

THRIVE TOGETHER!



**A Vision for
Texas Schools**
from Pre-K to Post-Doc



LETTER FROM THE PRESIDENT

With just 48 words in a document with roughly 95,000 of them, the drafters of the Texas Constitution laid out something they very much purported to value: education, freely available, and with the express purpose of creating informed, conscious citizens.

Adopted Feb. 15, 1876, Article 7, Section 1 of the Texas Constitution reads:

“A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.”

And yet here we are:

- Texas is 41st in the nation for per-pupil public education funding¹.
- Just over 91% of Texas public school students attend inadequately funded schools².
- On average, Texas K-12 teachers make \$7,700 less per year than their peers nationwide³.
- Two-thirds of Texans ages 25-54 lack an associate’s degree or post-doc⁴ because of rising costs and barriers to access⁵.

I could go on; there’s not a national ranking on education in which Texas does not appear in the bottom half of states. **I’m not willing to accept that this is the best we can do, and I hope you are not willing to accept it either.**

In the following pages, you will see a vision for a different future, one in which our public schools are funded to thrive and, by extension, are matriculating students who are ready and capable of being the informed, conscious citizens laid out in our state Constitution.

This future is possible. I need you to believe that. Our kids need you to believe that – and to demand it.

We have the money to support all of our students from the moment they enter a pre-K classroom. We have the money to pay their teachers and the support staff who help them every day. We have the money to make sure every student thrives after graduation, whether they pursue higher education, gain skills through vocational training, or jump straight into the workforce. What we lack is the leadership to make this vision a reality.

Please read through the important proposals, policies, and solutions outlined in these pages and ask yourself: “What can I do to realize this future for Texas public schools?” Because the only way we’ll thrive is if we **#ThriveTogether**.

In solidarity,



ZEPH CAPO

President, Texas AFT



WELCOME TO UTOPIA ISD. ENROLLING TEXAS STUDENTS FOR THE CLASS OF ... ?

There are certain things every Texas parent should expect from their child's school. For example, most of us assume that public schools in the state with the world's eighth-largest economy could guarantee a sufficient number of bus drivers to safely welcome kids to school in the morning. And most districts can guarantee that, **for now**, though the drivers who transport kids every day are doing so while living paycheck to paycheck.

Instead of supportive teachers who can devote their full focus and expertise to children's needs, we have teachers with an undefined workweek eyeing the clock, worried they won't make it to their second job on time.

In the following pages, we have outlined a different public education system – one that is funded to meet students' needs, from pre-K all the way to post-doc. This is not a pipe dream. It is the reality we could have if Texas' elected leaders prioritized it.

In the 89th Legislature, which opens in January 2025, lawmakers, inevitably, will argue over whether to increase the basic allotment for public school funding for the first time since 2019. Critics and those who would prefer to privatize public schools rather than invest in them will ask the same question they always do: "What is a fully funded public school anyway?"

In 2023, amid the lost session for public education that was the 88th Legislature, Texas AFT and Every Texan answered that question in our report, *Fully Funded & Fully Respected: The Path to Thriving Texas Public Schools*. The answer, as it turned out, was \$33.4 billion for the upcoming biennium.

Admittedly, that sounds like an enormous amount, but not when you put it next to the budget surplus for that biennium: \$32.7 billion. For roughly the same price tag as the extra money the state had in its coffers, Texas could have ensured across-the-board pay raises for teachers and all public school employees, increased staffing in mental health and student support roles, affordable health care for active and retired educators, and smaller class sizes for Texas kids.

The Legislature did not choose to fully fund its public schools, and we are living with the consequences. As we look toward the next opportunity lawmakers will have to ensure schools that help our kids – and the educators who care for them every day – thrive, we present to you what the state's plentiful resources could provide. In short, we want to show you what a fully funded public education system looks like.

Our hope is that by the end of this report, you're ready to stand with us and demand that future. Because our kids and our communities deserve it.

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VOICES FROM TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

What is it like to work in a public school in Texas? What are the struggles faced by educators? The best way to learn is by asking them.

"My students definitely respect me. I don't feel respected by my district or the people who pay me with the wage that they pay me. It doesn't show any respect for my work or my worth."

As a full-time employee and a manager of six years in the district, last year, my gross income was \$20,132.17 to support my two children. Not a lot of people realize just what dire straits that we're in trying to make ends meet.

I feed several hundred hungry students every day, and I struggle to feed my own two. We serve breakfast, lunch, and twice a week, my daughter eats supper at the school. For those of us in child nutrition, they're scared of retaliation and often just thankful to have a job. But their job is worth more. Their time is worth more."

PEARL WEST
Child nutrition manager,
San Antonio



"I have been an educator for over a decade, and I have never done this for the money. I worked for seven years as a special education paraprofessional, working with every facet of special needs child that you can imagine. The most money I made was \$17,000 with a master's degree in public administration."

My job title on paper is teacher, educator, but my real title is Defender of Children. The future of the world is in my classroom every day, and every child who comes into my room every day sees that specific statement outside my door."

TAKISHA KEGLER
Teacher, Lufkin





PHYLLIS RUFFIN
Retired educator, Houston

"I started my career as a paraprofessional where I made \$20,000 a year, which broken down, would be \$1,200 before taxes [per paycheck]. After taxes, about \$900 [per paycheck]. As a single mom, the salary I received from Texas schools wasn't sufficient.

I had to work multiple jobs to keep a roof over our heads and food on our table. Sometimes I didn't have enough food, so I made sure my daughter ate and the kids I was working with ate. I ended up staying with family and friends. I wasn't proud of it. I lost my car and had to ride the bus, to and from work, getting in at 2 o'clock in the morning and going back out at 5 to get to school.

I never forgot those who helped me."



JORGE JASSO
Teacher, Brownsville

"Two days ago, I was talking to a former student, and he just got hired by Amazon to work in computer science. \$200,000 a year, straight out of college. We have teachers who have been working their entire lives, 20 or 30 years, and will never make that amount of money in their lives. There's something wrong with that picture.

Name another career or job out there that doesn't go through a teacher. We feel like we've been forgotten. We feel we have not been respected. When we talk about respect, it's hard to teach when there are no supplies. It's hard to teach when the materials are not there. Yes, we want a raise. But we also want our schools to be funded."

STARTING OFF ON THE RIGHT FOOT: BRING UNIVERSAL PRE-K TO TEXAS

Study after study has shown that the most critical period for a child's intellectual development is not elementary school, middle school, or high school. These studies show that the most critical period is before a child even starts kindergarten, during their first five years of life. In Texas, public education doesn't typically even begin until after this critical period of development is already over.

Despite the overwhelming evidence that this period is critical for a child's learning and development, less than half of 4-year-olds and only 9% of 3-year-olds in Texas were enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs.

If we want our students to thrive, Texas needs to reimagine how we start – and when we start – their educational journey. The reimagining process begins with funding high-quality pre-kindergarten programs for all children across the state.

Currently in Texas, free pre-kindergarten programs are only available for a very small percentage of Texas children. The limited free pre-kindergarten program was intended to support the most educationally at-risk children, because it was widely understood that providing educational supports at an early age would mitigate risk factors and pave the way for future academic success in these at-risk populations.

This existing limited-eligibility free pre-kindergarten program has proven to be both wildly popular and wildly successful. As of 2021, 72.2% of all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds have enrolled in pre-kindergarten programs, and those children who did enroll are more likely to graduate high school and to attend college than their peers who were eligible but did not attend pre-kindergarten.

The benefits of pre-kindergarten do not just apply to the at-risk populations currently eligible for free pre-kindergarten enrollment. While these at-risk populations deserve priority access, the state has the resources, if not yet the will, to make pre-kindergarten available for all children. Studies in different states and across the nation have shown tremendous benefits to making pre-kindergarten free for all, not just those at risk.

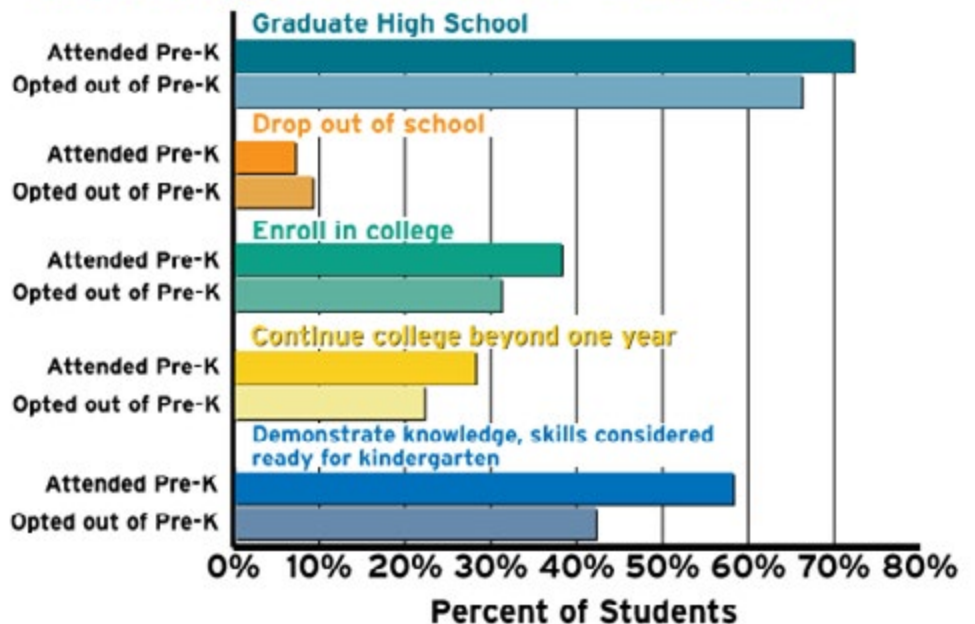
During the 88th legislative session, several bills were authored to expand the eligibility for tuition-free pre-kindergarten. Rep. John Bucy filed House Bill 342, which would have expanded eligibility to all 4-year-olds and would require the district-run pre-kindergarten be offered on a full-day basis, not just half-days as was previously permissible. Sen. Nathan Johnson filed Senate Bill 89, which would have expanded tuition-free pre-kindergarten eligibility to the children of teachers. Neither of these proposals were even considered in a public hearing.

Making the investment in education early is not only what's best for a child's development, it also will save the state money in the long run and would allow parents to return to the workforce.

Benefits of Early Childhood Education:

- Access to pre-K helps level the playing field for children from low-income families, reducing the achievement gap before it widens.
- Studies have shown that for every dollar invested in early childhood education, there is a significant return on investment in terms of increased productivity, reduced need for remedial education.
- Access to affordable pre-K enables more parents, especially mothers, to participate in the workforce.
- Early intervention through pre-K can help identify and address learning challenges before they escalate, potentially reducing the need for costly special education services.

THE IMPACT ON STUDENTS WHO UTILIZE FREE PRE-K PROGRAMS IN TEXAS



Source: Texas Education Agency, *Prekindergarten Outcomes for Texas Public School Students, 2017*

AFFORDABLE, QUALITY CHILDCARE PREPARES KIDS FOR SCHOOLS, KEEPS EDUCATORS IN THEM

The pandemic called attention to all sorts of weaknesses in our societal fabric. One of the many pillars of our economic system is childcare. Without it, even the COVID-19 “essential workers” could not be expected to return to work. Educators, as we know, were not labeled as “essential,” but they were nonetheless expected to return to work without the support and peace of mind that reliable high-quality childcare provides.

According to a new report from the Urban Lab at the LBJ School of Public Affairs, Texas saw the closing of more than 5,000 childcare centers and licensed family homes between March 2020 and January 2023, resulting in a 27% overall loss of childcare facilities and creating childcare deserts in more than half of Texas’s 254 counties.

The National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs has found that high-quality early childhood programs can yield a \$4 - \$9 dollar return per \$1 invested.

The Texas Workforce Commission distributed over \$4 billion in Childcare Relief Funding to nearly 11,000 childcare programs between 2021-2023. During the 2023 legislative session, the Texas Legislature considered a proposal to use \$2.3 billion in state funding to continue the childcare grants after the federal funding expires, but legislators ultimately decided not to approve the funding. However, none of these investments have managed to even stop closures of programs let alone create more accessible programs.

How Does This Impact Teachers?

Over 75% of all Texas teachers are women. While not all women in the education workforce have children, it should be assumed that access to and relative affordability of high-quality childcare is a consideration for many classroom leaders in this state. Parents who cannot access or afford appropriate childcare may be forced to remove themselves from the workforce. And while this lack of options disproportionately affects low-income families, it also impacts middle-income households.

The state unfortunately does not collect data on the teachers who choose to leave the profession. In Texas AFT’s annual membership survey, we learned that 45% of respondents have trouble finding and affording childcare options. Lack of quality childcare options in their communities may be one of the many reasons that teachers are leaving the classroom. Some districts are filling that gap by offering in-district childcare options for employees and even the broader public, but this option is not available for most public education employees.

Affordable access to childcare incentivizes maternal labor force participation. What percentage of teachers might be able to stay in or return to the profession if childcare access and affordability were not an issue?

Childcare Is Not Just a Workforce Issue

As important as childcare is to a parent or caregiver trying to participate in the workforce, young children also reap significant benefits from early quality care and education.

As childcare and pre-K access has expanded, so has the body of research documenting its positive impacts for students. Quality childcare can improve school readiness – communication and cognitive skills as well as early reading and math skills – especially for children from low-income households and children who are Black, Indigenous, or people of color². From this early school readiness, we see correlations to lower truancy rates, higher graduation rates, and higher educational attainment and employment.

The educational and financial benefits to the state are clear. Texas can and must invest in affordable access to childcare for all Texas workers. Proposition 2 (SJR 64) on the November 2023 ballot in Texas, allowing cities and counties to exempt childcare providers from property taxes on any facility used to run a childcare business, passed with 65% of the vote. While the impacts of this are not yet known, it does signal that the Legislature and Texans are taking the issue of childcare seriously. In 2025, lawmakers must develop a comprehensive plan, including incentives and funding, that expands affordable access to childcare for all Texans.

The average cost for infant care in Texas is \$777 per month¹, or

\$9,324 PER YEAR

– nearly 14% of the state’s median household income of \$67,3213 and more expensive than a year of in-state tuition at a four-year public college.

The average teacher salary in Texas is

\$62,463.

TO CREATE JOYFUL, CONFIDENT READERS, TEXAS NEEDS LIBRARIES & SUPPORT FOR EDUCATORS

Access to libraries and to books with diverse information and points of view fundamentally shape student literacy rates in Texas. It is essential that students develop the skills to read not only with comprehension and fluency but also to direct their own sense of self-concept and to promote increased awareness of their own thoughts and feelings, as well as those of others. Reading builds empathy as well as knowledge.

Texas, unfortunately, lags much of the rest of the country in literacy rates. It is often said that from early childhood through third grade, students are learning to read, and after third grade, students are reading to learn. This is certainly an oversimplification, but it highlights an expectation that students should be reading with a certain level of proficiency by fourth grade or they risk falling behind academically!



Young readers enjoy the free book selections at a Reading Opens the World book drive hosted by AFT, Spring AFT, and Spring ISD.

Texas has the fourth-lowest literacy rate of 81%, with 19% of adults lacking basic prose literacy skills. Texas has the fourth-lowest number of libraries at 3.2 per 100,000 residents.²

Recent legislation has been aimed at addressing these early literacy gaps in Texas. House Bill 3, passed by the 86th Texas Legislature in 2019, is largely referred to as a school finance bill, but it had several other provisions that affected educators. HB 3 required all kindergarten through third-grade teachers and principals to attend a “teacher literacy achievement academy,” what is now colloquially referred to as “reading academies.” All K-3 teachers, including special education teachers and principals, were required to successfully complete the coursework (without guaranteed compensation for the extra work) by the end of the 2022-2023 school year.

HB 3 also required that all educators who teach any grade level from pre-kindergarten through sixth grade demonstrate proficiency in the Science of Teaching Reading (STR) on a certification examination beginning Jan. 1, 2021. This exam is intended to assess a teacher’s proficiency in research-based and evidence-based reading instruction and to deliver that instruction using specific strategies in the classroom.

These new requirements were onerous at best. Piled on top of pandemic school closures and the extra workload of teaching both remotely and in person, these additional training and testing requirements became another loadstone on the backs of already overworked teachers as they tried to overcome their students’ pandemic-related struggles. Currently, the STR is being integrated into the exam for many of the core elementary certificates, and educator preparation programs are also becoming authorized providers of the reading academies, integrating this training for their candidates.

The 88th Legislature saw some additional bills related to early literacy, notably HB 2162 by Rep. Harold Dutton. This bill sought to build on recent public education reforms by eliminating instructional practices that are not aligned to the Science of Teaching Reading and providing for reading interventions to struggling students. The bill would have required reading testing for kindergarteners through second-graders up to three times a year to diagnose and monitor reading difficulties. It also would have required intervention services until the student performed satisfactorily. While early literacy is important, this would have been excessive testing for young learners and would have undoubtedly killed any nascent joy for reading.

The redesigned STAAR assessment, administered for the first time in the spring of 2023, was supposed to introduce another component related to the STR: grade-level passages that build background knowledge across content areas. Students should be reading about social studies or even fine arts content that they have encountered throughout the school year. After a significant change in the assessment, student performance tends to dip a little as students adjust. This year’s data shows students performed well despite the changes.

The American Federation of Teachers believes that reading is the foundation of everything we do. Our union’s Reading Opens the World initiative focuses on:

- Giving teachers and school staff the tools and professional development that translate the STR into usable resources to help students read – and read well.
- Giving parents and caregivers fun and research-based tips and tools to support literacy.
- Building on and forging new connections among families, communities, educators, and schools to be partners in students’ literacy.
- Giving children and young people free books to read, love, and keep, because Reading Opens the World!

TEXAS' BOOK-BANNING BLITZ HAMPERS STUDENT LITERACY EFFORTS

House Bill (HB) 900 from the 88th legislative session is a book-banning bill. Under the bill, private book vendors, not school librarians or even elected officials, would assign ratings to these materials to identify sexual or sexualized content. Depending on the book's rating, it would either be removed from library shelves or would require parental permission to be accessed.



In October, the American Federation of Teachers, The New Republic, and the African American Policy Forum toured the country inside a "banned bookmobile." At stops in Dallas, Austin, and Houston, organizers distributed free books, literacy tips and tools, and professional development resources.

PEN America tracked 3,362 instances of school districts restricting or removing an individual book title in the 2022-2023 school year - a 33% increase over the previous year. Targeted books discussed or featured student health and well-being, characters of color, and LGBTQ+ characters.

According to the American Library Association's data, 49 attempts were made to restrict access to books in Texas in 2023, resulting in challenges to 1,470 titles. Texas was surpassed only by Florida in the number of unique titles challenged.¹

The author of the bill stated it was not intended to be a book ban. However, numerous advocates, including Texas AFT, worried that the bill would effectively ban books that focus on Black, Brown, and LGBTQ+ experiences, regardless of the intended effect.

After its passage into law, the bill was swiftly challenged in the courts. The most recent legal action partially blocked implementation and declared the book rating system to be unconstitutional. The bill also required the State Board of Education to approve a collection development policy written by the Texas State Library and Archives Commission. This policy was adopted in December 2023 and remains in place despite the injunction on the rating portion of the bill.

HB 900 was the prevailing legislation, but there were many bills that sought to curtail freedom of information and to silence the voices of marginalized communities. Despite the court rulings, many districts proceeded to remove books from libraries under the guise of this bill. Several grassroots advocates that have been fighting book removals and book bans at their local levels have coalesced into the Texas Freedom to Read Project to provide a source of support for those fighting censorship across Texas.

HB 900 is just one bill in a wave of censorship legislation that is sweeping the country and is connected to other forms of repression such as Senate Bill 15, the anti-diversity bill affecting Texas's college campuses, and the SBOE's refusal to bring ethnic studies up for consideration. It is an interconnected web of right-wing extremist attempts to control the history and continued narrative of this state.

COMMUNITY SCHOOLS: THE RESEARCH-BASED SOLUTION FOR STRUGGLING SCHOOLS

At a time when the Texas governor and others in state leadership are using billionaire donors' money to demonize our neighborhood public schools in an attempt to privatize them, it is imperative to focus on what proven, research-based solutions are available to directly address the needs of students in partnership with parents and the local community.

State takeovers of struggling and underfunded schools do not solve problems within local school districts; in fact, they appear to create more problems. Community schools and community involvement are what is needed from the start when a school campus is struggling.

Unlike an outside takeover of a school district, the community schools model involves intensive community engagement and wraparound social services to "turn around" struggling schools. Community schools are an evidence-based strategy for equitable school improvement. Because community schools are created by the community, they can transform traditional public schools into neighborhood hubs that encourage students, staff, families, and community members to reimagine education and co-construct a shared vision for their school and community. Community schools ultimately create better conditions for both teaching and learning.

A Proven Solution

Across the country, community schools have been shown to:

- **Improve access to health care to reduce the loss of student instructional time.** Students miss fewer days of school for treatable illnesses and are less distracted by medical issues.
- **Decrease student mobility rates.** When schools are responsive to community needs and serve as hubs of the community, families can establish roots rather than moving around to receive necessary services.
- **Help parents support the work that teachers are doing in the classroom.** When using campus services, parents are more likely to gain skills to help with homework and reinforce the lessons taught at school.
- **Reduce the rates of chronic absenteeism.** When students are in school more often, teachers can more easily identify students' learning needs and their families' needs. In Texas, where we have attendance-based funding for schools, reducing chronic absenteeism can significantly increase a school's available funding.

What happens when the community is left out of school turnaround strategies?

After years of bargaining with state officials on a hair-trigger accountability system that allows state takeover of an entire district for low performance of one single campus, plus additional years of legislative changes, the Houston Independent School District (HISD) and its elected school board were taken over by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) in 2023. The Houston community has fought back at every step of this hostile state takeover, and groups like Community Voices for Public Education (CVPE) have been actively advocating for real solutions that address their local needs. Specifically, CVPE, an active group of parents, students, and educators united to protect their local neighborhood schools, has been calling on state-appointed Superintendent Mike Miles and HISD conservators to involve parents and community members in the changes being made within the district. They have repeatedly called for a community schools model and community-centered solutions.

Instead of listening to the community, Miles has decided to turn libraries into detention centers¹, hire uncertified teachers to fill the vacancies left by teachers leaving these hostile conditions, and even tripled the number of administrators making more than \$200,000² while teachers saw no meaningful salary increases.

A Texas Success Story

Reagan High School, a school with high numbers of economically disadvantaged students in northeast Austin, adopted and executed a successful community schools strategy. In 2008, Reagan had declining enrollment and a graduation rate below 50%. Parents, students, and teachers began organizing around a community schools plan to save Reagan from closure, and the district gave them permission to try it.

With this new community school model in place, Reagan expanded support services the community indicated they needed, including mobile health clinics and parenting classes, as well as the expansion of existing after-school activities. The result: graduation rates at Reagan increased to 85%, enrollment more than doubled, and the resulting new Early College High School program has since enabled many Reagan students to earn their associate's degrees before they graduate from high school. As one Reagan student put it,

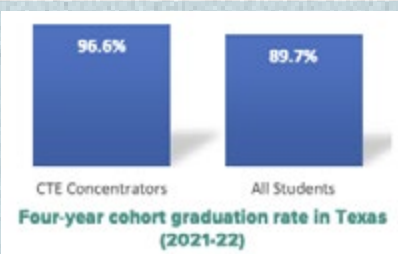
"There are so many supportive adults around, it's impossible to fail!"

Texas Community Schools Initiatives

Current community schools' initiatives are underway in Houston, Austin, El Paso, and Corpus Christi, as well as several other areas just starting their programs. Texas AFT's Bridges Institute has created a statewide community school network to share best practices, research, and technical support as school districts adopt community schools as their model for school improvement.

CAREER & TECHNOLOGY EDUCATION UNLOCKS STUDENT POTENTIAL

Career and Technical Education (CTE) is defined by the U.S. Department of Education (USDOE) in the Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education Improvement Act (Perkins V). States including Texas that receive federal CTE funds are required to align CTE programs of study to high-wage, in-demand, and high-skill occupations.



According to the Association for Career and Technical Education (ACTE), youth and adult learners in Texas with a CTE focus are more engaged and graduate high school at higher rates. In 2021-2022 school year, 1,792,279 students participated in secondary CTE programs.

The USDOE Division of College, Career, and Military Preparation has engaged members of the workforce including unions, secondary education, and higher education to advise on the development and recent refresh of programs of study, which include coherent course sequences, industry-based certifications, and work-based learning opportunities to ensure students are prepared for current and future careers in Texas.

The Texas Perkins State Plan includes a commitment to review programs of study every four years to ensure they continue to meet the Texas workforce's needs. At the culmination of that four-year review cycle, the new programs of study are now final and include 14 broad career areas or clusters, including engineering, health science, and information technology.

After passing House Bill 3 in 2019, the Texas Legislature now includes CTE within the College, Career, or Military Readiness (CCMR) indicator for state accountability purposes. This means districts now have an incentive to increase the number of students participating in CTE, who are included in the CCMR calculation for accountability purposes.

Career and Technical Education gives students a foundation for career success by integrating rigorous academic content with relevant job-specific technical skills and hands-on learning. Students who complete a CTE program of study in high school will be prepared to obtain an entry-level position or pursue more advanced education and training in their chosen career field.

The Union Apprenticeship Model

Union apprenticeship programs integrate systematic on-the-job training, guided by an experienced practitioner, with classroom instruction. The federal government, in cooperation with states, registers apprenticeship programs (including for teachers) that meet federal and state standards.

The best programs – which provide multiple industries with highly skilled workers who earn family-sustaining wages – are typically registered with government agencies, operated by sponsors representing labor and management organizations. According to the AFL-CIO, joint labor-management training programs in the building and construction industry alone contribute about \$1.5 billion to the American economy every year.

Apprenticeship Programs in Texas

While there are state-supported apprenticeship programs promoted by the Texas Workforce Commission, the commission consists of three industry representatives who are appointed by the governor and likely thinking of industry needs, not necessarily what is best for local communities. So, the voice of workers is missing at this critical policymaking level to ensure that CTE career pathways result in lucrative, long-term careers for student apprentices.

With that caveat, CTE programs are popular among students and are growing rapidly in Texas, opening new opportunities for students across the state. Grand Prairie ISD, for example, has significantly increased its CTE offerings, expanding from 11 CTE programs to more than 30 within 12 years. Enrollment in its CTE programs has increased by approximately 10% every year.

In Harris County, Cy-Fair ISD has had success partnering with local car dealerships to prepare students to operate complex technology now included in most automobiles. Students have been able to earn industry certification and receive on-the-job training toward a lucrative career.

About 80% of Del Valle High School's students are enrolled in one of 22 CTE programs. The culinary arts and hospitality services program, for example, teaches 470 students how to manage a restaurant and commercial kitchen.

These CTE students earn certifications and, often, college credits, and they get real-life career training in a safe environment. That is what our public schools give students of all backgrounds: an opportunity to thrive.

Scaling CTE Programs Across Texas

In 2023, the Texas Legislature addressed concerns about rural students' ability to access high-quality CTE programs by passing House Bill 2209, called the Rural Pathway Excellence Partnership (R-PEP). The program provides \$10 million per biennium in incentives and support for multi-district, cross-sector, rural college and career pathway partnerships. R-PEP is intended to expand opportunities for underserved students while promoting economic development in rural areas.

But more investment is needed to scale CTE programs across Texas to ensure that all learners have access to high-quality CTE programs that help them learn entry-level skills in well-paying, in-demand career fields. Robust investments are needed in training CTE instructors to teach in Texas' rapidly growing career cluster areas. As we discussed in the Community Schools section of this report, local communities can best define their employment needs, and the state would do better by its students and its economy if it involved central labor councils and union practitioners to ensure well-trained students have access to long-term careers, not just jobs that need filling.

ALL MEANS ALL: FULLY FUNDING SPECIAL EDUCATION IN TEXAS

Every child deserves a quality education, regardless of their abilities. However, for students with disabilities in Texas public schools, these ideals face a harsh reality. While the state allocates funding for special education services, a complex funding system and recent cuts leave many districts struggling to meet federal mandates and, more importantly, the unique needs of these students.

The Funding Gap: A Shortfall in Opportunity

Special education encompasses a wide range of services, from individualized learning plans to specialized therapies and equipment. These crucial supports come at a cost, and therein lies the challenge. Texas primarily allocates special education funding through the Foundation School Program (FSP) with a set formula. Critics argue this approach fails to consider the varying needs of different student populations. For instance, a student with dyslexia may require a lower student-to-teacher ratio and specialized training for educators compared to a student with autism. The current FSP formula doesn't account for these nuances, potentially leaving some students with significant needs under-resourced as these kids are not a one size fits all.

Further compounding the issue is a recent \$300 million cut in federal Medicaid reimbursements for special education services after Texas lost a final appeal of a federal audit. These funds helped districts offset the cost of providing therapies like occupational and physical therapy, crucial for many students with disabilities. The loss of these funds has placed an additional strain on already stretched district budgets.

The result?

- Many districts lack the resources to provide adequate staffing to meet the needs of every student receiving special education services.
- Specialized training for educators to provide essential therapies for students with disabilities is limited.
- This funding gap disproportionately impacts students from low-income households and students of color. These students may not have access to additional resources outside of the school system, further exacerbating existing educational inequalities.
- This substantial reduction in federal funding exacerbates an already critical situation for special education in Texas, coming when Local Education Agencies (LEAs) are underfunded by the state by about \$2 billion annually.

Chronic underfunding, coupled with the recent cut, is threatening to harm access to and the quality of the services that students receiving special education services in Texas need.

A Different Vision: Investing in Potential

So, what does a fully funded special education system look like? Here are some key aspects that would ensure all students with disabilities can thrive:

- **Needs-Based Funding:** A funding system that allocates resources based on the individual needs of each student, not a one-size-fits-all approach. This would ensure students with more intensive needs receive the appropriate level of support, such as smaller class sizes, specialized curriculum materials, and access to necessary therapies.
- **Adequate Staffing:** Hiring and retaining qualified special education teachers, therapists, and support staff is crucial. Competitive salaries, manageable workloads, and ongoing professional development opportunities are essential in achieving this goal. Special education teachers often face higher stress levels and burnout due to the demanding nature of their work. Investing in their well-being through competitive salaries and support systems allows them to provide the best possible education for their students.
- **Early Intervention:** Providing early identification and intervention services can significantly improve a child's long-term outcomes. A fully funded system would prioritize early childhood programs and screenings to identify potential learning challenges early on and ensure that no child gets left behind. Early intervention allows educators to address developmental delays and learning differences before they become significant obstacles to academic success.
- **Parental Involvement:** Parents are vital partners in their child's education, especially for students with disabilities. Districts should provide ongoing communication, training, and support to empower parents to advocate for their child's needs and participate in their educational journey.
- **Technology and Resources:** Investing in assistive technologies, specialized learning materials, and accessible facilities can create a more inclusive learning environment for all students. For example, text-to-speech software can help students with dyslexia access written materials, while ramps and accessible bathrooms ensure physical accessibility for students with mobility impairments.

The Road Ahead

Achieving a fully funded special education system requires a multi-pronged approach. Parents and educators can advocate for changes in funding formulas at the state and federal levels. This can involve contacting legislators, attending school board meetings, and raising awareness about the challenges faced by special education programs. Additionally, raising public awareness about the importance of special education services and the human cost of the funding gap is crucial to garner the broad support necessary for increased funding.



In February 2024, Socorro AFT donated more than \$1,500 in behavioral therapy tools for students with sensory needs at Desert Wind School. "This is going to help our students out tremendously with their sensory issues by helping them self-regulate," said Melissa Delfin, special education teacher in Desert Wind's structured learning unit.

ALL MEANS ALL: GUARANTEEING QUALITY EDUCATION FOR EMERGENT BILINGUAL & IMMIGRANT STUDENTS

SUPPORT AND MAINTENANCE OF SYSTEM OF PUBLIC FREE SCHOOLS.

A general diffusion of knowledge being essential to the preservation of the liberties and rights of the people, it shall be the duty of the Legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provision for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.

Texas Constitution (Feb. 15, 1876.)

The Texas Constitution states that it is the “duty of the legislature of the State to establish and make suitable provisions for the support and maintenance of an efficient system of public free schools.” However, in 1975, the State of Texas chose to leave some students behind by enacting section 21.031 of the Texas Education Code, which allowed public school districts to deny admission or charge tuition to undocumented children. In 1977, Tyler Independent School District charged \$1,000 per year for each child enrolled within the district who did not provide documentation of American citizenship, and the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund (MALDEF) took the case, *Plyler v. Doe*, all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court.

When the case reached the U.S. Supreme Court in 1982, the court struck down this discriminatory Texas law on a 5-4 decision and ruled all children – regardless of their immigration status – were entitled to free public education under both the Equal Protection clause of the 14th Amendment of the U.S. Constitution and Title IV of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. In the majority decision, Justice Brennan wrote that these provisions are “universal in their application, to all persons within the territorial jurisdiction, without regard to any differences of race, color, or nationality.” The court said denying immigrant students enrollment in public schools creates a class of marginalized youth with limited opportunities for education and social advancement. This was a big win for Texas children, but the fight for adequate funding to educate English language learners in Texas was far from over.

Bilingual programs in Texas have been significantly underfunded from the start. The Foundation School Program (FSP) is the primary means of distributing state aid to Texas public schools. The FSP includes allotments that provide weighted funding for services provided to certain student groups. When the first bilingual allotment was set in 1984, it was set at a weight of only 0.1, even though the research-based recommendation at the time was a 0.4 weight. Today, Texas still has just a 0.1 bilingual weight although 19% of our 5.4 million students are emergent bilingual students (English learners).

In 2019, the Texas Legislature established a new weight for dual-language programs. Schools receive an additional 5% of funding per student for each emergent bilingual student and non-emergent bilingual student in a dual-language program. However, few school districts operate dual-language programs. Notably, schools serving the roughly 80% of emergent bilingual students in the state’s other bilingual and English-as-a-second-language programs receive no additional funding from this new dual-language weight.

In 2023, the Texas Legislature passed another discriminatory piece of legislation that targets undocumented Texans. Senate Bill 4 is a cruel law designed to create a state-level immigration enforcement system. SB 4 would grant wide discretion to law enforcement to stop and question anyone suspected of unauthorized entry. Immigration attorneys warn the law could disproportionately affect Black and Brown people, even far from the U.S.-Mexico border.

The status of SB 4 has become increasingly chaotic in recent months as the Supreme Court of the United States and the Fifth Circuit Court of Appeals issued a slew of orders allowing the law to briefly take effect before once again blocking its implementation. As we write this, SB 4 remains on hold.

Educators know that laws like SB 4 intimidate undocumented parents, which could also result in students of undocumented parents missing more school days. Although the enforcement of SB 4 is prohibited on school grounds, it would create a chilling effect, scaring parents from taking their children to school, attending school functions, or even meeting with teachers out of fear of the draconian provisions in SB 4. While SB 4 is halted for now, it is critically important for all community members to understand the constitutional rights endowed to all individuals, regardless of immigration status.

“For us, the calculus is simple. SB 4 will greatly harm working people who cross the border to make a living and even citizens who are profiled and asked, in an encounter with law officers, to show papers. This law should never have taken effect, even for a few hours.”

-Texas AFL-CIO

LUNCH BREAKS & PLANNING TIME: ESSENTIAL INGREDIENTS TO EDUCATOR SUCCESS

What's the law, and why is it important?

In Texas, educators have legal rights to certain protections regarding their work schedules and breaks. Two key provisions laid out in the Texas Education Code are the right to a duty-free lunch period and the right to a planning and preparation period. These are important safeguards for educators' working conditions and a vital ingredient in supporting high-quality education for students.

Duty-Free Lunch

Section 21.405 of the Texas Education Code establishes the right to a duty-free lunch period for teachers and full-time librarians. The law mandates that "each classroom teacher or full-time librarian is entitled to at least a 30-minute lunch period free from all duties and responsibilities connected with the instruction and supervision of students." This duty-free lunch must be provided "during the regularly scheduled lunch period for the campus or grade level". Further, districts cannot force a teacher or librarian to stay on campus during their lunch, even if their school has "closed-campus" lunch periods, according to a decades-old opinion from the Texas Attorney General's Office².

That said, there are emergency circumstances in which a district can override this right. If the district deems it necessary – because of a personnel shortage, extreme economic conditions, or unavoidable or unforeseen circumstances – and in accordance with commissioner rules, it can require a classroom teacher or librarian to supervise students during lunch^{1,3}. **Even in those circumstances, however, the district cannot require a teacher or librarian to do so for more than one day in any school week.**

Planning and Preparation Periods

In addition to a duty-free lunch, teachers are entitled to dedicated time for planning and preparation (otherwise known as conference time) under Section 21.404 of the Texas Education Code. The law states that "each classroom teacher is entitled to at least 450 minutes within each two-week period for instructional preparation, including parent-teacher conferences, evaluating students' work, and planning and preparing instructional materials"⁴.

A teacher's planning and preparation time must consist of at least 45 consecutive minutes on any given instructional day; it cannot be divided up throughout the day. During a planning and preparation period, a classroom teacher cannot be required to participate in any other activity.

Unlike a duty-free lunch break, however, planning and preparation periods are duty time. This means teachers are not free to leave campus or engage in non-school related activities during your designated planning and preparation times.

More information about educators' rights to a duty-free lunch and planning and preparation time can be found online in Texas AFT's Know Your Rights resource hub: www.texasaft.org/resources/know-rights/

Why These Rights Matter

The duty-free lunch requirement ensures educators have time during the school day to rest, recharge, and prepare for the remainder of the instructional day. Providing teachers and librarians with this break supports their well-being and their ability to deliver high-quality instruction.

Planning and preparation periods are also essential for teachers to effectively carry out the many tasks necessary for high-quality instruction. This dedicated time allows teachers to plan and prepare lessons, grade student work, communicate with parents, and engage in other critical professional responsibilities.

Importantly, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has established that both of these necessary worker protections apply throughout the entire school year, including during the administration of state standardized tests like the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) exams. This guarantee is essential, as teachers often experience heightened stress and workloads during testing periods.

Violating these laws can result in serious consequences. If an educator believes their rights have been violated, they should document the situation, then attempt to resolve the issue at the local level and file a grievance with their school district if needed. If the educator is not satisfied with the district's decision, they can appeal directly to the Commissioner of Education⁵. The commissioner will review the case and issue a decision, which may include ordering the district to take corrective action.

Moreover, denying educators their entitled breaks and planning time can increase stress, diminish morale, contribute to burnout, lead to increased turnover, hinder their ability to effectively prepare, and ultimately compromise instructional quality. Diligently defending these rights and insisting that districts honor them is therefore critical for the well-being of both educators and the students they serve.

MORE THAN A MEAL: THE IMPACTS OF FREE SCHOOL LUNCHES

Free and reduced-price school meals play a critical role in fighting childhood hunger and supporting student success. Under the National School Lunch Program (NSLP), schools can provide free lunches to students from families with incomes below 130% of the federal poverty line or reduced-price meals to students from families with incomes between 130% and 185% of the federal poverty line. The federal government also runs several programs to feed school-age children:

- the School Breakfast Program
- the Child and Adult Care Food Program
- the Seamless Summer Option
- the Summer Food Service Program

In Texas, over 3 million students receive free or reduced-price lunches each school year¹. The program has been shown to alleviate food insecurity and poverty and improve academic performance, attendance, and physical and mental health outcomes for participating students². **For many Texas children, school meals may be the only meal(s) they have that day.**

However, many eligible students do not participate due to stigma or administrative barriers. Stigma associated with receiving free or reduced-price meals can deter participation, as students may feel singled out or embarrassed to be identified as low-income³. Additionally, the application process can be burdensome for families, particularly those with language barriers⁴.

To address these issues, the 2010 Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act created the Community Eligibility Provision (CEP), allowing high-poverty schools and districts to offer free meals to all students regardless of family income without requiring individual applications.



Initially, schools or districts with at least 40% of students eligible for free meals through direct certification could opt into the CEP. Direct certification includes students who automatically qualify for free school meals due to participation in certain means-tested programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), or the Food Distribution Program on Indian Reservations, as well as students who are foster youth, homeless, migrant, or enrolled in Head Start.

However, the United States Department of Agriculture's (USDA's) final rule, released in September 2023, lowered CEP eligibility threshold to 25%, making approximately 3,000 additional school districts eligible to participate starting in the 2024-2025 school year. By eliminating individual applications and providing meals to all students, the CEP destigmatizes school lunch participation, increases participation in school meal programs, eliminates school meal debt, and reduces administrative costs for schools⁵.

Statewide adoption of the CEP has been mixed. In the 2022-23 school year, 61.3% of eligible Texas school districts and 70% of eligible schools participated, ranking 34th and 37th, respectively⁶. Districts cite concerns about absorbing costs, as federal reimbursements do not always cover lost revenues from paid lunches. However, research shows the CEP's benefits outweigh its costs. A 2021 study by the USDA found that community eligibility increases school meal participation by 5-10 percentage points and boosts federal reimbursements, more than offsetting any losses from foregone paid meals⁷.

Moreover, a new study found universal free meals significantly reduce student discipline problems⁸. Comparing similar schools that did and did not adopt the CEP, researchers determined the program lowers suspension rates, with the largest effects for low-income and Hispanic students. The authors hypothesize free meals alleviate stigma and behavioral issues associated with school lunch status. Reducing suspensions not only improves school climate but also has long-term economic benefits, as students who are suspended are more likely to drop out and have lower earnings as adults⁹.

The economic impacts of universal free meals also extend beyond schools. Economists have discovered that retailers respond to the CEP by lowering grocery prices at stores in high-participation areas. These price reductions, amounting to a 4.5% decrease in grocery costs, benefit all consumers. The authors estimate that the indirect benefits of the CEP amount to approximately 10% of the \$80 direct monthly benefit to participating families¹⁰.

In a failure of leadership, Texas recently rejected nearly half a billion dollars in federal aid for a summer meals program. Authorized under the Consolidated Appropriations Act of 2023, Summer Electronic Benefits Transfer (Summer EBT) provides low-income families a grocery benefit of \$40 a month per school-aged child when school is out of session. Officials claim administrative hurdles and resource constraints prevented Texas from participating for summer 2024, but anti-hunger advocates argue the state could and should have prioritized overcoming these obstacles¹¹.

Especially with elevated food insecurity resulting from inflation and the end of federal pandemic aid, Texas leaders must not leave money for meals on the table. Policymakers should encourage wider CEP adoption and commit to implementing Summer EBT for 2025. Feeding children is both an educational and economic imperative – Texas must step up to the plate. With strong evidence demonstrating the far-reaching benefits of universal school meals, investing in programs like the CEP and Summer EBT is a smart strategy for supporting student success and strengthening local economies.

TWO YEARS AFTER UVALDE, GUN VIOLENCE IS AN EVER-PRESENT WORRY

Providing a safe learning environment for students and educators is a fundamental responsibility of our schools. However, the threat of gun violence on campuses has become an increasingly urgent concern, particularly after the devastating shooting at Robb Elementary School in Uvalde, that killed 19 children and two teachers in May 2022¹.

In the 2024 Texas AFT membership survey, gun violence prevention was ranked as the No. 1 priority out of 11 community and social justice issues. 82% of respondents were concerned about potential gun violence on their campus². Tragically, 1% indicated that their school has already experienced a shooting².

These concerns are understandable given the increasing prevalence of gun violence and school shootings. From August 1, 2021, to May 31, 2022, there were 193 gunfire incidents at preschools and K-12 schools nationwide, nearly four times the average during these months in all other years since 2013. Between 2013 and 2021, Everytown identified 573 such incidents resulting in 188 deaths and 392 injuries. Current or former students were the shooters in most incidents, including all mass shootings, 96% of self-harm incidents, and 91% of unintentional discharges.

Preventing gun violence requires a multi-faceted public health approach, going beyond physical security measures to address root causes and limit access to firearms by individuals who should not have them.



Raising the minimum age to purchase assault weapons to 21 is a common-sense reform that could reduce mass shootings. The 18-year-old Uvalde shooter legally purchased two AR-15-style rifles and thousands of rounds of ammunition in the days before the attack⁶. Had Texas required individuals to be 21 to buy assault weapons, as Florida did after the 2018 Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School shooting, he may have been unable to acquire such lethal firepower⁷. State legislation to raise the age failed in 2023 despite advocacy by victims' families.

Several states have also implemented Extreme Risk Protection Order (ERPO) laws, or "red flag" laws, that allow judges to temporarily remove firearms from individuals threatening to harm themselves or others¹⁰. Studies have found that ERPOs are effective at reducing gun suicides and show promise for preventing mass shootings^{11,12}. Texas currently lacks an ERPO law.

There is also a need to strengthen background checks and close loopholes that allow prohibited persons to obtain firearms. While Texas requires checks for sales by licensed dealers, private sellers are not obligated to do so¹³. Federal legislation has been proposed to require universal checks for all gun sales and transfers. President Biden also signed an Executive Order in 2023 to accelerate implementation of the Bipartisan Safer Communities Act, which includes directing the attorney general to close the "gun show loophole" and move the U.S. as close to universal background checks as possible without additional legislation^{14,15}.

Secure firearm storage is another crucial component of school and community safety. In Texas, Rep. Donna Howard and Sen. Carol Alvarado championed funding for a public awareness campaign in partnership with the Department of Public Safety (similar to public service announcements like "Click It or Ticket" and "Don't Mess with Texas.")¹⁶. At the federal level, the Biden-Harris Administration is taking comprehensive action to promote safe firearm storage and protect children from the gun violence epidemic. The Department of Education is sending a letter to school principals nationwide explaining the importance of safe storage and providing a communications template to engage with parents and families¹⁷. The Department of Justice is also releasing the most comprehensive guide on safe storage practices ever produced by the federal government¹⁷. These efforts build on the administration's previous work, including new rules from the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, Firearms and Explosives clarifying gun dealers' obligations to offer safety devices and DOJ grant funds for safe storage awareness and devices, including gun locks¹⁷. Keeping guns unloaded, locked, and separated from ammunition can reduce unintentional child shootings, gun suicides, and school shootings, as studies have found that guns used in school-based violence generally come from the shooter's home or the homes of family or friends¹⁸.

All these common-sense gun safety measures are broadly supported by a majority of Texans.

We caution against an overreliance on policing and physical security as the primary solutions to school gun violence, though they are important and require additional state funding to offset the unfunded mandates handed down to school districts in 2023. We also unequivocally oppose arming teachers.

While some expert-endorsed upgrades may be warranted, spending a disproportionate number of limited resources on surveillance, metal detectors, and armed personnel can create a hostile learning environment²⁰. These efforts should not come at the expense of hiring critical mental health staff and providing student support services, nor do they serve as a sufficient substitute for common-sense gun safety measures.

MENTAL HEALTH RESOURCES MAKE SCHOOLS SAFER

The student mental health crisis has been a growing concern for years, exacerbated by chronically underfunded, school-based mental health resources, pervasive social media and bullying, and the COVID-19 pandemic. An increasing number of students are struggling with anxiety, depression, and trauma that manifests in behavioral challenges, while schools remain ill-equipped to provide necessary support.

Texas schools have long grappled with a severe shortage of mental health professionals. The recommended student-to-counselor ratio is 250:1, yet in Texas, the ratio is an alarming 389:1.

98% of Texas students attend school districts that do not meet the recommended student-to-counselor ratio^{1,2}.

Lack of counselors disproportionately impacts rural districts, smaller districts, and charter schools. The ratios of students to social workers, psychologists, and other professionals are considerably worse compared to nationally recommended ratios³, and the expiration of temporary COVID-19 federal relief funding this fall threatens to reverse recent gains in these ratios⁴.

Social media has compounded students' mental health challenges as cyberbullying has become rampant. The 24/7 nature of social media means students can never truly escape this torment, leading to severe anxiety, depression, and suicidal thoughts⁵. A 2023 survey found that 55% of youth ages 13-17 had experienced cyberbullying, with 27% being cyberbullied in the past 30 days⁶.

The profound upheaval and social isolation students experienced during the pandemic has further worsened this crisis; From 2015 to 2022, rates of major depression among youth increased by 73%⁷. There has also been a "staggering increase" in anxiety disorders, post-traumatic stress, and other mental health conditions³. These trends have manifested in increased behavioral issues. Educators have reported more frequent and severe instances of disruptive, defiant, and even violent behavior from students struggling to cope with the trauma of the past few years.

Behavioral issues are often a symptom of deeper emotional distress, trauma, and Adverse Childhood Experiences⁸. Schools must maintain a safe learning environment while prioritizing trauma-informed practices, social-emotional learning, and proactive interventions to address the root causes of students' behaviors. The state must invest in expanding school-based mental health resources, ensuring adequate staffing of counselors, social workers, psychologists, and other professionals to provide counseling services, crisis intervention, Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports, and wraparound support.

In cases where a student's behavior poses a significant threat to safety or learning, more stringent disciplinary measures, including separation from the regular classroom, may be necessary. Alternative educational settings can provide a structured environment for students requiring more intensive support.

Though outdated, the Safe Schools Act established in Texas Education Code Chapter 37 allows for the removal of students from classrooms when their behavior is significantly disruptive or threatening, but due process must be ensured to protect their rights. Educators should strive to use exclusionary disciplinary measures as a last resort, focusing instead on alternative practices that foster long-term behavioral improvements.

Discipline policies must be clear, effective, and unbiased, focusing on addressing behavior while providing mental health support and trauma-informed care. Implicit bias must be acknowledged and prevented as disciplinary measures have been found to disproportionately impact students of color and contribute to the school-to-prison pipeline⁹.

Finally, addressing social media and bullying through digital citizenship curricula and improved response mechanisms is crucial. Texas must also invest in community-based mental health services to support students and families beyond the school setting.



Likes vs. Learning: The Real Cost of Social Media for Schools

A July 2023 report from a coalition of educator and parent groups – the American Federation of Teachers, the American Psychological Association, Fairplay, ParentsTogether, and Design It For Us – announced a series of recommendations and reforms that tech companies should take to keep American children safe and protect learning environments.

CHAPLAINS VS. COUNSELORS: THE DEBATE OVER SB 763

The 88th Texas Legislature passed Senate Bill 763, allowing school districts to use school safety funds to hire chaplains as school counselors (or accept them as volunteers) while exempting them from the rigorous training and certification typically required⁹. Districts' boards were required to vote on implementing a chaplain program. Advocacy groups representing various faiths, clergy members, and lay leaders (including > 170 chaplains) opposed SB 763 out of concern for religious liberty and student well-being¹⁰. Their voices and those of concerned parents and educators were heard by boards statewide. Overwhelmingly, school districts rejected SB 763, with only three small districts approving employing chaplains as counselors¹⁰. The 25 largest districts, serving one-third of all public school students, maintained their existing volunteer policies, allowing chaplains to participate like other volunteers but not replace qualified counselors.

This outcome demonstrates the respect for trained counselors and the power of local control and community advocacy.

WHAT'S ON TEXAS EDUCATORS' MINDS

What do teachers, professors, school staff, and retirees think about the current state of Texas public schools? We asked.

K-12 EDUCATORS

68.9%

say they have seriously considered leaving their jobs in the past year.

74.8%

report experiencing burnout in the past year.

77.5%

are concerned that expanding charter schools or instituting private school vouchers will hurt their public school.

72.2%

say either pay incentives *not tied to test scores* or changes to workload would make them most likely to stay at their job.

82.4%

say they are extremely or somewhat concerned by the possibility of gun violence at their campus or worksite.

1 IN 5

the number of participants in Texas AFT's 2023 Working Conditions Tracking Project who reported working a second job outside of school

50 HOURS

the average number of working hours worked by educators in Texas AFT's 2023 Working Conditions Tracking Project

HIGHER EDUCATION EMPLOYEES

52.7%

say they have considered leaving their jobs in the past year.

78%

gave the 88th Legislature a “not good” or “terrible” grade on retaining qualified higher education staff

53%

say pay incentives would make them more likely to stay at their job.

60%

report that they're so exhausted by the end of a workday that they're unable to do anything else in their off time.

81.1%

say they are concerned by the possibility of gun violence at their campus.

RETIRED EDUCATORS

33.6%

say they are using the cost-of-living adjustment to their TRS pension annuity or their supplemental checks for day-to-day expenses like groceries.

28.8%

say they received neither the COLA nor the “13th check” in 2024.

FAR FROM “EXTRA”: ROBUST EXTRACURRICULARS IMPROVE OUTCOMES FOR TEXAS STUDENTS

When most people think of Texas public school activities, the first thing that comes to mind is high school football and other sports. While we may be the land of Friday Night Lights, football is just one activity in a broad catalogue of extracurricular activities offered by Texas public schools.

Whether it's literary criticism, robotics, or marching band, extracurriculars offer student enrichment opportunities that are not only directly connected to classroom learning but also provide valuable student engagement that has been shown to improve student attendance and academic outcomes.

The University Interscholastic League (UIL) administers the state's academic, athletic, and music contests. Established in 1910, it has grown to the largest organization of its kind in the world. In 2022-2023, UIL reported almost 2.7 million student participants in its many contests and competitions. Students also participate in other sports and activities not sanctioned by UIL; we simply can't track that data. Students who regularly participate in extracurricular activities report a sense of community and belonging in their school. They are also more likely to enroll in college, join the military, or engage in the workforce.

48.6%

of all enrolled students participated in a UIL activity in the 2022-2023 school year

Texas high school students who enroll in more arts courses have better attendance, higher pass rates on standardized tests, and are more likely to attend college than their peers taking only the minimum arts requirement.

However, not everyone has equitable access to extracurricular activities. The Texas Cultural Trust, in its 2023 State of the Arts Report, found that schools in suburban areas offer 70% more secondary fine arts courses than in rural areas. And it is not just lack of access; some students are kept from participating in extracurricular activities because of their gender identity. House Bill (HB) 25 (87(3)) barred transgender athletes from participating in UIL sports in alignment with their gender identity. Just last year, Senate Bill 15 (88R) did the same for higher education in Texas.

In 2017, HB 22 required the commissioner of education to examine the feasibility of including extracurricular participation in the state's accountability system. Just this year, a report was published naming the likely benefits of such an indicator. At minimum, it would reduce the exclusive dependence on STAAR for an elementary school's accountability rating. HB 4402 from the 88th legislative session would have added an indicator for extracurricular participation and provided a small allotment for its implementation. Though it did not pass, the bill demonstrates that policymakers are convinced of the value that these activities provide to students.

PRODUCTS OF TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS



PATRICK MAHOMES
Whitehouse High School



BEYONCÉ
Kinder High School for the Performing and Visual Arts, Houston



JOHN HERRINGTON
Plano Senior High School



EVA LONGORIA
Miller High School, Corpus Christi

PERSEVERING AGAINST THE PRIVATIZATION THREAT

The core strategy around school privatization in Texas is the same strategy that has enabled decades of privatization in our state, across the country, and across history.

The formula is as follows:

1. Due to underinvestment, the quality of public services deteriorates.
2. Because of the deteriorating quality of public services, those who can (typically only the wealthy) seek out private alternatives.
3. Taxpayers become less willing to pay for the public services that are deteriorating, and that fewer people are using.

Wash. Rinse. Repeat. This pattern continues until public services are crushed by self-sustaining momentum. It's a simple formula for privatizers, one that they have sought to employ time and again. In the past few decades, this formula has resulted in rampant expansion of privately run charter schools and state takeovers of democratically-elected school boards; now we see lawmakers and big-money donors trying to push privatization even further in the form of private school vouchers.

Charter School Proliferation and their Unelected Boards

Charter schools are publicly funded but privately operated, and they don't have to follow many of the same policies that traditional public schools do. Charter school proponents say that this "enhanced freedom and flexibility" allows for charter schools to "innovate," but it's hard to see what is innovative about many of the exceptions that charter schools enjoy. Those exceptions include:

- **Class size:** Charter schools are not required to adhere to state-mandated class-size restrictions or student-to-teacher ratios.
- **Teacher certifications:** Teachers at charter schools are not required to be certified.
- **Student selection:** Charter schools can require an application process to admit students. Charter schools can turn away students based on their disciplinary history even for the most minor of infractions.

These exceptions diminish the quality of education that charter students receive and mean that charter schools spend less on their students. Despite these exceptions that reduce charter schools' costs, charter schools on average receive more money per student than traditional public schools.

An analysis by Raise Your Hand Texas found that charter schools, on average, receive approximately \$1,000 more per student than neighboring urban and suburban schools. Charter schools are among the fastest-growing part of the state budget, projected to total \$8.5 billion over the two years of the FY 2022-23 biennium.

Where is all this additional money going? Charter schools have a track record of questionable spending decisions. In 2019, it was revealed that IDEA charter schools spent \$15 million of taxpayer funds to lease a private jet and another \$400,000 on San Antonio Spurs tickets. Thankfully, this led to the departure of IDEA charter schools' then-CEO Tom Torkelson. Torkelson was well taken care of though: another source of charter school spending is lavish compensation packages for dismissed executives. In Torkelson's case, he received a \$900,000 golden parachute funded by taxpayers.

How are charter schools able to get away with this outrageous spending with relative impunity? One reason is their governance structure. While the trustees of independent school districts serve set terms and are elected by the voters, charter school boards are appointed and are thus unresponsive to any voting constituency. Because they are shielded from electoral consequences, they get away with this outrageous spending.

Voucher Proposals: Taxpayer Dollars Belong in Public Schools

The voucher plans that have gained the support of certain state leaders in recent years are an even more aggressive attempt to privatize the state's schools. Unlike charter schools, private schools in a voucher system would remain totally independent from the state. Texas would simply send taxpayer dollars to the school, subsidizing these private entities.

Numerous voucher plans were considered in 2023, but each plan included minimal guardrails. None of the plans included:

- standardized testing requirements
- subjecting private schools to the state's A-F accountability system
- a pathway for the state to audit these entities that would receive thousands of dollars in state funds

In other states with voucher programs, voucher spending has ballooned, far outpacing state projections, leading to massive holes in state budgets. Arizona's voucher program is projected to cost over \$950 million next year, which is \$320 million more than what the state has allocated to the program.

The demand is not driven by results. Separate studies in Indiana and Louisiana found that students in voucher programs performed significantly worse than public school peers on standardized tests.

Nor is the demand driven by students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, the children who voucher proponents trumpet as the intended recipients. The fact is that vouchers are welfare for the wealthy. According to data from a voucher program administrator in Florida, 69% of voucher recipients were already attending private schools. In Texas, Gov. Greg Abbott has insisted that any voucher program passed by the Legislature had to be "universal," meaning that wealthy families already sending their children to private schools could use the voucher.

Vouchers would undermine our state's public schools. Every Texan, a nonpartisan policy institute, calculated that with just 5% usage of a voucher system, Texas school districts would stand to lose more than \$2 billion per year. Our state leaders are leading our state's core public services straight to the chopping block. For Texas schools to thrive, Texas voters must reject private school vouchers at the ballot box.

COMMUNITY COLLEGES ARE THE CRUCIAL LINK IN A THRIVING EDUCATION SYSTEM

Texas's community colleges play a critical role in fulfilling the state's education and workforce needs. Whether they are educating a high schooler seeking college credit, a recent high school graduate working toward a degree or certification, or an older worker looking to upskill or pivot their career trajectory, Texas's 50 community college systems play a pivotal role in powering our economy, providing over 92% of workforce credentials in Texas as of 2021.

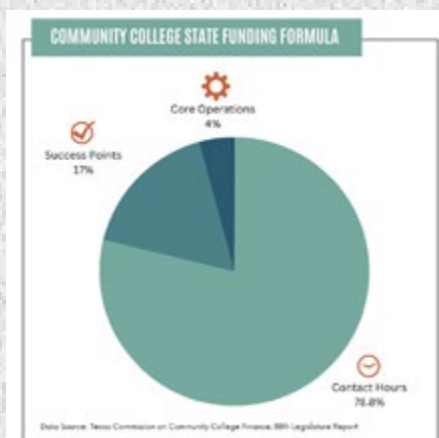
But these colleges can only fulfill their mission if they are properly supported by the state.

House Bill 8: One Step Toward a Fully Funded Future

Last session, the Texas Legislature made historic investments in Texas's community colleges with House Bill 8, which increased state funding across the board by 30% compared to the previous biennium. The bill sent \$683 billion to Texas community colleges, with roughly two-thirds of that going directly to colleges through formula funding and the last one-third being distributed through competitive grants.

Unlike the previous funding system, this new HB 8 funding is not static: Amounts allocated to schools are based on student outcomes, so if colleges continue to succeed, they will be rewarded with additional funding. Additionally, the new funding formulas are weighted more toward student outcomes, including credential completion, transfers to universities, and the awarding of high school course credits; the previous formula weighed contact hours of instruction more heavily.

Colleges desperately needed this influx of cash, but the success of this new system still hasn't been tested. There are some worries that a system more heavily weighing credentials will incentivize schools to award credentials more easily or to recruit students who are "easier" to educate. The bill also did not include any requirement that this new funding go to compensation for employees responsible for those students' success.



The State's 'Fair' Share of Funding

While this significant increase in funding was historic, more must be done to improve community college quality and access.

State funds make up just 26% of all the funds that go to community colleges. The rest of their funding comes primarily from tuition (29%) and local property taxes (44%). The state's share of community college funding has shrunk significantly since 1980 when the state covered an average of 68% of community college costs. HB 8 is certainly a step in the right direction when it comes to rebalancing the funding distribution, but the state is still paying far below its fair share. If the state's community college systems are going to thrive, Texas needs to pay its share.

While districts like Austin Community College have a large amount of high-value property within its taxing base, other districts do not. Those districts are unable to raise suitable funds to sustain their programs without overwhelming the local property tax base.

While HB 8 includes some provisions to compensate these "property poor" districts, more can be done to support these areas, which are especially in need of the economic development that workforce upskilling presents. With increased state investment, these districts can afford to fund programs like Austin Community College's Tuition Affordability program. Without increased state investment, "property poor" school districts will continue to rely more heavily on student tuition and fees to fund their programs, disincentivizing students from enrolling in community colleges.

Even for districts that do have comparatively more resources at their disposal, districts must ensure that those resources are being distributed equitably and efficiently. When it comes to compensation, too often community college resources are concentrated at the top, with the highest paid administrators making much more than the average employee. Relatedly, many community colleges are significantly underpaying their adjunct employees who often perform functionally the same job of educating students as their full-time counterparts. Texas community colleges can recruit and retain more high-quality employees if they pay them in an equitable manner.

The Work that Colleges are Doing

Despite the decades of chronic underfunding by the state and despite the problems that continue to go unaddressed, Texas community colleges make a difference in the lives of the roughly 700,000 students currently enrolled.

Our community colleges are playing a critical role in helping our state reach its goals for workforce development. The Texas 60x30 strategic plan was designed to ensure that by 2030, at least 60% of Texans ages 25-34 have a certificate or degree. Research shows that Texas is behind in this goal. If Texas is going to achieve this target, it will have to work to invest in community college access. If Texas is going to thrive, it must ensure that its community colleges are accessible.

HIGHER EDUCATION SUCCESS REQUIRES ACADEMIC FREEDOM & ACADEMIC INCLUSION

The process of learning is not just about books and lectures; to learn, students must feel welcome and safe to share their perspectives. Some recent laws in Texas, like Senate Bill 17 and Senate Bill 18, threaten the integrity of education environments on Texas college campuses and endanger the inclusive, supportive environment necessary for students to thrive academically.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

At the heart of any thriving educational institution lies a commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI). Many Texas universities, like their counterparts nationwide, had embraced DEI initiatives over the years to cultivate an environment in which students and faculty from diverse backgrounds feel valued and empowered. These initiatives not only enrich the educational experience by offering varied perspectives but also nurture a culture of respect and understanding essential for intellectual growth. With the passage of Senate Bill 17, however, DEI programs have been banned in Texas.

This ban is not just a blow to students' academic interests; it's a huge, self-imposed hurdle for Texas labor and the Texas economy. Texas colleges are shaping the labor force of tomorrow and must instill values of diversity allowing students to go on to foster inclusive workplaces. The Texas 60x30 strategic plan was designed to ensure that by 2030, at least 60% of Texans ages 25-34 have a certificate or degree. Texas cannot reach these goals unless the state and its institutions of higher education increase outreach to underrepresented communities and provide potential students in these communities with inclusive campus environments.

In tandem with DEI initiatives, Measurement and Evaluation Centers (MEC) at universities play a pivotal role in bolstering recruitment and retention efforts for staff, particularly educators. These centers provide essential support mechanisms for faculty development, performance evaluation, and continuous improvement, ensuring that educators receive the necessary resources and recognition for their contributions to student success. However, the potential dismantling of MECs is likely to undermine these vital functions, leading to a loss of talent, and grant funding that are critical for maintaining educational excellence.

Academic Tenure

Tenure stands as a cornerstone of academic freedom, granting professors the autonomy to explore controversial and relevant ideas, challenge prevailing paradigms, and engage in unfettered research without fear of backlash. In Texas, tenure serves as a bulwark against external pressures that might seek to stifle dissent or suppress unpopular viewpoints. However, recent legislative efforts, exemplified by SB 18, threaten the sanctity of tenure by introducing undue political influence into academic affairs, jeopardizing intellectual independence that is vital for educating students with honesty, rigor, and integrity.

Embracing and offering tenure is not common among community colleges, but across Texas, professors are fighting for their right to have it. An example of this is the Alamo Colleges District, which previously offered tenure to professors, but ended the program in 2022. Before this, the community college system stood out as a beacon of best practices in higher education because of its commitment to offering tenure to faculty members. By prioritizing tenure, Alamo Colleges attracted top-tier professors while also showing a steadfast commitment to honoring the invaluable role of educators in shaping the academic landscape.

Whenever professors lose the ability to have academic freedom, it isn't only them who suffer; their students do too. As many institutions grapple with the challenges of preserving academic freedom amid legislative overreach, community colleges should be a place for fostering a culture of respect, recognition, and professional autonomy among educators to effectively teach the leaders of the future.

What to Expect Next

The Texas Legislature should take immediate action to reverse SB 17 and SB 18 and oppose any new attempts to attack tenure, DEI, or academic freedom broadly.

Unfortunately, the Legislature not only is showing no sign of reversing course but also seems to be escalating the assault on these issues. Over the interim period, in preparation for the next legislative session, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has instructed the Texas Senate to study how SB 17 and SB 18 have been implemented. While the Legislature typically reviews the implementation of important pieces of legislation, increased legislative focus on these issues by unfriendly legislators could portend additional adverse legislative action next session.

Amidst the tumult of legislative battles and political maneuvering, Texas AFT is a stalwart defender of student and faculty rights in higher education. Through advocacy, activism, and grassroots mobilization, we remain committed to the principles of DEI and academic freedom, safeguarding the aspirations of millions of students across Texas.

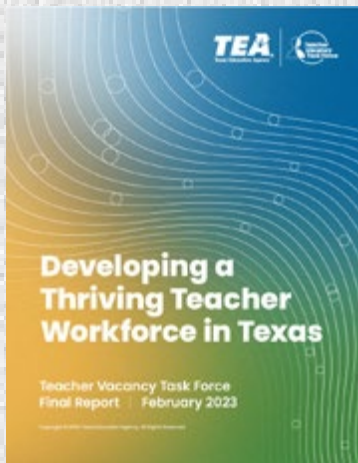
By continuing our efforts for collective advocacy and unwavering resolve, we will continue to support educators, students, and advocacy groups to chart a path forward towards a more equitable, inclusive, and intellectually vibrant higher education landscape.

TEXAS MUST DO MORE TO RECRUIT AND RETAIN TEACHERS

The teacher workforce pipeline is at a perilous juncture. We know from years of data that the teachers who produce the best student outcomes and remain in the profession the longest come from university preparation programs. However, with the continued rising costs of college tuition and the lack of growth in compensation in the teaching profession, fewer and fewer are choosing to spend their college experience preparing to be an educator.

Until 2017, most new teachers still entered the classroom certified from a higher education preparatory program. That year, the number was eclipsed by teacher candidates from alternative certification. The number of uncertified teachers has been steadily rising since 2012, but the pandemic fueled an explosion of teacher attrition, and the number of new, uncertified teachers is now higher than both traditional and alternative certified teachers.

Teachers Tell Us What They Need



To answer the question of how we got here and what could be done to fix this critical workforce issue, Gov. Greg Abbott appointed the Teacher Vacancy Task Force in March 2022. The task force (that initially had just two teachers on it) met for one year and produced a report in February 2023 that outlined several strategies, both local and legislative, that could help alleviate the outflow of teacher talent. The recommendations fell into three broad categories: compensation, training and support, and working conditions. When the dust settled on the 88th Legislature (and its many special sessions), very little had been done to address the task force's stated priorities, most especially concerning compensation. As a reminder, Texas' average teacher salary still lags the national average by \$7,449

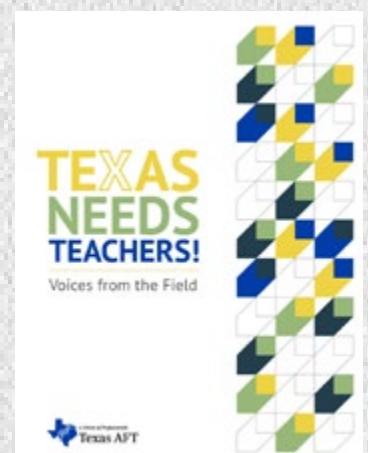
Almost in parallel with the state's efforts, Texas AFT worked with our members to produce the Texas Needs Teachers report (August 2022). Though an overall increase in pay was identified as necessary, teachers also pointed out that other compensation strategies, like tuition reimbursement and loan forgiveness programs, could incentivize staying in the classroom. But even more than the money, teachers cited a

desperate need to improve working conditions. Concerted efforts by leadership to hire additional support staff, reduce paperwork, protect planning time, and give teachers a voice in district policy making were all solutions that teachers said would help them choose to stay in the classroom.

During the 88th Legislature, Senate Bill (SB) 9 by Sen. Brandon Creighton, dubbed the "Teacher Bill of Rights," was an omnibus bill to address most of the recommendations of the task force. Though there were several aspects that might have helped the teacher workforce, including a small bonus for teachers, there was no new sustainable funding for continued compensation. Additionally, there were a few poison pills in the bill, such as the removal of the elected State Board of Education's authority to ratify appointed State Board for Educator Certification rules, and it did not pass.

Because all new money for schools was held hostage by the governor's attempt to pass a private school voucher program, the only so-called win in this policy arena was House Bill (HB) 1605, related to instructional materials. The bill is intended to ensure that Texas students have access to "high-quality instructional materials," however districts that have used the pilot products that led to this bill have reported that these materials are not an improvement in either instructional value or time saved for the teacher. The Texas Education Agency will be conducting the first review for this mammoth new implementation in summer 2024. The fall reports and adoption by the State Board of Education of this first round of materials will be telling.

Educators have told us over and over what they need to remain in the profession. Texas just needs the political will to enact the needed changes.



Striving to Thrive: Brazosport ISD's Teacher Apprenticeship Program Could Be a Model Statewide

What can districts do as teacher pipelines dry up and the state refuses to act? Brazosport ISD has made its own pipeline with its K-12 Teacher Registered Apprenticeship Program. Apprenticeship and residency programs that allow teachers in training the opportunity to work in a classroom while completing their studies are not new; they exist in many public school districts statewide, but most are the products of partnerships between ISDs and local universities.

Brazosport, south of Houston along the Gulf Coast, doesn't have a nearby higher education program to partner with. So the district created its own program, which, rather uniquely, allows high school students themselves to start the process of becoming teachers at a much lower cost than a typical four-year college degree. Among the initial participants in the program were many existing Brazosport ISD support staff who want to remain with the district as they grow into certified teachers.

(source: <https://www.texastribune.org/2023/07/18/brazosport-isd-residency-texas-teacher-shortage/>)



In August 2022, leaders from AFT, Texas AFT, and several local AFT unions hosted a roundtable discussion with Houston area superintendents, administrators, and experts (including Rep. Alma Allen) on solutions to the current staffing crisis. Practical solutions discussed included “grow your own” educator certification programs.

Thinking Creatively About the Pipeline

The State Board for Educator Certification was successful in establishing the teacher residency pathway recommended by the task force (rules adopted in spring 2024). Under this new “enhanced certificate,” candidates will spend a full year co-teaching in a classroom, earning a stipend, and ending in completion of certification. Several preparation programs and districts have piloted various models of teacher residencies over the past few years, and this model does have the potential to become a high-quality pathway into the profession. However, with federal pandemic funds running out and no strategic funding coming from the state, it is unclear how viable these programs will be as they begin their statewide rollout in fall 2024.

One other aspect to note is that these Texas residency programs might align with new Department of Labor registered apprenticeship programs (RAP) for teachers. This process is ongoing, and we look forward to analyzing the intersection of these in our educator preparation programs in the coming years. The grant funds associated with RAP may serve to supplant the expiring pandemic dollars.


Though the residency route may produce high-quality teacher candidates, this is a resource intensive pathway that will not be able to replace the thousands of teachers leaving the profession each year. Indeed, many of the well-intentioned improvements to the educator training and certification processes are impacting a shrinking percentage of the teacher workforce.

As the data shows, districts are hiring more uncertified teachers every year, sometimes using a state waiver but more often under the banner of a District of Innovation, a statute that allows a district to exempt itself from certain provisions of law. **There are 981 Districts of Innovation in Texas, and the exemption from teacher certification is the second-most used exemption.**

While modest improvements in educator training are needed, greater effort must be focused on providing a pathway to certification for those uncertified teachers already in Texas classrooms. There are a lot of creative possibilities available. A district with a large number of these teachers can hire a provider to do group trainings, or it can provide strategic compensation to reimburse certification expenses to individual teachers. The options exist, but both districts and these teachers need real incentives to take the necessary steps. If the policy landscape of Texas continues to support this avalanche of underprepared teachers, then the state will never achieve the student outcomes it desires.

EXCELLENCE IN TEXAS PUBLIC SCHOOLS

Even with the deck stacked against them, Texas public school educators, students, and families do remarkable things every day.



**MOST
LIKELY TO
SUCCEED**

Manor Middle School in Manor ISD Makes a Turnaround

In 2019, Manor Middle School earned an “F” ranking from the Texas Education Agency. Administrators, educators, and parents feared a TEA takeover or a coerced partnership with a charter school. Instead, the community came together to engage students and retain teachers, starting with a restorative justice focus. This Title I school placed emphasis on student leadership within the school and teaching students conflict resolution skills. Doing so allowed teachers to do what they do best: teach. To make sure they retained those experienced educators, district leaders offered pay incentives.

The results are starting to pay off.

“We heard naysayers like ‘Oh, it’s not going to work, they’re going to have to partner,’ different things like that,” Dione Mayes, the district’s restorative justice coordinator, told KUT. “So, when we got that announcement, on the inside, I was like ‘told you!’ But also, it did make me super happy because now I know we have more years to fight, more years to improve with these kids.”

Education Austin Member Rebekah Ozuna Leads Restorative Practices for Austin ISD Students

Cultural Proficiency & Inclusiveness (CP&I) has been a focus for Austin ISD since 2010. In 2020, that work to build a welcoming learning environment for all students took a step forward when the district was awarded a three-year, \$775,000 grant from the Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention in the Department of Justice. Education Austin member Rebekah Ozuna was tapped to oversee the implementation of the grant, supporting three district campuses. The goal: to decrease youth violence and victimization at the Alternative Learning Center, Crockett Early College High School, and Covington Middle School.

To meet that goal, Ozuna and educators on those campuses implemented culturally responsive, restorative practices to identify and support students at risk for delinquency or who are involved in the juvenile justice system³. The grant and Ozuna’s work to facilitate it ended in 2023, but the work for healthy, happy learning environments continues.

“My three schools have gone through so much the last three years,” Ozuna said. “And they continue to do great work and build capacity with campus leaders (staff and students) to sustain what we’ve started.”



**MOST LIKELY TO MAKE
A DIFFERENCE**

The Youth Power Project & Rep. Carl Sherman Work to Give Students a Voice

When we think of stakeholders in our public schools, we too often forget that our students should have a voice in decisions made about them too. In the 88th Legislature, a dedicated group of Texas students brought forward a proposal to change that dynamic. Youth Power Project members roamed the halls of the Texas Capitol throughout the 2023 session, rallying support for House Bill 2647, which would have created a non-voting student trustee position within a school district's board of trustees. The bill was carried by Rep. Carl Sherman (D-DeSoto), but it failed to make it all the way through the legislative process.

Undeterred, Youth Power Project members in Texas have said they plan to find another sponsor for the legislation in the 89th Legislature².



Brownsville Educators Stand Together Wins a Right to Recess for Elementary Students

Every elementary school student in Brownsville ISD is now guaranteed a minimum 15-minute recess each day thanks to advocacy from Brownsville Educators Stand Together (BEST AFT).

In December 2022, BEST members asked district administrators and school board members to mandate daily recess on every elementary campus. They noted that Brownsville ISD recently spent millions of dollars to build new playgrounds, but too many students were routinely being denied access to them.

"We posed the question, 'If we can waste countless hours of instructional time on excessive practice testing, then why can't we use 15 minutes a day for the well-being of our children and community?'" said Esmer Garcia Barajas, co-chair of BEST AFT and an elementary teacher.

In February 2023, district administrators read a letter to be sent to campus principals, stating that recess must be provided daily and cannot be used as a discipline consequence or reward. BEST AFT's advocacy is an example of empowered educators – working together in a union – using their voices to improve learning conditions for our kids.



MOST ATHLETIC

Black Voters Matter & Northeast Houston AFT Give Students an Up-Close View of Civic Engagement

Throughout the past year, Northeast Houston AFT, which represents employees in Channelview, Galena Park, and Sheldon ISDs, has partnered with the Black Voters Matter Fund on a civics student engagement project for high schoolers in area schools.

The shared goal is to build power in predominantly Black communities, through engaging more deeply and consistently in electoral and political processes. As educators, our members see it as a responsibility to teach students about their democracy and help them engage with it.

A highlight of this partnership was a 2023 trip with Sheldon ISD students to the Texas Capitol during the 88th Legislature. Students had the chance to tour the Capitol, meet with legislators, and, on more than one occasion, ask them hard questions about their support for Texas public schools.

The bones of democracy are brittle in Texas, gerrymandered and under the rule of voter suppression bill Senate Bill 1, but these students give us hope for a better tomorrow.



MOST LIKELY TO BECOME PRESIDENT

A PENSION IS A PROMISE: TEXAS EDUCATORS NEED RETIREMENT SECURITY

Texas educators spend their careers working to ensure that students thrive. When it comes time for them to retire, the state needs to make sure they can thrive themselves.

For too long, the state of Texas has undercut its educators in retirement, effectively kicking them out the door after a career in which they have been drastically underpaid. In Texas, the average retired educator receives just \$2,199 per month from their Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) pension. **\$2,199 a month is not enough to retire with dignity; \$2,199 is not enough to thrive.**

Texas must permanently fix the state's educator retirement system if the state itself is going to thrive.

Texas's History of Broken Promises

A fundamental aspect of any quality pension system is a "COLA" or a cost-of-living adjustment. The fundamental principle is simple: As inflation increases a retiree's cost of living, their pension should increase to allow them to maintain the same quality of life throughout their retirement.

Texas is one of a minority of states across the U.S. in which retired educators cannot expect an automatic COLA. COLAs in Texas are provided by the Legislature on an ad-hoc basis. Texas used to provide retirees with frequent ad-hoc COLAs, but such basic investments have become all too rare in recent years. In 2023, retired educators finally received a COLA, but before that, no educator who had retired since 2004 had ever received one, despite inflation increasing the costs of goods by as much as 60%. The most any retiree received from last year's COLA was a 6% increase in their pension. The average retiree received just an extra \$76 per month.

Because ad-hoc COLAs were previously more regularly distributed by the Legislature, many retirees went into the profession expecting to have their benefits increase at pace with inflation. Retirees created their financial plans with the assumption that the state would keep its promise to support them in retirement. But the state didn't.

After years of broken promises from the state, educators now are being forced to invest in 401k plans when they previously could rely on their pension for financial support in retirement. **For many educators who are already retired, it's too late.** Educators in the lower end of the income spectrum are being forced to take out payday loans just to make ends meet.

Pensions to Thrive

In addition to simply wanting to provide educators with dignity in their retirement, there are many reasons why the state should provide educators with strong pensions with a built-in, automatic COLA.

A good retirement is a strong tool for the state to recruit and retain high-quality educators. In Texas, where education funding has stagnated in recent years, educators are leaving the classroom in droves. According to Texas AFT's most recent membership survey, 68.9% of educators surveyed reported that they have considered leaving the profession in the past year.

While Texas should pay its active teachers respectful wages, it must also provide them with reasonable benefits, like a secure retirement. The state has long argued that, while schools don't provide educators with salaries competitive with the private sector, they do provide more competitive benefits. In Texas, that is no longer the case, which is making it more difficult to recruit and retain educators.

A secure retirement, even compared to other benefits, does more to retain educators as it takes five years for educators to become vested in the retirement system, making them eligible to receive a pension upon retirement. The longer educators pay into the system, the larger their monthly pension will be; if they knew they were working toward a substantial retirement pension, educators would be incentivized to work in the public school system for longer.

In addition to being good for Texas schools, a secure retirement is good for the Texas economy. TRS studies how retiree pension dollars are spent and what effect that has on the Texas economy as a part of its yearly "TRS Value Brochure." Last year, the system found that 94% of all TRS pension payments were spent locally in Texas - a higher figure than in most states - which means that TRS retirees stimulate the Texas economy with their pensions. TRS estimates that last year its retirees were responsible for adding \$23.9 billion to Texas's gross domestic product (GDP) and that the system's pension and health care payments created 268,183 jobs in Texas last year.

Every \$1 in benefits paid by TRS generates \$2.35 in economic activity, a clear indication of the downwind benefits of providing retirees with a secure retirement.

Real Solutions

A true solution to this issue will be complicated. The one-time COLA increase in 2023 and the previous supplemental checks that retirees received are Band-Aids. The state should pass legislation that automatically guarantees retirees a COLA tied to the rate of inflation. The state should also adjust the base TRS pension formula so that retirees receive more from their retirement as soon as they retire.

Both of these solutions will require increased and continuous investment in TRS. The State of Texas pays into the TRS pension fund an amount equal to 8.25% of the total payroll for those vested in TRS. Educators themselves pay a matching 8.25% that is deducted from their salaries. There is no law that requires the state and personal contributions to match. The state should increase its percentage without forcing already underpaid teachers to invest more of their salary into the pension system.

TRS FAST FACTS

- TRS provides benefits to nearly half a million retired educators.
- The TRS pension trust fund is currently valued at about \$186 billion.
- Each month, the pension trust fund provides TRS retirees with over \$1 billion in total pension checks paid out.
- The TRS investment fund has \$9.5 billion worth of holdings invested in Texas-based businesses.

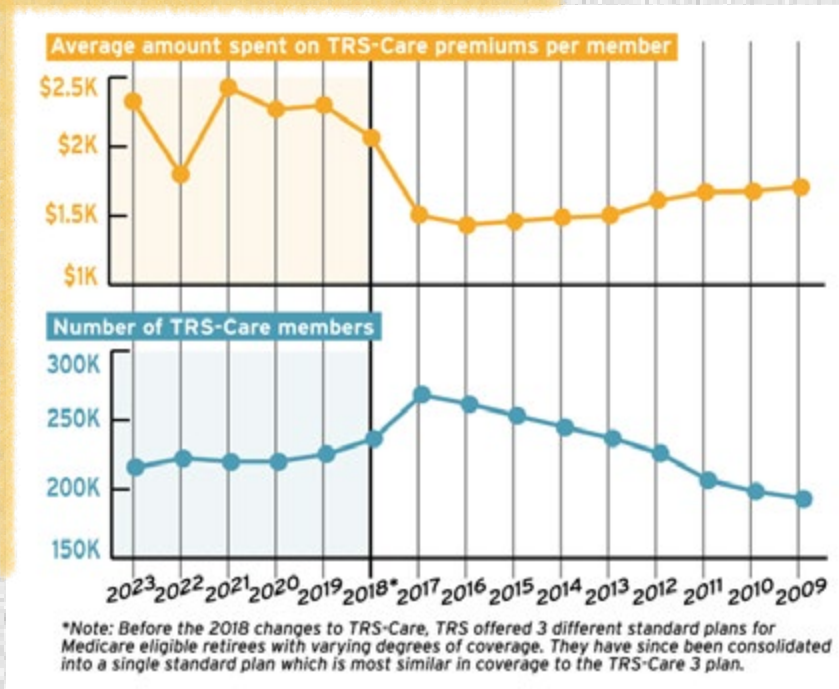
HEALTH CARE IS A RIGHT. TEXAS HAS GOTTEN IT WRONG FOR TOO LONG.

A strong pension isn't the only benefit that educators should enjoy in retirement – they also deserve access to affordable health care. The Teacher Retirement System of Texas (TRS) also administers TRS-Care, the state's health care system for eligible retired educators and their dependents.

Members of TRS-Care have to pay insurance premiums, but those rates are subsidized contributions to TRS-Care that are paid by the state, employers (community college systems, universities, and school districts), and current public education employees; the amounts of the contributions of each entity are based on employee payroll. For Medicare-eligible retirees, Medicare can also be claimed to cover the cost of TRS-Care.

Contributing entity	Contribution amount (as percentage of total payroll)
State of Texas	1.25%
TRS-covered employers	0.75%
TRS-covered employees	0.65%

TRS-Care was formed in 1985 as a placeholder health insurance program, but it has become a permanent and important fixture for retired educators. Due to the contributions from each entity and the collective power that the TRS-Care system has with over 215,000 members, TRS-Care was designed to offer better coverage at lower rates than the private insurance market or from Medicare alone. Increasingly, this is not the case, however, as the number of retirees and their dependents enrolled in TRS-Care has been slowly declining in recent years.



Source: TRS Annual Comprehensive Financial Report

In 2017, after years of insufficient contributions, TRS-Care was facing a \$1 billion shortfall. That legislative session, the state committed \$626 million to the system for the biennium, but lawmakers also subjected TRS-Care members to a series of changes made to stabilize the system. These changes included increasing premiums and the elimination of a \$0 premium plan, which was previously a lifeline for retired educators who were struggling financially and couldn't afford to pay the premiums associated with higher-quality care plans.

These changes sparked a mass exodus with over 36,000 TRS-Care members (roughly 5% of the system's membership at that time) leaving the system in 2018. Once a retiree leaves the system, they can't return, barring special legislatively decreed circumstances (such as a change in their Medicare eligibility). These retirees, who contributed to the TRS-Care system throughout their careers, were forced to leave that money on the table because they could no longer afford to pay the premiums, or they thought they could find cheaper insurance on the private market.

Since 2018, TRS-Care premiums have largely stabilized due to ad-hoc state intervention to tamp down on rising premiums, especially in the face of rising health care costs since the COVID-19 pandemic and beyond. But retirees have continued to leave the system, which has the twofold effect:

1. those leaving the system will be without TRS-Care coverage that they paid for throughout their careers
2. the system is weakened for the remaining retirees because smaller membership undercuts its premium bargaining power

The mass exodus from TRS-Care is a cautionary tale from which the state has yet to learn. Instead of funneling one-time ad-hoc appropriations during legislative sessions, the state needs to permanently increase its contributions to the system. Without implementing a permanent solution, TRS will be unable to properly plan for the future. As the system has gained solvency and premiums have stabilized in recent years, TRS has allowed more former enrollees to re-enroll. These special re-enrollment periods are necessary for the state to correct the wrongs, but they are not a permanent solution. The state needs to act to permanently keep TRS-Care affordable.

WHEN EDUCATORS COLLECTIVELY BARGAIN, THEY RAISE THE BAR FOR ALL OF US

Let's imagine that Texas was experiencing a severe shortage of trained firefighters. In this scenario, homes and businesses were routinely reduced to rubble because of delayed response times.

For the sake of argument, let's also posit that Texas's municipal and state officials were invested in swiftly ending this crisis. Who would they look to for solutions?

Would the Legislature prioritize expert testimony from six-figure fire safety consultants? The contractors who installed faulty wiring systems in new homes? The arsonists who set fire to abandoned buildings?

Or would we expect lawmakers to speak directly with firefighters? It would seem absurd to take any other course of action.

Substitute "educator" for "firefighter." Does it seem so absurd now?

Texas Educators Lack Voice in Education Policy

In Texas AFT's most recent membership survey, 68.9% of K-12 educators – teachers, librarians, bus drivers, custodians, nurses, and more – reported that they have considered leaving the profession¹.

That number has stayed consistent in the three years since we first asked the question, hovering around two-thirds of those surveyed. That consistency begs the question: why aren't our elected officials acting on this emergency?

The answer is simple: they don't have to.

In *Texas Needs Teachers! Voices from the Field*, a 2022 report from Texas AFT and Batelle for Kids, teachers said they were concerned about the lack of teacher input into state education policies, including testing, school funding, licensure renewal, and evaluation². While the elected Legislature and State Board of Education may establish the guardrails for Texas' public education system, day-to-day rulemaking is often taking place in appointed bodies (State Board for Educator Certification) or set by Texas' appointed education commissioner, an office currently occupied by someone without teaching experience.

We've seen the results in our current educator retention crisis.

It's time we listen to educators, the experts on turnover, workforce challenges, and the state of our children's public schools. That means giving them the right to collectively bargain their contracts.

As Every Texan's Amanda Posson points out, Texas law restricts public sector employees from collective bargaining over wages, hours, or conditions of employment – with two notable exceptions³. State statute carves out an explicit exception for firefighters and police officers⁴:

"The policy of this state is that firefighters and police officers, like employees in the private sector, should have the right to organize for collective bargaining, as collective bargaining is a fair and practical method for determining compensation and other conditions of employment. Denying firefighters and police officers the right to organize and bargain collectively would lead to strife and unrest, consequently injuring the health, safety, and welfare of the public."

Just four short years ago, at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas teachers and school employees were lauded as "frontline heroes." Yolanda Fisher, an Alliance/AFT member and cafeteria manager in Dallas ISD, made the cover of *Time* magazine for her staff's efforts to feed hungry children⁵.

Why then, if their work is contributing to the health, safety, and welfare of the public, are these employees not guaranteed the same right to bargain collectively for better working conditions?

Why Texas Educators Need Collective Bargaining Rights

The Texas law is rooted in the South's confederate legacy, slavery, and Jim Crow-era segregation laws⁶. As the mayor of Richmond, Virginia, explained in a 2020 opinion piece in *The Washington Post*: "Workers in the South were barred from bargaining collectively for the same reason that enslaved people were barred from learning how to read. Because people in power know there is power in numbers."⁷

This legal ban is an affront to our shared values, and it is holding our state back from boasting a thriving public school system.

Research shows that teachers unions add value to public education and improve student performance⁸. Educators' working conditions are students' learning conditions. The ability for educators to negotiate and obtain better pay, benefits, and working conditions improves the classroom experience across the board.

According to the Economic Policy Institute, states that have restricted collective bargaining experienced a decline in teacher compensation⁹. Predictably, lower teacher compensation leads to higher teacher turnover and overall instability in schools.

Texas AFT members consistently cite two things that would keep them in their jobs: higher salaries and manageable workloads. In our latest survey, 72.2% of members said those two things would keep Texas students from experiencing a revolving door of substitute teachers, canceled bus routes, and shrinking programs¹⁰.

FULLY STAFFED SCHOOLS REQUIRE MORE THAN TEACHERS



Ms. Nataliya Derou, M.A. - School Counselor, Alliance/AFT

"This is my second year as a school counselor, but I've been in education for almost 20 years. A school counselor is the one that ensures a student graduates and that the child is happy and mentally healthy. I work at an early college high school, so my students are on the path to receiving an associate's degree. I feel responsible for guiding them through that journey. The majority of my work is done behind the scenes, but when I'm on campus, I can't focus because I have an open-door policy to be accessible to all students. 80% of my work I do during the weekends at home.

It's never unpleasant, but it's too much for one person. I kept telling my principal that we need another counselor. To be more effective, I need more time. If my school didn't finally get a second counselor next year, I would've gone to work somewhere else. This new counselor wasn't allocated by the district. My campus chose to pay for the position out of the school's budget."

According to an analysis by the Houston Chronicle in 2022, "the vast majority (98%) of students attended districts that did not meet the Texas Education Agency's recommendation of one counselor per 250 students. According to TEA data, Texas employs 14,271 school counselors. To meet the recommended ratio of one counselor per 250 students, the state would need to employ 7,854 more school counselors.



Ms. Mary Serff, L.S.S.P. - School Psychologist, Education Austin

"There are a lot of people who understand the developmental needs of children, but what's different about school psychology is more specific to special education services. Without school psychologists, it'd be harder to comprehensively evaluate their needs in terms of special education. We had a significant shortage of school psychologists over the last couple years, but this year we are finally fully allocated. But that doesn't mean we have enough to offer comprehensive services. Things like assisting with development intervention and supporting behavioral consultations. Working with the kids is my favorite part of my day."

According to an analysis by the Houston Chronicle in 2022, "the National Association of School Psychologists recommends one psychologist per 500 students. Just 25 districts met that standard." According to TEA data, Texas employs 2,158 school psychologists. To meet the recommended ratio of one school psychologist per 500 students, the state would need to employ 8,904 more school counselors.



Ms. Brittany Reyes, L.M.S.W. - School Social Worker, San Antonio Alliance

"School social workers help connect students and families with resources like food, shelter, and medical care. We are able to take a holistic approach and look at issues from a systems level. In San Antonio ISD, we only have about 40 social workers across more than 90 campuses. Some of my students have siblings at other campuses across the district. I often have to tell parents that their other child doesn't have a social worker on their campus. I try my best to fill in that gap, but there is only so much I can do across campuses."

According to an analysis by the Houston Chronicle in 2022, "Only four districts met the 250 students per social worker standard recommended by the National Association of Social Workers." According to TEA data, Texas employs 1,126 school social workers. To meet the recommended ratio of one school social worker per 250 students, the state would need to employ 20,999 more school social workers.



Mr. George Cuba - Paraprofessional, Texas AFT Associate Membership Program

"Teachers are the bedrock, but you also can't have a school without paras. We fill and plug in all the cracks, gaps, and spaces that teachers can't or shouldn't fill. While teachers are the first line of defense when working with students and parents, we are on the front lines too. I'm attempting to earn my teaching certification, but I make \$1,500 a month after taxes. I couldn't even afford to pay the \$299 enrollment fee until four months after being accepted into the program."

Paraprofessionals play essential roles in the classroom providing support to teachers, filling in when certified educators are absent, and addressing student needs, especially for special education populations. Yet base pay for paraprofessionals is disturbingly low: just \$24,966 on average².



Ms. Rosemary Curts - Math Teacher, Dallas Alliance/AFT

"(Fully staffing schools with teachers) frees up TA's and administrative assistants, which allows them to do what they were hired to do. Everybody at the school has a job that they are supposed to be doing all day, so when there are vacancies and you put in paras or admin assistants, they aren't there to do the job that they are supposed to do.

I remember my first year of teaching, my freshman class told me they that they didn't have a teacher at their middle school for almost the entire year before due to an unfilled vacancy. That made my job much harder because they did not have a teacher the year before to provide them with a foundation in eighth-grade math."

In statute³, the state mandates all classrooms in pre-K through Grade 4 be capped at 22 students and that teachers in Grades 5-12 must average at or under 20 students per class across the district. The reality looks much different. Not only can a district exempt itself from class size limits through a District of Innovation plan or file an individual class size waiver with the Texas Education Agency (which approved 100% of class size waivers this school year⁴), but students are also often left teacher-less midway through the school year due to unplanned vacancies. School districts are not provided the appropriate resources from the state to be able to fill these vacancies in a timely manner.

FINAL BELL: A TALE OF TWO APPROACHES

“Democracy in education, and education for democracy.”

That was AFT’s motto when it was first founded in 1916. And it is our union’s fight today. As the State of Texas moves to take over democratically elected school districts, as charter schools - operated by unelected boards that are unaccountable to voters - proliferate, and as the Legislature considers a proposal that would give public education dollars to unaccountable private schools in the form of a voucher, this motto is alarmingly relevant in Texas today.

Our union fights to expand democracy in the workplace through union representation and to educate students on the principles of democracy in the classroom. We do this not because it is easy, or even popular, but because we are committed to defending our public institutions, where the community has a voice and a vote, and to strengthening our public services, which are available to all.

In Houston ISD, we’re already seeing current state leaders’ vision for public education, one in direct defiance of our stated principles and the best interests of a community.

The State’s Vision for Public Schools

By every objective metric between the Texas Education Agency’s original attempt to take over Houston ISD in 2019 and when the district finally was taken over in 2023, HISD schools were on a path to improvement. For the 2021-2022 school year, the most recent for which A-F ratings have been published, the district received a B rating. Of the 50 schools that had previously received a D or F rating, 40 earned at least a C rating. The grade for Wheatley High School, the school whose F rating triggered the HISD takeover in the first place, improved to a C rating, just two points from a B rating.

Yet Commissioner Mike Morath opted to take over the school district, the most aggressive option available to him, ousting the democratically elected board of trustees and installing his hand-picked, unelected board of managers. Many HISD trustees had been elected during the intervening time between the first takeover attempt and the final takeover. Instead of allowing those freshly elected leaders to continue the district’s upward trajectory, the state government in Austin wrested control of local schools in Houston from the district’s students, parents, educators, and voters.



AFT President Randi Weingarten, AFT Executive Vice President Evelyn DeJesus, and HFT President Jackie Anderson march with educators, parents, and community members in protest of the state takeover of Houston ISD.

This action wasn’t a fluke. The takeover of Houston ISD is the continuation of the standard playbook in Texas: starve, shame, and shutter.

Wheatley High School wasn’t always a struggling school. In fact, before 2011, Wheatley had consistently been rated “academically acceptable.” 2011 was the year that YES Prep, a charter chain with 23 schools across the Houston area and five more schools currently in development, opened its Fifth Ward campus, less than a mile away from Wheatley.

Charter schools like YES Prep can choose which students they serve, with charter schools typically opting to serve populations that require fewer resources to educate. Wheatley can’t choose its student body; it accepts all students. The populations that YES Prep of the Fifth Ward serves is clear: During the 2021-2022 school year, Wheatley served 10 times as many Black students and more than twice as many students with disabilities as YES Prep.

This situation that sparked the state takeover in the first place is illustrative of TEA’s broader strategy. As students and educators struggle under state-installed Superintendent Mike Miles, and as schools struggle under the heel of the state, students are being pushed toward private options. It’s difficult to avoid the conclusion that this is what Morath, a longtime proponent of privatizing education, wanted all along.

Texas Schools Funded to Thrive

What we have seen in Houston is the silencing of a community's voice. We see that same silencing in denying educators their right to collectively bargain, in book-banning attempts, and in attacks on diversity, equity, and inclusion programs.

If we continue this current path, Texas public schools will be lucky to survive at all.

We are at a crisis point. With the November 2024 election and the 89th Legislature in 2025, Texans have a choice to make: do we invest in a public education system that thrives, or do we force our public school educators and students down an uncertain journey for survival?

We know what Texans say they want. In a 2023 poll from the Charles Butt Foundation, 89% of public school parents said they were satisfied with their child's education, with an equal number signaling their support for increased state funding and boosts to educator salaries¹. Likewise, 90% of Texans surveyed by the Texas Hispanic Policy Foundation this year said they were in favor of increasing teacher pay specifically².

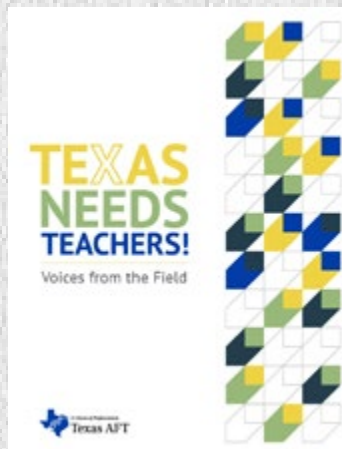
Compare that to declared support for Gov. Greg Abbott's private school voucher proposal (just 36%) in the same survey³, and you begin to see which vision for the future is more popular in Texas. The only remaining question is whether Texans at large are willing to stand and fight for it.

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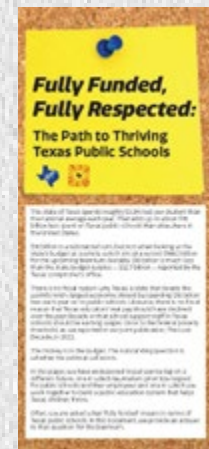
The Lost Decade

In "The Lost Decade," a report published in April 2022, Texas AFT and Every Texan revealed startling trends in Texas' funding of public schools, as well as the effects that underfunding has had on teacher and staff salaries. If our state and local leaders fail to address issues like back-sliding pay, we will continue to lose hard-working, experienced educators. The groups reissued this report with updated data in May 2024.



Texas Needs Teachers!

In a call to action, the Texas AFT reached out to Battelle for Kids (BFK), a national not-for-profit serving K-12 education systems for over 20 years, to facilitate conversations with a broad geographic distribution of teachers to not only uncover contributing factors, but to surface solutions and give voice to those closest to the work. This paper presents the findings from a series of focus groups.



Fully Funded, Fully Respected

The state of Texas spends roughly \$3,314 less per student than the national average each year. That is about \$18 billion less spent on Texas public schools than elsewhere in the United States. In this report, Texas AFT and Every Texan put a price tag on a different future, one in which we work together to build a public education system that helps Texas children thrive.

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