

# The crocodile tears of Texas politicians for Uvalde's schoolchildren

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The massacre of 19 children and 2 teachers in Uvalde, Texas evoked a flood of “prayers and condolences” from Texas politicians. They shed crocodile tears over an event, horrific in the extreme, which was, among other things, a particularly grotesque manifestation of the militarism, deranged gun rights politics, and social viciousness long promoted by all sections of the political establishment. The insincerity of their grief over the crime committed against Uvalde’s schoolkids is exposed by a review of the deplorable state of public education in Texas.

“Texas is one of the most uneducated states in U.S.,” observed a January 2020 article by news outlet KXAN. It ranks 43rd in the nation overall in terms of educational attainment and, according to a recent study by Understanding Houston, it is “second to last nationwide in the percentage of residents with at least a high school diploma.”

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the situation. The Texas Education Agency released data last June showing that STAAR (State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness) results have gone down, with “widening academic gaps and disparities among students of color and economically disadvantaged students,” according to a March 29 KXAN report.

The state government and its agencies are not forthcoming with COVID-related statistics, but a December 2021 “Mortality Experience from COVID-19” chart from the Teachers Retirement System of Texas shows that deaths, which had been in the 8,000s from 2016 to 2019, went from 8,701 in 2019 to 10,451 and 11,386 in 2020 and 2021 respectively.

Governor Greg Abbott and Attorney General Ken Paxton are leading promoters of the ruling class policy of letting the pandemic run rampant, scuttling all anti-COVID public safety measures and getting children back into the classroom so that their parents can produce profits for their employers. Abbott has issued orders against, and Paxton has filed lawsuits to weaken or eliminate, the modest mitigation measures recommended to keep COVID-19 at bay.

There have been protests—walkouts, petition drives, absences—against the state’s school COVID-19 policies, but districts statewide have dropped online instruction, and pushed for complete reopening while refusing to institute mask mandates or any other mitigation, much less elimination, measures. Undercounting and other official sleight of hand cannot disguise the results, which have clearly been disastrous.

By the end of the first month of the spring semester this year, there were already over 192,000 student cases and more than 61,000 staff cases. “That appears to be the highest case level since the pandemic began in 2020, although the data collected by the state is often incomplete,” reported the *Texas Tribune*. As for cumulative cases of child deaths in Texas, the state has had 147, more than twice the number in California (70), which has a third larger population.

Texas’ schools are extremely underfunded. The Education Law Center (ELC) reported last November that Texas is ahead of just 10 other states in the country in terms of its level of funding for K-12 public education. The ELC gave Texas an “F” for its per-student financing of \$11,987, over \$3,100 below the national average.

In the category of funding distribution, or the allocation of funds relative to poverty levels, Texas garnered a “D” grade. The report stated, “Alabama, Florida and Texas have regressive funding, with high-poverty districts, on average, receiving less per-pupil funding than low-poverty districts.”

As for a third category, funding effort, which is “measured by the percentage of the state’s economic activity or gross domestic product (GDP) allocated to support the K-12 school system,” Texas also does very poorly.

“The effort index is an important indicator of how a state prioritizes education spending relative to its economic capacity,” explains the report. Despite the fact that “[a]ll the Southern states except Texas have lower-than-average fiscal capacity—measured as state GDP [gross domestic product] per capita,” Texas makes “a lower-than-average effort to fund schools.”

Texas’ teachers are underpaid, and measly salary increases

do nothing to stave off the impacts of inflation. Educators' real incomes, like those of the working class in the US in general, are falling. According to a National Education Association report on the 2020-21 school year, teacher salaries rose by 1 percent in 2020-21 compared to the 1.5 percent national average. Teacher pay was more than \$7,400 lower than the national average and fell a notch from 27th to 28th nationwide.

These dismal findings followed the June 2019 passage of House Bill 3, which was supposed to boost teacher pay and education funding. Upon signing it, Governor Abbott claimed, "You could not overstate the magnitude of the law that I'm about to sign because this is a monumental moment in public education history in the state of Texas." He further boasted, "This one law does more to advance education in the state of Texas than any law that I have seen in my adult lifetime in the state of Texas."

In fact, per-student spending increased by 14 percent in 2019-20 but shriveled to 1.5 percent the following school year.

The Center for Public Policy Priorities (now Every Texan), in an article titled, "There's a New School Finance Law in Texas... *Now What?*" noted, "Because HB 3 includes costly property tax cuts, the law will put a strain on the state's budget and limit resources available for future investments in education and other state priorities. Districts with slower property value growth will also see higher tax rates under HB 3, presenting a serious equity problem."

In a February 2021 policy brief, the Texas 2036 website identified another dimension of the property tax-school funding problem. Noting that "skyrocketing property taxes and the challenge of equitable distribution have homeowners and schools crying out for relief," the brief pointed out that "at the same time, the state's education fund is increasingly vulnerable to volatile global markets."

Specifically, about 20 percent of Texas school funding is linked to oil and gas exploration and production. The brief, basing itself on four possible oil pricing scenarios, projected that oil and gas revenues could decline by as much as 73 percent, or \$9.7 billion annually by 2036.

While these projections did not anticipate the US/NATO proxy war in Ukraine and the currently skyrocketing oil and gas prices, there is no reason to assume that whatever temporary funding relief Texas' schools might get from the present scenario will continue. Meanwhile, families' wages are being hammered at the gas pump.

Texas grossly underfunds its schools, despite the fact that millions of people in the state are in poverty, with their children needing more, not less, educational assistance. "Looking at multi-year averages for Texas, the state's official poverty rate for 2018-2020 of 12.9% (3.7 million

people) is significantly worse than the national average of 11.2% (36.5 million people) for the same time period. Only five states had significantly worse official poverty averages than Texas in recent years," notes the September 2021 Every Texan report.

Basing itself on U.S. Census Bureau statistics, Every Texan reported, "Almost 1 in 5 Texas households lost employment income in the past month—including 1 in 4 Black and Hispanic households." Though the poverty rate is worse for people of color, working class families of other or mixed ethnicities also suffered high rates of poverty.

Within this context, the state government and politicians are moving to limit what children can be taught. In June 2021, Abbott signed a bill, HB 3979, that bans the teaching of critical race theory (CRT), queer studies and other identity politics-based perspectives. The law mandates a "civics training program" for at least one teacher and one administrator at each school district to impose what teachers can and cannot teach.

The *World Socialist Web Site* opposes CRT and other forms of identity politics because they reject class as the fundamental source of social inequality and seek to sow disunity among workers. However, the ban on CRT in Texas schools has no progressive content. It is an attack on free speech rights, and the right-wing drive to control curriculum and content will be extended to Marxism, socialism, communism or any other left-wing approach to history and society that challenges class oppression.

The attacks go beyond the classroom and into the states' school libraries. Under pressure from right-wing parents and "community members," Texas education boards have fired librarians who do not buckle under to censorship. They also face harassment and intimidation.

In Keller Independent School District, for example, the *Texas Tribune* reported, "local Facebook group pages and Twitter accounts have included pointed comments about librarians being 'heretical' and portrayed them as pedophile 'groomers' who order pornographic books. After a particular book challenge failed, one commenter included the phrase 'pass the millstones,' a biblical reference to execution by drowning."



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