

The Educational Aide Exemption Program: A Missing Link to Increase Texas' Teacher Pipeline

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Educational Aide Exemption (EAE) program, established under Texas Education Code §54.363 and administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), aims to remove financial barriers for educational aides (also referred to as paraprofessionals) pursuing teacher certification. While designed to address workforce shortages and expand pathways, its potential remains under-realized. This research examines why underutilization persists, how institutions decide to participate, where communication gaps exist, and what practice and policy changes could increase access and impact.

Our Findings

Texas institutions fall into three participation categories:

- **Opt-in institutions:** Mission-aligned and committed to serving local aides, yet hampered by capacity constraints, complex verification requirements, and siloed communication between financial aid and educator preparation programs. Even so, aides describe the program as “life-changing” and “the only way I can afford to stay in my program.”
- **Opt-out institutions:** Formally decline participation due to misalignment between EAE rules and institutional structures, narrow eligibility, or concerns about administrative burden outweighing perceived impact.
- **Zero-response institutions:** Neither opt in nor out, often due to insufficient awareness, unclear applicability, or lack of guidance. Leaders report “never having the time or capacity to look into EAE” or uncertainty about how it fits their context.

Community colleges lead participation, benefiting from close school district ties and strong program alignment. However, leaders across all categories call for clearer state guidance, streamlined processes, and stronger department coordination. Promising practices — such as proactive student identification, warm handoffs, dedicated liaisons, and cohort supports — show that, when designed intentionally, the EAE can significantly support aides in transitioning into certified teaching roles.

About This Research

Between June and August 2025, EdTrust in Texas engaged with leaders and educational aides at over 15 Texas institutions through interviews, written responses, and public information requests to understand EAE participation. The participating institutions represented a diverse array of sectors and contexts, from community colleges to regional universities. Our findings reflect the perspectives of institutional leaders and educational aide, offering actionable insights to inform state policy and practices that work.

Overview

The Educational Aide Exemption (EAE) is a vital financial aid resource designed to support educational aides — individuals already employed in school settings — as they pursue educator certification in Texas. Established through Texas Education Code §54.363 and administered by the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board (THECB), the EAE allows eligible educational aides to receive tuition and fee exemptions while completing coursework related to teacher certification.

Texas employs approximately 86,000 educational aides, who earn an average of just \$24,000 annually. This workforce is racially and culturally diverse, often more so than traditional teacher candidates, and plays a critical role in supporting bilingual instruction, special education, and behavioral interventions. Despite their contributions, educational aides face systemic barriers such as low wages, limited benefits, and a lack of affordable, high-quality pathways into teaching. Investing in this population is essential to solving the state's shortage of well-prepared, certified teachers. The number of uncertified teachers has dramatically increased, representing many of the newly hired teachers in Texas over the past two years.¹ Educational aide-to-teacher pipelines offer a powerful, place-based approach to diversifying and strengthening the profession.

While the policy intent of EAE is clear — removing financial barriers for those already serving students — implementation varies widely across institutions. For the 2024-25 academic year, THECB allocated just over \$2.6 million in EAE funds across 42 participating institutions. However, the data collected showcases inconsistent participation and persistent underutilization of funds among institutions.

Institutions must opt in to participate, manage internal processes to award funds, and comply with state verification and administrative standards. Eligible candidates must be currently employed educational aides pursuing coursework required for Texas teacher certification through an approved educator preparation pathway — which may include associate degree programs, bachelor's degree programs, or alternative certification programs — and often must meet specific continuous employment and administrative verification requirements.

EAE Within the Broader Teacher Workforce Strategy in Texas

Texas is facing a dire shortage of well-prepared, certified teachers, with recent state reports showing persistent gaps in high-need areas such as bilingual education, special education, and STEM subjects. By the 2024-25 school year, nearly 12% of Texas public school teachers — approximately 42,000 educators — were working without certification.² To address these shortages, state leaders have expanded investments in high-quality teacher preparation and certification pathways.

One such initiative is the Preparing and Retaining Educators through Partnership (PREP) allotment, created under House Bill 2, which was passed in the 2025 legislative session. This allotment includes dedicated support for Grow Your Own (GYO) programs, which create pathways for high school students and current district employees — including educational aides — to complete certification coursework while receiving on-the-job training. By building the teacher pipeline from within communities, these programs aim to reduce reliance on uncertified hires and strengthen the long-term educator workforce.

The EAE complements these efforts by specifically reducing affordability barriers for classroom-based educational aides pursuing a bachelor's degree, a state requirement for licensure, through Texas public institutions of higher education. When paired with GYO initiatives, EAE has the potential to offset significant portions of academic costs, providing aides with increased financial support and structured training to transition into certified teaching roles.

Despite its potential, EAE remains underutilized even as the state's teacher pipeline shrinks. Strengthening implementation could help address shortages in a sustainable, student-centered way. As one participant noted, "These are folks already in schools, already connected to kids. They just need support to finish."

By leveraging EAE within the broader policy ecosystem — including PREP allotment funding, registered teacher apprenticeship programs, certification reforms, and performance-based funding for community colleges — state leaders can more holistically address both recruitment and retention challenges in the educator workforce.

Origins and Evolution of the EAE Program

The EAE was first introduced through legislative action in the late 1990s. It was specifically designed to encourage educational aides to complete their full teacher certification by providing exemptions for tuition and fees. The statute mandates eligibility criteria, including Texas residency, financial need, one year of educational aide employment in the preceding five years, and enrollment in certification coursework in state-identified shortage areas. THECB subsequently adopted rules outlining required student progress standards, verification processes, and compliance expectations, reflecting a policy intent to create accessible pathways to the classroom for aides who are already part of the school ecosystem.

In its early implementation, the program explicitly applied to aides pursuing certification through both degree-granting programs and alternative certification routes; however, subsequent rulemaking by THECB narrowed implementation. Current rules specify that the exemption may only be applied toward courses at Texas public institutions of higher education that are required for teacher certification, which excludes stand-alone community college coursework unless it is part of a pathway culminating in a bachelor's degree and licensure. This means that aides enrolled only in lower-division courses at community colleges remain ineligible for the exemption, even if the courses are prerequisites for later teacher preparation.

Program adjustments have also affected requirements for student teaching. In earlier years, aides with sufficient in-classroom experience could petition for partial waivers of student teaching, reflecting legislative recognition of their existing instructional role. Under current rules, aides who receive the exemption before earning a bachelor's degree receive a student teaching waiver, but aides who already hold a degree must complete the full requirement.

How the EAE Program Works

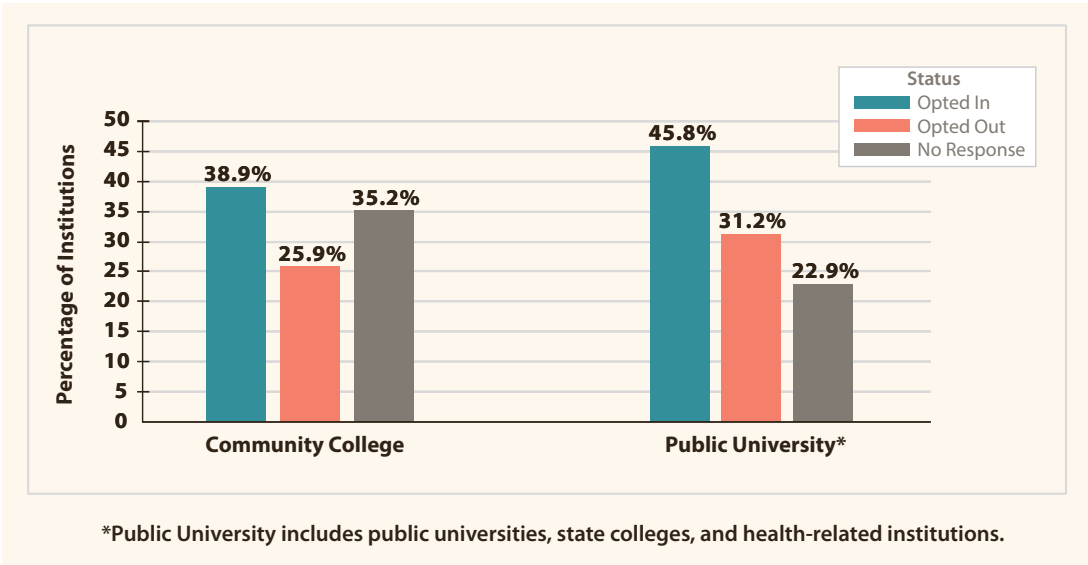
This section outlines program structure, eligibility, and institutional compliance procedures.

- **Participation and funding mechanics:** Institutions opt in annually, and THECB allocated approximately \$2.6 million statewide for 2024-25, split equally among participating institutions — averaging about \$11,200 per institution. Each institution manages awards independently.
- **Eligibility criteria**
 - Must have been employed as a Texas educational aide (or substitute teacher) for at least one school year in the past five years
 - Must demonstrate financial need through FAFSA or TASFA
 - Must be enrolled in coursework at a Texas public institution of higher education that is required for teacher certification in designated shortage areas
 - Must meet academic progress standards as determined by THECB rules
- **Administrative responsibilities**
 - Institutions certify eligibility and notify both the candidate and the employing district
 - Verification records and employment history must be submitted per THECB rules
 - Institutions must ensure recipients maintain satisfactory academic progress

By the Numbers: EAE Allocation, Engagement, and Who Is Served

The data below highlights key quantitative findings from publicly available sources, offering a clear picture of how institutions are engaging with the EAE program and who is benefiting:

Figure 1: EAE FY 2025 - Opt-In Status by Sector (Percentage of Institutions)



- **Total funding (FY25):** \$2.6 million allocated across 233 institutions

- **Participation**

- 41.7% of institutions opted in
- 28.2% opted out
- 30.1% provided no response

- **Allocation distribution**

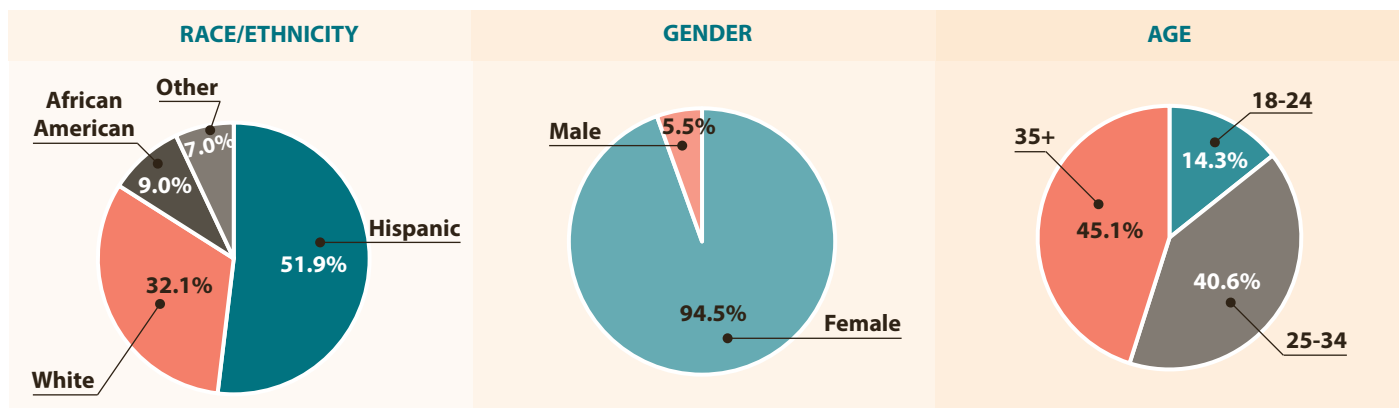
- **Community colleges:** just over 50% of total funds (~\$1.3 million)
- **Public universities:** just under 50% of total funds (~\$1.3 million)

- **Number of recipients (2023-24):** 135 students statewide

- **Fund utilization insights**

- Across participating institutions, utilization of allocated EAE funds remains below capacity, frequently in the 25%-40% range.
- Even with steady allocations over multiple years, a significant share of the funds goes unused — limiting potential impact on addressing teacher shortages.

Figure 2: EAE Recipient Demographic Breakdown (2023-24)



Recipient demographics show that the majority are Pell Grant-eligible, female, and Latino, reflecting a strong reach to underserved populations; however, counts for Black recipients were suppressed in state reporting due to low numbers — underscoring the need to expand access and participation across more under-represented groups.

Source: Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board, Educational Aide Exemption Program Records, FY 2023-24

Institutional Perspectives: Why Some Opt in, Opt out, or Stay Silent

The varying participation of Texas institutions in the EAE program reflects a complex intersection of programmatic alignment, capacity, and policy clarity. While some institutions actively engage and award exemptions, others opt out due to limited relevance or operational strain, and a third category remains silent — neither formally opting in nor out — raising concerns about awareness and missed opportunities.

Opt-In Institutions: Aligned Mission, Strained Capacity

Institutions that opt into the EAE program often see it as a meaningful tool to support aspiring educators from within their local communities. For many, EAE aligns directly with institutional missions to recruit and retain local talent — especially educational aides already working in K-12 schools.

“It fits right into our mission. Many of our educational aides are already working in the community — EAE helps us remove the last financial hurdle.”

— Administrator, regional university

“We proactively flag students working in ISDs and reach out to them — but verifying employment and processing the exemption takes a lot of coordination.”

— Administrator, large public university

Despite the benefits of EAE, many institutions face capacity challenges. Financial aid and educator preparation teams often operate in silos, creating bottlenecks in communication, verification, and compliance. Education leaders continue to call for stronger crosswalks between departments and more streamlined state guidance to ease the administrative load.

“We value the program. But from the admin side, it’s a full-time job just managing compliance for a relatively small award.”

— Financial Aid Director, Public University

From the student perspective, the benefits are clear and deeply personal. Aides describe EAE as a lifeline that reduces financial strain, makes teacher preparation possible, and enables them to stay focused on their academic and professional goals.

"Without this program, I'd be paying for school out of pocket while working full-time as an aide. It's the only way I can afford to stay in my program."

— Educational aide, large community college

"I'm a single parent, so EAE takes a huge burden off me. I can focus on my classes and my job without worrying about how I'll pay."

— Educational aide, large community college

This dual reality — mission alignment paired with operational strain — underscores the importance of both preserving the program's funding and addressing implementation challenges to ensure that more aides can benefit without overtaxing institutional capacity.

Opt-Out Institutions: Misalignment, Resource Constraints, and Misinterpretations

For many institutions, structural misalignment or practical constraints can outweigh the perceived benefits of the EAE program, leading them to not participate. For some, the program's statutory exemption from student-teaching for EAE recipients who have not yet earned a bachelor's degree directly conflicts with their belief that student-teaching is a critical, non-negotiable component of educator preparation.

Other institutions weigh the administrative cost of implementing EAE against the funding they receive — often around \$10,000 annually — and conclude that the resources required to manage the program exceed the value of the allocation.

Another challenge arises from the narrow eligibility criteria for EAE. Because participants must be enrolled in courses required for certification in a state-designated critical shortage area — limited to bilingual education, ESL, secondary career and technical education, computer science/technology applications, and special education — some institutions struggle to identify students who meet all requirements, leading them to opt out after repeated cycles of underutilization.

"We believe student teaching is essential. Waiving it for certain candidates doesn't align with our program philosophy."

— Administrator, university-based educator preparation program

"It's a lot of paperwork for \$10,000. We have to make choices about where to put our administrative energy."

— Program director, regional university

"We couldn't find students who met all the criteria — especially the shortage area requirement — so we didn't see a way to use the funds."

— **Financial aid administrator, community college**

This highlights a key implementation tension: EAE participation is only viable when the program's statutory conditions align with institutional philosophy, when funding offsets the cost of administration, and when the eligible student pipeline is large enough to justify the effort.

Zero Response Institutions: A Silent Sector

Some institutions neither opted in nor formally opted out of the EAE program. These "silent" institutions may be unaware of the program, unclear on its requirements, or uncertain about its alignment with their context. In many cases, EAE has simply not risen to the level of strategic discussion.

"I've heard of EAE, but I'm not entirely sure how it works or if it applies to our students. It's not something we've explored in depth."

— **Faculty member, public university**

"It's not that we don't support aides — we just haven't had the capacity or the push to dig into EAE and figure out how it would work here."

— **Department chair, community college**

For some, the lack of engagement stems from limited internal communication between departments that need to coordinate to properly implement the program. For others, turnover or shifting priorities mean the program remains on the periphery.

These responses suggest that targeted outreach, coupled with tailored technical assistance and examples of peer institutions successfully implementing EAE, could encourage more campuses to actively engage.

Bright Spots and Promising Practices

While challenges persist, some institutions have developed promising approaches that could serve as models:

- **University of Houston** stands out for its cross-functional collaboration. The university's financial aid team proactively identifies students eligible for EAE based on school district employment and alerts them about the opportunities. A participant noted, "We run regular queries in our system based on district employment codes

and proactively reach out to those students.” They also track utilization and meet regularly with the College of Education to align messaging and support.

- **San Jacinto College** has a dedicated staff member who serves as the EAE point of contact. One interviewee shared, “When aides have a question, they know exactly who to ask — we don’t bounce them around different offices.” Educational aides know exactly who to go to, and the college has developed strong relationships with local independent school districts to verify employment. Their model shows the impact of a “warm handoff” approach.
- **Dallas College** implements an effective cohort model through combining peer support structures with strategic funding to enhance affordability and retention. A leader from the program shared, “The cohort builds confidence. When they see someone who looks like them graduate, it makes the goal feel real.” They also highlighted the partnership with local districts that allowed for smoother employment verification and wraparound services. Their structured monthly meetings foster interdepartmental collaboration, significantly improving certification completion rates.

These examples highlight that with the right structures — dedicated personnel, shared data tracking, intentional outreach, and collaboration with districts — educational aides can access and benefit from the program as intended.

Recommendations for Institutions

To maximize the potential of the EAE program, institutions can implement practical, targeted strategies that improve program awareness, access, and completion among educational aides. These include:

- **Enhance awareness and outreach:** Establish dedicated EAE coordinators within financial aid and educator preparation offices. Develop targeted communications, leveraging school district partnerships, orientation sessions, and digital campaigns tailored to current educational aides. Institutions should partner with K-12 district talent departments to identify eligible staff and jointly promote EAE as part of GYO initiatives.
- **Strengthen departmental coordination:** Formalize cross-departmental working groups that include financial aid officers, educator preparation faculty, and registrar staff to regularly troubleshoot challenges, align messaging, and track student progress.
- **Implement cohort models:** Develop cohort-based programs that integrate academic advising, peer mentorship, district partnerships, and holistic support services (child care, tutoring, transportation assistance). Encourage shared learning communities to reduce attrition and boost morale.
- **Create internal tracking systems:** Use customer relationship management (CRM) systems or internal databases to flag EAE-eligible students based on employment history and support continuous monitoring of application and award status.

Considerations for State Policymakers

To complement institutional strategies and promote broader systemic support for EAE, the following state-level actions could strengthen program consistency, transparency, and long-term viability.

- **Enhance data transparency:** Tri-Agency (THECB, Texas Education Agencies, and Texas Workforce Commission) leaders should consider producing a longitudinal impact report on the EAE program, using existing data sources to link participation to certification and employment outcomes. This would provide state policymakers with a baseline understanding of the program's impact on the educator pipeline.
- **Broaden candidate eligibility:** In coordination with TEA, THECB should consider expanding the list of critical shortage teaching areas that qualify for EAE to help meet the state's goal of phasing out uncertified teachers in all foundation courses. Broadening eligibility would permit more educational aides to access the program, reduce administrative burdens, and address local teacher vacancies.
- **Align student teaching expectations:** In coordination with TEA, THECB should revisit student teaching waiver criteria to more tightly align with recently codified apprenticeship and GYO funding requirements. Doing so would reduce friction for programs and help ensure candidates are positioned to access complementary financial resources intended to support their success.
- **Restructure funding allocation:** Agency leaders should consider shifting from annual to biannual allocations to enhance program stability and institutional commitment to program participation. Concentrating funds would enable institutions to better serve more candidates while maximizing the efficiency and impact of existing appropriations.
- **Encourage braided funding:** Through technical assistance partners like Dallas College's new [Center for Reigniting the Educator Workforce \(CREW\)](#), TEA can help institutions learn how to optimize the EAE with other funding streams, including new PREP allotment and apprenticeship grant dollars, to most effectively support aides through certification pathways.

Looking Ahead: Strengthening EAE for Greater Impact

The EAE program holds great promise — but without deliberate, cross-sector collaboration and policy integration, it will remain an underleveraged resource. Institutional leaders have voiced the same message in different ways: This program could accomplish so much more, if only it were easier to navigate, better known, and more fully supported.

As one educational aide shared, after years of leading classrooms without the title or pay of a certified teacher, “I know my worth, and I know my talent... I'm tired of making little money for big work.” For them and many others, EAE is not just financial aid — it's a pathway to turn long-standing, under-recognized labor into a valued credential and sustainable career.

By working collaboratively to enhance communication, streamline processes, and integrate EAE into long-term planning, stakeholders can strengthen the state's capacity to develop and retain strong, locally rooted educators.

Acknowledgements

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Participating institutions include:

- Dallas College
- Lee College
- Prairie View A&M University
- Sam Houston State University
- San Jacinto College
- Texas A&M University – Corpus Christi
- Texas State University
- Texas Woman’s University
- The University of Houston
- The University of Texas at El Paso

Endnotes

1. Texas Education Agency, Teacher Employment, Attrition, and Hiring, April 2025. <https://tea.texas.gov/texas-educators/superintendents/teacher-employment-attrition-and-hiring-april-2025.pdf>
2. Ibid.