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## Education Lab

# Paxton probing districts' compliance

AG demands proof schools across Texas are displaying the Ten Commandments

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Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton is demanding proof that school districts across the state, including three in the Dallas-Fort Worth area, are displaying the Ten Commandments in classrooms, as required by a 2025 state law.

Paxton's office announced the investigation Thursday. As a part of the investigation, the attorney general's office

is also demanding that the 29 school districts turn over proof that their boards have voted on a policy to require school prayer.

The 29 districts targeted by the investigation were involved in lawsuits challenging Senate Bill 10, which requires public schools to display donated copies of the Protestant version of the Ten Commandments in classrooms. Dallas, Fort Worth and Plano ISDs are among the districts.

Senate Bill 11, which lawmakers also passed last year, requires school boards across the state to vote on a resolution to

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## DALLAS

# Campaign launched to relocate City Hall

Former mayor wants area redeveloped for potential entertainment district

By Devyani Chhetri  
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Former Mayor Mike Rawlings is ramping up the fight over City Hall as questions grow over how to reshape downtown Dallas.

Rawlings launched a coordinated campaign Thursday to build support for relocating City Hall,



MIKE RAWLINGS

In an interview with *The Dallas Morning News*, Rawlings said his efforts are designed to shift the City Council beyond wrangling over repair estimates and focus in-

stead on how best to use the site as a catalyst to attract new business and reinvigorate its southern edge. "My fear about downtown is we're thinking too small," he said. "We've got to have a force to change this."

The campaign marks an escalation in the increasingly high-stakes fight over City Hall's future. It's been a clash of competing visions, centered on whether the council should invest in costly up-

using newspaper and social media ads, a website and other outreach to promote redevelopment there, possibly for a sports arena and entertainment district.

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## Education Lab



Elias Valverde II/Staff Photographer

St. Philip's School and Community Center first grade students Giselle Lewis (left) and Harrison June read to Kali during a literacy program at Equest on April 13 in Dallas.

# A 'tail' of three horses

A trio of equine friends are helping first graders learn to read

By Jessica Ma  
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Flipping through his book, first grader Briden Green stretched out vowels, feeling the curvatures of each word. Sometimes, he repeated the sentences, printed in black ink, until they sounded just right.

Lending him an ear was his new friend Kali, a horse with an ashen snout and specks of gray doused

across her white hide.

As Briden made his way through a 22-page book titled *Ranger and Friends*, he occasionally glanced up at the mare, gently rubbing his hand against her cheek. Towering over the child, Kali peered down at him through her glassy black eyes.

This is the kind of connection Equest, a therapeutic riding program, hopes to foster. Equest offers a four-week curriculum aimed at strength-

ening vocabulary and reading comprehension among first graders. With the help of horses, the program hopes to instill a love for reading among the region's youngest learners. That's meaningful in a state like Texas, where students have demonstrated low reading scores, said Kim Burris, an equine assisted learning coordinator.

Studies show a student's early struggles with reading has implications for their later education. For ex-

ample, of nearly 4,000 students, those who didn't read proficiently by third grade are four times more likely not to earn their high school diploma than proficient readers, according to a 2011 study from the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

"We're catching them at the end of first grade, when they're really starting to build their reading skills," Bur-

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## GRAND PRAIRIE

# City scraps Muslim event

Abbott funding threat leads to Eid water park celebration cancellation

By Sarah Bahari  
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Grand Prairie canceled a private party for Muslims at a city-owned water park after Texas Gov. Greg Abbott threatened to pull hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funding.

The city announced the cancellation Wednesday evening, about seven hours after Abbott issued the ultimatum on social media: Call off the event by May 11 or lose \$530,000 in state funds.

"That's religious discrimination," Abbott wrote on X. "It's unconstitutional."

In an emailed statement to *The Dallas Morning News*, the city said it canceled the party "after further review and in the best interest" of Grand Prairie.

City-owned park Epic Waters Indoor Waterpark had planned to host a June 1 celebration for Eid al-Adha, an Islamic holy day that celebrates devotion and sacrifice. But fliers for the event circulated on social media in recent days, prompting a backlash among conservatives and social media influencers.

Abbott pointed to a law he signed last year that targeted the business structure behind The Meadow, a planned Mus-

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Spotty showers possible



Metro, back page

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# Rawlings pushes for move

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dates to the building or move government operations and pursue a different use for that large swath of land as the Dallas Mavericks look for a new home.

The council is expected to make that consequential choice in June after city staffers present a cost comparison of staying or leaving. Previous votes have indicated the mayor and eight council members support exploring relocation, while six members are opposed.

Consultants earlier this year estimated repairs at \$329 million and a full modernization at \$1 billion over two decades.

City Hall backers say figures are inflated and a former facilities and engineering assistant director who is aligned with a prominent architects group pegged repairs at \$70 million to \$100 million over 10 years. That group also says Dallas should not surrender a prominent civic landmark to accommodate sports and business interests.

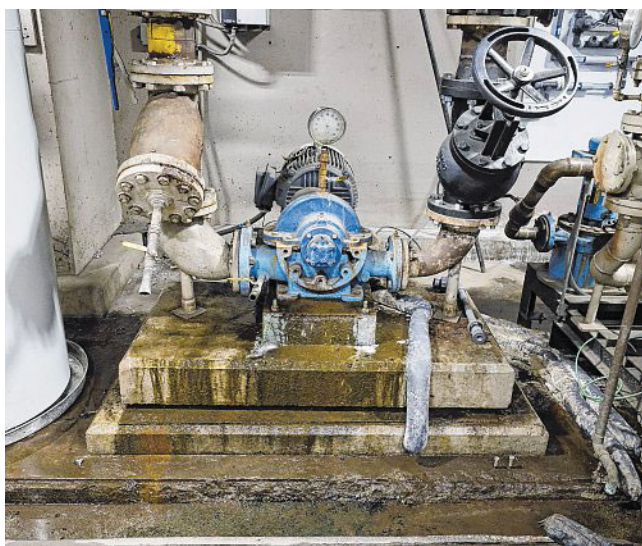
Rawlings acknowledged those concerns but said Dallas, instead of fixating on repairs to the nearly 50-year-old building, should instead weigh the site's larger value.

## Keeping the teams

He said moving City Hall could clear the way for a major entertainment district that keeps the Mavericks and Stars downtown while expanding the city's tax base.

"Dallas can pour up to a billion dollars into patching a building that will never meet a modern city's needs, or it can put those dollars to work rebuilding the downtown core," the new Say Yes to Downtown website states.

The website and newspaper ads also say:



Chitose Suzuki/Staff Photographer

Water leaked from an HVAC pump in a mechanical room at Dallas City Hall. Former Mayor Mike Rawlings launched a coordinated campaign Thursday to build support for relocating City Hall.

■ City Hall's core systems are failing and "beyond lifespan," and the I.M. Pei-designed building is outdated, inefficient and damaging to customer service for residents.

■ Renovating the building at 1500 Marilla St. would cost "hundreds of millions" more than relocating city employees into a downtown office tower, leaving taxpayers to absorb maintenance and operating costs for decades.

■ The area near the Kay Bailey Hutchison Convention Center "is where Dallas' next arena belongs," giving Dallas a chance to keep the Mavericks and Stars and energizing downtown activity and investment.

Dallas has done this before, he said, pointing to the American Airlines Center and Victory Park, whose value jumped to \$2.5 billion from \$16 million. "Let's play that again," he said.

## Civic boost

Rawlings said the campaign is meant to mobilize residents, business owners

and civic advocates who believe Dallas should take a bolder approach to downtown.

"This is bigger than basketball," he said. "Our city manager is putting together a budget right now, and in that budget, she has got to determine whether we're going to put maintenance in for City Hall. That is a big pivot point on a lot of fronts."

Rawlings is personally funding the campaign and business leaders Tré Black, Bruce Orr and Amanda Moreno-Lake have joined him to help drive a stronger civic push behind downtown. He said the campaign was put together after he heard complaints from others that "the narrative was taken away from how citizens really feel in the city."

Rawlings also said he wants to show support to Mayor Eric Johnson and eight council members who backed relocation discussions.

"Somebody needs to say thank you to them publicly" for having "the courage to stand up for the taxpayers," he said.



Photos by Elias Valverde II/Staff Photographer

Equest offers a four-week curriculum aimed at strengthening vocabulary and reading comprehension among first graders. With the help of horses, the program hopes to instill a love for reading among the region's youngest learners.

# Students read to horses

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## Engagement

Burris said. "It's a motivational program, and it's incentivized by horses. Because who doesn't love horses?"

Most of the reading is done in school, not the stable.

At the end of the four weeks, students have the chance to visit the horses at Texas Horse Park in the heart of the Great Trinity Forest. That's when the first graders get to, finally, show off their well-practiced stories.

On this cloudy Monday morning, more than 20 first graders from St. Philip's School and Community Center dashed around Equest's grounds for two hours of equestrian buffoonery. The students petted the horses, groomed them and pretended to be them.

They eagerly awaited to read to them *Ranger and Friends*, which was provided by Equest. The book contains short, snappy and simple sentences. With photographs, the book introduces students to the animals that they'd encounter at the stable: Dare, Kali, and of course, the book's titular character, Ranger.

On one page, there's a photograph of Jolene, a "pinto" with brown and white patches. First grader Chanel Griggs said she felt delighted when she got to read to the mare, seeing her on paper — and in real life.

If Chanel had to guess, Jolene thought her story "was really good."

It's possible, though, Jolene may have hit the snooze button, said Megan Price, an occupational therapist at Equest. Turns out, horses can doze off, while standing upright and with their eyes open.

When the horses are awake, though, Burris insists they "love it." Burris, a sort of horse whisperer, is speaking from decades of experience working with the animal.

"They crane their heads over the stall doors and are like, 'Tell me more!'" Burris said. "The students are so proud of themselves for reading to these horses."

Over six years ago, Equest's director first approached Burris, an academic language therapist, to start the literacy program. Burris is a ferocious reader who has scarfed down two to five books a week since 1966. Naturally, she jumped on board.

"Reading can take you anywhere," she said. She wanted to bring that magic to first graders.

They started with a pilot program of about 13 students. This year, Equest is serving almost 600 first graders, all from underserved communities, according to Burris. The program is funded by donations and grants and comes at no cost for the schools.

At the start of the four weeks, the horses visit the participating schools. The animals become pen pals with the students, who write letters to them in the weeks leading up to the field trip.

Similar equine-assisted reading programs have popped up across the nation — emblematic of educators' efforts to get students engaged in reading.

Texas has historically seen its students struggle with reading. The National Assessment of Educational Progress, dubbed "the nation's report card," found that about 43% of fourth graders and 39% of eighth graders in the state are reading below basic level and the national average.

Equest's program isn't the sole antidote to what Burris describes as a "huge literacy crisis in Texas." But "half the battle" is getting students excited about reading, she said.

## Horsin' around

On top of reading to horses during the field trip, the kids found time to horse around, too. The first graders rotated through different parts of the grounds, spending time grooming a horse, riding a stick horse and more.

In a corner of a dirt arena, students galloped their stick

horses through an obstacle course. They raced around a barrel, glided across a fake bridge and weaved through cones. The speedy ones could spur their wooden steeds to the finish line in about 15 seconds. The slower ones traversed the course in about 22 seconds.

Once the dust settled, the horde of chattering, jittery first graders departed the arena and gathered into a line. Burris fielded lingering questions from the young equestrian aficionados: Can horses sneeze? Did the horses enjoy the story? Why did the horses lick them?

Once her answers sufficiently nourished these curious minds, the students were set to scatter back to school. Burris proclaimed, "Teachers, they're all yours!"

The students may be leaving the stable, but Burris hopes their love of reading sticks. Plus, if they visit the library, they might, one day, catch another glimpse of their furry buddies. Each summer, Equest's mini horses pay visits to public libraries.

"Them being interested in what they're reading about keeps them engaged," said first grade teacher Angela Young.

Next free draw period, she anticipates she will see plenty of horses etched out.

*The DMN Education Lab deepens the coverage and conversation about urgent education issues critical to the future of North Texas.*

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# Abbott threat stops Eid party

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lim-centric neighborhood about 40 miles northeast of Dallas, previously called Epic City. It is not clear if the law applies to private events at publicly funded facilities.

Fliers initially described the event as for "Muslims only," with a modest dress code and private prayer area. Aminah Knight, a Dallas-area mother of six who is hosting the event, said she did not intend to exclude anyone and later revised the flier to say "All are welcome."

"As Muslims, we have a modest dress code. Going to a water park can be a challenge," Knight said. "This is a way to have fun and make sure our children and community feel seen."

On Tuesday, the city said in a statement it was aware of concerns surrounding the event and has been in contact with the park to ensure all policies and procedures were followed.

Epic Waters opened in 2017 after voters approved a 0.25% sales tax. The park, which is managed by an outside third party, can be rented by groups or individuals for a minimum of \$5,000 an hour.

This would have been the third year Knight reserved the facility for fellow Muslims, drawing little notice in the past. This year was different.

Citing what some called an "Islamic threat," influencers urged followers to complain to the city of Grand Prairie. Prominent conservative commentators, including radio host Dana Loesch and activist Michael Quinn Sullivan, lambasted the event and city.

"How is a taxpayer-funded, city-owned entity allowed to discriminate against non-Muslims at a public water



2017 File Photo/Staff Photographer

Grand Prairie canceled a private party for Muslims at Epic Waters Indoor Waterpark after Gov. Greg Abbott threatened to pull hundreds of thousands of dollars in state funding.

park?" Loesch said.

Anti-Islamic rhetoric in Texas and across the U.S. has surged in the past year, according to a report last month by the nonprofit Center for the Study of Organized Hate. The center traced the current wave of Islamophobia to a single tweet from Abbott in February 2025, in which he amplified a post calling the Epic City development a "Sharia city."

Over the next several months, anti-Islamic posts flooded social media, the center found. Many framed Muslims through the lens of terrorism and national security, calling for the deportation or denaturalization of Muslims. Others used dehumanizing language, labeling Islam as a "death cult," "cancer," and "plague."

Abbott did not respond to an email from *The News* on

Wednesday seeking comment.

This is not the first time the governor has sought to use funding as leverage, adopting a strategy favored by President Donald Trump, who has threatened to pull funds from states and cities whose policies did not align with his administration.

Last month, Abbott threatened to pull \$32 million in state funds if Dallas did not repeal police department rules around collaboration with U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement. He issued similar warnings to Houston and Austin.

In response, Dallas revised its rules to allow police to ask people detained or arrested about their immigration status, work with federal immigration authorities and share immigration-status information with them.



St. Philip's School and Community Center first grade students brushed and groomed a horse during a literacy program at Equest on April 13 in Dallas.