

# The 86th Texas Legislature Is Underway. Here's What Your Elected Officials Are Prioritizing

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Sara Magalio

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Now that the 86<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature is in full swing, our Texas representatives and senators are working on turning their priorities for the session into reality. And at least when it comes to areas of focus, it seems a lot of them are on the same page. In our conversations with Dallas-area state reps, it became clear that infrastructure and criminal justice reform are top of mind.

But, without question, public school budget reform is receiving the most attention. And Dallas could have a large influence over how that plays out, considering the success of innovative reforms within Dallas ISD.

Many reps discussed a need to alleviate school districts' growing local property tax burden by allocating more state funds, while another groundswell is pointed toward ensuring there are enough counselors to adequately address student mental health. Our elected officials say Texas' public school system needs to improve.

And the governor has a like mind. Gov. Greg Abbott's third State of the State address pushed an agenda aimed at "targeted" improvement of schools. He also pointed out the issue has a unified front. "Rarely has Texas witnessed such bipartisan, bicameral support for an issue this substantial this early in a session," Abbott said during his speech.

Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas, echoes the governor's optimistic outlook.

"It is fantastic to see that public education and our schoolchildren are going to be our top priority," says Meyer.

In the Governor's Budget for 2020-2021, Abbott emphasizes the critical impact that these reforms could have on Texas children.

"Comprehensive school finance and property tax reform are needed this session to ensure Texas' continued cultural and economic vibrancy," the report reads. "Without both, 20 years from now, today's pre-kindergarteners will not be able to afford to live in this state they call home because they will not be college- or career-ready, and because property taxes will put homeownership out of reach. The time is ripe for reform."

To get a sense of our region's priorities this session, which runs through May 27, we talked to representatives and senators who have a portion of their district touching the city of Dallas. Education is a common thread, but each official is bringing to the table issues unique to their district, reflecting the wide variety of concerns that are prepped to be addressed this legislative session.

### **District 100: Rep. Eric Johnson, D-Dallas (Dallas and Mesquite)**

Johnson, a mayoral candidate, pointed us to several bills he's pushing for. He's authoring House Bill 65, which would increase transparency by requiring school districts to report data on school suspensions to the Texas Education Agency. According to Johnson, "The data reported will allow academics, policymakers, and the general public to know how many students are suspended annually, the reasons behind the suspensions, and other demographic information that will better inform future policymaking regarding school discipline."

Johnson also aims to improve voter turnout by altering the voter registration process. He authored House Bill 79, which would allow online voter registration and automatically register Texans to vote when they renew or apply for a driver's license or government-issued ID card.

Currently, individuals can choose opt-in to register to vote when going through those processes, but Johnson wants to change this to an opt-out procedure.

Last, Johnson is concerned with proactive preparation of the city in the event of a natural disaster like Hurricane Harvey. His House Bill 100 would “require certain state agencies to consider changes in our state’s weather, water availability, and climate when creating their biennial strategic plans.”

**District 102: Rep. Ana-Maria Ramos, D-Dallas (Addison, Dallas, Garland, Richardson)**

Like others, Ramos puts schools atop her list. But she also mentions she will be working on empowering families in family courts, with the goal of making the judicial process efficient and centralized around the needs of the child in question.

“[I’m] really making sure that we are protecting domestic violence survivors and empowering parents to make the right decisions when it comes to families and the best interest of the child,” she says.

As a member of the Natural Resources Committee, Ramos says she’s made it her goal to protect Dallas water.

“It is very important for our community to have an advocate to ensure that if we were to ever have another drought, or there was ever another time where we had massive shortages of water, that our residents in the Dallas area and North Texas area are really protected,” Ramos says.

**District 103: Rep. Rafael Anchia, D-Dallas (Dallas, Farmers Branch, Irving)**

Anchia notes the significance of improving Texas public schooling systems as a catalyst for the city’s continued economic prosperity. “If Texas is to remain an economic powerhouse,” Anchia says, “we must develop and fund a globally-competitive public education system that produces a high-quality workforce and citizenry at scale.”

He also stresses the importance of economic development and the maintenance of a thriving job market.

“With an ongoing trade war that disproportionately and adversely impacts our state and looming economic headwinds, Texas needs to deploy all of the economic development tools at its disposal to maintain a vibrant job market,” he says.

Anchia also noted the importance of gas pipeline public safety, and the need for clearly conveyed rules and regulations of the industry.

**District 104: Rep. Jessica González, D-Dallas (Cockrell Hill, Dallas, Grand Prairie)**

González wants to address issues specific to her district, including resident displacement from city development and rising property taxes. “This district is undergoing a lot of development and gentrifying in several areas of it, and so that is a big concern here,” she

says.

"It's a balance between embracing economic development to bring money and development into the community, but at the same time preserving the culture and the people who live there and making sure that we're taking care of the people who are here," she adds.

González also mentioned her desire to improve the voting process, which would ideally increase voter turnout by "making it easier for folks to go vote."

**District 107: Rep. Victoria Neave, D-Dallas (Dallas, Garland, Mesquite)**

Neave will be addressing issues of sexual violence and assault, which she noted have gained visibility through the emergence of the #MeToo movement.

"We are fighting for legislative solutions crafted through our Sexual Violence Task Force to bring justice to survivors of sexual assault and to address the rape kit backlog," Neave says.

Neave also has her eye on learning. She wants to restore funding cuts to public education and promote the pursuit of higher ed. "Because we know that we can transform a family and create generational change with a college degree, as well as help our Texas economy by connecting existing resources with the families who need it the most via House Bill 535," she says.

**District 108: Rep. Morgan Meyer, R-Dallas (Dallas, Highland Park, University Park)**

Meyer emphasizes that the improvement of Texas public school funding is his absolute top priority, pegging the improvement of school-provided mental health as a sub-goal.

"Currently we have approximately one mental health professional for approximately every 7,000 students," Meyer says. "And the recommendation, which in my opinion is way off, is one to 1,000 students. I don't know how one mental health professional could ever help 1,000, let alone 7,000, students."

Meyer also wants to push against human trafficking, a point of emphasis since the issue first came to his attention during his first session in 2015.

"We've led on some of those comprehensive laws on trafficking," Meyer says. "Expanding the definition for trafficking, increasing the penalty for trafficking, making it easier to prosecute traffickers, but also realizing that there are victims here, and we've led on legislation that has really helped the victims, who maybe have a conviction for prostitution [but shouldn't] have it ruin their lives."

**District 110: Rep. Toni Rose, D-Dallas (Balch Springs, Dallas, Mesquite)**

Rose wants to protect “vulnerable Texans faced with uncertainty.” She lists “senior services, children’s health care, foster system reform, access to mental health services, as well as emergency preparedness and management” as groups who will be receiving her attention this session.

She’s also latching onto a criminal justice reform point tucked within those categories.

“The Supreme Court has outlawed the death penalty for persons with intellectual disabilities, yet Texas continues to expose citizens experiencing severe mental illnesses to the punishment of death,” Rose says. She wants to extend the protections to people with severe mental illnesses.

#### **District 114: Rep. John Turner, D-Dallas (Dallas)**

When it comes to education, Turner wants to relieve some of the pressure from property taxes at the local level by allocating additional state funding on a per-student basis.

Turner says he’d also like to improve cooperation between state and local governments, “instead of having the more adversarial relationship we have seen in some recent sessions.”

#### **District 2: Sen. Bob Hall, R-Edgewood (Dallas, Bonham, Greenville, Sulphur Springs, Terrell)**

Infrastructure, election integrity, and education are all on Hall’s list of priorities.

According to Hall, an effort to protect the electrical grid from both natural and manmade threats—known as The Resilient Communities program—represents “by far the single best opportunity to ensure sustainable economic prosperity for future generations of Texans.”

He also wants to do away with red-light cameras, in the defense of those who are “mailed a ticket without the right to face their accuser.”

“Legislation will be filed to both prohibit the continued use of red-light cameras, and to prevent a county from refusing to register a vehicle as a result of an outstanding penalty against a vehicle owner as a result of a civil violation,” Hall says.

Hall also wants to address concerns surrounding election integrity. His reforms include phasing out electronic voting systems during recounts in favor of a system of paper ballots, eliminating rolling polling and making sure that polling locations are consistently marked and open, and giving the Secretary of State’s office the power to enforce statewide procedures for elections.

#### **District 16: Sen. Nathan Johnson, D-Dallas (Dallas, Carrollton, Addison, University Park, Garland)**

Johnson targets education, healthcare, and criminal justice reform, including expanding Medicaid, bolstering the 1115 waiver process, and filing three bills on criminal justice reform that he thinks “are going to have broad bipartisan appeal.”

The criminal justice reform bills aim to decriminalize the possession of small amounts of marijuana and reduce the penalties for possession of other levels (Senate Bill 460), provide ID and job history documents to those leaving prison to facilitate their job searches (Senate Bill 461), and exempt Texas from a federal mandate requiring states to automatically suspend driver’s licenses in all cases of drug offenses.

Johnson also makes the broader point that every measure needs to empower marginalized individuals to more successfully participate in the Texas economy and society in general.

**District 23: Sen. Royce West, D-Dallas (Dallas, Cedar Hill, Cockrell Hill, Duncanville, De Soto, Lancaster, Hutchins)**

West will be prioritizing public school funding reform. He also wants to work with the Texas Department of Family and Protective Services on expanding alternative foster care through primary care assistance. A monthly stipend for relatives would help “to place children with family members instead of the foster care system,” which he believes is ultimately beneficial for the child and costs the state less money.

West’s criminal justice reform legislation includes Senate Bill 120. The bill is aimed at stopping private entities from selling criminal history information on those who’ve gotten an expunction or an order of nondisclosure. It would also allow a person whose verdict has later been set aside by a court to petition for an order of nondisclosure.

In regards to the City of Dallas and Dallas County specifically, West will be focused on prioritizing the affordable housing issue in the city. His reforms include Senate Bill 335, which is a cleanup of the existing statute regarding community land trusts.