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**OPINION**

# Texas needs a compromise in Austin to fund public schools

Public charter school CEOs demand Legislature take action to provide appropriate education funding.



Teacher Joshua Castille's Advanced Placement African American studies class meets at KIPP Oak Cliff Academy in Dallas on Thursday, Feb. 16, 2023. Four public charter school system CEOs are demanding action from legislators. "Choosing intentionally to underfund our education system is an anomaly that undermines our state constitution, fails to uphold Texas values, and threatens the very foundation of our future," they write. (Juan Figueroa / Staff Photographer)

By Fatih Ay, Mark DiBella, Yasmin Bhatia and Sehba Ali)  
1:30 AM on Dec 13, 2023



Thousands of schools experience constant disruption due to school closures, classroom consolidations and increasing teacher vacancies in Texas. As these education challenges persist, the state holds on to \$4 billion earmarked for education. This means that school districts are forced to maneuver costs and salaries amid inflationary conditions and the impending end to COVID-era federal funding.

As leaders of some of the highest-performing community public charter schools in Texas and the country, collectively serving over 150,000 Texas children, we are proud of our graduates' 100% college acceptance rates, college graduation rates at four times the national average for first-generation college students, and alumni entering the workforce with average earnings that contribute significantly to the Texas economy. These outcomes require additional resources.

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We invest \$500 to \$800 per student each year to ensure each of our high school students is on a successful path to achieve economic mobility. However, our costs have increased by about 20% since 2019 both in terms of teacher salaries and non-wage expenses like school transportation, food costs and custodial services.

Statewide, about 400,000 students — or roughly 6% of Texas kids — attend a public charter school. There are no local bonds or voter tax rate initiatives to cover the gaps when funding from the state falls short. These students and their schools rely on state funds for even the most basic educational or operational expenses. When state funds are unavailable or inadequate, those students suffer from diminished educational opportunities.



## Opinion

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School districts were forced to make tough budget choices this past year and can't afford another school year under these same conditions. We implored the Texas Legislature to recognize the urgency of this situation, work together to reach a compromise and act swiftly to provide necessary support for our public schools.

If our state is unable to come to consensus and reach a reasonable compromise for Texas students, we, the leaders of high-performing schools, will have to make tough decisions on where to invest our limited resources. Signature programs, like the ones that have great economic mobility outcomes, are at risk.

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We are asking the state Legislature to appropriate and distribute the approved \$ 4 billion in the state's K-12 public education budget. Without the approval to distribute this funding, public schools, both traditional ISDs and public charter school networks, will continue to hold flat on state funding at 2019 levels — despite costs that look far different from a few years ago. We will see staff and program reductions when our students still need meaningful support recovering from pandemic academic and social-emotional health losses.

Our state is known for its resilience and determination. Choosing intentionally to underfund our education system is an anomaly that undermines our state constitution, fails to uphold Texas values, and threatens the very foundation of our future.

We believe a compromise is possible today that allows a new form of school choice — one that is highly accountable to taxpayers and prioritizes our highest-need students — while releasing \$4 billion to our public schools. Our communities simply can't afford to wait any longer. We ask the public to encourage their legislators to find a compromise that benefits 100% of public school children in Texas.

The call to action is clear — Texas leaders and the Legislature must return to Austin to rekindle productive conversations about school funding and choice and reach a compromise that prioritizes the well-being of Texas public school children. The stakes are too high. Our networks alone would face tens of millions of dollars of budget shortfalls if the state doesn't release the approved funds. Are we willing to sacrifice the education of more than 5 million children because our legislators can't find common ground?

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These children are our future political leaders, community leaders and workforce. We implore our leaders to return to their responsibilities in Austin, recognize the transformative power of education and adequately fund our Texas public schools now.

Our children can't wait until the 2025 legislative session. Immediate legislative action will have a ripple effect for generations as Texas students thrive and contribute meaningfully to our great state, and the gratitude we extend will be immeasurable.

*Fatih Ay is chief executive officer of Harmony Public Schools, Mark DiBella is chief executive officer of YES Prep, Yasmin Bhatia is chief executive officer of Uplift Education and Sehba Ali is chief executive officer of KIPP Texas.*

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Fatih Ay, Mark DiBella, Yasmin Bhatia and Sehba Ali)

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