

Texas lawmakers face challenges as they convene

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Public health issues and public school funding are among the challenges facing the 87th Texas Legislature.

Although the Texas Capitol reopened to the public this week as lawmakers convened on Jan. 12, access will be curtailed during the 140-day legislative session and public safety protocols are in place due to COVID-19.

Issues related to the pandemic will be among the first orders of business for state legislators, Michael Evans Jr., public policy director for Texas Baptists' Christian Life Commission stated.



Michael Evans Jr.

"COVID-19 is by far the most important issue that will be addressed because it has single-handedly reshaped life as we once knew it," Evans wrote in a Jan. 6 analysis posted on the [CLC website](#).

"COVID-19 has affected our health, safety and economic well-being in this year, and it does not seem to be leaving us anytime soon. Even though a vaccine may be available, that is not a total cure, nor will it erase the damage that COVID-19 has already done.

"In the future, there could be more potential shutdowns of businesses, face

mask mandates and regulations on public education during Covid-19. All of these issues and many more will be the first order of business during this year's legislative session."

Decrease in available funds

Texas Comptroller Glen Hegar released his [biennial revenue estimate](#) on Jan. 11, projecting \$112.53 billion in revenue available for general purpose spending in 2022-23—a 0.4 percent decrease from funds available in the previous biennium.

The comptroller's office attributed the decline directly to the COVID-19 pandemic, which caused revenue collection to fall about \$1 billion short of what legislators expected when they approved the 2020-21 budget.

The revenue forecast is "clouded with uncertainty," Hegar said.

"The ultimate path of the pandemic and the behavior of consumers and businesses during a resurgence are difficult to gauge," he said. "It's also unclear how they'll respond once the pandemic is fully under control. As a result, there is a wide range of possible outcomes for state revenue through the end of fiscal 2023, with the possibility of revenue falling short of this forecast but also a chance revenue could exceed it, perhaps substantially.

"In any case, the legislature will again face some difficult choices to balance the budget."

Protect the vulnerable

As lawmakers make those choices, they must consider the impact of their decisions on the state's most vulnerable citizens, Evans insisted.

"We must ensure that, while budget cuts are a natural part of our

governing process, those most vulnerable must be protected,” he said.

Evans particularly noted with concern proposals to cut funding in Texas Medicaid programs, early childhood education and women’s preventive care.

“The CLC will be advocating for the protection and support of all programs that focus on caring for vulnerable women, families and children in the upcoming session as a part of following our Micah 6:8 mandate,” he said, referring to the Old Testament call to “seek justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God.”

Provide full funding for public schools

[Pastors for Texas Children](#) likewise is calling on lawmakers to expand free high-quality early childhood education and sustain the historic level of funding for public education secured by HB3 in the previous legislative session.



Charles Foster
Johnson

“Universal education, provided and protected by the public, is an expression of God’s common good, as well as a Texas constitutional mandate,” said Charles Foster Johnson, executive director of Pastors for Texas Children. “Our children are counting on us all to advocate for it.”

Pastors for Texas Children is urging state legislators to examine the state's "budget and revenue sources in new ways to meet human needs."

Among its other priorities for the legislative session, the public school advocacy group also is calling on the Texas Legislature to:

- Invest in programs for schools that support the whole family to ensure educational success.
- Pursue racial justice and healing through establishing equity in public schools.
- Support efforts to provide access to high-speed internet access and close the "digital divide" that hinders education for many students.
- Find new measures of meaningful assessment to replace "burdensome standardized testing."

Oppose vouchers and gambling

Pastors for Texas Children and the CLC each pledged to oppose some measures during the legislative session.

Pastors for Texas Children particularly will oppose any voucher initiatives to divert money away from public schools to private schools. The organization also will oppose expansion of charter schools and "insist that existing charters are held to the same standards as public schools."

The CLC will resist efforts to expand legalized gambling in Texas.

"Though it is not our place to legislate morality and impose our convictions on those who do not share our faith, it is our place to speak up for and defend those who are oppressed," Evans said. "The practices of the gambling industry are often predatory toward those of lower income."

"They present misleading ads about the chances of winning, encouraging addictive habits with aggressive follow-up tactics and provide no

safeguards for those who reach a point of crushing debt. Their very business model is to take more than they give and keep taking 'til people have nothing left to give."