



Let Us Teach: ATPE Members Provide Input to Teacher Vacancy Task Force

To share the voices of Texas educators with the Teacher Vacancy Task Force, the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) surveyed its members to gather feedback from those in the field on why educators are leaving the profession. Since March 24, over 400 Texas teachers, counselors, administrators, student teachers, and other school personnel have responded to the survey, and we have chosen to keep the survey open to provide an opportunity for Texas educators to continue providing input. Here, we summarize the feedback supplied thus far and provide related policy recommendations.

Workload: Overwhelmingly, educators expressed that their plates were overloaded with an unrealistic number of expectations—**“so above what can humanly be done,”** as one member described it. These demands include reporting and paperwork; filling in for vacant staff; Reading Academies and other training; state-man-

dated tutoring under last year’s House Bill (HB) 4545; lesson planning to align with endless curriculum standards; complying with state testing and accountability requirements; and implementing new technology, initiatives, or curriculum “fads”—all of which are causing educators to feel stressed, burned out, and micromanaged. A recent national [survey](#) indicates that teachers work 54 hours per week and that less than half of this time is actually spent teaching students. Unnecessary “extras” inhibit educators from tackling the extreme challenge of addressing the social, emotional, behavioral, and academic needs of students in the aftermath of COVID-19 learning disruption. When it is impossible to succeed amid these unreasonable expectations, educators feel they take all the blame, worsening their stress and frustration.

The expectations on educators are compounded by staff shortages, which have increased class sizes, and a lack of substi-

tutes and specialized staff such as counselors, nurses, social workers, and special education teachers. In explaining what it is like for educators to take on these specialized roles when they are not trained to do so, one respondent said, **“I am the village.”** Educators’ sacrifice of energy and personal time has taken a toll on their health and their ability to be parents, spouses, and caretakers, which is causing many to choose early retirement or resignation. One respondent said, **“I can be broken.”**

Compensation: Although educators have their plates overflowing with work demands, they have not seen commensurate increases in compensation. Expectations to work excessively, beyond a typical workday, without any additional pay devalues educators’ time and leads to their feeling stressed, unappreciated, and that they are not treated as professionals. Many of ATPE’s survey respondents also commented they have second jobs. State leaders are often quick to point to the Teacher Incentive Allotment (TIA), a merit pay program created under 2019’s House Bill 3 to provide bonus funding for high-performing teachers, as evidence of Texas’ effort to boost teacher salaries.

However, educators report that the TIA hasn’t delivered on its promises **and is “value with strings attached,”** as it is too closely tied to student scores on standardized tests.

Beyond urging legislators and policymakers to pay educators for their time, respondents also stressed the importance of ensuring veteran educators are paid appropriately relative to newer teachers. The salary scale structure in many school districts creates a situation in which new teachers can earn almost as much as a veteran teacher, which causes experienced teachers to feel undervalued and question whether they should remain in the profession, especially when the job market offers higher-paying opportunities in other fields with fewer demands on their time.

Educators are also frustrated by the limitations of their insurance and retirement benefits, the cost of which can consume a large percentage of their paycheck and may be insufficient for their needs once they reach retirement age. Additionally, though this is a federal issue, many educators are frustrated that they face restrictions on their ability to collect Social Security benefits.

Students: Many educators note that students' time away from the structure of school routines, as well as loosened requirements during the pandemic, such as passing to the next grade without demonstrating mastery, have hindered students' behavior and academic habits. One teacher described themselves as a **“child wrangler”** while others shared harrowing stories of physical and verbal abuse in the classroom. Additionally, educators feel hamstrung in their ability to discipline students and perceive a lack of partnership with campus leadership and parents in applying consistent and effective consequences to students. Without adequate staffing and supports to help students through behavioral challenges, educators are losing valuable class time to frequent and often severe disruptions.

The lack of student accountability aggravated by the pandemic, combined with a temporary relaxation of state accountability requirements, has also caused students to become **“apathetic”** toward school, in the words of one respondent. Another educator said: “[COVID-19] taught them that they can pass regardless of whether they attended any classes virtually or attempted any work.” Furthermore, the sudden intro-

duction of virtual schooling and its lingering effects, such as continued increased usage of laptops, tablets, and phones, has detracted from traditional classroom teaching, distracted students, and negatively affected students' social skills.

Disconnection: Educators feel misunderstood by policymakers, who are often disconnected from the realities of the diverse classrooms across our state, which causes distrust of state leaders and frustration with mandates that seem out of touch with the needs of teachers and students. State-mandated Reading Academies are described as **“salt in the wound”** and insulting to educators' professionalism, and the required training has taken away hundreds of hours that could have been spent planning for instruction. Additionally, the state's focus on testing has become so embedded into the classroom environs that educators no longer feel joy in teaching as they and their students have been reduced to data points. The disconnected overemphasis on data, compliance, and micromanagement, coupled with a political rhetoric that degrades public schools, has caused educators to feel disrespected by society.

Policy Recommendations:

To alleviate these concerns, ATPE recommends the following:

1. Reduce educators' workload so that they can focus on teaching:
 - a. Support educators by funding *people*, rather than unnecessary technology, curriculum, or initiatives that could decrease educators' capacity to teach.
 - b. For every new or extra expectation placed on educators, such as state-mandated training or tutoring, remove another expectation or ensure that other school staff can help carry the increased workload.
 - c. To address staffing shortages that lead to increased burdens on existing educators, avoid creating new barriers to entering the profession, and find ways to support teachers as they begin teaching, such as by employing retired teachers to serve as paid mentors.
2. Pay educators as professionals for the work they do, and ensure adequate benefits:
 - a. Honor the work/life balance of educators through initiatives such as development of leave pools and compensation for or otherwise accounting for hours worked outside of the normal workday.
 - b. Raise the base pay for all educators to keep pace with other, less-stressful professions that require the same level of education and credentialing. Avoid means of raising pay that impact a very small percentage of educators and that attempt to pit educators against each other.
 - c. Ensure veteran educators are paid commensurate with their experience, especially relative to beginning educators who start on a new salary scale.
 - d. Provide yearly raises for educators that are at or above the rate of inflation and consider their cost of living.
 - e. Encourage Congress to eliminate provisions in federal law that prohibit Texas educators from receiving full Social Security benefits.
3. Support educators' ability to meet students' needs:
 - a. Ensure class sizes are small enough for teachers to give adequate attention to students, especially given the increased instructional and behavioral needs of students following the COVID-19 pandemic.



- b. Hire the necessary support staff and specialized staff, such as counselors, social workers, school psychologists, special education and bilingual teachers, and nurses. Students' basic social, emotional, and mental needs must be met before academic progress can be made.
 - c. As much as possible, reduce the emphasis on state testing, as this has deleterious effects on classroom teaching and student and teacher morale.
4. Promote a culture of respect for educators:
- a. Strive to better understand educators' working conditions by collecting and analyzing data on hours worked, pay, and reasons for leaving the profession.
 - b. Encourage partnership and a "village" mentality among teachers, administrators, and parents so that expectations and communication are clear, consistent, and respectful.
 - c. Empower district and campus leaders to support educators' growth rather than forcing mandates or compliance activities that detract from the instructional leadership position in which administrators would like to serve.
- ATPE appreciates the opportunity to provide member feedback to the Teacher Vacancy Task Force and understands the great challenges facing our state and nation as we recover from the losses of the COVID-19 pandemic. Our educators overwhelmingly express that they feel unable to teach because their plates are unrealistically overloaded, which, over time, has caused them to feel broken and unsuccessful in both their professional and personal lives. Although many educators stay in the profession for their students, the magic of learning has faded for both students and teachers. Returning joy to the profession by getting back to basics—letting teachers teach—will stop the exodus of existing educators and help inspire those who wish to work alongside them.

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