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Statewide teacher survey yields insight despite first-year obstacles

ATPE disappointed that more school districts did not encourage participation

AUSTIN, Texas — According to a recent poll, 81 percent of Texas teachers surveyed say they strongly agree that their school is a good place to work and learn. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) announced results of the first Teaching, Empowering, Leading and Learning (TELL) Texas Survey today. The survey was launched in April in response to a 2013 bill passed by the Texas Legislature requiring the state to survey teachers and other educators biennially about teaching and learning conditions in their schools.

Statewide, 83,103 teachers participated in the anonymous survey this spring. Questions covered topics such as teachers' access to technology, facilities and resources, how their time is spent in and out of the classroom and the types of training and support they receive. Most teachers who took the survey described their schools as good places to work and learn and expressed a desire to continue teaching in the same school.

The state's largest educator group, the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE), was one of several partner organizations that helped TEA communicate with educators about the online survey and encourage participation. To administer the survey, the TEA contracted with the New Teacher Center, a national non-profit entity that had already administered the same survey instrument successfully in many other states and in Austin ISD. All four of the state's major teacher organizations signed on to be TELL Texas partners, along with Educate Texas, a public-private education foundation. Associations representing the state's school boards and administrators declined invitations to partner with TEA in promoting the survey.

Teachers, principals and other professional school staff were invited to take the TELL Texas survey using anonymous access codes that were mailed to each principal. Principals were instructed to distribute the access codes to the educators in their schools; according to ATPE, some teachers reported that their principals did not supply them with the survey packets. Educators were also able to obtain anonymous access codes directly through the TELL Texas vendor, but the timing of the survey undoubtedly contributed to low response rates, as well. The inaugural survey took place during the same time frame that STAAR tests are administered to students.

“The timing was not ideal, but we also know there were some districts in which administrators did not follow state’s instructions to make the survey available to all their teachers,” ATPE Executive Director Gary Godsey said. “Some even discouraged their staff from participating in TELL Texas. We hope that the responses provided by the thousands of teachers who did participate this first year will alleviate any concerns that the survey would be used as a way to disgrace individual principals or superintendents. If all school districts and administrators will support and promote the survey next time, we will be able to obtain more beneficial data.”

Most of the state’s largest school districts had response rates that were too low to generate reports about the conditions within their districts. To preserve anonymity and validity of the survey, campuses and districts were required to meet a minimum response threshold for their local results to be reported. At least 50 percent of the staff and a minimum of five teachers had to respond to the survey in order to generate reports specific to that campus or district. All responses were included in the statewide report.

“The TELL Texas Survey can be an extremely valuable tool for school leaders to use in their planning,” Godsey said. “For instance, some of the most insightful feedback from teachers who responded to the survey relates to areas in which they want more professional development. That data could help districts better plan the use of staff development days to make them more productive.”

Statewide, many teachers reported a desire for more training in closing achievement gaps and differentiating instruction to meet varying needs of students, such as those with disabilities. But as Godsey noted, “Campuses and districts that did not encourage their teachers to take the survey won’t have access to the type of local data that the TELL Texas survey could have provided.”

The public can view statewide results of the teaching and learning conditions survey at TELLTexas.org. Campus- and district-level reports are available only for those schools in which at least 50 percent of the staff responded to the survey. A similar statewide survey for superintendents is currently underway.

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The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas educators since 1980. It is the leading educators’ association in Texas with more than 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, future, retired and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for 5 million public schoolchildren. ATPE is the ally and the voice of Texas public school educators.