



The Lost Decade

and a half



An Update on Texas Public Schools' Underfunding & Staffing Shortages

May 2024

In April 2022, Texas AFT and Every Texan released **The Lost Decade**, which demonstrated how far Texas teacher and support staff salaries had fallen from 2010 to 2020. At that time, our research showed that, when adjusted for inflation, salaries for Texas public school teachers had fallen by an average of 4% since the 2009-2010 school year. Salaries for public school support staff, meanwhile, remained close to poverty-level wages.

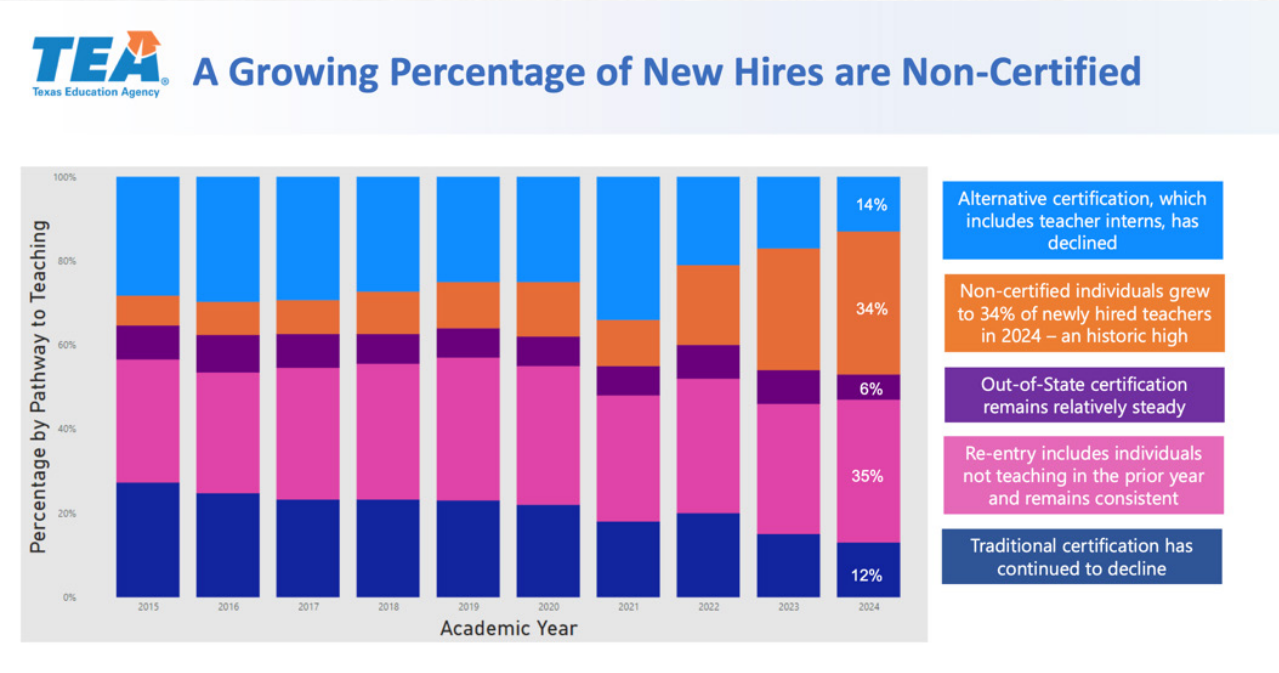
In 2023, the Texas Legislature met for its regular session plus four additional special sessions called by the governor. Throughout the Legislature's 11 months of lawmaking in 2023, members offered initiatives to significantly raise salaries for teachers and school support staff. With the state's \$32.7 billion surplus of taxpayer dollars, raises for school staff seemed like a real possibility.

However, Gov. Greg Abbott and several of his billionaire donors intent on privatizing our public school system forced a situation in which raises for hard working school staff would be contingent on the passage of private school vouchers. Fortunately, House lawmakers didn't accept this poor bargain that would ultimately undermine our public schools. Even with a budget surplus that surpassed the entire budgets of 24 states, the political goal of passing private school vouchers to appease Abbott and his donors took precedence over the immediate needs of hard-working school staff throughout the state.

To make up for the Legislature's failings, some locally elected school boards have found creative ways to provide modest raises for staff struggling to keep up with record inflation. These same boards had to use significant amounts of their emergency funds just to keep their teachers in the classroom. But most districts cannot use savings for the raises school staff deserve because, after decades of underfunding, they don't have those savings.

Instead, most Texas public school districts are laying off experienced staff and closing schools as they face unprecedented budget deficits, while others are leaving the profession en masse and being replaced with uncertified staff at an alarming rate never seen before in Texas.

For the first time, in the 2023-2024 school year, the count of newly hired teachers with no Texas certification has surpassed the count of new hires following all other preparation routes. 34% of all new hires are non-certified, including 31% of new public school district teachers and 59% of new charter school teachers.



Countering False Political Narratives

Even during this time when public schools are facing unprecedented financial struggles, Gov. Abbott and some Republican lawmakers have recently claimed that Texas is funding public education at its highest level ever despite the high-profile failure of the 88th Texas Legislature to increase the basic allotment or provide raises for educators and school employees.

This concocted narrative is dishonest and misleading. Per-student spending has decreased by \$590 in inflation-adjusted dollars over the past 10 years according to the state's Legislative Budget Board (LBB). Additionally, an Austin-American Statesman analysis of public education funding in recent years found that, "adjusted to 2024 dollars, per-student funding from state and local sources is down by 12.9% — \$10,387 this year [2023-24] compared with \$11,919 per student in 2020."

Rather than growing the state share, which dropped to 43.8% in 2023 (40.8% if you include facilities funding), state spending has been supplanted by growth in local spending (and recapture) and artificially bolstered by temporary federal COVID-19 relief funding set to expire this fall (\$6 billion total or roughly \$1,400 per student more than usual in 2022).

While the governor and other pro-privatization officials would like to push a narrative that public schools are flush with cash, the salary data doesn't bear out this claim.

Two years after the release of the report, an updated analysis using the latest salary data available shows the situation has only worsened, pushing educators' and school employees' compensation further behind inflation and exacerbating a growing retention crisis in our public schools.

The numbers from the 2023-2024 school year are stark:

- When adjusted for inflation, the average Texas teacher salary has declined by over 9% since the 2009-2010 school year, a figure significantly worse than the 4% decline in real wages between 2009-2010 and 2020-2021. In many districts, the drop has been much more severe with teachers losing nearly 20% of their earning power over this "Lost Decade and a Half", including in Corpus Christi ISD (-20.48%), Lubbock ISD (-19.56%), and North East ISD (-18.87%). This decline in real wages reaches as high as 30-40% in some districts.
- Texas teachers now make approximately \$9,000 less on average than their peers nationwide, a gap that has widened since the 2022 report. Even when adjusting for differences in cost of living between states, Texas ranks a dismal 30th out of the 50 states and Washington D.C. for teacher pay and in the bottom 10 nationwide for per-student funding.
- Salaries for school support staff in Texas have seen modest gains, but many roles remain close to poverty-level wages. Specifically, paraprofessional staff (including educational aides and interpreters) and auxiliary staff (including custodians, food service workers, bus drivers, and many others) have seen modest gains in average base pay over the past 12 years, but the average base pay for these two categories (\$24,966 and \$32,697, respectively) is less than half that of professional staff (\$66,720 - including teachers, counselors, and school administrators), and stagnant pay over the past few years together with inflation have eroded those gains. For example, the average paraprofessional base pay has actually decreased by almost 2% since the 2011-2012 school year when adjusted for inflation.

A full list of updated school district-level "Lost Decade and a Half" analyses breaking down the changes in average salaries over time by staff type, including an accounting of the impact of inflation, can be found on Texas AFT's website at <https://www.texasaft.org/lost-decade-and-a-half/>.

Low and stagnant pay is a primary factor driving teachers and school staff to consider leaving their jobs in education. In a Spring 2024 Texas AFT membership survey, 45% of respondents named salaries as their top workplace concern, up from 34% in Fall 2021. The same survey revealed that 69% of school employees had considered leaving their jobs in the past year, an increase from 66% in Fall 2021.

While pandemic stresses and political attacks on public education (such as classroom censorship, the DEI ban, and anti-CRT witch-hunts) have undoubtedly taken a toll on teachers and staff, the report makes clear that turnover was a growing problem long before COVID-19, as even the most dedicated educators struggle to make ends meet on salaries that increasingly lag behind rising costs of living. With inflation hitting new highs since 2021, the pain has only grown more acute.

The consequences of failing to invest in competitive compensation are evident in Texas' spiraling teacher turnover rate. Teacher turnover has been steadily increasing over the past 14 years, reaching a historic high of 21.4% in the 2022-2023 school year — nearly double the 11.8% rate in 2009-2010 and significantly up from 17.7% in 2021-2022.

Looking Ahead: Solutions Needed in the 89th Legislature

It doesn't have to be this way. The solution is clear: Texas needs a substantial, permanent increase in the basic allotment, the fundamental building block of our school funding system. By raising this allotment, requiring that an increased portion of the new funds be used to increase teacher and staff salaries (at least 50%, up from 30%), establishing a permanent inflationary adjustment mechanism, and transitioning from attendance-based to enrollment-based funding, the 89th Texas Legislature can provide districts the means to offer competitive, sustainable, and inflation-adjusted compensation and stem the teacher turnover crisis before it does permanent harm to our children's education.

The latest school funding proposal came in the form of House Bill 1 filed by House Public Education Committee Chairman Brad Buckley in the fourth special session of the 88th Texas Legislature. HB 1 was the omnibus school finance, voucher, and testing bill that would have provided for a modest increase to the basic allotment (\$540, far short of the \$1,000 needed to account for inflation at the time), granted educators a small one-time bonus, and added a new inflation adjustment mechanism to take effect in the 2026-2027 school year. Our public schools' financial situations have only grown more dire since that bill failed after school funding and raises were held hostage for vouchers. As budget expert Eva DeLuna Castro noted, "current CPA [Comptroller of Public Accounts] economic forecast indicates the Basic Allotment would have to be almost \$7,950 [a \$1,790 increase] by fiscal 2027 to make up for inflation since the last increase in Fall 2019."

Unfortunately, state leaders have shown little appetite to make the investments necessary despite our historic \$33 billion surplus in 2023, prioritizing further property tax cuts and universal voucher legislation over funding schools. Policymakers must recognize that our students' future depends on having qualified, committed educators in every classroom. Until Texas gets serious about fixing the school finance system so teachers and staff can earn a decent living, that future will remain at risk.

The 2025 legislative session offers an opportunity to change course and give our schools the resources they need to recruit and retain the best educators and school employees to support Texas students. With the help of our members and allies across the state, Texas AFT will be fighting harder than ever to ensure 2025 is the year our leaders finally act to make Texas a national leader in public education.

The Impact of a Potential Voucher Program

Despite claims by Gov. Greg Abbott that "school choice" voucher programs increase public school funding and benefit all students, evidence from other states shows the opposite is true. A recent analysis of seven states with long-running voucher programs found that as voucher spending more than doubled, ranging from a 119% increase in Wisconsin to an astounding 883% increase in Georgia, six of these seven states substantially reduced or froze per-student funding for K-12 public schools, with declines ranging from -1.5% in Indiana to -12% in Florida. This occurred even as voucher students fared worse academically than their public school peers, with studies finding voucher students performing as much as 24 percentile points below their public school peers in math after four years. Research on traditional vouchers over the last decade strongly suggests they actually lower academic achievement and the results tend to be worse the larger the voucher program, while student achievement improves upon return to public schools.

In Arizona's "universal" ESA program, the wealthiest communities are obtaining funds at the highest rates while the poorest communities participate the least, exacerbating inequities. A study on Iowa's ESA program found it led to tuition hikes of 10-16% for partially eligible grades and 21-25% for universally eligible grades, limiting access for families unable to afford the difference. Vouchers also often subsidize private school tuition for students who would have attended private schools anyway, with 70% to 95% of voucher students in states like Florida (69%), Arizona (75%), Wisconsin (75%), New Hampshire (89%), and Arkansas (95%) not previously enrolled in public schools, siphoning funds from public schools while exempting private schools from accountability standards and allowing for discrimination against students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students. Even the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has privately acknowledged vouchers could decrease funding for public schools, with TEA Deputy Commissioner Steve Lecholop admitting districts losing students to vouchers may have to cut teaching positions. Additionally, Arizona districts have had to spend hundreds of thousands on special education evaluations for ESA students they don't enroll, as families seek to qualify for higher ESA subsidies. As Texas faces a growing school funding crisis, diverting limited taxpayer dollars to unaccountable private schools would only further undermine our public education system's ability to provide all children a high-quality education.

CONTACT TEXAS AFT:

Email address:
info@texasaft.org

Phone number:
(512) 448-0130

912 Highway 183
South, Suite 100-A
Austin, TX 78741

