



A Union of Professionals

Texas AFT

The Crisis in Our Schools

What's needed to support
employees and students

The Crisis in Our Schools

What's needed to support employees and students

In January, amid surging COVID-19 cases caused by the Omicron variant, Texas AFT, a state labor federation representing 65,000 public school employees, surveyed members on their working conditions.

The results grimly confirmed the anecdotal reports we have heard from teachers and school staff stretched far too thin for far too long—many of whom are seriously contemplating leaving education altogether.

In the January survey, just 12% of respondents said they felt safe returning to school after winter break amid the rise in cases.

There is nothing earth-shattering in what school employees are requesting. To feel safe and supported at work, they ask for the essential, effective mitigation strategies we know work — something we know from two preceding school years disrupted by pandemic.

Because we recognize this is both a local and a state problem, we will discuss the various actions that must be taken to address this public health crisis and the very real staffing emergency our schools find themselves in.

Texas AFT, AFL-CIO

Zeph Capo
PRESIDENT

Ray McMurrey
SECRETARY-TREASURER

The Texas American Federation of Teachers represents more than 65,000 teachers, paraprofessionals, support personnel, and higher-education employees across the state.

Texas AFT is affiliated with the 1.7-million-member American Federation of Teachers and AFL-CIO.

912 South Highway 183
Suite 100-A
Austin, TX 78741

800/222-3827
www.texasaft.org

 TexasAFT

 @TexasAFT

 @TexasAFT

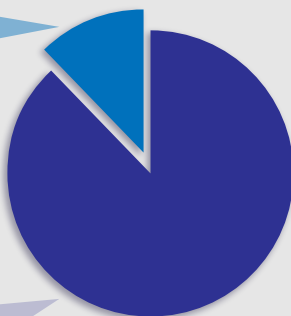
OMICRON VARIANT CONCERNS

From 2,498 respondents

Safety

12% said they felt safe returning to campuses

88% did not feel safe returning to campuses or had mixed feelings about safety



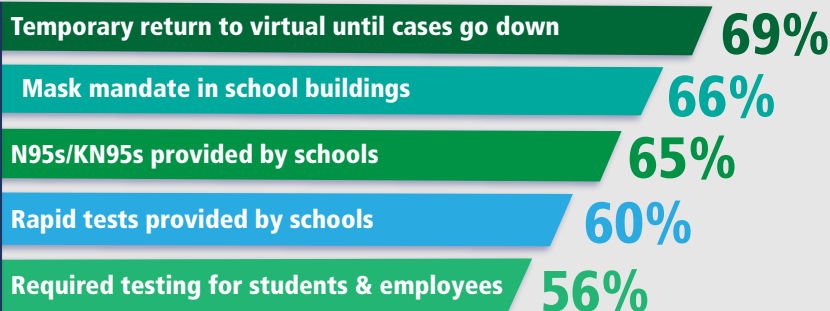
Communication

30% indicated they were aware of a plan to return to campus

68% said their school district had not communicated a plan, or weren't sure if the district had done so



When asked what would make respondents feel safe and supported at work, the top priorities were:



Omicron Variant & School Safety | Texas AFT Survey (January 2022)

“Everyone is working very hard and is physically and mentally exhausted. As teachers we are scared, not feeling safe or protected at school. Even though millions of dollars were sent, we don’t see that reflected in our classrooms. No air purifiers were given to each classroom as promised at the beginning of the school year. I honestly feel this is my last school year being a teacher.”

— Teacher

Immediate state action needed

Support for temporary periods of virtual instruction during significant outbreaks as determined by local health officials.

As we have said repeatedly during this pandemic, local officials and district leaders should be able to make public health decisions appropriate for their communities without fear that they will face funding cuts or other retribution from the state. Overwhelmingly, school employees told us in their survey responses that they did not want prolonged returns to virtual instructions, just temporary remote periods to manage spiking case levels that empty our school buildings anyway.

Support for local mask mandates.

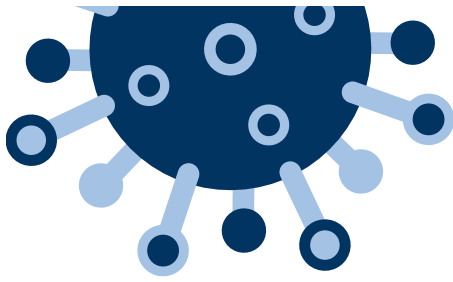
Much has changed in our understanding of COVID-19 since March 2020, but not this fact: widespread masking significantly reduces the spread of the virus. Our schools cannot keep students and employees safe while the governor and state leaders continue their political quest to ban mask requirements on campuses.

Cancel this year's STAAR assessments (2021-2022).

Educators are being asked to do the impossible: “catch up” students from last year while also continuing to navigate an ongoing pandemic. Our schools are in chaos, and instructional time is still being lost as educators and students test positive for COVID-19 in rolling waves. Why would we then dedicate more precious instructional time to preparing for a test that will tell us the obvious? Students are struggling. Their teachers know this well. But a standardized test cannot give us an accurate read of anything right now; all it can do is add stress to an already dire situation.

“I’m so, so tired and the stress in the workplace is out of control. The district and the state are piling on expectations as if everything is back to normal and NONE of this is normal. Teachers are hanging on by a thread.”

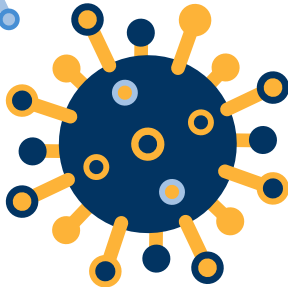
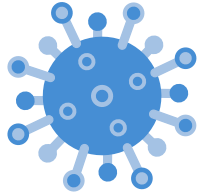
— Teacher



Immediate local action needed

Clearly communicated expectations and protocols.

68% of Omicron survey respondents said their school district either had not communicated a plan for handling outbreaks during this surge or were unsure if the district had done so. This is unacceptable.

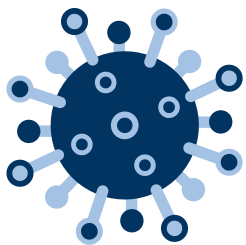
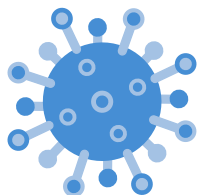


High-quality masks and rapid tests provided by schools and districts.

The CDC has acknowledged cloth masks are not sufficient to stop the spread of this variant. Employees and students should be provided with N95 or KN95 masks, which are difficult to find at many retailers. Likewise, at-home COVID-19 tests are in short supply in many locations but are critical to catching infections before they reach the school doors. They should be provided for employees who are required to work in person.

Federal dollars spent on mitigation supplies and protocols.

School employees advocated strongly for districts to receive federal COVID-19 relief funding last year. That money must be spent on strategies and equipment to keep employees and students safe as the pandemic continues.



“The support staff who would normally be able to help me in crisis (and we are in crisis mode) are not available to assist me because they are covering staff shortages in the classrooms.”

— Nurse

The long-term crisis of staff retention

The preceding items are actions that must be taken now to address the immediate public health crisis. But they are also critical first steps in addressing the education crisis with a longer shadow: the mass exodus of dedicated, qualified school employees.

In a Fall 2021 survey of Texas AFT members, 66% said they had considered leaving their jobs in the past year. That was November, before the latest COVID-19 surge and the resulting increases to everyone's workload.

Teachers and school staff are being asked to more than ever before, with little to no thanks and with little to no raise in compensation. A 3% raise or a \$250 one-time bonus, as some districts have provided, are starts, but they don't go far when you're doing the work of three full-time employees.

This is not an isolated problem within our membership. Every day, another headline appears along these lines:

Texas teachers are more likely to quit after their first year, study shows | *Houston Chronicle*

Bus driver shortage has North Texas students on long commutes, late for school | *CBS DFW*

Teachers in Fort Bend ISD are facing extreme pressures as staffing shortages continue | *Houston Public Media*

More North Texas districts cancel school due to staffing shortages, COVID-19 | *Dallas Morning News*

Central Texas school districts start new semester trying to fill employee gaps | *KWTX*

"I have 33% more students & only about 60% of the planning time I had pre-COVID. The workload was too much before the pandemic. This is just intolerable now."

— Teacher

When asked what would make school employees stay in public education, our members spoke clearly:

45%

Pay Incentives
(retention bonus, pay raise)

35%

Changes to Workload
(fewer responsibilities)

8%

Workplace Safety
Improvements

8%

Changes to Benefits

Parents and teachers agree

Right now, educators and school staff need the support and respect of leaders and communities. Instead, they feel state leaders have abandoned them, while Gov. Greg Abbott has chosen this moment to pit parents against teachers for political gain.

The governor's political attack on public schools is a deliberate attempt to create a wedge between the two most influential groups of adults in most children's lives: their caregivers and their teachers.

This is an invented battle. We know most parents unequivocally support their neighborhood schools and those who work in them. When you listen to both parents and school staff, you realize that they're in lockstep on what's needed for students—and that's a strong, fully supported public education system.

"I can't do my job because I am being pulled to cover a class, because we're short on subs and so many teachers are out with COVID-19."

— Bus driver

A recent national poll by the American Federation of Teachers shows this support:

72% of parents surveyed say that their children's public school provides them with an excellent or good quality education.

78% of parents surveyed think that the quality and performance of their children's teachers is excellent or good.

79% of parents surveyed are satisfied with their children's public schools when it comes to helping their children reach their full potential.

Source: https://www.aft.org/sites/default/files/hart-lake_natl-parent-survey_010722.pdf

Retaining & respecting educators and school staff

Safety is an important, immediate need to keep school employees on the job—but it is only one urgent step.

If we are to prevent a true, lasting staff retention crisis, elected leaders at every level must demonstrate the respect owed to teachers and school staff who have kept our school running in a time of crisis — and that requires *listening* to them as stakeholders and as experts.

Pay teachers and support staff what they're worth.

- 35% of Texas AFT members surveyed in November told us their No. 1 workplace issue was salary.
- All teachers, nurses, bus drivers, counselors, and school employees want to help students succeed. But they work in education for the income — along with the outcomes.
- We shouldn't have educators who can't afford to live in the districts in which they work.

- And no educator should be worried about making a living based on the performance of their students on high-stakes multiple choice tests. The state of Texas and TEA should be able to “make it rain” for all school employees — not just those whose students perform well on STAAR.

Set reasonable expectations and reduce their workload.

- 24% of Texas AFT members surveyed in November said their No. 1 workplace issue was their workload.
- This issue has only grown in importance with the Omicron surge, with every available staff member covering multiple classes, bus routes, or other duties.
- Just as many teachers slog through the extra 60 hours of work for state-mandated Reading Academies—much of it uncompensated night and weekend work—they have also been hit with the need to manage severe student academic and behavioral issues spurred by the pandemic, while their planning time is eaten up covering classes for sick or absent co-workers.
- Right now, the state could do one major thing to ease the burden and lighten the load for teachers in the classroom: cancel STAAR.

Provide safe working environments for all school employees.

- When only 12% of school employees say they feel safe at work, we have an unprecedented crisis.
- Every school district should provide school employees with high-quality masks and adequate rapid tests. TEA should hold districts accountable for providing those supplies and for having a well-documented plan for managing COVID-19 outbreaks.
- The state should use the federal relief funding it kept in its coffers to ensure every school employee has 10 days of paid COVID-19 leave.

Fully fund neighborhood public schools.

- 28% of Texas AFT member surveyed in November ranked public school funding as their top community issue.
- \$3.6 billion of state funding each year goes to a second school system. Privately run and scandal-ridden charter school chains weaken our public schools with false promises to parents and an extra burden to taxpayers.
- Put this money where it can be best used: public school districts that serve every single student, regardless of “behavioral” or “disciplinary” histories, and that are accountable to voters through elected school boards.

Create space for parent-teacher collaboration—not competition.

- Parents and teachers are allies, and students are best served when they work together.
- Parents can and should be involved in their children’s education, and there are ample opportunities for that to occur—without inflammatory remarks and invented culture war outrage.
- Fully funding our public education system should include more dollars and statewide support for a true community schools model with wraparound services to support students, families, and communities.

Give school staff a reason to stay.

- What other vocation asks so much of an employee to provide them so little financial return on investment?
- Not only do current teachers and staff struggle to make ends meet, but retired Texas educators are also clipping coupons and cutting back on expenses more every year.
- Most retired educators haven’t had a cost-of-living increase for their benefits checks in more than a decade. They can’t collect their full Social Security benefits—even if they paid into it before entering public education—or that of their spouses, even if widowed.
- Who would stay in this field long-term given that bleak future?



A Union of Professionals

Texas AFT

AFL-CIO

912 South Highway 183, Suite 100-A | Austin, TX 78741
800/222-3827 | www.texasaft.org

