>	<p><b>Expand the Early Education Allotment</b> so that PreK 3 &amp; 4 students generate the weight, strengthening access to critical quality early education and providing school systems more resources to provide evidence-based acceleration strategies prior to 3rd grade.</p>

<sup>5</sup> [US Bureau of Labor and Statistics](#)

<sup>6</sup> Commit Analysis of student-level STAAR scores 2019-2022, Texas Education Agency. Acceleration is calculated as the percentage of students who scored Meets or Masters in Year B out of all students who scored Do Not Meets or Approaches in Year A.

<sup>7</sup> Commit, [Dallas County STAAR Dashboard](#)

<sup>8</sup> [PEIMS, 2023-2024 Student Enrollment](#)

<p><b>Texas currently does not have reliable, valid data on student academic growth prior to 3rd grade.</b> Because of this, Texas schools lack tools to support instruction, intervention, and inform policymakers of the efficacy of passed policies to improve outcomes. This lack of information has further realtime ripple effects, given that 9 in 10 parents believe their child is performing on grade level in reading and/or math.<sup>9</sup></p> <p>When educators identify students in need and provide high-quality supports early on, however, kids can catch up: a recent research study shows that early tutoring provided to North Texas elementary students significantly improved learning, meeting or succeeding the national baseline by the end of the year. <b>The growth was even more profound for the students who started furthest behind.</b><sup>10</sup></p>	<p><b>Strengthen early screening &amp; intervention</b> by ensuring schools utilize evidence-based progress monitoring and diagnostic instruments to detect foundational gaps and teachers are provided data literacy to adequately inform classroom instruction, and provide targeted, research-based support for students to get back on track. Additionally, <b>provide parents with reliable information on their student’s progress and resources</b> to effectively support at-home learning.</p>
<p>Only 36% of elementary and middle school principals in Texas report that all or almost all of their math teachers demonstrate deep knowledge of math pedagogy, and only 41% have a deep knowledge of math.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>Implemented at the state policy level in 26 states (Texas is not one of them), instructional coaching has been found to be an evidence-based program to support students’ early literacy outcomes by increasing teachers’ utilization of effective classroom practices.<sup>12</sup></p> <p>Research suggests that the difference in the quality of instruction between teachers with instructional coaches and those without was equivalent to the difference between novice teachers and teachers with five to 10 years of experience.<sup>13</sup></p>	<p><b>Consider efforts to expand access to high-quality professional development for math teachers</b>, by scaling or providing appropriate incentives for participation in Math Academies, pending the TEA’s efficacy study.</p> <p><b>Provide teachers across foundational subjects in reading and math with additional supports – such as instructional coaching –</b> strategically aligned to HQIM implementation and focused on campuses with the greatest percentage of academically behind students.</p>

<sup>9</sup> Learning Heroes & Gallup. (2024). [B-Flation: How “Good” Grades Can Sideline Parents](#)

<sup>10</sup> National Student Support Accelerator. (Oct. 2023). [The Effects of Virtual Tutoring on Young Readers: Results from a Randomized Controlled Trial](#)

<sup>11</sup> RAND. (Feb. 2024). [Elementary and Middle School Opportunity Structures That Factor into Students' Math Learning: Findings from the American Mathematics Educator Study](#)

<sup>12</sup> The Elementary School Journal, Vol. 111, No. 1 (Sept. 2010) [Assessing the Value-Added Effects of Literacy Collaborative Professional Development on Student Learning](#); [ExcelinEd Literacy Policy Map](#)

<sup>13</sup> Kraft, M.A., and Blazar, D. (2018). [Taking Teacher Coaching to Scale: Can personalized training become standard practice?](#)

When adults redouble our focus to the foundational academic years prior to 3rd grade, Texas can support more students in a strong academic start, catch up students who fall behind early on, and ultimately prepare more students for success following high school graduation. We thank the Committee for a strong commitment to ensuring that every student has access to a high-quality education resulting in the knowledge and skills necessary to be successful in the modern economy. We appreciate your consideration of the impactful, evidence-based policy recommendations outlined in these comments and look forward to future discussion regarding the literacy and numeracy outcomes of PK-3 students in Texas.

Gratefully,

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**Supporting Organizations**

