



The Texas Voucher Program Highlights Disparate Investments in Youngest Learners

IDRA Testimony on the interim charge monitoring SB 2 (89R), Submitted to the Texas Senate Education Committee by Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., October 7, 2026

Dear Chairwoman Campbell and Honorable Members of the Committee:

My name is Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., and I am Director of Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement at IDRA, an independent, non-partisan non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.

But today, I want to focus on what comes far before college: early education in pre-kindergarten and kindergarten. These two grades held the greatest number of awardees among any other grade level in the Texas Education Freedom Accounts program, at about 19% of the awardees (PreK: 9,449; Kinder: 7,013) (see TEFA Demographic Report, Aug. 2026). Through the Comptroller's rules for the program, qualifying childcare providers can be considered private schools for the purpose of offering the full award amount of \$10,474 per student.

And yet state funding for public pre-kindergarten is only based on half the daily attendance funding. State spending on pre-kindergarten per student is about \$4,395 (NIEER, 2025). That leaves a **more than \$6,000 difference** between the state's per-pupil pre-kindergarten investments across these two systems. This means that the state invests more than double the public pre-kindergarten amount in the private school voucher system and does so without the transparent reporting on learning standards and student outcomes.

Research tells us that young learners must have high standards of care and instruction to set them up for success (IDRA, 2017; 2025). For instance, students benefit from teachers certified in early childhood education who are equipped to meet students' educational and linguistic needs. They do best with engaging instructional materials and pedagogical strategies delivered in the languages in which they learn. Quality bilingual education is essential in prekindergarten as 40% of students in public pre-K are identified as emergent bilingual (TEA, 2026). Strong parent and family engagement from schools also is important for young learners' success (IDRA, 2017, 2025).

Texas' investments in these programs have begun to pay off. Attending pre-kindergarten confers numerous long-term learning benefits for children, including stronger third grade reading performance (See Exhibit 5 in Perez & Latham Sikes, 2026). IDRA's recent analysis of the student outcomes related to the early education allotment revealed that emergent bilingual students demonstrated some of the greatest academic gains in both reading and math from pre-kindergarten investments (Perez & Latham Sikes, 2026).

Given these known benefits, the state should make effective investments in children through substantive and equitable investments in early education. Providing disparate investments in two different systems is not efficient nor benefits the majority of Texas' youngest learners.

Recommendations

IDRA encourages the Committee to consider the following ahead of the 90th Legislative session:

1. Fund public pre-kindergarten based on full-day attendance.
2. Institute more quality standards and oversight over the program providers in TEFA, especially regarding the educational services provided and participants' learning outcomes.
3. Expand the TEFA annual report requirements to include early learning metrics, such as kindergarten readiness assessments, for those grade level students in the program.
4. Adopt more detailed reporting requirements on applicants, denied applicants, awardees, program participants and participants who exit the program.
5. Ensure that the federal voucher program (federal scholarship tax credit) participation, awards, and overlap with the TEFA program is transparently reported by the demographic report characteristics, including grade level, age and race/ethnicity.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Chloe Latham Sikes, Ph.D., Director of Policy, Advocacy and Community Engagement, at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

Resources

- IDRA. (2017). IDRA Early Childhood Centers of Excellence Model. <https://www.idra.org/services/idra-early-childhood-centers-of-excellence-model/>
- IDRA. (2025). Early Childhood Education Research. https://www.idra.org/research_articles/ece/
- Latham Sikes, C. (March 2026). My Child is Starting Kindergarten. Texas' Voucher Program Worries Me. IDRA. <https://www.idra.org/resource-center/my-child-is-starting-kindergarten-texas-voucher-program-worries-me/>
- NIEER. (2025). State of Preschool, 2025 Yearbook – Texas State Profile. National Institute for Early Education Research. <https://nieer.org/yearbook/2025/state-profiles/texas>
- Perez, A., & Latham Sikes, C. (January 2026). Effective Investment in early Education – How Texas School Districts Use the Early Education Allotment and Its Impact on Student Learning – IDRA Research Brief. IDRA. https://www.idra.org/education_policy/effective-investment-in-early-education-idra-research-brief/
- Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. (August 2026). Texas Education Freedom Accounts Annual Demographic Report, 2026-27. Texas Comptroller of Public Accounts. <https://educationfreedom.texas.gov/wp-content/uploads/2026/07/TEFA-Annual-Demographic-Report.pdf>
- Texas Education Agency (2026). Enrollment in Texas Public Schools 2025-26. <https://tea.texas.gov/data-reports/school-performance/accountability-research/enroll-2025-26.pdf>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college.