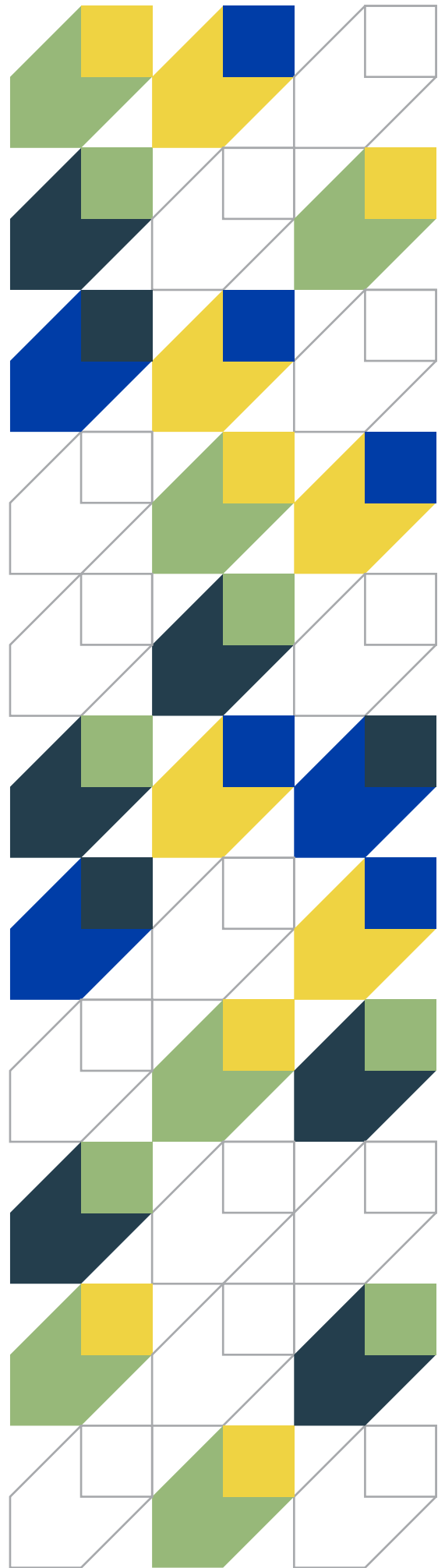


# TEXAS NEEDS TEACHERS!

Voices from the Field



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## Voices from the Field

For over a decade now, education leaders have been sounding the alarm of an impending and catastrophic teacher shortage. From local news stories reporting the number of teacher vacancies in neighborhood schools, to national whitepapers, surveys and summits that examine the causal factors leading to a shortage, the overall conclusion is clear – **Texas needs teachers.**

A recent publication from the Brookings Institute reports the devastating impact of the pandemic on student learning (Kuhfeld, 2022). Student mental health, behavior issues, and violence in schools also increased. As we emerge from a worldwide pandemic, talented teachers and stability for our classrooms are needed more than ever.

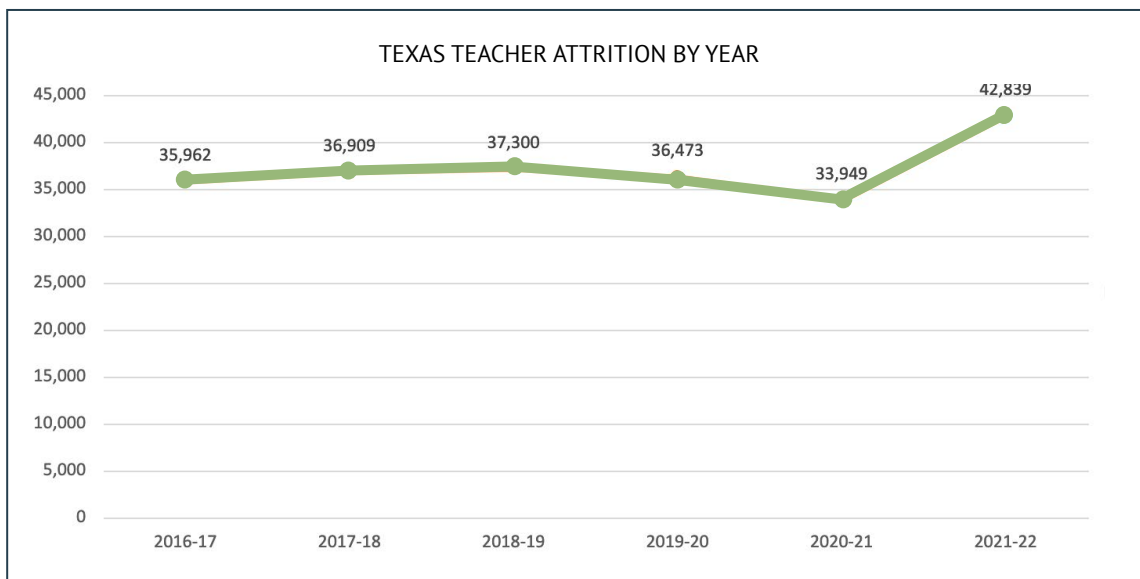
Schools are struggling to not only attract new hires to fill vacancies, but also to retain the experienced teacher talent they have. A fall 2021 survey of educators by Texas AFT reported that **66 percent** of Texas educators said they had considered leaving their jobs in the past year.



*“I don’t know how bad it’s going to have to get before we realize as a country that if we don’t invest in education...we will not have anyone in the classrooms to teach our children.”*

— Dr. Lynn M. Gangone, President and CEO of the American Association of Colleges for Teacher Education (AACTE), 2022

A 10-year lookback on Texas teacher attrition shows a near steady-state turnover with an average turnover of approximately **36,000** per year. In the 2021-22 school year, this curve takes a dramatic turn skyrocketing to nearly **43,000** (Landa, 2022). This attrition is particularly acute in large urban systems such as Houston ISD, which has over 950 vacancies for the 22-23 school year (Miles, 2022).



In a call to action, the Texas chapter of the American Federation of Teachers (Texas AFT) reached out to Battelle for Kids (BFK), a national not-for-profit serving K-12 education systems for over 20 years, to facilitate conversations with a broad geographic distribution of teachers to not only uncover contributing factors, but to surface solutions and give voice to those closest to the work.

This paper presents the findings from a series of focus groups conducted in Dallas, El Paso, Houston, San Antonio, and the Rio Grande Valley. These focus groups, along with two additional virtual options, were attended by over **100 Texas teachers**.

This report synthesizes the perspectives of the dedicated teachers who contributed to advance this important discussion. In addition, a meta-analysis of the data provides an interesting intersection of these findings with other research from the workforce at large.



*“Educator vacancies and other staff shortages represent a real challenge as our schools work to recover from the pandemic, falling hardest on students of color, students in rural communities, students from low-income backgrounds, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners.*

*Are we supporting them? Are we giving them a competitive salary? That’s the question that we need to ask ourselves today, and it shouldn’t take schools to be closed and the crisis that we’re seeing where we don’t have enough teachers to understand and appreciate what teachers contribute.”*

*—Secretary of Education Miguel Cardona, 2022*



# Methodology

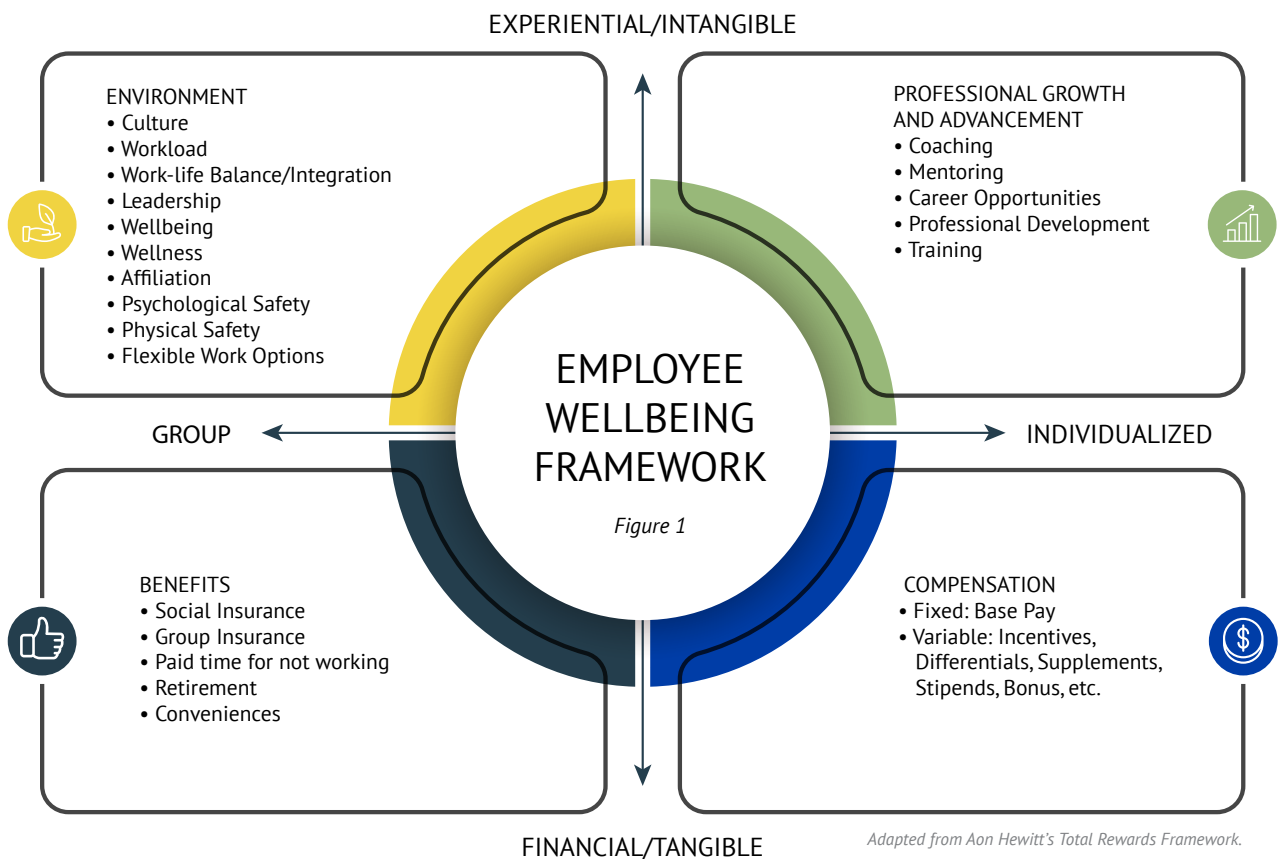
In collaboration with Texas AFT leadership, BFK designed the focus group activities utilizing the science of facilitation, widely accepted frameworks, and design-thinking principles to focus the conversation and produce results. In design-thinking, there are five generally accepted principles:

- 1 **Empathize** – research the problem, meet the participants where they are, honor their voice, and create equitable voice.
- 2 **Define** – clarify the need or problems to be addressed.
- 3 **Ideate** – create ideas and identify solutions.
- 4 **Prototype** – start to create solutions and impute the likely outcomes.
- 5 **Test** – try out the solution.

The scope of this engagement covers stages 1-3 to inform policy- and decision-makers on potential potential solutions for prototyping and testing (stages 4-5).

To accomplish these steps, stages 1-3 were conducted through facilitated conversation and captured through MeetingPulse®. This process allows all ideas to be captured in equal weight without dominant voices. Subsequently, users could weight the responses (vote) to surface the most significant agreements on causal factors from their perspectives.

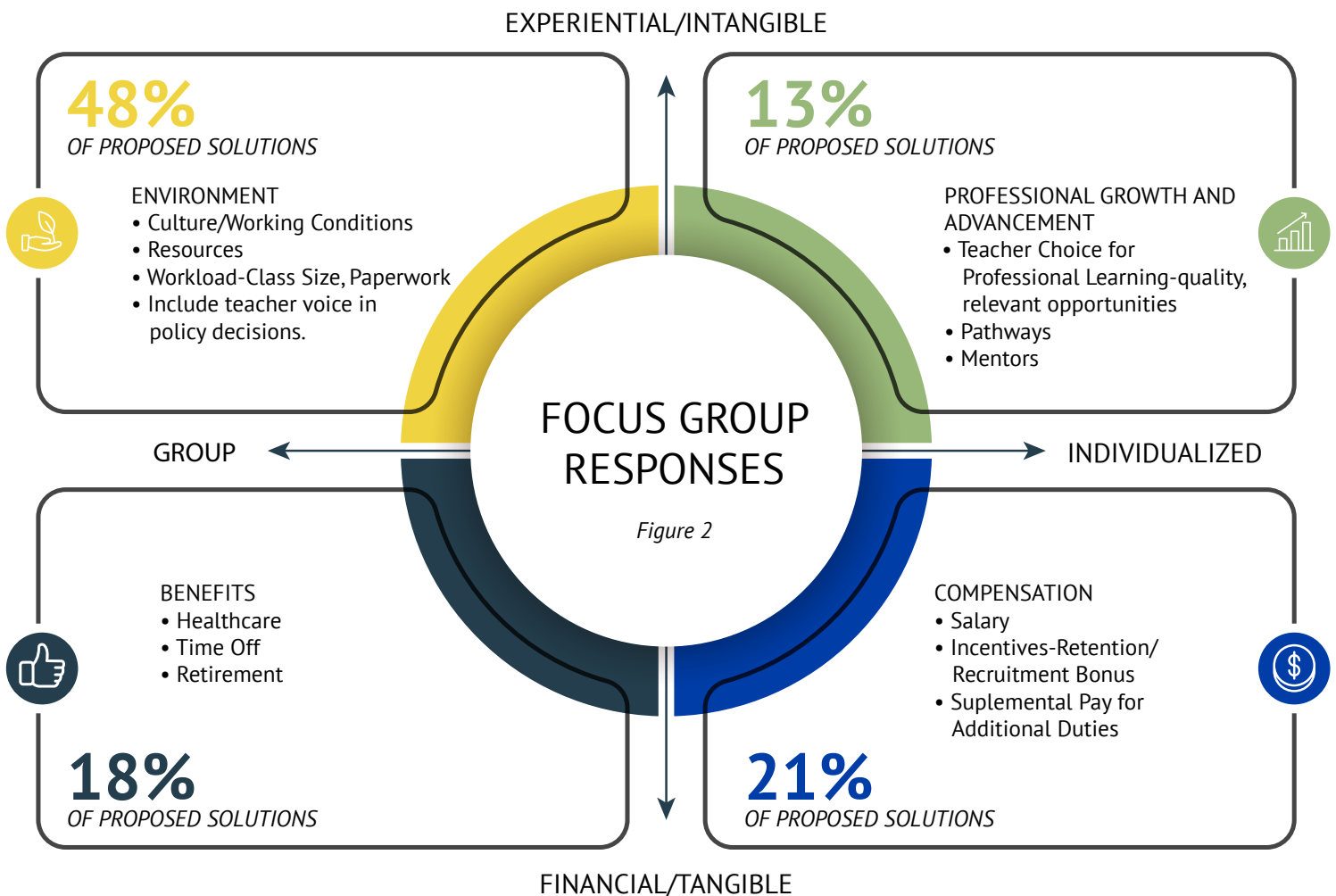
In this study, BFK utilized an Employee Wellbeing Framework adapted from the widely accepted, original Total Rewards Framework from Aon Hewitt which categorizes results into vertical distinctions between Tangible (Financial) and Intangible (Experiential), crossed by the horizontal distinctions of Group and Individualized. An example of this framework is shown below.



To further ideate on solutions, participants were empowered to imagine a scenario where they were Governor – a position of authority to enact the changes – and asked to define the actions they would take to produce positive outcomes impacting the workforce shortage. These results were captured, aggregated across all groups, and clustered in themes mapped to the framework above.

# Results

Using the Employee Wellbeing Framework to map the focus group responses (n=539), the results were affinity grouped by major theme and plotted into the respective quadrants in Figure 2.



The predominant theme of responses were related to the **Environment** quadrant with over 48 percent of the responses which are the Group-Intangible rewards. The second predominant theme was mapped to the Individualized-Tangible quadrant of Compensation with 21 percent of the responses. These were then trailed by **Benefits and Professional Growth and Advancement**.

In each of the following sections, the report includes the solutions offered by participating teachers that were solicited through the ideation design-thinking activity.



## ENVIRONMENT (CULTURE/WORKING CONDITIONS)

Teachers voiced the need for improvements in culture and working conditions. This perspective aligns strongly with what the U.S. is experiencing in the workforce at large where the “quit rate” has reached a 20-year high. A 2022 [MIT article](#) on the “Great Resignation” highlights factors in predicting employee attrition relative to compensation:

1. A toxic work culture was 10.2 times more predictive.
2. Job insecurity and reorganization was 3.5 times more predictive.
3. High levels of innovation was 3.2 times more predictive (i.e., initiative fatigue).
4. Failure to recognize employee performance was 2.9 times more predictive.
5. A poor response to COVID-19 was 1.8 times more predictive.

Teacher dissatisfaction with overall conditions is at an all-time high. A recent study by Hart Research for AFT shows **79 percent of teachers are dissatisfied (46 percent very dissatisfied)** while only **20 percent (1 in 5) report being satisfied**. Increased workloads have been further stressed by COVID-19, safety, and polarizing political environments amplifying charged issues of social justice, race, LGBTQ+, and more.

While these impact school culture, teachers in the focus groups revealed that strong building leadership is essential for helping them to overcome or better manage these challenges. In addition, they indicated the inclusion of teacher-voice in decision-making is essential. When teachers have a voice in school-based decisions, they are four times more likely to work hard to reach their goals, believe they can make a difference in the world, and feel excited about their future career in education. (QISA & TVAIC, 2015).



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

—Anonymous Teacher,  
[Texas AFT report \(2022\)](#)

A concern voiced by our participants is the lack of teacher input into state-level policies such as testing, school funding, licensure (renewal), and evaluation. A survey from the Center on Education Policy found that only 19 percent of respondents felt their voice impacted district-level policies while only 2 percent felt they had a voice in shaping state-level education policy (Rentner, et al., 2016).



### WHAT TEACHERS SAID

- Train building principals and department supervisors on strategies to increase employee engagement and foster a supportive culture.
- Allow educators in certain grade bands or subjects to educate remotely a portion of the time.
- Create environments of collaboration that transcend traditional models (e.g., substituting in lower grades or collaborating with colleagues in different content areas).
- Increase the ratio of staffing and instructional support (e.g., teacher assistants, special education classroom aids) to increase teachers’ ability to service every student’s unique learning needs.
- Decrease the amount of time required for non-learning tasks, such as paperwork.
- Include teacher voice in state and district policy making.



## COMPENSATION

Teachers in the focus groups discussed compensation as a key driver to address the workforce shortage issue in both attracting people to the field as well as retaining talent in the classroom.

Many studies have tried to correlate pay levels, pay satisfaction, and job satisfaction. Research indicates that outcomes such as pay will result in higher levels of job satisfaction (Hulin, 1991). Other research proposes that pay satisfaction is a function of what one receives relative to what one thinks they should receive (Heneman, 1985).

In an interview with CNBC (2019), Andrew Challenger, vice president at Challenger, Gray & Christmas, the oldest staffing firm in the U.S., revealed that workers often answer the question about work satisfaction by weighing whether the value they contribute to the workforce is reflected in the size of the paycheck they receive. He gave an example that if an individual has two master's degrees and is paid \$100,000, but they think they should be paid \$120,000, they are not particularly satisfied. Even the low end of that salary comparison eludes many teachers with similar education levels.

With teacher job satisfaction at an all-time low, pay satisfaction appears to be a strategy to counterbalance the effects of working conditions. However, salaries for Texas teachers lag behind their peers nationwide. Public school teachers in Texas make an average of \$7,449 less than the national average teacher salary. When teacher wages are indexed to the cost of living, Texas ranks 29th. Salaries of Texas public school teachers have fallen over the past 11 years. Since the 2009- 2010 school year, inflation-adjusted wages have declined by approximately 4 percent (Texas AFT & Every Texan, 2022).



### WHAT TEACHERS SAID

- Increase pay significantly. Offer supplements for additional duties and stipends for hard-to-staff assignments.
- Give bonuses to teachers who recruit or refer individuals to the profession or their schools.
- Create paid mentor programs for new professionals. Allow experienced educators to grow others within the profession and receive financial rewards.
- Increase teacher tax credits and deductions for educators and classroom teachers.
- Expand and make tuition reimbursement and loan forgiveness programs easier to unburden teachers from ongoing education expenses and student loan debt.



## BENEFITS

Benefits, the third ranked quadrant, are the not the prevailing concern but remain important to teachers. These are often connected with other aspects of employee wellbeing and cannot be viewed in isolation because of their connection to other quadrants. While there are many creative benefit approaches being used throughout the country, the main ones tend to aggregate around healthcare, retirement, and time off.

Quality, affordable healthcare coverage is an important value-add for teachers. Too often, raises have been coupled with increases in the employee share of benefit costs, particularly healthcare, resulting in a net loss in overall income. Loss aversion theory has shown that people feel losses twice as much as gains (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979). These moves contribute to the disequilibrium of pay satisfaction and job satisfaction. Therefore, it is not surprising that ideas such as covering all health insurance costs or extending state-provided health insurance for all teachers were ideas strongly endorsed by focus group participants.



While pay satisfaction deals with present income, retirement deals with “future-expected income.” In some ways, retirement is highly linked with pay satisfaction. Participants expressed that they want to have confidence their retirement system will fund their future income needs. Participants suggested that covering the employee share of retirement contribution was yet another way to increase current pay satisfaction. The relationship between current pay and future-expected pay is not clearly understood, but it has risen as an area for further investigation and consideration.

Time is a valuable commodity. In a 2022 study, Deloitte found that time (work-life balance) was a top priority for Gen Z and millennials – an important population for the teacher workforce. Participating teachers revealed that, during a school year, the intensity of the work can often be overwhelming. Thus, it was suggested that more frequent time off throughout the year was one way to improve job satisfaction and increase the likelihood of retention. Focus group participants proposed differentiating the amount of paid time off to incentivize longevity along with more flexibility in how time off can be used as either partial or full days.



### WHAT TEACHERS SAID

- Extend state health coverage to educators.
- Provide more education on supplemental retirement options for teachers.
- Consider the feasibility of allowing for retirement after 20 years of consecutive service.
- Look at time-off programs that allow for earning flextime that provides an opportunity for set scheduled days off.



## PROFESSIONAL GROWTH AND ADVANCEMENT

While culture/working conditions, compensation, and benefits were of greater import to participants, the opportunity to learn and grow as a professional was also emphasized. Teachers expressed that it was important to have access to high-quality professional learning to improve their practice and to support career advancement.

Teachers advocated for more strategic choice of professional learning opportunities that are relevant to their role. Teachers voiced that too often their limited time for professional learning includes repetitive, required training that was not relevant to their responsibilities as educators. Solutions such as increasing access to and funding for high-quality personalized learning were strongly supported by participants and were viewed as enhancing the value of the overall profession.

These results align with Nobel prize winner Gary Becker's models of investing in generalized versus job-specific trainings. While there are clearly needs for generalized professional learning, these tend to satisfy legal and regulatory needs and should be limited. Investing in job-specific training increases productivity and assists teachers in producing better outcomes for their students.



### WHAT TEACHERS SAID

- Provide autonomy and differentiation in professional learning options.
- Provide job-embedded learning and meaningful opportunities to collaborate with colleagues.
- Provide funding for professional learning experiences outside of the local environment. Teachers who participate in these experiences can share their learning with their peers.
- Provide innovative career pathways that do not follow the traditional path directly to administration.

# In Summary

The American imperative is to have a skilled workforce and citizenship to fuel the economy. Parents, the American public, and our employers expect much from teachers in our public education system, and our students need teachers to foster their learning and growth. The voices from these expert professionals are essential to understanding the solutions to the challenges facing the workforce shortage –attracting people to teaching and retaining experienced teachers in today’s classrooms.

The findings from the focus group participants include many discrete suggestions often stemming from the pain points of the existing system. The voices from the participant teachers indicate an imbalance in the system with culture and working conditions, and compensation a close second. Benefits and professional growth offered additional enhancements to balance the system. The Employee Wellbeing Framework, adapted from the time-proven Total Rewards Framework, helps us better understand the dynamic of tangible, intangible, individual, and group rewards. No one solution in isolation solves the challenge. The interplay of the components creates an Employee Wellbeing Framework making teaching a more attractive profession for workers in the U.S. as they consider their career choices.

Compensation matters, but working conditions appear to matter even more. We need to elevate the profession and create conditions that inspire people to want to contribute by preparing our young people to be lifelong learners and contributors.

Teacher voice needs to be incorporated into shaping the path forward. The next steps are to engage the broader stakeholder groups to prototype and test solutions. In order to solve this critical teacher shortage, we must create deeper understanding of what it is like to be a modern teacher and align solutions accordingly.

**What is abundantly clear – Texas needs teachers!**



*“One lesson of the pandemic is that, for all their inadequacies, schools do work, and for all their inequities, they provide a more equal setting than the worlds they draw children out of. Kids need to be in school—for their academic learning and for their health and safety. Parents need kids to be in school to do their jobs and keep their sanity. And communities need kids to be in school to sustain their solidarity.”*

*(Levinson & Markovits , 2022)*



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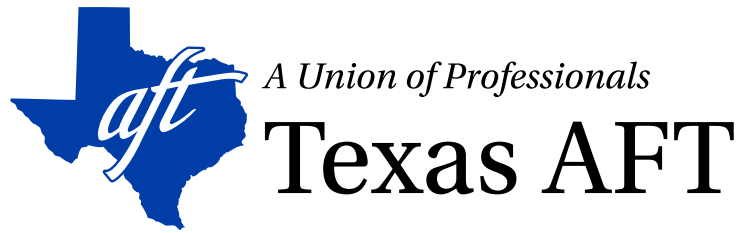
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Texas AFT represents all non-administrative certified and classified public school employees in the state of Texas.

We represent the interests of teachers, counselors, librarians, diagnosticians, custodians, cafeteria workers, bus drivers, nurses, teaching assistants, clerical employees, and the other employees who make our schools work.

We also represent employees in universities, colleges, and community and junior colleges.

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