

# EDUCATOR'S Bill of Rights

## 1 RIGHT TO REASONABLE WORKING CONDITIONS

Our Texas Needs Teachers report found that working conditions were even more important than compensation in retaining educators by an almost 2-to-1 ratio. When the state underfunds local school districts, teachers and all staff are saddled with more and more duties, exacerbating high turnover rates and hiring costs. Ultimately, it's our students' academic and emotional well-being that suffers.

## 2 RIGHT TO FAIR WAGES

Texas teachers earn over \$9,000 less than the national average and receive \$5,000 less in per-student funding; on average, their inflation-adjusted salaries are 6% lower than they were in 2015, contributing to an educator shortage statewide. In 2022, 70% of Texas AFT members surveyed said they were thinking of quitting, and many support staff are living on poverty-level wages. The same is true of higher education, particularly for adjunct professors.

## 3 RIGHT TO A SECURE RETIREMENT

Our educator workforce deserves to retire in dignity and security, and we can't do that on the \$2,199 per month the average teacher receives from the Teacher Retirement System of Texas. Texas voters turned out in force in 2023 to support Prop A, the first statewide TRS cost-of-living increase in nearly two decades. But that was a one-time Band-Aid. Texas needs to join almost every other state in making sure its retired educators get annual, automatic pension increases that are tied to inflation.

## 4 RIGHT TO QUALITY CHILDCARE

In our 2024 Texas AFT member survey, 45% of educators who needed regular childcare said they had trouble accessing or affording it. Additionally, more than half of Texas counties are considered childcare deserts. This isn't just a childcare problem — it's an educator retention problem. If our teachers and school staff can't find or afford quality childcare for their own kids, how can they stay in the classroom taking care of our students?

## 5 RIGHT TO HEALTHY, SAFE, AND SECURE WORKING ENVIRONMENT

Safety is a prerequisite for learning. Right now, Texas is failing our students and educators on multiple fronts in providing them with a safe learning and working environment. In Texas AFT's 2024 member survey, gun violence prevention was ranked as the No. 1 priority out of 11 community and social justice issues. But this back-to-school season, we've also seen the other hazards in our schools, with campuses across the state struggling to keep buildings sufficiently cooled in blistering summer heat and districts scraping by with crumbling facilities that have lead in the drinking water and asbestos in the walls.

## 6 RIGHT TO ACADEMIC FREEDOM

Any assault on public education is an assault on our freedom as Texans and on our professional duties in educating the next generation of citizens. Ending classroom censorship by repealing book bans and limitations on classroom instructional materials is vital to fostering critical thinking skills in our students and to retaining caring, dedicated teachers to nurture those skills. The same is true in higher education, where protecting tenure and shared governance ensures Texas colleges and universities can recruit and retain the best and brightest academic minds to open the world to our students.

## 7 RIGHT TO MEANINGFUL TRAINING AND DEVELOPMENT

The Texas Legislature has a disturbing addiction to placing unfunded mandates on our school districts. Most of those then fall on the backs of our educators, through shoddily conceived, burdensome, and unpaid trainings like House Bill 3's despised reading academies. Educators are professionals; it's time this state treated them like it by reducing the annual requirements for continuing education and encouraging educators to select professional development opportunities that actually pertain to them and will help them improve their students' success. That professional growth also shouldn't be restricted to classroom teachers; we have dedicated and knowledgeable support staff and paraprofessionals who would be great teachers if given the time, space, and funding to pursue their credentials. That's what solutions to the educator retention crisis really look like.

## 8 RIGHT TO ORGANIZE

Empowered educators produce engaged students. History consistently shows how unions can raise the bar for all of us. And that includes our children's teachers and school staff. The working conditions for educators are children's learning conditions. If educators have a voice in their workplace, free from fear of retaliation, they can negotiate and win better working and learning environments — the same right their fellow public employees, firefighters and police officers, already have codified in Texas state law. It's time for Texas educators to have the right to collectively bargain so we can finally achieve a public education system that works for every Texan.

## 9 RIGHT TO DEMOCRATIC REPRESENTATION

The past several years have shown just how brittle the bones of democracy are in Texas, from our gerrymandered legislative districts to elected leaders' continued witch hunts for mythical voter fraud to the state's forcible takeover of its largest (B-rated) school district. Our Texas Needs Teachers report highlighted a deep concern among Texas educators about the lack of teacher input into state-level policies such as testing, school funding, licensure (renewal), and evaluation. The only way Texas educators feel they can shape policy right now is by voting with their feet and walking right out of their profession.

## 10 RIGHT TO FREEDOM OF RELIGION IN SCHOOLS

Our public schools ought to be safe spaces for every Texas child, regardless of their race, socioeconomic background, gender identity, or religious upbringing. Increasingly, state leaders are blurring the lines between church and state, and that includes inside our public school classrooms. Whether it's through a voucher push that would funnel taxpayer dollars to religious private schools or new state-created curriculum that's chock full of biblical material, we are enduring an unprecedented, big-money assault on religious freedom in Texas. Our educators are being put in the unconscionable position of choosing whether to violate their students' constitutional rights or violate the state's mandates to force religious instruction upon them.

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