

# Baptists join call to increase public school funding

March 12, 2019

AUSTIN—A Baptist pastor from Houston joined teachers and administrators at a March 11 rally on the steps of the Texas Capitol, urging lawmakers to increase funding for public education.



John Ogletree

Schoolteachers and preachers alike plant “seeds of hope” in young lives, said John Ogletree, pastor of First Metropolitan Church in Houston and school board president for the Cypress-Fairbanks Independent School District.

“You plant seeds of hope in our children,” Ogletree told public educators before offering an invocation at the rally. “You plant these seeds no matter the socio-economic background; no matter the race, creed or color; no matter the dysfunction that they’ve come from in their homes; no matter whether they have limited abilities, physically or emotionally or intellectually. You still do the job and plant seeds of hope.”

Ogletree, who serves on the board of the [Pastors for Texas Children](#) advocacy group, noted the challenges public schoolteachers face, but

encouraged them to remain hopeful.

"We urge you to remain diligent, remain patient, but whatever you do, remain confident, because we will win this fight," he said, as reported by [EthicsDaily.com](http://EthicsDaily.com). "I'm here to tell you that the seeds of hope that you plant will one day produce a harvest of hope that we'll see all across this state from the children that you educate."

## Among the governor's emergency items

In his biennial [State of the State](#) address Feb. 5, Gov. Greg Abbott named school finance reform, teacher pay raises and property tax relief as emergency items for the Texas Legislature.

"Texas must recruit and retain the best and brightest teachers to educate our students. This session, we must pay our teachers more," Abbott told legislators.

In response, lawmakers in both the Texas Senate and the state House of Representatives have introduced bills addressing school finance reform and pay increases for public schoolteachers.

[SB 3](#), introduced by Sen. Jane Nelson, R-Flower Mound, authorizes \$4 billion over two years, providing \$5,000 annual pay raises for full-time classroom teachers and school librarians. The bill passed unanimously in the Senate.

[SB 4](#), filed by Sen. Larry Taylor, R-Friendswood, offers money for teacher merit pay, as well as incentives for districts to improve third-grade reading performance. It also provides funds for full-day pre-kindergarten and increases funding for low-income students.

[HB 3](#), filed by Rep. Chair Dan Huberty, R-Houston, chair of the House Public Education Committee, and supported by Speaker Dennis Bonnen, R-Angleton, provides \$6.3 billion for public education and \$2.7 billion for property tax reform.

## **‘Called to pursue the common good’**



Kathryn Freeman

Kathryn Freeman, director of public policy for the [Texas Baptist Christian Life Commission](#), particularly expressed appreciation to Huberty and Bonnen for their efforts “to reform the broken school finance system.”

“HB 3 invests \$9 billion into the future of Texas through an investment in our public school children. We are called as Christians to give special attention to the poor and vulnerable, so we are pleased HB 3 targets resources to children most at-risk for failing to obtain a high school diploma, such as students with learning disabilities and living in poverty,” Freeman said.

“The vast majority of Texas school children will attend a Texas public school. As Christians called to pursue the common good, we support HB 3 because we believe it is a step toward ensuring all children—even those in impoverished neighborhoods—have access to quality neighborhood

schools."

## **'A step in the right direction'**

In a public statement released the day of the rally for public education in Austin, Pastors for Texas Children likewise expressed support for HB 3.

"While still short of what our children need, \$9 billion is a significant step in the right direction," said Charles Foster Johnson, founding executive director of Pastors for Texas Children.



Charles Foster  
Johnson

"A budget is an intrinsically moral document, not merely a financial one. We pray that our Texas House and Senate will produce a final school finance plan that puts our children, and the ones who teach them, in the place of highest priority where they belong."

In a March 12 email, Johnson noted Texas remains about \$40 billion behind in funds required "to bring us to the middle of the pack nationally in per pupil funding," but both the House and Senate bills represent real progress.

While both call for teacher pay raises and include plans for full-day pre-kindergarten classes, he pointed to two significant differences.

"First, the House version does not tie their funding to performance outcomes on standardized tests, like the Senate version does. Second, the Senate version makes some of the pay increases for teachers contingent upon 'merit'—this is, the academic performance of their students," he wrote.

"We disagree on our provision [of funds] having strings attached. We will seek to reconcile these two versions into a plan that funds our schools without conditions. It's our moral duty to do so, especially when we are so far behind."