

By: Stephanie Gomez, Texas Civil Rights Project August 2020

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

- foreward
- 2 Executive Summary
- 4 Texas's Unique High School Voter Registration Law
- 6 Latest Compliance Findings and Analysis
- 15 Spotlight on Student Activism
- 18 Texas Educators for Civic Education
- **20** Efforts by the Own Our Vote Initiative
- 21 High School Voter Registration Work Moving Forward
- **22** Conclusion
- 24 Endnotes

## **FOREWARD**

When I left for spring break on a random Thursday in March of 2020, little did I know it would be the last time I stepped foot on my high school campus. As a National Honor Society member, homecoming queen, varsity soccer captain, and drum major of the band, the news of a pandemic shutting down schools was devastating.

The loss of prom, sports seasons, graduation ceremonies, and high school rites of passage is not the worst thing to happen to the class of 2020. For example, take a look at the times in which we were raised: never knowing our country pre 9/11; being trained to "Run, Hide, Fight" to avoid being gunned down at school; and growing up with families being destroyed due to the opioid epidemic. We are no stranger to the cultural ramifications of our leaders' actions — or inactions — and we are prepared to change the future for our own childrens' good.

My generation is more politically involved than ever before. We staged the March for Our Lives protests last year and more recently many of the Black Lives Matter protests have been organized by students. We understand that long-lasting change starts with a simple vote. However, in times of COVID-19, registering to vote in Texas is nearly impossible, with no robust online registration and the very real concerns of Volunteer Deputy Registrars having to come into contact with future voters. How do I know of these difficulties? This year, I had been working on a senior project where I had planned to go to all 11 high schools in my district and run a voter registration drive. Part of this project included getting my friends and myself trained as Volunteer Deputy Registrars.

It should not be the responsibility of myself and my classmates to make sure we are provided our guaranteed inalienable right to register to vote. However, my generation is not about to give up. Not now, and not ever. We've seen too much, lived through too many preventable tragedies, and seen our policies and elected officials fail us time and time again. The time is now to support new voters with easy, equitable, and accessible voter registration.



Kylie Helterbrand, 18 San Antonio, Texas

# **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Since 2013, the Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) has worked to make high school voter registration a reality for all young Texans. Alongside our partners, TCRP has led the fight to boost statewide compliance with a 1985 Texas law that requires every public and private high school in the state to distribute voter registration applications to eligible students at least twice each school year. Texas youth are poised to lead the country into the future, and an essential part of their leadership comes from the recognition that this law has the potential to not just make Texas a leader in youth registration and voter turnout, but to ensure the next generation of Texas leaders are cultivating a culture of civic engagement.

Our previous reports have found that while we can identify a general upward trend in compliance with the high school voter registration law, compliance across the state is still nowhere near a majority of Texas schools. Our most recent report, published in 2019, verified a significant increase over the past three years — 38% of public high schools in Texas with at least 20 senior year students were compliant with the law, meaning they requested voter registration forms from the Secretary of State or conducted a voter registration drive with a member of the Own Our Vote initiative, a collaborative effort of grassroots organizations working to close the gap in compliance. The efforts of the Own Our Vote initiative are an essential aspect of the surge in statewide compliance.

Consistent with previous reports, TCRP based this year's findings on a Public Information Act request sent to the Texas Secretary of State seeking copies of all requests for voter registration forms by high schools. That request is consistent with the 2019-2020 academic

year, and spans June 2019 - May 2020. Once again, we have created a data set from the information within the request, and have added data reported by the partners of the Own Our Vote initiative identifying schools in which they conducted voter registration drives in partnership with educators.

### **OUR KEY FINDINGS INCLUDE:**

- TCRP was able to verify the compliance for 38% of Texas public high schools with more than 20 seniors during the 2019-2020 academic year. Although the compliance rate did not rise for the 2019-2020 academic year as compared to last year, it is important to note the external factors of the academic year that warped the timeline for the 2020 report. Texas's academic year was cut short due to the statewide shutdown of Texas schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19. A majority of requests to the Secretary of State's office and voter registration drives were conducted from August 2019 - Feb 2020, an entire 3 months before the school year ended.
- TCRP was able to verify requests for high school voter registration forms from 54 private schools, doubled from the previous reporting period.
- The efforts of Own Our Vote partners is essential to addressing racial disparity in voter registration and turnout. An analysis of the available compliance shows that the efforts of the Own Our Vote partners are overwhelmingly servicing areas where people of color constitute a majority. Harris County, Hidalgo County, and Dallas County,

in particular, have a higher frequency of partners servicing schools. Further, Harris County and Dallas County, the two areas with the highest frequency of partner work, have dedicated regional collaborative efforts working to address racial disparities in civic engagement and voter registration.

- The changes in compliance rates in our focus counties demonstrate the importance of regional collaboration between schools and grassroots organizations. Harris County and Dallas County were able to obtain high compliance rates for this time period by strategizing, pooling resources, and staying in communication with one another. The high schools supported by Own Our Vote partners benefit from the demonstrated expertise these organizations bring on voter registration, voter education, Get Out the Vote (GOTV) strategies, and supporting historically marginalized voting populations — despite lack of support and resources from State institutions.
- Many of the same issues detailed in previous reports remain, and will only increase in severity under COVID-19. Despite the efforts of Own Our Vote partners and educators, the statewide compliance rate is still too low. This report once again details the steps that the Secretary of State must take to support schools in their efforts to register students. The Secretary of State must affirmatively provide voter registration forms to schools, review current methods, and devise and implement additional outreach methods, including a standard training for schools available online, and implement a tracking mechanism to publicly acknowledge schools that are complying and support those who are falling short.

The work of Texas's tireless educators, volunteers, and grassroots organizations has not wavered. The dedication shown to support the civic engagement of young Texans is aweinspiring, but we must continue to demand guidance and resources from state leadership. Looking forward to the 2020-2021 academic year, the Own Our Vote partners implemented new strategies to support schools, safely register eligible students to vote, and ensure they are able to cast a ballot in the 2020 presidential election.

# TEXAS'S UNIQUE HIGH SCHOOL VOTER REGISTRATION LAW

Since 1985, Texas law has required public and private high schools to offer voter registration applications to eligible students twice an academic year. For the past seven years, the Texas Civil Rights Project (TCRP) has investigated high school voter registration practices and analyzed available data to determine compliance rates for Texas high schools. In 2017 we expanded our scope of work beyond compliance checks to include technical and policy support for organizations engaging in high school voter registration and public awareness about the law. Since then, we have produced a How-to Guide to support educators in their voter registration efforts<sup>2</sup>, as well as authoring yearly compliance reports. Our reports discuss the work being done by educators, students and grassroots organizations to address the gaps in young Texans accessing the opportunity to register to vote and cast a ballot in elections.3

Determined educators, students, community members, and advocates have provided enormous support to schools and districts to realize compliance with the 1985 law. However, the State has failed to live up to its end of the bargain. Across the board, individuals working to provide registration opportunities for students, as required by law, cite a lack of guidance and support from the State on how to best carry out high school voter registration efforts in schools. Their tireless endeavors have moved the needle, but our yearly analysis continues to demonstrate that a majority of Texas high school seniors do not receive the opportunity to register to vote, as they are supposed to be under Texas law. Until the Secretary of State (SOS) provides high schools the necessary support, resources,

and guidance to offer voter registration to every eligible student, Texas will not be able to realize the shared goal of ensuring that students are registering to vote and entering a life-long path in civic engagement.

As can be read in more detail in our previous reports, the 1985 law specifies that:

- The principal of each high school, or the principal's designee, is designated by law as the high school deputy registrar (HSDR). As detailed below, the principal has a legal obligation to offer registration opportunities twice each year to eligible students.<sup>4</sup>
- Under SOS's regulations, the HSDR must request a sufficient number of voter registration forms to register all qualifying students.<sup>5</sup>
- The HSDR must offer voter registration applications to eligible students at least twice per school year, along with a notice explaining how the students may deliver the applications.<sup>6</sup>
- Students may choose to return voter registration forms to the HSDR. The HSDR must review the applications for completeness, give assistance upon request, and collect them for delivery to the county voter registrar. Alternatively, students may give their voter registration form to a Volunteer Deputy Registrar (VDR) for turning into the county voter registrar.<sup>7</sup>
- Students may deliver their form in person or by mail to their county voter registrar.

# DESPITE THE CLEAR OBLIGATIONS UNDER THE LAW, HIGH SCHOOLS CONTINUE TO STRUGGLE WITH PROVIDING VOTER REGISTRATION TO ELIGIBLE STUDENTS. 77

- 30 days after the voter registration form is submitted to the voter registrar, the student is registered.<sup>8</sup>
- The student votes during the next election in which they are eligible.

Despite the clear obligations under the law, our past reports demonstrate that the law is not sufficiently implemented across Texas. High schools continue to struggle with providing voter registration to eligible students. This failure does not rest on schools or the dedicated volunteers. but on a lack of clarity, support, resources and accountability that is necessary to ensure that efforts to stay compliant with the law are properly executed. Educators face rampant confusion surrounding the law and the inability to implement it well in schools across Texas, and this confusion directly affects a young Texan's ability to seamlessly enter the democratic process from the earliest possible moment. This moment is of vital importance, given that research on youth voting indicates that if a young person is not voting in the first elections they're eligible, they're likely to become a non-voter for good. The opposite is also true — if young people vote in the first three elections where they are eligible, they are significantly more likely to remain civically engaged for the rest of their lives.9 Supporting high school voter registration is worth the task of assisting schools in their efforts to remain compliant with the law.

The Generation Z population, the demographic cohort of individuals who were born in the mid-1990s to 2010, makes up the most diverse generation in Texas. US Census figures continue to demonstrate that the majority of young Texans are students of color, with a large percentage of these students residing in Texas's major metropolitan areas. 10 Texas schools are one of the first opportunities that a student has in order to develop healthy habits for their civic engagement, as well as an opportunity to develop their political identity, regardless of eligibility to vote. Failure to support these students in their journey to becoming civically engaged and active participants of our democracy continues the cycle of lower voter registration and voter turn-out rates for people of color. In order to address this racial gap, Texas must start with supporting high schools in voter registration efforts.

In an ideal Texas, schools would have the necessary resources, support and confidence to engage the civic health of their students from the earliest possible moment — well before the student is eligible to register to vote.

# **Latest Compliance Findings and Analysis**

The methodology of our research is consistent with our 2018 and 2019 reports on high school voter registration compliance. TCRP submitted a Public Information Act request to the Texas Secretary of State for copies of all voter registration request forms submitted by schools — the first step that high schools must take in complying with the high school voter registration law. The request analyzed in this report spans high school voter registration efforts from June 2019 through May 2020, and covers the 2019-2020 academic years. The information gathered from our Public Information Act request serves as the basis for our analysis and efforts to track high school voter registration compliance across the state.

Once again, TCRP recognizes that Texas high schools rely on the supportive efforts of Own Our Vote, a collaborative effort of voter registration and education organizations working to support high school voter registration compliance across Texas. High schools across the state depend on their relationships with dedicated community volunteers and civic engagement groups to provide voter registration and voter education to students, aiding in their efforts to be compliant with the 1985 HSVR law. To include these efforts in our report, TCRP requested data on voter registration drives in high schools conducted by the partners in the Own Our Vote initiative. By coupling self-reported partner data with information gleaned from the Public Information Request, TCRP is able to produce a more accurate depiction of high school voter registration efforts in Texas.

Despite our efforts to collect and analyze all available data to report on the state of high school voter registration compliance, the information obtained through our Public Information Act requests and the self-reported data is inherently limited. Without a formalized tracking mechanism and enforcement of the law led by the SOS's office, we will be unable to know the exact compliance rate for the high school voter registration law. Our research to date offers the most accurate representation of the high school voter registration compliance rate, but the SOS must allocate further research, resources, and support to high school voter registration efforts to ensure that every young Texan is well informed on civic responsibility and engagement. To date, no study in Texas has examined the effectiveness of various types of programming schools and organizations have implemented to support compliance with the high school voter registration law.

# COMPLIANCE FIGURES FOR THE 2019-2020 ACADEMIC YEAR

Since beginning this investigation, TCRP has been able to verify steady increases in high school voter registration compliance efforts across the state. Due to our efforts and the work of the Own Our Voter partners, the high school voter registration compliance rate has nearly tripled from 14% to 38%, as recorded in the 2019 Report. The increase in the compliance rate is widely attributed to the efforts of the Own Our Vote initiative established in 2017.

TCRP was able to verify the compliance for 38% of Texas public high schools with more than 20 seniors during the 2019-2020 academic year. Our compliance rate is calculated by compiling the high schools who requested voter registration forms from the Secretary of State (23%), high schools who partnered with one of the Own Our Vote initiative partners, or

who did both (15%). Further, TCRP was able to verify requests for high school voter registration forms from 54 private schools, doubled from the previous reporting period.

An initial review of our findings will likely be compared to previous reports that show a steady increase in the compliance rate across the State. Although the compliance rate did not rise for the 2019-2020 academic year as compared to last year, it is important to note the external factors of the academic year that warped the timeline for the 2020 report. Texas's academic year was cut short due to the statewide shutdown of Texas schools to prevent the spread of COVID-19.

Starting in March 2020, school districts in Texas began to implement complete shut-downs or limited operations — with only the most basic, necessary functions of the myriad of services they provide for the communities they serve. The 38% compliance rate for the school year is determined by requests made to the SOS's office and partner efforts from August 2019 through the end of February 2020 — an entire three months before the spring semester ended for most Texas schools.

TCRP believes that the overall statewide compliance rate would be higher than 38% if

schools had not closed due to COVID-19. A majority of high schools and partner organizations wait until May to conduct their voter registration drives, in order to ensure as many young people as possible are eligible to register to vote before they go into Summer vacation. Additionally, we know that graduation ceremonies, end of the year celebrations, and other similar large gatherings are popular events for partners and schools to distribute voter registration forms or host drives. To reach 38% compliance for the 2019-2020 school year without these events is a testament to the hard work and civic engagement of teachers, students, administrators, and Own Our Vote partners.

Contextualizing the pandemic and its consequences, it is safe to assume that under normal circumstances, the statewide compliance rate would have surpassed the currently observed rate. Securing a 38% compliance rate is something that deserves to be celebrated, especially given that this achievement was only possible because of the heroic efforts of educators and partner organizations across Texas. Changes in the statewide HSVR compliance rate since 2016 can be seen below.

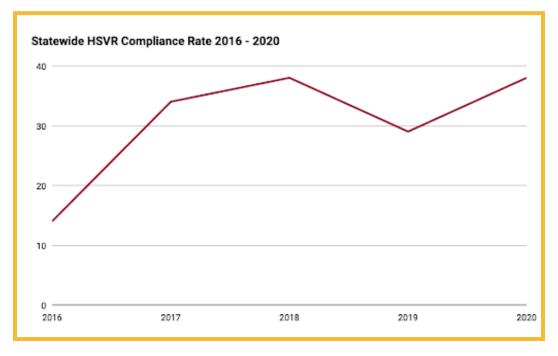


FIGURE 1.

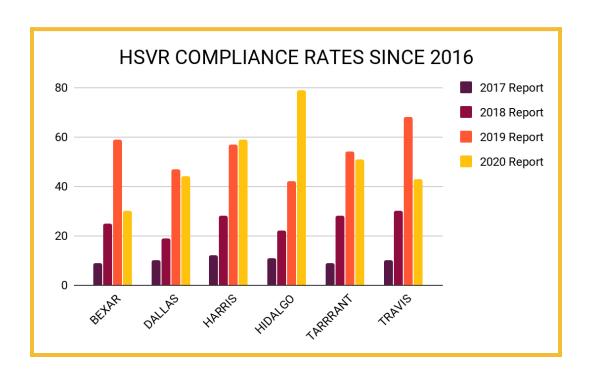
Figure 1 demonstrates a generally upward trend for high school voter registration compliance which is in line with our assumptions: increased community awareness on the high school voter registration law amongst stakeholders leads to direct improvements in compliance. A small decrease in compliance was recorded for 2019 due to a lack of availability of partner data for this time period — further affirming the significance of the work of community partners engaging in direct voter registration efforts.

Despite the general increase in compliance rate since 2016, TCRP knows that the growth has been uneven — it's led mostly by urban counties. For the 2019-2020 school year, changes in rates by county varied and widely depended on the availability of partner data (as seen in Figure 2 below). Bexar and Travis County saw the most significant drop (29 percentage point decrease and 25 percentage point decrease, respectively), while Dallas and Tarrant counties saw a small decrease (3 percentage point decrease for both counties) as compared to the last school year. Harris and Hidalgo counties both experienced an increase in compliance rate (2 percentage point increase and 37 percentage point increase, respectively). The compliance rates for our targeted counties are as follows:

# COMPLIANCE RATE BY COUNTY

Bexar County: 30%
Dallas County: 44%
Harris County: 59%
Hidalgo County: 79%
Tarrant County: 51%
Travis County: 43%

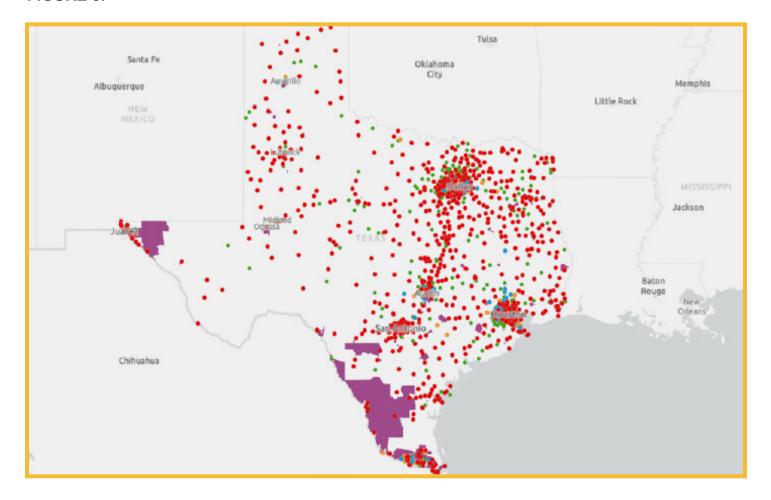
FIGURE 2.



In previous years, TCRP has released a Google map available online that provides a visual representation of which schools have requested high school voter registration forms from the SOS pursuant to the law, which schools have worked with partner organizations, and which schools TCRP has not been able to verify compliance. The newest installment of our map has been updated to reflect the 2019-2020 efforts of schools and Own Our Vote partners, and features the same basic format as its predecessors. The 2019-2020 map also shows Texas opportunity

counties for increasing the youth vote, identified by our partners at Children's Defense Fund, and census block groups with majority Black, Latinx, and Asian populations shaded in purple. To view the full interactive map, visit: <a href="https://www.ownourvote.org">www.ownourvote.org</a>.

### FIGURE 3.



### **LEGEND**

- Green: Schools that requested forms directly from the SOS
- Blue: Schools that worked with a partner organization
- Orange: Schools that requested forms directly from the SOS and worked with a partner organization
- Red: Schools for which we have been unable to verify voter registration status

For the full interactive map, visit www.ownourvote.org

### STUDENTS SERVED

An analysis of the map and school compliance shows that the efforts of the Own Our Vote partners are overwhelmingly servicing areas where people of color constitute a majority. Harris County, Hidalgo County, and Dallas County, in particular, have a higher frequency of partners servicing schools. Further, Harris County and Dallas County, the two areas with the highest frequency of partner work, have dedicated regional collaborative efforts working to address racial disparities in civic engagement and voter registration.

The work of Own Our Vote partners, shown by the orange and blue dots, demonstrates that much of the efforts in Harris County serve areas of the region that are majority populations of color. Much of this work can be credited to the continuous efforts of the Houston in Action<sup>11</sup> collaborative, a member-driven initiative that focuses on supporting civic engagement efforts in the Greater Houston Area. Similarly, March to the Polls<sup>12</sup>, a non-partisan voter empowerment collaborative, works to develop relationships with school district officials and educators in the Dallas-Fort Worth metroplex. Together with partners such

as the Student Voter Empowerment Coalition (SVEC), they work to serve the students of Dallas, Richardson, Garland, DeSoto and Farmers Branch/Carrollton ISD. Member organizations in Hidalgo County also reported working with districts in order to organize senior assemblies and events to register a large number of students in a short amount of time. Partner organizations were able to service all high school campuses in major districts and charter school systems within Hidalgo County.

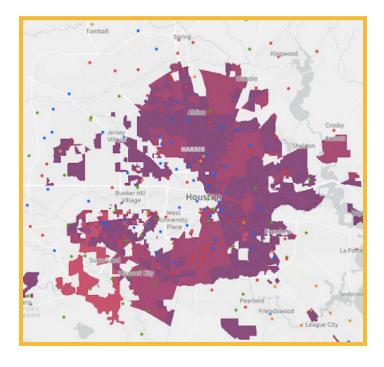
The impact of regional collaboration that can be seen in Harris, Dallas, and Hidalgo Counties cannot be understated. Alongside Hidalgo County, these regions were able to obtain high compliance rates for this time period by strategizing, pooling resources, and staying in communication with one another. The high schools supported by Own Our Voter partners benefit from the demonstrated expertise these organizations bring on voter registration, voter education, GOTV strategies, and supporting historically marginalized voting populations — despite lack of support and resources from State institutions.

### FIGURE 4.



PAGE 10

### FIGURE 5.



# TRENDS AND CONSISTENCIES IN THE DATA

The numbers indicate that the statewide high school voter registration compliance rate continues to increase, although with short-term deviations in certain counties due to external factors, the general picture emerging from TCRP's analysis is that statewide compliance continues on an upward trend.

TCRP expected a general decrease for the 2019-2020 academic year due to the forced shutdowns because of COVID-19. However, even with three fewer months for registration efforts, TCRP saw the same compliance rate as the year previous. It is safe to assume that had COVID-19 not affected the physical availability of students in schools, compliance rates for both the state and individual counties would surely have increased past 38%. The dedicated efforts of educators, districts and our partner organizations during the time period that schools were open have certainly contributed to the statewide compliance rate holding steady. As we look toward the Fall 2020 academic semester, partner efforts will continue to be highly valued as we adjust strategies in order to get as many high school students registered as possible, safely and effectively, in time to vote in the 2020 presidential election.

# CONTINUED LACK OF SUPPORT FROM THE SECRETARY OF STATE

The feedback TCRP heard from students, the steady compliance rate, and the files we received from the SOS's office all tell the same story: the State refuses to remove barriers for student voter registration. The very issues students warned us of in our previous reports showed up again in this year's SOS documents, despite the simple solutions TCRP has provided time and time again in our previous reports. The most obvious solution — the SOS proactively providing the necessary forms so that schools can focus on distribution — has yet to be

implemented.

The Secretary of State's office has offered very limited guidance to help schools register students, a task that so clearly falls within their mandate.

At the beginning of the year, the SOS's office sends out a mass email to all principals, based on an irregularly maintained email list from the Texas Education Agency (TEA). The email lays out the law and expectations regarding high school voter registration, as well as supplementary documents for reference and distribution. While this email features a lot of information for principals, inquiries directed to the SOSs office indicate that the email is ineffective; principals often find themselves more overwhelmed and confused after reading it than they were before. Further, principals who reach out for more guidance and information on how to best introduce high school voter registration work in their schools are simply forwarded the mass email, with no further help or instruction (as seen in the email exchange in Figure 6).

This practice speaks to two key problems in the SOS's process. First, the TEA email list that the SOS utilizes as the basis of its communication with principals is flawed. Previous reports elaborated on holes in the information that the list holds: it is not regularly maintained and there is no indication of how frequently the list is updated. New principals and high school voter registration designees have no way to proactively add themselves onto the email list. Secondly, in order to best support the work of principals distributing voter registration forms to their students, attempts to clear up questions on how to best distribute forms should be met with actual support and guidance. In the coming academic year, high schools across Texas are going to be juggling educating students while trying to adapt to an ever-changing model of instruction.

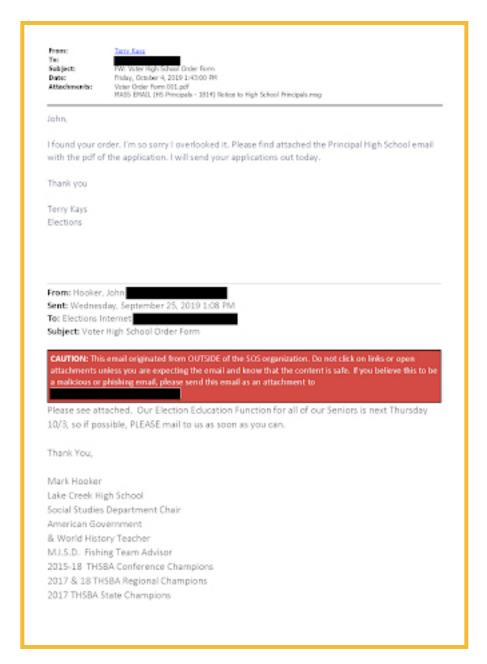
### FIGURE 6.



Further, there is no quality tracking mechanism to ensure that schools get their voter registration forms on time, especially before the voter registration deadlines. Schools are unable to determine whether or not their request for voter registration is being fulfilled without sending emails to the SOS's general email. Educators who reach out typically receive a response from the SOS, but oftentimes the emails are unclear on whether or not they received assistance (or,

more importantly, their voter registration forms) on time. Furthermore, principals who send their requests via email are at risk of having their requests overlooked — in many cases, this means that they do not receive their voter registration forms on time (as shown in the email exchange in Figure 7). The school's request was overlooked by the SOS's office, and they were unable to get voter registration forms in time for their all-senior assembly.

### FIGURE 7.



Requesting the forms from the SOS's office is not as simple of a process as it seems, or as it should be. Many principles are left confused on what needs to be done in order to request the forms. The informality of the request process allows orders to be overlooked and not submitted in time for the deadline, directly impacting whether or not young Texans will be able to exercise their right to vote. The state could streamline this process by sending the forms

directly. Instead, the Secretary of State continues to use an opaque and confusing process while answering questions with vague responses.

Given the uncertainty of the coming academic year, the need for clear and seamless processes is more important than ever. Schools will be navigating an ever-changing dynamic as they undertake the 2020-2021 academic year during a pandemic. In previous years, TCRP



has advocated on behalf of common sense measures that would remove the burden from schools, such as proactively sending schools the appropriate numbers of voter registration forms at the beginning of the academic year. Implementing this simple change would alleviate the stress placed on increasingly over-burdened educators, as well as work in the state's favor by removing the issue of overlooking orders from requests made via email.

Until the Secretary of State's office implements the necessary changes to make voter registration efforts easier for schools to implement, TCRP and the Own Our Vote partners will continue to rely on educators, students and community members to register young people to vote. Although their efforts are heroic, the responsibility and guidance of the SOSs office is critical. The SOS must update their procedures in order to best support the civic health and commitment to the lifelong voting of young Texans. COVID-19 has caused schools to face a new level of uncertainty, especially as the very format of schooling changes at a rapid pace. Despite the circumstances, schools remain a multiservice and necessary component of a healthy community.

The COVID-19 pandemic cannot be used as an excuse to allow the civic rights of young Texans to take yet another backseat — if anything, the current conditions of young Texans' lives are further energizing them to participate in civic life. Further, the idea that young people do not desire to be civically engaged members of our democracy while they are students is inaccurate; there are many recent and compelling examples of young students who became aware of injustice in their community and took the initiative to take action on the issues that they cared about the most.

# Spotlight on Student Activism: Lakes4Lives "Come for the Ice Cream, Stay for the Activism"

Student leaders across the state are taking action in order to ensure that their peers are engaged in social justice efforts and are working to become active members of our democracy. The frequent refrain that young people are not "motivated" to get involved is not borne out by the evidence. A quick look in Texas high schools will quickly demonstrate that young people are more than ever looking to support voter registration and voter education efforts in their communities.

Lakes4Lives is a student-led civic engagement group based out of Cypress Lakes High School that provides a friendly, non-judgmental space for Cypress Lakes students to engage in community, share their opinions and personal story, and discuss issues free of political parties through guided discussion, fun powerpoints, and games. Founded in 2018 in response to the Stoneman Douglas High School shooting in Parkland, Florida, then-student Wasig Javed organized his fellow students to show up at the March for Our Lives Rally in downtown Houston, Texas. With over 60 students in attendance, Cypress Lakes High School had the largest turnout out of all the Houston area high schools.

The 2019-2020 academic year was full of opportunities for students to support and engage with their communities. Through the leadership of their executive board, President Laura Gonzalez (she/her/hers), Secretary Mandy Tran (she/her/hers), Historian Calvin Nguyen (he/him/his), and Outreach Coordinator Kathleen Hoang (she/her/hers) worked to ensure that Lakes4Lives was one of the top

student groups at Cypress Lakes High School. Students were introduced to the organization through strategic recruiting for an introductory Ice Cream Social. The event was so successful that Lakes4Lives doubled their goal of 60 new members, causing them to have to hold two separate interest sessions for the organization. With this new group of students ready to discuss policy and support the community, the executive board planned a series of large events to mobilize their peers.

"IT WAS NEVER ABOUT POLITICAL PARTIES, IT WAS ABOUT TRYING TO UNDERSTAND OTHER PERSPECTIVES" - LAURA, EX-PRESIDENT OF LAKES4LIVES DURING ACADEMIC YEAR 19-20



### PROJECT DOWNTOWN HYPE EVENT

Lakes4Lives's first event was called the "hype event," designed to continue the energy of students and demonstrate that the organization was "the real deal." Lakes4Lives members collaborated with college students from the United Mission Relief organization at University of Houston to distribute care packages to Houstonains experiencing homelessness. All members of the organization donated sandwich supplies and organized a carpool system with the NHS and parent volunteers in order to make sure that students were able to safely get downtown. "All of the students were just collaborating and having fun! Making sandwiches, and it was hectic too! We were making so many sandwiches and packing them at the same time. We were overflowing with sandwiches, but it was amazing at the same time." After over 200 sandwiches were made and inserted into small care packages, students and volunteers distributed the sandwiches out to Houstonians until there were none left.

"I REMEMBER ONE OF OUR MEMBERS (WHO WAS A FRESHMAN) SAID, 'I'VE NEVER EXPERIENCED ANYTHING LIKE THIS, I DIDN'T KNOW HOW MANY [PEOPLE EXPERIENCING HOMELESSNESS] THERE ACTUALLY WAS IN DOWNTOWN HOUSTON'. IT WAS HEARTWARMING AND HUMBLING TO SEE HOW WE WERE MAKING AN IMPACT ON LITERAL PEOPLE - NOT JUST THE PEOPLE WE WERE GIVING SANDWICHES TO, BUT IN OUR NEW MEMBERS." - LAURA

### **ANNISE PARKER TIME!**

In order to ensure that the conversations on youth activism continued after Project Downtown, the officers of the organization picked up an event that in previous years had never come to fruition — inviting former Mayor Annise Parker to their high school to lead a conversation on the importance of youth activism and civic engagement. After working with school administrators to organize

the event, Mayor Parker was invited to speak to a large group of high school students in October 2019 in order to energize the members of their organization, and even extended the invitation out to fellow students in the district. Mayor Parker spoke, and approximately 400 students joined in the conversation. At the end of the event, Mayor Parker told the group that they had brought together the largest group of students she had ever seen at a high school. The event was so successful that they were featured on their district's website, on social media, and in a Texas magazine.

"IT WAS JUST A GREAT EVENT. WE BROUGHT THE FORMER MAYOR TO OUR SCHOOL AND THAT'S ALL THAT MATTERS!" - KATHLEEN, NEW-PRESIDENT OF LAKES4LIVES ACADEMIC YEAR 20-21







# CLEANING UP FOR THE DESCENDANTS OF OLIVEWOOD

The Lakes4Lives student leaders also reached out to Descendants of Olivewood, a historic cemetery in Houston that served as the city's first incorporated Black cemetery, after learning that the cemetery was neglected and in need of community support and funding. The leaders put together an education powerpoint for their peers on the history of the cemetery, and discussed with students how the current neglected status of the cemetery was directly tied to the descendants of people within the cemetery being forced out of 6th Ward, a historically Black part of Houston, due to gentrification of the surrounding area. The students then invited all of the members of Lakes4Lives to take a trip to downtown Houston once again in order to rake the ground, clean up graffiti, and organize the cemetery. The Lakes4Lives chapter continues to stay involved with the Descendants of Olivewood, and plans to continue supporting the cemetery through volunteering in the coming academic year.

# LAKES4LIVES IN THE 2020-2021 ACADEMIC YEAR

These three examples are a small example of the work that Lakes4Lives put into their community and their school during the 2019-2020 academic year. They also organized a vigil for the anniversary of the Stoneman Douglas shooting, and, once COVID-19 shut down the rest of their spring semester, they

worked to organize resources to support their fellow students and promote digital events. Over the summer of 2020, new president Kathleen, along with the incoming executive board, Jocelyn Gonzalez (she/her/hers), Mia Cuevas (she/her/hers), Sebastian Prieto (he/ him/his), Angel Ridriguez (he/him/his), and Paula Perez (she/her/hers), reached out to TCRP in order to discuss the best ways to begin planning how to ensure that eligible students in Cypress Lakes are being offered the opportunity to register to vote. Lakes4Lives will work with their school's administration and community partners in order to utilize Fall 2020 as an opportunity to continue to engage students in the community, register to vote, and cast a ballot in the upcoming election.

Lakes4Lives and its student leaders are simply one example of various student groups across the state that have reached out to Own Our Voter partners in an effort to support high school voter registration efforts in their high schools. This energy has not slowed, despite the structure of schools still being up in the air for many districts across the state. There is an ill-informed, old-age framing that young people are apathetic and unconcerned about voting, civic engagement and their civic duties. But conversations with young people in Texas particularly those who are Black, Indigenous, or Young People of Color—demonstrate that they truly understand the severity of the issues that their generation faces, and they know that sometimes the response needed is outside of the ballot box.

# **Texas Educators For Civic Education!**

Our state has no shortage of dedicated superintendents, principals, teachers and administrators who are working to ensure that students have the opportunity to register to vote. In the 2019-2020 academic year, approximately 55% of the voter registration form requests were sent in by the designated high school voter deputy registrar instead of the principal. Despite the confusing nature of the requests, TCRP sees Texas educators taking the necessary steps to provide voter registration and voter education to their students.

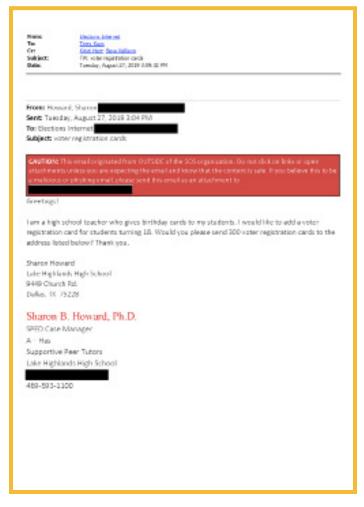
Educator efforts are absolutely essential to the success of statewide high school voter registration. Emails sent to the SOS

demonstrate the creative ways that educators support high school voter registration work in their schools, as well as their desire to seek guidance and information on best practices in order to best support healthy attitudes of civic engagement in their students. In many of the emails, teachers indicate their concern with the students vocalizing confusion with the registration and voting process (as seen in Figures 8, 9, 10). Furthermore, several teachers indicated that they work to distribute forms to juniors and seniors, as well as proactively attaching the forms to handouts to the students — a great way to ensure that all eligible students are being accounted for in their outreach.

### FIGURE 8.



### FIGURE 9.



### FIGURE 10.

From Lacky Partic

Sent Pricky, Again 30, 2019 11:07 AM

From Lacky Partic

Sent Pricky, Again 30, 2019 11:07 AM

From Lacky Partic

Sent Pricky, Again 30, 2019 11:07 AM

The between internet

Subject More Registration Cords

Contribut Theory against Against 30, 2019 11:07 AM

The between internet

Subject More Registration Cords

Contribut Theory against Against 10 and 10 and

# Efforts by the Own Our Vote Initiative

The members of the Own Our Vote initiative remained busy this year despite the shorter academic calendar. In collaboration with Own Our Voter partners, TCRP was in the process of planning a series of regional convenings in our targeted counties in early 2020 in order to ensure that partners and schools in each major region of Texas were adequately prepared to ensure as many young Texans as possible were registered during the Spring 2020 semester. Our regional convenings, however, were cancelled due to safety concerns from the COVID-19. Instead, the partners of the Own Our Vote initiative began strategizing to determine the best ways to provide support to schools, educators, and students.

Our first action was to revamp the Own Our Vote website in order to make it user-friendly and accessible to any educator or community member looking for resources to support their high school voter registration efforts. This included compiling resources from the Own Our Vote partners that could be integrated into the average high school curriculum including webinars, YouTube videos, toolkits, guides, and powerpoints. These resources are readily available on our website for anyone who may need them.

Second, TCRP directly contacted principals and district officials via email to alert them of the new website and the resources housed there. TCRP utilized the flawed email list provided by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) that catalogues points of contact for all of the public high schools in the state. This list was supplemented by: TCRP's records of dedicated superintendents, principals, and school administrators who have reached out for assistance on high school voter registration, as well as shared by partners of the Own

Our Vote initiative, many of whom hold deep relationships with the educators in the communities they serve.

Third, TCRP designed and launched the High School Voter Registration Public Awareness survey in order to gauge public knowledge on the 1985 high school voter registration law. The survey was short, but the anonymous data from the survey will be shared with partners and used to inform our continued work to ensure that high schools and communities receive the support they need to register their students to vote, in compliance with the law.

Lastly, Texas Civil Rights project, with the support of the Own Our Vote partners. organized the 2020 High School Voter Registration Convening, held virtually due to COVID-19. The convening was designed as a week-long series of sessions led by partners that discussed the most pressing issues on high school voter registration in Texas. Each session had an average of 70 participants, with attendees coming from over 58 Texas cities. The sessions covered during the convening were a refresher on the high school voter registration law and compliance updates, a rundown of target counties for expanding the youth vote, best practices for engaging, and including, all students when discussing civic engagement, a discussion on how to best work with county administration, state leadership, and educators, and a planning session for Fall 2020

# High School Voter Registration Work Moving Forward

The Own Our Vote initiative was forced to re-evaluate our strategies in how grassroots organizations support schools in high school voter registration efforts. Historically, TCRP has relied on our grassroots organizing partners to work within schools to provide high school voter registration efforts to young Texans. With the format of schools changing for the foreseeable future, Own Our Vote partners utilized the 2020 HSVR Convening to determine the best ways to move the work forward, build capacity in our targeted regions, and invest in the civic leadership of young Texans.

The Own Our Vote partners have recognized the need to collaborate on a statewide level in order to share resources and build power together. In order to do that, partners have increased communication with one another. TCRP organized a collaborative workplace on Slack for Own Our Vote partners, dedicated community volunteers, and student leaders so they could easily discuss issues and share ideas, as well as make scheduling and meeting easier. Further, Own Our Vote partners voiced the need to discuss Get Out the Vote strategies for high school students. In order to keep this conversation moving forward, TCRP established a statewide HSVR Get Out the Vote Working Group. The conversations that began at the statewide convening will be continued digitally, through smaller regional convenings, and regular check-in sessions.

TCRP worked with Own Our Voter partners to create a reliably maintained, statewide high school voter registration resources document, in order to make sure that regardless of location, our partners had access to the necessary contacts and information to support

their communities and schools for high school voter registration.

Lastly, as Texas approaches the start of the school year, the core partners of Own Our Vote have been working together to implement a series of Train-the-Trainer events with educators across Texas. The Own Our Vote partners recognize that COVID-19 makes it highly unlikely that our partners will be allowed back into the schools. Own Our Vote partners will ensure that high school students are still being registered to vote and provided voter education by training district officials on the high school voter registration law, as well as providing educators and principals with the necessary knowledge to answer questions on how to register to vote and cast a ballot. Further, our partners have redirected their efforts into producing content that can be distributed to schools to assist them with high school voter registration efforts: informative videos, toolkits, curriculum, lesson plans, etc.

The future of high schoolers in Texas is uncertain, but the civic health of young Texans cannot take a backseat to the rest of their needs. Own Our Vote partners are more ready than ever and dedicated to supporting the youth of Texas as we look forward to one of the most important elections in our lifetime.

# Conclusion

Our report has detailed the necessary support that community leaders and grassroots organizations have continued to provide to high schools and their students. Even under the constraints of a pandemic, Texas was able to maintain its statewide compliance rate of 38%. The consistently laudable work of dedicated educators, volunteers, and organizations has been documented in our previous reports, and is clearly the center of our efforts looking forward to the next academic year.

However, schools and community organizations cannot do it alone, nor should they. Now more than ever, the SOS's office needs to provide schools with support and guidance on how to ensure they are adequately prepared to support the voter registration of Texas students. Our past reports have discussed actions that the SOS can take in order to support high schools. Since they have yet to be implemented, we once again ask that the Secretary of State considers the following:

- The Secretary must review current methods, and devise and implement additional outreach methods, including a standard training for schools available online, in order to support educators about the requirements of the high school voter registration law. TCRP's reports have identified issues in the current outreach methods for schools — an overwhelming mass email sent to a proven unreliable listsery, and a lack of guidance on how to move forward as schools adapt to COVID-19. Strengthening current outreach efforts and developing with a comprehensive training online would be a key step for the Secretary in ensuring schools are supported in their efforts.
- The Secretary must affirmatively mail voter

- registration applications to each Texas high school at the beginning of year. This proposal is more important than ever, as the format of school operation is in a flux, and educators across the state find their workloads increasing and rapidly changing.
- The Secretary must develop and implement a robust tracking mechanism to determine which schools are complying with the high school voter registration law, follow up with schools and support them as they come into compliance, and publicly acknowledge the districts and educators who are consistently leading the efforts to register students under the law.
- The Secretary must also ensure that it provides the necessary support to schools who may lack resources and personnel to sufficiently devise a plan to register and educate its students on voter registration and civic responsibility.

Lastly, we continue to recognize the importance that community members, educators, and students hold in boosting statewide compliance for high school voter registration in the coming academic year. While we wait for the Secretary of State's office to implement the changes mentioned above, we also ask that Texans across the state come together in order to create a culture of civic engagement in Texas's youth.

 Educators should continue to build partnerships with the members of the Own Our Vote initiative, as well as county and city officials, in order to determine the best way schools can continue to support students in their efforts to register to vote and engage with our democracy.

- Educational leadership should work to include comprehensive civics education for Texas high school students.
- Districts and schools should consider alternative ways to get voter registration forms into the hands of students while school is remote— mailing or emailing eligible students voter registration forms and information is a great way to start.
- Educators and community leaders should continue to utilize the resources on OwnOurVote.org in order to develop safe processes to register, educate, and engage students in civic participation.
- Students must continue to work
  with community groups and schools
  administrators to ensure that they are
  working to actively engage with their
  communities and fellow peers —by forming
  student groups or joining with larger
  community efforts, similar to Lakes4Lives.
- Stay connected with us! Send us pictures and stories of the work you're doing across Texas, and remember that Own Our Vote is here as a resource to ensure that Texas youth are engaged and active.

These proposals are more important than ever as Texas looks towards the quickly approaching 2020 presidential election. Students and educators deserve the support and guidance of state leadership in preparation for the first full semester under a COVID-19 reality. Until

the Secretary implements these changes, the members of Own Our Vote will continue to support students and Texas high schools to ensure that young Texans are not left out of our democracy. Texas youth are poised to lead the country in the coming years, and the partners of Own Our Vote are committed to fighting for them to have an equal opportunity to cast a ballot that counts.

# **Endnotes**

- 1. Tex. Elec. Code § 13.046.
- 2. Texas Civil Rights Project, Texas High School Voter Registration: A How to Guide (2017), https:// texascivilrightsproject.org/wp-content/ uploads/2018/02/ HSVR-Guide.pdf
- 3. James Slattery, High School Student Voter Registration in Texas: Grassroots Activism Pushes Progress, Continued Failings of State Officials, (Texas Civil Rights Project, 2019), https://texascivilrightsproject. org/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/2019-HSVR-Compliance-Report.pdf
- 4. Tex. Elec. Code § 13.046.
- 5. Tex Admin. Code § 81.7.
- 6. Tex. Elec. Code § 13.046; Tex Admin. Code § 81.7.
- 7. Tex Admin. Code § 81.7.

- 8. Tex. Elec. Code § 13.046.
- 9. Franklin, Mark, Voter Turnout and the Dynamics of Electoral Competition in Established Democracies since 1945, Cambridge Press, 2004, https://assets.cambridge.org/97805215/41473/frontmatter/9780521541473\_frontmatter.pdf
- 10. Ura, Alexa, Carbonell, Lindsay, Young Texans Make Up Most Diverse Generation,, The Texas Tribune, 2016, https://www.texastribune.org/2016/06/23/texas-childrenmake-most-diverse-generation/
- 11. https://www.houstoninaction.org
- 12. https://www.marchtothepolls.org



www.txcivilrights.org