



# TEXAS LEGISLATIVE STUDY GROUP

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## **LSG Policy Report: The Anatomy of the Teacher Shortage State Leaders Bring Culture War Politics to Our Children’s Classrooms**

August 12, 2022

### **LSG Colleagues and Supporters,**

During the early days of the COVID-19 pandemic, teachers were celebrated as heroes for going the extra mile for their students, as they taught time-consuming online classes, stayed in touch with students and their families to help them continue learning, and risked getting COVID to teach classes on campus.

Since teachers and school staff returned to classrooms last year, they have worked even longer hours to help students overcome the “COVID slide” while still grappling with COVID-19 cases and an increase in mental health concerns among students. Throw in school safety threats and unpaid mandates like the reading academy, and it is no wonder that [68% of Texas teachers](#) have considered leaving the profession as local districts scramble to hire thousands of teachers statewide before the first day of school.

Educators have also faced an organized political effort that threatens to drive a harmful wedge between parents, teachers, and local school leaders who know what it takes to educate our children. Sadly, the Governor and Lt. Governor have served as political cheerleaders for efforts to ban books and rewrite history instead of bringing Texans together to provide a quality education for all 5.4 million students who attend Texas schools.

As we move forward toward the November election and next legislative session, the LSG will develop policy papers on school finance and school privatization, two hot button topics we expect to tackle next year.

Thank you,

Rep. Armando L. Walle  
Chair, Texas Legislative Study Group

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## **LSG Policy Report: The Anatomy of the Teacher Shortage State Leaders Bring Culture War Politics to Our Children’s Classrooms**

The current teacher shortage is a serious nationwide issue, but in Texas shortages of qualified teachers have been common for decades, especially in special education and STEM classes. The pandemic created an environment that exacerbated the inequities in our public school system that resulted from a lack of proactive policies by state leadership. With schools scheduled to start this month, local school districts are offering financial incentives, holding job fairs, and taking innovative measures to address teacher and staff shortages.

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### How Bad is the Teacher Shortage?

During the 2011-12 school year, 10,000 teachers and another 20,000 school employees, including many teacher’s aides, lost their jobs after the legislature cut \$5.4 billion from public education in 2011, despite an enrollment increase of 83,000 students.

- Since 2011-12, the Texas teacher attrition rate has hovered around 10%.
- The attrition rate dipped to about 9% during the 2020-21 school year but it is going back up — [rising to almost 12% during the 2021-22 school year](#), when Texas employed 370,431 teachers.
- The numbers for 2022 are not yet available as districts are still working to fill vacancies, but 12% of 370,431 would leave our students without 44,000 teachers.

### Sample of Local Teacher Shortages Reported in late July and early August.

- Houston ISD, the largest school district in the state: [870 vacancies](#)
- Dallas ISD, the second largest school district: more than [1,000 vacant teaching positions](#)
- Cypress Fairbanks ISD, the third largest school district: [472 vacancies](#)
- Austin ISD: [550 teacher vacancies](#)
- Aldine ISD: [370 vacancies](#)
- Eighteen other districts in suburban Harris and surrounding counties: [3,400 vacancies](#)
- Both Beaumont and Port Arthur ISD’s: more than 200 vacancies and [other professional and support staff shortages](#).

Meanwhile, several small rural districts, where recruiting and retaining staff is difficult, have adopted plans to switch to a 4-day school week during the 2022-2023 school year, which would allow teachers to receive professional development and other resources on Fridays.

### What Led to the Teacher Shortage?

The teacher shortage is not a surprise. A spring 2021 poll of 919 public school teachers by the Charles Butt Foundation found that [68% of public school teachers had considered leaving](#) the profession, up from 58% the year before. A survey of 3,800 members of the Texas AFT, conducted in early 2022, found that [66% of their members had considered leaving the profession](#).

Recently, fewer teachers are being trained in traditional collegiate four-year degree programs, and more are being trained in short term alt-certification programs. Those who are trained through alt-certification [leave the profession at higher rates](#). It is unclear why they leave at higher rates, but some speculate it is because they do not receive the same support as those who go through 4 year programs. That said, the 2022 teacher shortage appears to be a broader response to several issues, many of which existed prior to the pandemic, including:

- An inadequate response to COVID-19 by the state that took months to get federal funds out to districts to upgrade HVAC ventilation, provide online learning and protect the health of students and teachers.
- Long hours and extra work coupled with inadequate pay, costly health insurance, and poor retirement benefits.
- Polarizing political attacks that are bringing divisive politics to our classrooms that could threaten teachers’ jobs and the quality of education for our children.
- Safety concerns related to school shootings.

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### **Teacher Vacancy Task Force**

This spring, Governor Abbott directed the TEA Commissioner to create a [Teacher Vacancy Task Force](#) to address the teacher shortage. The task force has met twice so far and is set to meet once every other month for a year with a final report in February 2023. The original task force had 28 members, including 26 superintendents and administrators and only two teachers. Teachers found this disturbing because one might think teachers would know best what happens in the classroom and why teachers are leaving the profession. After a lot of criticism and pressure, [TEA then added 24 more teachers to the task force](#), but teachers were prepared to make recommendations without needing another task force, suggesting better salaries and working conditions for starters.

### **Texas Teachers: Underpaid**

For decades, the Texas state budget has undervalued teachers and students, as evidenced by the fact that state funding has lagged well below the national average for per pupil funding and teacher salaries and benefits.

- In 2011 the state leadership cut \$5.4 billion from the state education budget, cuts that cost 10,000 teachers their jobs and eliminated 20,000 other educational jobs.
- Some of those cuts were restored in 2013, but nothing was done to restore state funding to its pre-2011 level until HB3 was passed in 2019.
- HB3 required school districts to spend a fixed percentage of the increased funds for employee salaries, actual teacher raises were determined by local districts and were not enough to change the state’s abysmal record on teacher pay.

The latest teacher salary [state rankings](#) compiled by the National Education Association (NEA) found that **Texas teacher salaries lag more than \$7,500 behind the national average**. Based on state financial data reported to NEA, the average compensation for Texas teachers in the 2021-2022 school year is \$58,887 and the average Texas salary for valuable experienced teachers lags \$1,300 behind the national average. According to a 2021 [University of Houston report commissioned by Raise Your Hand Texas](#), when adjusted for inflation, Texas teacher salaries actually fell from \$55,433 to \$54,192 a year. Furthermore, Texas retired teachers have among the worst benefits in the country, having not received a Cost of Living Adjustment (COLA) for all retirees since 2004. With [\\$30 billion in the bank](#), it’s time for Texas to join other states like Tennessee to improve salaries and benefits for current and retired teachers.

### **Teachers Working Two Jobs**

For at least a decade, surveys have found that many teachers work second jobs to provide health, housing, and other needs for their families. A [Texas State Teachers Association \(TSTA\) survey](#) conducted by Sam Houston State University shows that 41% of teachers “moonlight” during the school year and 55% take a second job in the summer. 79% of moonlighters believed their additional jobs hurt the quality of their teaching. The survey also found that 70% have considered leaving the profession.

### **Texas Teachers: Overworked**

Teachers have [worked longer hours](#) to meet the challenges posed by the pandemic. In fact, dedicated teachers have been driven to work longer hours than required by contract due to concerns about student engagement and learning during the pandemic. Longer hours were required to adapt to online technology, and teaching hybrid courses that were taught both online and on limited classroom days.

These findings are consistent with those that predate the pandemic, such as high stress and burnout in the profession. The study suggests that increased hours should be considered when



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school leaders are assessing needs for additional support and compensation and setting expectations for teachers.

### **School Support Staff Shortages Impact Students and Teachers**

The pandemic reminded us that providing a safe and secure teaching and learning environment requires [more than just teachers](#). Hamshire-Fannett ISD Superintendent Dwaine Augustine says “these school vacancies go beyond teachers. Most districts also have [professional and school support staff vacancies](#)”. When support staff are not available, teacher workloads become more difficult and students that need individual supports are often the first to suffer.

### **Reading Academies, An Unfunded Mandate**

On top of a teacher shortage and the extra demands brought on by the COVID-19 pandemic, those who teach grades K-3 are also required to complete a 60-to-120 hour course on reading, in order to keep their jobs next year. This provision was included in HB3 in response to the need for students to read at grade level.

Although teachers uniformly support efforts to improve reading comprehension, this new law requires them to work these additional hours on their own time without state compensation. Some local school districts that have available funds are providing stipends, but for most K-3 teachers, this online course amounts to an unfunded mandate. For some, this may be the straw that breaks the camel’s back and push them out of the profession.

### **Abbott, Patrick Bring Culture War to the Classroom: Teach the Truth or Teach a Lie?**

During both the 2021 regular and special sessions, the legislature passed legislation that effectively directs school districts and the State Board of Education (SBOE) to develop a restrictive social studies curriculum. The SBOE has already begun the process, which involves having expert panels develop suggested curricula standards. Additionally, Social and Emotional Learning (SEL) is under attack. In fact, [two extremist billionaire contributors](#) are pumping funds into this effort because they want to replace public education with a voucher system allowing the state funding of religious schools.

The Senate-approved version of the Texas Classroom Censorship bill includes specific essential curriculum items that students are required to understand, like the Declaration of Independence and the Federalist Papers, and the Senate tossed out several House amendments that required students to study the writings or stories of multiple women and people of color. The most potentially harmful aspects of the bill include a requirement that teachers must explore current events from multiple positions without giving “deference to any one perspective.” This provision has already led to an ISD instructing teachers to teach [both sides of the Holocaust](#). It also bars students from getting course credit for civic engagement efforts, including lobbying for legislation or other types of political activism.

When Governor Abbott signed the Texas Classroom Censorship bill, he announced that he will keep Critical Race Theory (CRT) out of Texas classrooms, which should be a very easy task because [CRT is a legal theory that is only taught at the college level and is not taught in Texas classrooms](#). Another easy task for the Governor should be writing his “parental bill of rights” because the legislature enacted a “Parental Bill of Rights” law in 1995.

For the Governor and Lt. Governor, this legislation, along with charges that pornography is available to students in school libraries, is nothing more than keeping their right-wing base happy as they storm local school board meetings.

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## **The Governor Held up School Safety Funds Meant for Local Schools**

In late April 2021, about a year into the COVID-19 pandemic, federal recovery funds were desperately needed for local school support, students, and educators who were working to address the impact of the pandemic on their schools and their families. With the Legislature in session, many believed legislators and statewide elected officials were looking for ways to divert those funds that were intended to help local school districts respond to COVID-19 quickly. Eleven billion dollars of the stimulus money was finally released three months late on April 28, 2021, after local school leaders and Texas Democrats, who worked to pass the funding bills in Congress, demanded the release of the funding.

## **Action Items**

- Enact legislation that gives Texas teachers and school staff a much needed raise.
- Enact legislation that gives retired teachers a COLA for the first time since 2004.
- Require that the legislature provide funding for mandates like the Reading Academies.
- Collaborate with local school leaders to improve working conditions in our schools.
- Monitor the [Texas Teacher Vacancy Task Force](#) and summaries of discussions after the meetings (these meetings are not subject to Texas Open Meetings Act and will not be livestreamed). The next meeting will take place in late August.

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