



## **Texas Parents Need Transparency to Make Informed ESA Decisions**

Written Comments on House Bill 3

Submitted to the House Public Education Committee

March 11, 2025

### **Key Takeaways:**

- Parents need information to make informed choices about their child’s education. This includes ensuring each participating family has access to information on their child’s academic performance and progress.
- Taxpayers and legislators need information to assess ESA program performance. This includes ensuring student outcomes data on academic performance and College, Career, and Military (CCMR) readiness outcomes are longitudinally tracked in the state’s educational research center.

Texas has long maintained a commitment to accountability and transparency across its public education system. As one of the first states with a statewide system of standardized assessment and school accountability, Texas has been on the vanguard of providing parents with data on student and school performance for decades. It is through accountability and transparency that the state can provide parents with the information needed to make informed decisions about their child’s education and that the state can measure the effectiveness of educational programs and the return on taxpayer supported funding.

If Texas chooses to create its ESA program, Texas 2036 recommends that this same ethos and rigor of transparency and accountability transfer over into the ESA program as well. **Texas voters strongly support this position, with 71% of voters supporting ESA program participants taking tests similar to public schoolers in order to compare and evaluate learning outcomes.**<sup>1</sup>

There are several provisions in HB 3 as filed that provide parents and taxpayers with important data on school performance. The bill’s requirement that students take an assessment (either the STAAR exam or a norm-referenced exam) will provide parents with information on whether or not their student is meeting grade level expectations. The bill also contains a requirement that the Comptroller include student assessment performance results in their annual report on the program.

While Texas 2036 applauds these transparency and accountability measures, Texas 2036 recommends the following changes to strengthen these provisions and ultimately increase the transparency of the proposed ESA program to provide parents and policymakers the information required to make informed decisions.

**1. The Comptroller should be required to report results at the student level to the Texas Education Research Center so that long-term program effectiveness can be fairly evaluated.** Texas has a robust data infrastructure that allows

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<sup>1</sup> The full question in Texas 2036’s 8th Voter Poll, conducted by Baseline & Associates in November 2024, reads: “The Legislature will consider creating a program with state funds to help families pay for educational expenses, including tuition at private schools. If that passes, should participating students take tests similar to public school students so that Texans can compare and evaluate learning outcomes for students in the program?” 71% of voters agreed (43% strongly; 28% somewhat), 9% responded “unsure” or refused to answer, and 20% disagreed (6% somewhat; 13% strongly). The full poll and results can be found at <https://texas2036.org/poll/>

for long-term analysis of student outcomes through its Education Research Centers (ERCs). This FERPA-compliant repository allows for secure, de-identified analysis of student learning and program performance. While HB 3 requires that the Comptroller collect information on student performance, it does not explicitly require that such data be linked into the state's ERCs to allow longitudinal analysis of program outcomes. Texas 2036 recommends that HB 3 contain language requiring the Comptroller to report data on student outcomes in the choice program to the ERCs. Texas 2036 recommends that, as with current public school students, Texas Student Data System (TSDS) numbers be used to longitudinally link (a) program participation, (b) school enrollment history (including public and private school settings), (c) assessment data, (d) postsecondary enrollment, (e) postsecondary completion, and (f) relevant demographic and geographic information about participating students.

**2. The Comptroller should ensure program data integrity, including that CCMR results are accurately reported by private schools.** HB 3 currently contains language allowing for surveys and information from a variety of other sources in determining CCMR rates for choice program participants. This can be a component of the outcomes monitoring process, but should be complemented by additional verification methods and inputs to ensure program outcomes can accurately and comprehensively be measured. Completion of postsecondary credentials, including IBCs, Level I and II Certificates, and other postsecondary and workforce credentials and the student level should be integrated into longitudinal data systems at the ERCs directly from the awarding academic institution (if in Texas) or via the National Student Clearinghouse (if out of state). Postsecondary enrollment data should be independently provided by institutions of higher education and linked in the ERCs using the student's TSDS number.

**3. The State should crosswalk norm-referenced exams to the STAAR test to better inform parents and taxpayers.** Information from different assessment instruments needs to be crosswalked against each other in order to be compared. The state's assessment is a criterion-referenced exam, while private schools are afforded the option under HB 3 to take a norm-referenced test. With the state's criterion-referenced exam, students are evaluated against a list of criteria (known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills or TEKS). Norm-referenced exams do not test the TEKS. They test a series of standards but then evaluate student performance relative to other students. In other words, they're graded on a curve.

Scores on these two types of exams cannot be compared to each other without crosswalking those scores. Texas 2036 recommends that the state undergo a crosswalk analysis of the state assessment and norm-referenced tests taken by private school students so that taxpayers, legislators, and other stakeholders can understand how scores compare. Funds will need to be set aside to ensure that TEA has the resources necessary to undertake this effort quickly.

**4. Where possible, the State should publish outcomes data at the school level.** HB 3 requires the Comptroller to publish certain aggregate data about student and program outcomes. This is important: Texas taxpayers, legislators, and other stakeholders need information on the aggregate level of ESA program performance to draw important conclusions about programmatic efficacy and the need for future funding enhancements. However, it is unclear from the current reporting requirements how information in the Comptroller's annual report will be displayed and whether it will be sufficiently granular to inform policymakers and parents.



Where possible, Texas 2036 recommends data be published in a manner that would identify outcomes by the specific private school in which a participating student is enrolled. This may not always be possible, as maintaining student privacy is essential and best practices typically mask sample sizes below 10 students. However, when a private school has sufficient ESA enrollment to allow the publication of de-identified outcomes, such data can inform parents and policymakers regarding the student learning outcomes in a transparent manner.

For those schools with less than 10 students, Texas 2036 recommends that results be reported at the city, county or regional level, as appropriate to protect student privacy.

**5. Private schools should be required to provide information to families participating in the ESA program on their child's academic progress.** Assessment results tell parents how their student is currently performing at a certain point in time. These results do not tell parents whether or not their child is performing better or worse than they were the year prior. Texas 2036 recommends that private schools be required to provide results on student progress when they provide assessment results to parents. This could be done by comparing the student's results from previous year to the current year's results or by comparing the students end-of-year results to the student's beginning-of-year results. Where possible, private schools should be required to provide parents with information using the crosswalk recommended under #3 (see above) so that parents can judge whether or not their student is progressing at an acceptable pace.

Thank you for your attention to these critical matters. If Texas chooses to have an ESA program, Texas 2036 recommends that it contain robust accountability and assessment mechanisms that are designed to maximize transparency for Texas parents and taxpayers.

For additional information, please contact: **Mary Lynn Pruneda, Director of Education and Workforce Policy**  
MaryLynn.Pruneda@Texas2036.org • 325.665.9460  
210 W. 7<sup>th</sup> Street, Suite 1100 • Austin, Texas 78701