

Drowning Prevention Education in Texas Schools: A Policy Analysis

Stephanie McNeese

School of Nursing, Texas Tech Health University Health Sciences Center

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Dr. Alexia Green

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Drowning is the third leading cause of accidental death among school-age children in the United States (Denny et al., 2021). Between 2018 and 2022, 2,289 children and adolescents between the ages of 5 and 19 died due to accidental drowning in our country (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, n.d.). Nearly 1 in 10 of those drownings occurred in the state of Texas. Even more concerning is the fact that Texas children in that age range who identified as Black drowned at a rate more than twice that of other races. Statistics such as these prompted this policy analysis of how water safety education is addressed within our Texas Education Code.

In this analysis, we will explore a proposed change: mandating the implementation of drowning prevention education and swimming competency for children and adolescents in Texas public schools. We will begin with a background discussion highlighting the historical and cultural factors contributing to this issue. Next, we will analyze the strategic factors involved, including stakeholders, economic considerations, and ethical concerns. Finally, we will propose specific goals and solutions to address the problem and conclude with a summary of key points and recommendations.

Policy Issue

Drowning is a silent but persistent public health threat, claiming many young lives each year despite being largely preventable. The need for comprehensive water safety education is undeniable in a state like Texas, where summer water recreation is a way of life for many populations. However, policies and educational efforts remain insufficient, leaving many at heightened risk. Drowning prevention education and swimming competency should be required

in Texas public schools' physical education (PE) curriculum. By addressing these issues, we can make progress toward reducing drowning incidents and saving lives.

Defining the Issue

As previously stated, drownings are a leading cause of accidental deaths in children (Denny et al., 2021). Despite this, Texas schools put minimal effort into educating our children on this topic. Currently, the Texas Education Code contains one reference to water safety education: a brief ten-minute video that is required viewing by students enrolled in drivers' education classes (TX Educ Code § 29.9021, 2025). This statute is the sole mention of water safety education within the 3,586 pages of education statutes. Jodie Ramos, principal of Wilshire Elementary in the Hurst-Euless-Bedford Independent School District, stated that local water safety advocates such as the YMCA may offer to provide educational presentations to the students but explained that these efforts are not required and vary between schools, even among those sharing a district (J. Ramos, personal communication, January 28, 2025). It appears that the Texas educational system has a great deal of room for improvement when it comes to drowning prevention education.

Public Health Problem and Drowning Disparities

Between 2006 and 2020, a total of 5,401 Texans, both children and adults, died from accidental drowning (Johnson et al., 2022). That is nearly one death per day over fifteen years, encompassing both adults and children and making Texas the third-highest state in total drowning deaths in the United States. Texas is known for its scorching summers, and nearly all its citizens have reasonable access to various recreational water sources. Beaches, pools, lakes, and rivers are all popular for Texans looking to cool off in the heat, and a lack of swimming

ability is not necessarily a deterrent. Drowning rates in Texas peak during the hot summer months but remain a problem throughout the rest of the seasons (Johnson et al., 2022).

The lack of consistent drowning prevention education impacts minority populations especially hard. Minorities across the United States are disproportionately more prone to drowning, especially those who identify as Black (Denny et al., 2021). Texans who are Black drown at higher rates than their White peers, and this disparity is more pronounced in children (Johnson et al., 2022). The disparity between Black and White drowning victims is more significant in Texas than in the United States as a whole, which is concerning (Abedin et al., 2024).

Background

Understanding and correcting the issue of drowning prevention education in Texas requires examining the history, culture, and barriers that have shaped the issue. The difference in drowning rates among children of different backgrounds shows why inclusive and focused solutions are necessary.

History, Social-Cultural Issues, and Inequities

Historically, inequalities have played a large role in why minorities and their children are more likely to drown (Abedin et al., 2024). During segregation, Black and Hispanic families were not allowed to use public swimming pools, which meant fewer opportunities to learn to swim. Even after segregation ended, discrimination and financial issues kept many of these families from gaining access to swimming pools and lessons. Past injustices have left lasting effects. Today, many minority families do not place a high priority on developing strong swimming skills.

Social and cultural factors also contribute to this issue. In many communities, swimming lessons are seen as a luxury rather than a need (Wilson et al., 2023). The cost and inconvenience of lessons often make parents decide not to enroll their children. Children with limited exposure to water safety grow into adults who are, in turn, less likely to provide this critical education for their own children, perpetuating the cycle. Additionally, campaigns about water safety often do not represent or connect with minorities (Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2020). Addressing these challenges will take community-wide effort and improving fair access to these resources.

Current Political Feasibility

Restraining Forces

Mandating swimming competency and drowning prevention education in Texas public schools faces significant challenges. The biggest roadblock is funding. Many schools, especially in lower-income or rural areas, do not have pools, trained instructors, or the budget to transport students to an off-site facility (Willcox-Pidgeon et al., 2020). Then, there is the issue of fitting a new curriculum into an already packed schedule. PE teachers must cover other required activities, and adding swimming may result in cutting back in another area.

Politically, some lawmakers and parents may push back, arguing that schools should not be responsible for teaching children to swim and that it should be up to families. There is also concern about liability; schools might worry about the risks, accidents, and insurance costs, making them hesitant to implement swimming instruction.

Driving Forces

Despite these challenges, some strong reasons exist to push for swimming and water safety education in Texas schools. Drowning is a leading cause of death for children in the state, and teaching basic swimming skills could save lives (Johnson et al., 2022). Organizations such

as the American Red Cross and advocacy groups such as the National Drowning Prevention Alliance support equitable water safety education, and their voices could help convince lawmakers that it is a necessary step (American Red Cross, 2022; National Drowning Prevention Alliance [NDPA], 2024). Many parents, especially those who cannot afford private swim lessons for their kids, would likely support a policy that ensures all children get the chance to learn water safety at school. If tragic drowning incidents continue to make headlines as they do every summer in Texas, public pressure could grow, making it harder for policymakers to ignore. Additionally, leaders who champion equity in education might see this as an opportunity to make sure all children, regardless of their background, have access to life-saving skills.

Also worth mentioning as a political driving force is the example set by the state of Florida. In the 1970s, the rate of drowning for Black male Floridians was more than twice that of their White peers (Gorsuch et al., 2019). By incorporating learn-to-swim programs, promoting competitive swimming among minority groups, and ensuring the safety of swimming areas, Florida has made significant progress in reducing the number of fatal drownings and significantly reducing the racial disparities between drowning rates, even eliminating the disparity in most age groups. Florida demonstrates that such far-reaching initiatives are feasible and have been proven successful.

Strategic Factors

Successfully implementing drowning prevention education in Texas public schools requires understanding the key stakeholders, the resources involved, and the underlying societal values that influence policy decisions. A variety of stakeholders will have vested interests in the implementation of drowning prevention education, each with different perspectives and levels of

influence. Each factor plays a critical role in determining the feasibility and success of proposed solutions.

Stakeholders and Power Analysis

Parents

Parents, particularly those from high-risk communities, are among the most directly affected stakeholders and a great power source. Many parents will likely support including water safety education in schools, recognizing its potential to save lives. However, some parents may be hesitant, viewing such programs as unnecessary or expressing concerns about the allocation of time and resources. Parents of school-age children are also generally taxpayers, which brings us to our next stakeholder.

Taxpayers

Taxpayers play a decisive role in this proposed change. Taxpayers are also voters, and votes determine who our lawmakers are. Advocates argue that investing in water safety education can reduce long-term costs associated with drowning incidents, such as healthcare expenses and legal liabilities. However, some taxpayers may resist funding such programs, especially if they perceive other issues as more pressing priorities or do not have children themselves. In order to pass an initiative as important and far-reaching as this one, public opinion must be influenced to support changing policy.

School Boards

School boards are important stakeholders because they determine how drowning prevention programs will be implemented in each school district. Individual school boards have limited power over statewide policy changes; however, they can form coalitions with other districts, dramatically increasing their influence (Sutherland, 2022). School boards can also

mobilize community members to support or oppose state-level policy changes. While many school boards will likely recognize the public health benefits of implementing policy changes directed toward drowning prevention, logistical concerns such as obtaining qualified instructors and ensuring access to swimming facilities may cause them to have reservations about supporting this policy change.

Advocacy Organizations

Advocacy organizations, including the NDPA, Colin's Hope, and the American Red Cross, are valuable allies in promoting water safety education. These groups provide expertise, resources, and lobbying efforts to advance the issue. Advocacy organizations can wield great power through lobbying and will provide essential support as they are likely to back policy change that aims to reduce drowning rates (Foley, 2021).

Policymakers

Lawmakers exist to serve in the public's best interest or risk being voted out of their positions. They are essential to enacting policy changes. By framing drowning prevention as a public safety and equity issue, lawmakers can build a strong case for prioritizing it despite the political and logistical hurdles. Influential Texas lawmakers such as Senator Brian Birdwell and Representative Tony Tinderholt have the authority to sponsor legislation and mobilize support for drowning prevention initiatives. These policymakers can overcome resistance and drive meaningful change by collaborating with advocacy groups and constituents.

Economics and Resource Allocation

Despite growing awareness of the importance of drowning prevention, implementing comprehensive water safety education in schools remains challenging (NDPA, 2024). The Texas Education Agency's budget plan for 2026–2027 focuses on fully funding existing programs and

meeting legal requirements (Texas Education Agency [TEA], 2024a, Section 3.B.). With billions of dollars in state and federal funding under its management, the agency already has significant financial commitments. Major allocations include funds for technology, facility improvements, and special education resources. Since these programs, and many others, have already been earmarked, limited funds may be available for new initiatives like mandatory drowning prevention education.

Of additional concern is the Texas basic allotment for per-student funding, which has not increased since 2019 despite the significant rate of inflation that has occurred since (TEA, 2024b). Inflation places an additional financial burden on school districts; in a world where everything costs more, they are required to make do with the same funding.

Implementing a comprehensive drowning prevention program in Texas schools will require careful planning and allocation of resources (NDPA, 2024). Costs include developing curriculum, training PE teachers and support staff, and ensuring access to swimming pools for practical instruction. While these expenses may seem significant, they are outweighed by the long-term benefits. Preventing drownings saves lives, reduces healthcare costs, and alleviates the emotional and financial burdens on affected families.

Partnerships with community organizations and nonprofits can help reduce costs by providing access to both swimming pools and qualified instructors, especially for districts without swimming programs already in place (Abedin et al., 2024). Additionally, state and federal grants for public health and injury prevention initiatives can be leveraged to support pilot programs in high-risk areas. Demonstrating the effectiveness of these programs through pilot programs can build a strong case for statewide implementation and lead to additional funding opportunities.

Values Assessment

Drowning prevention education is in line with the core values of our society, including equity, safety, and the desire to prevent avoidable tragedies. This proposed policy change promotes health equity by addressing disparities in access to water safety education. It ensures that all children can learn life-saving skills regardless of their background. It also reinforces the human responsibility to protect children and invest in their well-being. These values resonate with parents, educators, and policymakers, creating a compelling foundation for advocacy efforts.

Creating a culturally inclusive water safety education program for Texas schools is in the best interests of all Texans. Children who develop swimming and water safety skills grow into adults more likely to seek those same opportunities for their children (Wilson et al., 2023). On the other hand, negative aquatic experiences as a child can instill a fear of water as that person develops into an adult (Wilson et al., 2023). Introducing water safety in a safe, age-appropriate environment can reduce the number of children who fear water and increase their likelihood of developing these necessary skills.

Goals and Solutions

This policy initiative aims to implement comprehensive drowning prevention education and swimming competency into the physical education curriculum of Texas public schools. Achieving this goal will require collaboration among stakeholders, strategic resource utilization, and a commitment from lawmakers to address disparities in drowning prevention education.

Policy Goal

The primary objective of this effort is to make drowning prevention education and swimming competency a required component of physical education classes in Texas public

schools. By equipping all children with essential water safety knowledge and basic swimming skills, we aim to reduce drowning rates and address the disproportionate risks faced by minority children. These skills would continue to benefit children as they become adults and, through them, benefit future generations of Texan children (Wilson et al., 2023).

Proposed Solutions

Incorporate Water Safety Curriculum into Physical Education

One potential solution is to mandate the inclusion of water safety education in PE classes statewide. This approach ensures that all students receive consistent, high-quality instruction on drowning prevention. The curriculum would combine classroom-based lessons on water safety principles throughout all grade levels, with practical swimming instruction offered extracurricularly for elementary and junior high students, then as required curriculum for high school. Partnerships could be formed with local recreation centers or municipal aquatic facilities to provide access to pools and instructors for districts that lack swimming pools. Swimming competency would become a graduation requirement for students, with exception waivers available for eligible students.

School-Community Collaboration

Another solution involves fostering school-community partnerships. Schools could collaborate with nonprofit organizations (such as the YMCA) or municipal recreation departments to deliver swimming lessons and water safety workshops to all grade levels. These partnerships would enable schools to offer comprehensive programs without significant infrastructure changes, with community organizations providing the expertise and facilities. Funding would be allocated for these services and transportation to incorporate off-site swimming lessons into the school curriculum.

Pilot Programs to Assess Feasibility and Barriers

A third approach is to launch pilot programs in high-risk areas to assess the feasibility and impact of drowning prevention education. Funded by state grants, these programs would target schools serving underserved communities with elevated drowning rates. Data collected from these initiatives would demonstrate their effectiveness and guide the development of a statewide strategy. Pilot programs also allow for identifying and resolving potential challenges before attempting to implement change on a larger scale.

Identification of Policymakers

This policy analysis will be submitted to Texas Senator Brian Birdwell, Texas Representative Tony Tinderholt, and Texas Senate Education Committee Chair Brandon Creighton. Senator Birdwell and Representative Tinderholt represent my district, making them key figures in advancing a proposal for drowning prevention education in Texas public schools. Additionally, as the chair of the Senate Education Committee, Senator Creighton holds an influential role in shaping education policy in the state. The goal is to provide evidence-based recommendations that emphasize the urgency of this issue and offer practical solutions for implementation. Their support and legislative action could help establish comprehensive water safety education statewide, ultimately reducing preventable child drownings in Texas.

Summary

Drowning is a pressing public health issue that demands immediate attention. In Texas, the lack of accessible water safety programs leaves many children, particularly those from minority communities, at heightened risk of preventable deaths (Abedin et al., 2024). Our public school system has a critical role in addressing this problem by providing all students with the skills to stay safe in and around water.

Incorporating drowning prevention education into physical education classes is the preferred solution with the highest potential impact. By making water safety a required part of the curriculum, all students will receive consistent, age-appropriate instruction, reducing disparities and improving overall water competency. Implementing this policy statewide will equip Texas children with essential life-saving skills, ultimately preventing unnecessary drownings.

By prioritizing water safety and swimming competency in our schools, Texas can create a safer environment for its citizens. Drowning is not just a childhood phenomenon; it is a problem across all stages of the lifespan (Johnson et al., 2022). This proposed policy change has the potential to benefit future generations of Texans, not just through schools but by promoting a culture of water safety in a society that values aquatic activities as part of their lifestyle. We can save lives, promote equity, and uphold values of safety and collective responsibility. Implementing drowning prevention education in Texas schools is vital to protecting the state's most vulnerable populations and building a safety culture for future generations.

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