



The 2022 Texas Teacher Forum:

Persistent Problems

and a Path Forward

Charles Butt
— FOUNDATION —

Public Opinion Research

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Key findings

This report amplifies Texas public school teachers' experiences, joys, and frustrations with the teaching profession. At campuses across the state, teachers report deep challenges, leavened by visions of improved practices — and, for many, the unique, intangible rewards of successful teacher-student relationships.

Twenty-six public school teachers participated in five days of moderated discussion in online forums conducted for the Charles Butt Foundation, including 14 who were certified traditionally, in undergraduate and graduate programs, and a separate group of 12 with alternative certifications. Their comments add color and depth to the results of the **2022 Texas Teacher Poll** — a separate, representative, random-sample survey of Texas teachers also produced for the Foundation.

Among key takeaways:

- Echoing results from the 2022 statewide survey, several participants were on the verge of leaving the profession. Those with low job satisfaction described high stress, heavy workloads, frustration with non-teaching duties, long hours, and poor pay and benefits.
- The presence or lack of administrative support emerges as a key variable in teacher retention. Comments make clear that proactive campus administrators can put in place effective teacher support systems that encourage retention. Where such support is lacking, frustrations run especially high.
- Related to these administrative supports is the presence or absence of a positive work environment, the product of both effective leadership and collegial cooperation among teachers.
- Better pay and benefits are central to teachers' concerns. However, one proposed approach — differential incentive pay — raises concerns about fomenting rivalries.
- Differences are evident in the experiences of those with traditional versus alternative certifications, with the latter feeling they lacked essential classroom time to be adequately prepared for their first year of teaching. Regardless, teachers across the board described broad challenges and varied levels of support in their first year, pointing to areas for more effective induction support.

- Mentoring is one such area: It was taken seriously and well-organized for some teachers when they joined the profession, haphazard and subpar for others, leading to substantial frustrations as they tried to learn the ropes. Providing well-designed mentoring programs is one of several examples of needed administrative supports. Others include opportunities for meaningful teacher involvement in policy and process formation, efforts to recognize and reduce administrative burdens and provide adequate resources, and effective student disciplinary programs.
- Beyond structural changes, teachers — with comments that are sometimes emotional — make clear their need for recognition of the pressures they experience and appreciation for their efforts. Though soft support cannot take the place of required structural changes, empathy is an essential element of success in a stressful work environment.

About the forum

The Texas Teacher Forum was produced for the Charles Butt Foundation by **Langer Research Associates**. Forums were held June 6-10, 2022, with participants responding to questions posed in discussion guides, commenting on one another's postings, and replying to follow-up questions. Beyond certification, retention, working conditions and support, conversations covered classroom autonomy, teacher influence, the pandemic, and the future of public education.

A digital download and additional resources are available at CharlesButtFdn.org/2022TXTeacherForum.

The 2022 Texas Teacher Forum was directed by Victoria Wang, senior research associate and Lauren Cook, senior strategist at the Charles Butt Foundation; with Jessica Enyioha, director of research. The report was designed by Joel Goudeau, art director; Lauren Knori, multimedia designer; and John Jacob Moreno, multimedia designer. The lead author of this report is Christine Filer, senior research analyst at Langer Research Associates; with Steven Sparks, research analyst; Allison De Jong, research analyst; Sofi Sinozich, senior research analyst; and Gary Langer, project director.

The Charles Butt Foundation thanks Brittany Walker who is featured on the cover of this report. Findings or quotes in the report are not attributable to Brittany Walker.

Teacher preparation and certification

Teachers were asked to share their experiences regarding teacher preparation, for both their certification programs and first-year induction support.

Program selection

Sharp differences are apparent in how teachers selected their certification program. Most with traditional certifications chose their program as part of their undergraduate degree; this includes some who went to college with the intention to pursue a career in teaching.

I always knew that I wanted to be a teacher; there was never another profession in my mind. When I attended my university I learned about the bilingual education certification, which is something that I had never heard of before.

— **Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification**

Only a handful of teachers with traditional certifications noted affordability, familiarity, or proximity as central to their certification program selection.

By contrast, affordability and familiarity, as well as the flexibility afforded by online programs, were common factors in program selection for those with alternative certifications.

We decided to relocate from Maryland to Texas. ... I searched the internet for an alternative certification program that fit our plan. Texas Teachers of Tomorrow offered the best option for me. I was able to start the program while processing our relocation to Texas. ... The online program made everything easy and convenient for my situation.

— **Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification**

First, I did not go to school to be a teacher, so I chose the alternative certification route. Second, I chose my program after speaking to an HR employee from a local district to see if they had a preference. Third, I couldn't afford to be out of work long enough to do an in-person program, so I opted to do an online program.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, alternative certification**

I became a teacher from necessity to survive, not because I really wanted to. I already had a bachelor's and a master's degree, and I needed a job, stat, so I knew I just had to become certified. I did use the Texas Teachers program, because 1) it was the first I found, 2) it said I could do the whole thing on my time, online, and 3) the price was right.

— *Dan, high school teacher, Houston area, alternative certification*

Certification experience

In terms of preparation for the classroom, satisfaction with one's program again diverges by certification type. Few with alternative certifications were satisfied; more common in this group were notions that their program left them unprepared to begin their first teaching job.

The alternate certification program was borderline useless. All I remember about it was it was a bunch of videos on teaching topics, and you needed to pass a test that was stupidly easy. You also needed observation hours, which were honestly the most instructional. I did a semester-long, long-term substitute job that taught me way more than the program. If it wasn't for the fact that I had strong mentors early on, I would probably not still be in the profession.

— *Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area, alternative certification*

Once I got my first "real" job during my probationary year, I quickly realized I was not prepared... It was a nightmare and I'm surprised I survived at all. While I was to blame for jumping into a profession I wasn't prepared for, the certification program certainly didn't help.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification*

Many with traditional certifications cited abundant in-classroom experience — both observational and practical — as one aspect of their program that provided valuable preparation. But satisfaction with traditional certifications was not universal: One teacher cited a need for more coursework with real-world applications; another went further, saying nothing besides teaching experience can truly prepare one for teaching.

I strongly believe that my certification program gave me the best foundation on which to build my craft. We had to do roughly 400 hours of observation and hands-on practice for our program.

— *Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification*

My experience was very valuable in terms of preparing me to become a teacher. Prior to actual student teaching (that lasted one semester), we had multiple classroom experiences, and two full semesters of what I would describe as part-time student teaching. On those days, we

were in the classroom two days a week and in teacher-prep classes three days a week.

— Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area, traditional certification

The program was both valuable and not so valuable in preparing me for real classroom teaching. It was valuable in the sense that it provided a really good general overview of concepts/ideas you need to know, but now, after teaching for 10 years, it seems like many of the classes I was required to take were not “real world.”

— Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, traditional certification

Improving the certification experience

Teachers were asked to share thoughts on how their certification experience could have been improved. Among those with alternative certifications, actual time in the classroom was most often mentioned as a crucial missing element.

The online modules were informative but nearly useless in a classroom environment. What I wish I had was an opportunity to shadow a teacher for a year in a position that I would eventually take over. Pie in the sky, I know, but I was so out of my depth that experience was the key missing from my program.

— David, high school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification

Student teaching should be part of any program. Reading about teaching is not even close to what actual teaching is like.

— Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, alternative certification

Beyond classroom experience, those with alternative certifications spoke about a need for more mentorship and guidance on lesson planning.

There needs to be a more guided and structured mentorship program and cooperation from active teachers beyond simple observations.

— Alice, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, alternative certification

I feel they could have dived in more on the day-to-day and lesson planning. I feel the lesson planning aspect is where I struggled the most just starting.

— Brianna, elementary school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification

Some cited lack of curricular preparation in their assigned subject area as a major hurdle in their first year — particularly among those with alternative certifications.

When I entered my first teaching position, I was not prepared at all. I had chosen college classes based on being a math teacher and my first job was in kindergarten. Having gone through my alternative PK-6 certification program, the only

classroom experience I had was from being a substitute teacher for a year, and I definitely had no idea about how to teach kindergarten.

— **Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas, alternative certification**

I was assigned AP [Advanced Placement] Physics 1 my first year with no formal physics training. I felt prepared to interact with students but did not feel prepared about the content. Most of the preparation I did prior to starting the year was studying on my own using AP exam review books.

— **Alice, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, alternative certification**

Among teachers with traditional certifications, a few were particularly satisfied with their experience and suggested that no improvements were needed.

I honestly can say that there isn't anything else that could have made my certification experience stronger... overall, the education program at UT [University of Texas] Arlington set me up for success.

— **Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification**

Very few of those with traditional certifications mentioned needing more classroom experience, although one teacher said she would have “enjoyed a

longer student teaching experience” (Sarah, middle school teacher, Central Texas).

Far more prevalent among those with traditional certifications were discussions of curricular adjustments. Some wished for a more specific focus, saying the broad nature of their educational program was a drawback. Others wished for additional coursework to better prepare them for classroom management.

I think something that would be more helpful for the certification experience is narrowing in on specialties. A certification in K-12 (mine is PK-4) is way too broad and does not allow teachers to be truly knowledgeable at the grade level they teach. A five-year-old is very different and has very different developmental needs than a 15-year-old.

— **Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas, traditional certification**

Many classes I had to take were focused on primary-grade learning, yet I was always going to teach in the secondary setting, so they provided no real benefit... There should be a two-track certification program so students can choose primary or secondary certification and classes that provide a really strong foundation.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, traditional certification**

I think there should be a more detailed class for dissecting TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills],

learning objectives and expectations, and classroom management! These are all kind of glossed over in college and they are at the core of any good teacher.

— *Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas, traditional certification*

Preparation to enter the classroom

When asked about their preparedness for their first jobs, teachers with traditional and alternative certifications alike spoke of complex and challenging experiences. Many highlighted ways in which they were well-prepared and others in which they were distinctly unprepared. On balance, many elaborated more on ways in which they were unprepared.

In one theme, several spoke of being unprepared for challenges related to classroom management and student behavior.

I was not ready for the confrontations and emotional episodes that I was faced with on a daily basis. Middle school students are A LOT. And even if they are straight 'A' students they still have so many other things going on in their lives.

— *Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, alternative certification*

I was not ready for the student population at that time that would

fight for any reason. ... I was not prepared to break up fights, but now it's second nature.

— *Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, traditional certification*

Some also noted being unprepared for the day-to-day tasks of running a classroom, ranging from remediation plans and safety preparedness to parents and workloads.

Something that they don't prepare you for in the certification program is the small details that go on into the day-to-day operation of school. Like, analyze data and create a remediation plan, how to prepare for safety situations, what you'll need for parent conferences. That is what I felt I wasn't prepared for.

— *Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification*

The one thing I felt underprepared for was handling parents, but I'm not sure how they would instruct on that at the university level.

— *Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area, traditional certification*

For others, lack of preparation to address students' individual learning needs stood out.

I knew there would be students with reading and writing deficiencies but not at the level my school was seeing. It was obvious these students were

being promoted and exited from the elementary schools no matter their reading levels.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, traditional certification**

I felt unprepared in SPED [special education] services my students were receiving. Specifically, in recommending students for testing, as I was still lacking experience in what was or was not considered “normal” for my students.

— **Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification**

Amid these hurdles, bright spots emerge. For some, experience and familiarity — often conferred through student teaching or working as a substitute teacher — were key factors in preparedness.

I felt very prepared. My focus was math and science, and I had student-taught those subjects, and the grade level I was placed in, prior to entering my first teaching district. I felt prepared for almost everything.

— **Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area, traditional certification**

Others spoke more generally about having access to the resources needed for their success.

My first year teaching, I taught 2nd grade. I felt that I was very prepared

as far as classroom management and course content. I had student-taught in 1st grade and that team met regularly with the 2nd grade team to vertical plan. There is no one-size-fits-all to teaching, but I felt I had all the tools at my disposal. I just needed to know what to use and when.

— **Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification**

Among other positive experiences, several felt prepared in a variety of ways, ranging from comfort with curricular content to supportive mentors who eased their transition, as discussed below.

First-year induction support

In another area — resources and support as first-year teachers — experiences converged among those with traditional and alternative certifications. Most teachers had mentors, with many citing official mentorships assigned by their school, district, or certification program. Others had informal mentorships develop organically, at times when an official mentorship was unfruitful.

I did receive additional support after I started teaching. I had a wonderful mentor and an instructional specialist who routinely checked in on me, modeled lessons for me, stayed after school with me to prepare materials, and always offered to sit in conferences with me if I needed them

to. I did not have to ask for this, it was part of my principal's plan for teacher success.

— Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area, traditional certification

During my first year teaching I had a ton of mentors — I think five. One from alternative certification, one from the district, one from the school, and two unofficial mentors. All my official mentors were pretty bad and didn't really help much. My unofficial mentors that I met my first year helped me a ton and continued to help me over the next few years until I moved districts.

— Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area, alternative certification

Other teachers also found mentorship shortcomings. A few shared experiences in which mentors added challenges rather than support in their entry into the profession.

The school assigned me a mentor who I think I only saw once or twice the whole year. It was a large building, and the mentor was in a different content area and on another floor. I had to make a point to seek her out and, when I did, she was either busy or unwilling to dialogue. Looking back on the experience, it almost feels like it was somehow personal. ... It was stressful and counterproductive. That first year was rough.

— David, high school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification

I was given a mentor during my first teaching job, but she used that relationship to make herself look better. She and I were the only ones on campus teaching a particular subject, so she used my lack of knowledge about the TEKS [Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills] and curriculum to make her scores look better. She only conducted one observation of me the entire year and I had to request it. Even then, the feedback was almost useless.

— Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas, alternative certification

More helpfully, several teachers experienced useful, additional professional development opportunities, with strong administration support.

Even before I began my first year of teaching, my district provided excellent training. My principal recommended several trainings throughout the year and personally saw to it that my training needs were met. After the first year, I was sent to several seminars on all core contents. I was free to take any training I wanted to help enhance and develop my teaching skills.

— Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas, alternative certification

My district provided a year-round New Teacher Academy where new teachers met once a month to discuss topics first-year teachers would need to become successful. This was a mandatory training we had to attend. They covered topics such as classroom management and our Student Success

Initiative. I remember as a first-year teacher, I was sent to many trainings. I didn't have to seek this out, my administration sought those out for me.

— *Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification*

A few teachers participated in school-established support groups with other first-year teachers. One sought out similar support groups on Facebook.

As a first-year teacher, I was part of a group of other first-year teachers in my school. I was assigned a mentor and given the space to vent and converse with my peers who were all starting out with me. We were led by an assistant principal who allowed us to let our hair down and complain if need be.

— *Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, alternative certification*

We were given time and days during the school year to meet with other first-year teachers to collaborate and share with. This was very helpful as a first-year teacher, as I was able to meet other teachers that were in the same situation I was in.

— *Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth, traditional certification*

Also, some teachers mentioned receiving early-career support in the form of premade lesson plans, slides, and worksheets, with one noting that she received these from her unofficial mentor.

Teacher satisfaction and retention

This section of the report details teachers' experiences regarding job satisfaction, retention, and retention strategies, including working conditions, administrative support, autonomy, input into decision-making, and pay and benefits.

Job satisfaction

All participants were currently employed as public school teachers in Texas during the time of this study. When asked about their level of satisfaction regarding their current roles as teachers, several mentioned high dissatisfaction with their job; some had plans to leave.

Between the gun violence and general student apathy, it's hard to find any passion for teaching anymore. Fewer and fewer students are engaged, and I've noticed an alarming downward trend in ability even before COVID. I've done my best to teach softer skills like

writing and graphical analysis but it's taking more and more time away from actual content... Every year gets a little more frustrating and depressing in equal measure.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas*

To be honest my level of satisfaction is very low to the point that I am currently looking for a stay-at-home job that could possibly be in a field other than teaching. I am not satisfied with the way admin treats teachers at my school. In general, the pay and the appreciation has become scarce in my experience. My kids were so far behind at the beginning of the year and made progress throughout the year, but it wasn't recognized as success because they didn't reach the level for the next grade. Those kids worked so hard and it's so sad to see.

— *Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

...I too have been looking for remote jobs, which is crazy because I never would have thought I would want to transition out of education, but my mental health comes first.

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

A few teachers singled out administration as leading them to feel let down or unfairly pressured.

My exhaustion levels are off the charts, mostly from the stress that comes from administration. They always want more, no matter how accomplished a teacher you are. For me, the pay is not as important as the job expectations. Teachers have way too much on their plates, which is the major reason why attrition is so high.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

Still, some teachers said they have high job satisfaction, despite the challenges.

I continue to teach, first and foremost, because I love children. I love the energy children possess, I enjoy their enthusiasm, and I love being with them in teaching and learning contexts. I would describe my current level of satisfaction as an educator as high. Given the nationwide circumstances we as educators have had to contend with over the past three years, including COVID and most recently school violence, I have become even more committed to ensuring the preparation and success of my students.

— *Stephen, middle school teacher, East Texas*

Retention strategies

Teachers were asked about factors potentially related to retention. Several broad topics were discussed: relationships with students and the impact teachers can have, work environment and working conditions, feeling supported, autonomy, influence, and pay and benefits.

Each of nine retention strategies offered for discussion was available to at least some of the teachers in our groups. Those referenced the most were strong relationships with students and a positive work culture and environment, followed by autonomy as classroom leader, the ability to help students reach their potential, a rewarding career that makes a difference, and a job that makes a positive impact on society. Some cited the ability to do creative work, input into school and district decision-making, and leadership opportunities.

Other items mentioned as positives for staying in the profession included strong relationships with colleagues, positive feedback, encouraging self-care, feeling valued, having supportive parents, and having professional development opportunities.

More broadly, several teachers described a personal sense that their work is a good fit for them, saying this helps keep them in their job. For some, it is teaching in general, while others relish teaching their specific subject.

A few also mentioned the teaching schedule (i.e., being able to keep the same schedule as their children or having holiday and summer breaks).

Relationships with students and the impact of the teaching profession

As for what keeps them in the teaching profession, teachers overwhelmingly cited their students, especially the relationships they build with them. These were seen as rewarding in the short term and something that continued to make a difference in retention over time.

What keeps me in the teaching profession is the kids. I would say I am probably neutral on my job as a teacher. There are parts of teaching that bring me great joy but there are aspects that are just ridiculous and hard to stomach. But, thinking about those kiddos and who they could possibly be with if they were not with me frightens me.

— **Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

The kids are what keeps me in my profession. Honestly, I have thought about leaving teaching this past school year because of the admin at my campus, but I can't imagine leaving my students.

— **Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas**

In the short term, I love that I know I can make a difference and help my students grow into amazing people. In the long term I cannot wait to hear back from students in the future that have grown up to do awesome things. I love the opportunity to help the kids succeed.

— **Sarah, middle school teacher, Central Texas**

Several teachers described the impact they have on students' learning as a key factor that keeps them in the profession.

The few moments of inspiration, seeing kids light up once they understand a difficult topic, keep me going...

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

I have really enjoyed being one of the first "exposures" to education in children's lives. Teaching them not only grade-appropriate instruction but also social skills they will carry with them throughout their years in school is something worthwhile.

— **Jasmine, elementary school teacher, Houston area**

A few others spoke to the importance of feeling that their career is rewarding.

Both "a rewarding career that makes a difference" and "strong relationships with students" are why I choose to stay in this profession... Knowing the pure love [students] have and the joy they get from learning is hard to parallel in other careers.

— **Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

Work environment and working conditions

Many teachers described a positive work environment as paramount in their continuing as teachers.

I think a positive work environment matters tremendously. I feel like I can get through tough parents, never

ending to-do lists, and rough days when I know I am supported and have people I can rely on to help. It is because of the people at my school that I choose to stay.

— *Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

I agree with you about a positive working environment making or breaking the teacher to stay at a school or even in the field.

— *Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

The workplace environment is my key issue also. I can adjust for less money, but I can't adjust for toxicity.

— *Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Teachers generally see a range of challenges in their working conditions, including campus morale, culture, workloads, and physical conditions, including safety. Many pointed to their interactions with administrators, other teachers, and parents as part of their working conditions.

When I think about working conditions, I think of things such as the physical condition and cleanliness of the building, the morale of the administration and staff, and the parental support and involvement, all woven together..

— *Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas*

Working conditions to me mean the physical, social, and mental

environment that one encounters at their workplace.

— *Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Working conditions is the environment, coworkers, and administration of where you work, whoever and whatever surrounds you. How you are treated and how you feel in your environment.

— *Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Teachers overwhelmingly described a direct connection between their working conditions and how they feel about their job. Often, positive working conditions were tied to career commitment while negative ones were associated with intending to leave or leaving the profession.

Working conditions have definitely contributed to me leaving a program. I worked in a toxic school environment that was micromanaged and feedback was only ever to point out how you could have done something differently. Teachers were not seen as people but robots.

— *Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

Overall, morale is very good. Staff gets along and supports each other without question. Sometimes I feel like our admin picks their battles and student discipline is not as strict as I'd like it to be and also is not very fair, depending on the parents of the students involved. However, I am not micromanaged. I have freedom to try new things in class and run my

classroom pretty much as I see fit and those things alone have far more to do with positive conditions than any dust that comes in when the wind blows. I know I could make considerably more money in a larger district, but the positives of where I work far outweigh the negatives of a larger school.

— **Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas**

I have witnessed these conditions contribute to both myself and colleagues seeking change year after year. The pressure placed on STAAR-tested subjects often prompts moves to different subjects. Toxic administration usually leads to a change in campus or district, or sometimes career altogether. The bottom line is, yes, these conditions absolutely lead to attrition in one form or another.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

I didn't feel the most welcomed this past year at the new district I taught at. I was dissatisfied with how my coworkers and administration treated me. The working conditions absolutely allowed me to make the decision that I would like to steer away from teaching in the near future.

— **Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Many also said their workload directly impacts how they feel about being a teacher.

Another form of working conditions such as workload has definitely increased over the years. On top of regular curriculum, some of which we feel doesn't align with our student needs gets dumped on us to push out regardless. We get asked to perform more and more assessments each year but are still expected to maintain our minutes for each content area. It's a lot. It comes down from the state to district level and I think the people pushing this haven't been in the classroom for a while and forget how many minutes each day has.

— **Jasmine, elementary school teacher, Houston area**

That is the truth! We barely have enough [time in the] day to even teach the content that we then are required to assess on.

— **Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Overall, I am mainly dissatisfied with my current working conditions. I'm having more of a workload added to my plate. For example, having to track all students' data even if they're not special education students or English language learners, with little to no help or assistance to accommodate the extra workload. I'm required to contact every parent of failing students and this requires me to stay late nights after school. I'm often having to cover classes during my one conference period. So a lot of my work such as creating lesson plans and grading is also having to be done after school.

It's just too much work and stress for the return. The workload has caused several teachers that I know to leave the district or the field altogether.

— *Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Teachers said their colleagues have a large influence on their working conditions and their desire to remain in a certain role.

Socially, the working conditions I work in are ideal. I love my school and the people I work with. I do not see myself going anywhere else because there is something about the spirit of the staff that I am surrounded by.

— *Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Working conditions will largely depend on the admin and colleagues of the campus. I've seen people switch subjects to avoid working with certain people.

— *Alice, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Something that I do think contributes to our working conditions are the teammates you have. I have had really great teams, but I have also had teams that are negative and drain you.

— *Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Teachers also saw administrators as having a large impact on their working conditions, discussed further on [page 19](#).

Poor physical conditions (such as old buildings or not enough space) and lack of resources are tied to satisfaction, but

not directly connected to the decision to leave a position.

I am also supposed to do this with a meager amount of supplies given to me. I am often forced to spend my own money for things the campus won't fund. And, yes, in many cases, this means pencils, Expo markers, and many other day-to-day teaching necessities. ... I am utterly unsatisfied with the following: classroom size, curriculum (or lack thereof), supplies, classroom furniture (I am required to keep SPED [special education] documents locked up but I have never been given a key to my desk or filing cabinet), infrastructure (I've worked in districts with a single copier for the whole campus), and (often) administration.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

A few teachers noted safety concerns as part of their working conditions, including COVID-19 and school violence alike.

I left my last job because of working conditions. Specifically, I didn't feel the campus was responding appropriately to COVID. We went virtual for a bit but a few months later, they packed 30+ students into cramped rooms with an optional mask requirement. Teachers and students got COVID again and again with no change in policy or procedure. With an immunocompromised baby at home, I had to leave because of unsafe working conditions.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas*

Up until recently I would say I was okay with my working conditions but after the most recent shooting in Uvalde I have questioned how safe my campus is. A few months back we had a student bring a fake BB gun to school and he had it all day and was not caught with it until the last 10 minutes of school. The BB gun looked like a real gun and the student was sent away, but it made me think what if it was real. I am dissatisfied with our inability to know if a student has a weapon or not. We are unable to search their bags so how would we know?

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Feeling supported

Teachers are divided in regard to feeling very supported, supported, and unsupported in their roles as teachers. In their words:

I feel very supported in my current role at least for the school year 2021-22. My admin has given me several options on my training developments. They were available when I needed questions answered. This year, the principal has been very pleased with my students' growth. So, they pretty much leave me alone. Also, I belong to a very cohesive team where we collaborate and support each other both at work and in our personal lives.

— *Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

I feel VERY supported. I was in the same school for six years prior to this

move and after this one year I have really seen what I was missing out on. My admin and my direct supervisor are just so helpful, always in my corner. And I didn't get that before. They worry about us on a personal and mental level. It's not just about students at my current school; they really care about teachers. I feel very fortunate.

— *Jasmine, elementary school teacher, Houston area*

I used to feel very supported, but that has changed over the last couple of years. Admin has gotten to where they side with kids and parents in every situation. They try to get me to change grades to pass students who have done absolutely nothing.

— *Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas*

On the admin side, I often just feel ignored. I'm asked for my opinion when it comes to curriculum planning for a teacher vacancy, even generating material a handful of times, only to be completely ignored. It's not an antagonistic relationship but it certainly hasn't left me feeling supported or listened to.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas*

Supporting teachers in parent-teacher conferences is rare. The administrator seems to support the parent and child regardless of the circumstances. We currently cater to them, and teachers do not have a say and are treated as unreasonable. I rarely have a PTC [parent-teacher conference] but when I do I assume that the assembled group

is there to attack me, not deal with the problem the child created.

— *Henry, high school teacher, Houston area*

Some teachers felt supported within their department or because of their teammates, but not outside of that context. One said she felt supported when it comes to her content, but not regarding classroom behavior.

Because of the specifics and technicalities that come with working with students with specialized instruction, there is not a lot of support that comes from outside of the department. We typically let administration know what our needs are and try to navigate through our issues ourselves. I think if there was an administrator that had been involved in SPED [special education] or has some knowledge of the area it would be helpful for teachers in departments where it takes some more experience and knowledge to be successful.

— *Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Outside of my current team, I have little to no support. When we all have a question, we are all stuck; we often don't know who to turn to or how to get the help we need, and this is concerning. I would feel more support if the district curriculum writers and leads would offer help, curriculum, tips, etc. instead of just my current teammates.

— *Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Whenever I would send [a student] to the office (as a last resort) his assistant principal would immediately send him right back to me. Whenever I would write him up for major things it would result in minor consequences, and I had to meet with my principal to figure out why this student was not being held accountable especially since other teachers were having the same issues. In short, the support this year could have been better had my admin team tried to do more.

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Administrative support stood out in discussions about both retention strategies and working conditions. One teacher mentioned his campus administration as making a difference in his staying in the profession, and several others chimed in.

In the last three years, staying in the profession has become harder and harder. I speak for myself when I say, administration is one reason why I stay. My administrators are some of the most empathetic and compassionate individuals I know. They take the time to listen to their teachers' concerns and formulate a plan to try to alleviate the situation.

— *Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

I agree, if I did not have such a great principal, I would have been gone this year.

— *Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

We had an AMAZING addition to our admin team this year, that has helped tremendously!

— *Nancy, elementary and high school teacher, Central Texas*

At the same time, other teachers said their administration had a negative influence on their desire to stay — generally, by asking for too much, or by micromanaging them.

At this point, I think I have one more year left in me to attempt to negotiate a more reasonable daily load. I am at a point in my life where having work-life balance trumps helping kids learn math. My administration can either look at my scores this year and say, “Yep, she’s got it, we can leave her alone,” or they can continue to nitpick about ridiculous tasks that shouldn’t apply to a seasoned, successful teacher simply for the sake of being fair to the other newer teachers. I am no longer interested in sacrificing my mental and physical health for other people’s kids. Without a reduction in daily responsibilities, I can’t be convinced to return.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

I think part of my reason for leaving the profession is because admin doesn’t care about self-care, always pulling teachers in so many different directions. Asking us to be flexible and just go with the flow. It can be so overwhelming and stressful. You never know what you’re going to walk into at meetings.

— *Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Teachers also saw administrators as having a large impact on their working conditions. In some cases, their influence was positive:

Our admin team does an amazing job to ensure we all are a family and that we are taken care of ... Every year at the end of the year my principal sends out a survey that allows us teachers to voice our concerns and express what we like and don’t like and then the team leads and department heads review the survey and come together to figure out what can be fixed for the following year.

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Still, several teachers voiced concerns about administrators being demanding, micromanaging, or not providing needed support, leading them and/or their colleagues to seek a change.

If teachers aren’t happy with admin, they don’t care as much about their jobs and the students can definitely tell. At my school, the environment isn’t great. Many teachers have issues with administration, including myself. They try to micromanage us and refuse to listen to anything we have to tell them. They almost always side with the parents and students on issues and rarely have our backs. This makes loving my job difficult most of the time. I try to stay away from admin as much as possible and just do my job and love my students.

— *Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas*

My campus has already lost five teachers to transfers to other schools or districts because of our principal. We will lose more.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

Every time I have made a change it's been because of admin being a negative influence on my teaching and day-to-day attitude. Currently I like my admin because they leave me be and let me do my job and only intervene when I have an issue. I have had bad admin in the past that either waste my time with constant extra work or were overly critical with negative feedback and constantly bothering me, making it harder to concentrate on my actual job which is the kids. To sum it up admin is the main thing influencing the working conditions at schools.

— **Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area**

I completely agree that admin is the main cause of job satisfaction or dissatisfaction. It seems like administrators forget what it's like to be in the classroom.

— **Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas**

In some cases, it was apparent that administrators could make a big difference simply by communicating more clearly with teachers.

Currently, I feel comfortable but often disrespected when it comes to how admin runs things that directly affect me and my paycheck. ... For example, I still don't know what I'm teaching

next year. We were promised on five different occasions and it's the second week of summer with no update. When I had valuable input on how to run specialized courses (which I taught for three years), admin asked for me to develop LPs and assignments and nothing was used. Students sat around doing nothing for half the year. Breakdowns in communication are frequent and go without rectification.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

Are write-ups acted upon, and if so, are they then told to the teacher after the fact what happened from it, or do we just guess?

— **Dan, high school teacher, Houston area**

When asked what makes them feel supported, teachers cited several helpful actions from administration, such as being responsive and helpful, advocating for teachers as well as students, being in teachers' corner (including in interactions with parents and handling students' behavioral issues), not pressuring teachers to achieve unreasonable results, understanding that teaching is ever-changing, and showing teachers they value them and care about them on a personal level.

My current admin's willingness to find answers as well as lend a listening ear when you need to vent or share are what make me feel most supported. After experiencing my last campus' toxicity, I really only require basic respect (yes, it is such a shame that my standards were lowered that much) but my current admin offers that and

much more. Even though they don't have math backgrounds, they will diligently search for resources, ideas, etc. if I ask for them. In addition, they genuinely care about how I am doing both personally and professionally.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

My principal is amazing and always tries as much as she can to support and advocate for us.

— *Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

I feel very supported by admin when it comes to parent issues. Our admin (almost) always has our backs and quite often we never even know that a parent has complained.

— *Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas*

I feel supported when, if I have a problem, admin can respond quickly and effectively to solve it.

— *Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area*

I feel supported in my current role. I have not in the past but my appraiser this year has been more than understanding and professional. I think having admin that understands that teaching is ever-changing is the most beneficial and how different it is from even five years ago would help all teachers feel more supported.

— *Imani, middle school teacher, Central Texas*

My admin and my direct supervisor are just so helpful, always in my corner... They worry about us on a personal and mental level. It's not just about students at my current school, they really care about teachers.

— *Jasmine, elementary school teacher, Houston area*

Teachers also mentioned helpful actions by district specialists or instructional coaches, curriculum instructors, their team lead, and co-workers, as well as certain aspects of their position.

District specialists or instructional coaches can make teachers feel supported by checking in, answering questions, and helping with issues. One teacher cited their curriculum instructors, team lead, and schoolwide PLC [professional learning community] meetings as key factors in their feeling very supported in their current role. And several teachers said they derive support from collaborative coworkers.

My district specialists are amazing at checking in, answering questions, and going out of their way to help with an issue.

— *Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Our campus received an Instructional Coach this year who is new to our campus. She is AMAZING! I really enjoy working with her and picking her brain. This person was always ready to support the ELAR [English language arts and reading] department which was something we never had before. Her support was sometimes just

serving as a buffer between our department and administration, but she did so much more.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

I feel very supported in my current role as a teacher of middle school science mostly because of the systems and supports in place within our district, namely our curriculum instructors are very supportive and clearly delineate curriculum and teaching responsibilities. I have a great team lead who keeps the department organized and productive.

— **Stephen, middle school teacher, East Texas**

The support of my team makes me feel very supported. We are very cohesive and transparent with one another if something bothers us or even makes us happy. We truly feel that all the kids on the grade level are all our students.

— **Brianna, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

In the special education department, my peers that work alongside me support me thoroughly.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

I feel supported because I have a great team. We might not all teach the same things, but we are there for each other.

— **Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area**

Teachers also mentioned feeling supported by having autonomy in the classroom, needed resources, the ability to set boundaries to balance home and work, students and families who want to be there and grow, and professional development offered by their district.

I feel best supported as an experienced teacher when I am left alone to do my job without too much admin interference.

— **Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area**

I pretty much have the freedom to do whatever I want in my classroom. I am not micromanaged at all and have all the resources I need (except for a full-blown science lab — I have to have labs in the classroom).

— **Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas**

I feel supported in my role as a teacher. I think I feel this way though because I have learned over time to set boundaries for how much I can take on at school in order to balance home and work.

— **Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

I have... students and families who want to be there and grow.

— **Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

My admin has given me several options on my training developments.

— **Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

Descriptions of what makes teachers feel unsupported referenced the absence of the items above. For example, several teachers mentioned dissatisfaction with their administration's handling of students' behavioral issues. Others noted a lack of resources, feeling left out or isolated from other teachers, and being asked to do too much.

Being unsupported is when there are real issues happening on campus and no one in administration will work to fix them. Teachers are left to deal with behavior issues on their own. ... I don't need pizza to feel supported. I don't need to wear jeans to feel supported. I want the administration to be proactive in addressing issues that are negatively affecting our campus.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

I would feel more supported if I knew that admin had my back with everything and that I could go to them with any situation.

— **Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas**

At this point, the only thing that I KNOW will make me feel supported is making my daily teacher to-do list shorter. Less meetings whose contents can easily be put in an email, less duty, less pressure to sponsor a club, less tutoring (just hire a tutor already because my days are already too long and I am exhausted), less parent phone calls, less immediate responsibility when it comes to behavior, less data tracking,

less working lunches, less working Saturdays, less everything.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

A few teachers felt unsupported because they were the only ones on campus in their subject area, lacking someone to brainstorm with and to provide curriculum-specific feedback.

My first job, being at an ISD, was interesting because I had built-in PLC [professional learning community] time with other science teachers in my content area. In the three other schools I've been at since, I've been the only one in my subject area. I suspect this is mostly common among other teaching jobs but it has left me always feeling unsupported. I do my best to be the one in charge but I always wish I had other teachers to bounce ideas off of or to have more opportunities for cross-curriculum planning.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

My direct superior does not share my math background; her expertise is ELA [English language arts]. Consequently, I am alone on campus if I reach a topic or point in the curriculum I may want feedback on. In addition, my observations can't be done with content in mind because admin doesn't know it. Yes, I am very strong in my content, but I always want to get better, and their lack of knowledge creates a barrier there.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

Autonomy

Several teachers mentioned the importance of classroom autonomy; while not the most-cited retention strategy, it was highly important to some.

The long-term strategy that matters to me is not being micromanaged consistently (how my campus is run). The administration needs to learn to trust the teachers enough. Any concerns can be alleviated by reviewing my STAAR data for the last 4 years.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

Having the ability to have a say-so in what I do is important to keeping me in an education environment. I know that students need different types of learning, and if I am given only one way to teach them, there is no way I can provide them with what they need.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

The biggest is autonomy in the classroom. If you let me do my job and give me the freedom to teach how I like teaching I am generally happy and want to stay.

— **Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area**

When asked about their level of autonomy as a classroom expert, most teachers — but not all — said they have sufficient autonomy as classroom experts.

In some ways I have a good amount of classroom autonomy (types of activities, types of lesson engagement, etc.). In other ways, however, I have little. My current admin has very strict expectations when it comes to how much time students spend working collaboratively versus independently, how much time is spent engaging in game-type activities, and how much time is spent on warm-up activities. As an experienced teacher, I know how to harness all these things in a way that maximizes learning potential. However, admin thinks they know more even though they have never taught math.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

My level of autonomy as a professional goes down every year. Currently in Texas, there is a big issue with CRT [critical race theory] and my principal has talked to us about this and being careful to not cause issues with parents. I feel that everything I do could be under attack, cause me to lose my job, or cause me to get in trouble. My principal has even stated she wants us to follow the curriculum and lessons the district provides (which is skin and bones) to a T, that way we are not doing our own thing which may lead to trouble with parents. It makes no sense to me for me to get a degree and be a professional if I have no autonomy over what's best in my classroom and for my students.

— **Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

One described not having enough classroom autonomy in her previous position, which led her to seek a change.

I left the English department because of this issue. I was not coming into teaching thinking I would have “freedom.” But I knew that I wanted to have my flair and style in my classroom and in the way that I taught. Initially, I was able to do things in a way that I saw fit for my students, but then rules from the district started to affect my campus. I was being told that the way that I taught was not going to work with the pacing that we had for the school year. Which meant I would have to change the way that I taught all together. I, obviously, complied and taught the lessons that they wanted me to teach. Many of my students fell behind, many required me to work with them outside of class.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Influence

Though some teachers feel their input is valued at the school level, others are less sure — either saying their school does not value input at all, or rarely acts on it.

Most said they have little or no influence at the district level, though a few were unsure, not having tried, and one reported a successful effort to win a pay raise. Some have a say via a district-wide teacher survey, others through committees or by connecting with a district-level decision-maker. One worried about retribution if she tried to have influence at the district level.

It’s so depressing that we teachers have to always just “hope things get better.” Sometimes I just feel so powerless when it comes to my profession and livelihood.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

In my district, I have decided to start attending the district’s board meetings. Last month, we requested an increase in pay and presented our reasons for the increase. Lo and behold, next school year the board has agreed to give teachers an 8% increase! What I learned from this is they do listen and my voice does count, I just need to make the time.

— **Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

My district and school give us teachers a platform each year to voice our concerns. The district sends out a survey that allows us to reflect on things that went well and that we would like to change.

— **Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

As far as the district, if you aren’t on a certain committee then your voice will get overlooked.

— **Brianna, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

When it comes to the big issues and decisions (district level and above), the superintendent and school board don’t often consider my opinion or the opinion of my colleagues as having much weight in their final say.

— **Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas**

I don't really choose to go to district about anything, really. The culture of my charter school district is often cult-like and I don't want to damage my professional reputation by suggesting something that in some way offends their vision for the district.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

At the state level, teachers reported feeling no influence at all beyond voting.

I vote each year and that is as much say/influence that I can say I have at the state level...

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

I feel like the people making decisions at the state level have never even met an actual public school teacher and really don't care to.

— *Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

I could feel more supported if the state of Texas actually paid attention to the things teachers are saying.

— *Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area*

If teachers had any influence on the state, STAAR testing would have been gone a long time ago.

— *Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas*

For many teachers, the lack of a voice in policy matters is problematic.

I feel like overall at each level the teacher's voice is very important because we deal with the day to day of the students and school in general.

— *Brianna, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

Pay and benefits

In considering other benefits or retention strategies, teachers overwhelmingly spoke of better pay and benefits. Several considered it most important; to one, “a determining factor for me to want to leave education” (Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth).

If I'm being honest, there is one factor that trumps everything else and probably isn't a great thing to admit: money. Work is, above all, work, and I need to take care of my family. Compensation has always played a large role in staying or leaving certain positions.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas*

Money is important. Teachers tend to be made to feel like we shouldn't be upset because of the low pay. I've been told so many times that I knew what I was getting into when I started teaching and knew that the pay was low and maybe I should have just done something that paid more. We

shouldn't be made to feel that way. We are people after all, doing a job that most people would never do but that everything and everyone depends on. We deserve better compensation for that.

— **Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas**

I love teaching but the pay and status are incredibly low. The district I'm in is the absolute pinnacle of education but my contributions are not financially rewarded. I get about \$4,000 more than a brand-new teacher after two decades. That tells me that my job is not valued despite the platitudes that people value education.

— **Henry, high school teacher, Houston area**

A livable wage would be top of the list for retention. I have had to take on a part-time job to keep up. I know I would be much more willing to have all the responsibilities teachers have if I wasn't also stressed about making sure I can pay all my bills.

— **Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

In terms of other approaches to retention, one teacher received five-year \$5,000 bonus incentives; another, loan forgiveness. (See also the next section of this report specifically on incentive pay.) Another said having an assistant would help, “along with extra funding at the federal level so that we can have the materials we need” (Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth).

My district has recently pushed out a retention pay initiative for teachers. This was something huge for the district. After compiling data, they saw that teachers would leave at 5-year marks. So every 5 years [we] get a \$5,000 incentive for staying. Although the monetary compensation is great ... being able to make a positive impact while being trusted to do what is best for my students is the main reason why I stay.

— **Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Incentive pay

Teachers were asked about their opinions on incentive pay, defined as increased pay for teaching deemed effective or teaching in certain high-needs subjects or schools. Most teachers acknowledged both positives and negatives of incentive pay, while others held entirely negative opinions.

In terms of positives, teachers said they would (or already do) appreciate increased income in the form of incentive pay. They also saw incentive pay as potentially attracting people to the profession, encouraging classroom performance, and improving retention.

My campus currently uses the MTI (Master Teacher Initiative) which provides incentive pay based on STAAR data to see if growth is occurring. The MTI doesn't motivate me although I'll gladly accept any incentive pay. The incentive pay right now would be

the greatest benefit because of the inflation we are currently dealing with.

— **Rob, middle school teacher,
South/Southwest Texas**

I have been a recipient of incentive pay my entire teaching career because I teach math. In my entirely biased opinion, I do think incentive pay is necessary to get qualified individuals in the door because if they are qualified to teach math well, they are likely also qualified to do something else that pays a lot better and is infinitely less stressful.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher,
South/Southwest Texas**

I think incentive pay should be utilized and is a good idea. The pros would be that strong teachers would be compensated for preparing their students during the year. Incentive pay could very possibly be a determining factor for a teacher thinking about leaving the profession.

— **Rob, middle school teacher,
South/Southwest Texas**

A few said incentive pay should be focused on high-needs subjects or schools.

I believe that incentive pay should be for teaching a high-need area such as a content area or even Title I school, and/or filling a role that has been left unfilled after some time. I think these are great ways to try to fill empty positions and keep teachers.

— **Ruby, middle school teacher,
Dallas/Fort Worth**

Many schools already provide special education teachers a stipend. Mine does not and from talking with other teachers, now more than ever, it's becoming an issue. Special education is exploding and with it comes more paperwork, more parent contacting, more behaviors, etc. Teachers are beginning to look at which districts acknowledge this new workload and are willing to compensate for it.

— **Mary, high school teacher,
Dallas/Fort Worth**

Others voiced concerns about incentive pay focused on certain subjects or schools — namely, that it may breed animosity, be unfair, and poorly distribute resources.

I've never been a fan of incentive pay. I think it takes away from teachers who might not be in the regular classroom but that do have a direct impact on the students that are in the regular classroom.

— **Courtney, elementary school
teacher, Houston area**

We had a meeting a few months ago where admin introduced incentive pay for special classes. AP [Advanced Placement]/CTE [Career and Technical Education]/pre-AP [Advanced Placement] teachers would see a modest increase in pay as a result of taking on extra responsibilities for these classes. The problem is that teachers don't get to elect what they will or won't teach. To make matters worse, this introduces politics into assigning classes and doesn't

prioritize what (read: who) would be best for students.

— *David, high school teacher, Central Texas*

Pay based on school performance (most likely academic) would lead to terrible results in the school community. It would lead teachers to advanced courses and away from less privileged districts. I also think pay disparity between subjects will not benefit students. I believe it will lead teachers into subjects they don't know well for financial motivation.

— *Alice, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

While there were concerns of equity, a few teachers described ways to implement incentive pay appropriately, such as measuring students' growth in addition to their test scores.

I think there must be a way to even the playing field. For my district, the teacher incentive allotment has to do with both how the students do but also growth. This may be a good way to make it a bit fairer than just on scores.

— *Sarah, middle school teacher, Central Texas*

Teaching is more than just checking boxes. Incentive pay should include student feedback as well since they are the ones on the receiving end. Incentive pay needs to take everything into account — not just how your lessons fare and student success on state tests. Do students feel safe in this classroom? Are there clear

relationships between teacher and student? Does the teacher make their presence known on campus and in campus activities?

— *Imani, middle school teacher, Central Texas*

Among other concerns associated with incentive pay, teachers identified difficulties in measuring performance, an undesirable reliance on testing, competition with other teachers, decreased morale and collaboration, and concerns about cheating. One said incentive pay can lead to hiring teachers focused on compensation rather than the students.

I am on the fence about incentive pay just because some things cannot be measured. We do so much in the classroom and we see our students progress in areas that will likely not even be noticed. I am sure incentive pay will focus on test scores and test scores do not present an accurate picture of what students learn and excel in for the whole year.

— *Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Sadly, I have heard from other teachers who have experienced this change that it can create a weird and competitive culture with teachers which causes them to be very secluded and hurts teacher relationships with each other because they want to out-perform each other.

— *Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Several teachers said they simply do not think incentive pay works — as a motivating tool, a retention strategy, or a tactic to improve student success.

Incentives only work if done across the board and in addition to the normal pay structure, not to replace it. It also has to be substantial enough to matter. ... If the money isn't worth it, people are not going to do it. It's something my current district is proposing, that if you hit certain benchmarks as a teacher you would get a pay raise, but the raise is fairly small and the workload needed to meet the standards isn't worth it. This had caused most teachers to ignore it and not care.

— **Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area**

Most significantly, the major con for me is I do not think the data on incentive pay supports positive impacts on student outcomes.

— **Stephen, middle school teacher, East Texas**

A few teachers favored a campus-wide incentive initiative, while others saw potential negative outcomes such as decreased morale, heightened pressure, and unfair benefits for certain campuses in a district.

I do think the campus-wide initiative could work because we are all working towards a common goal. The collaboration will have to be there in order to ensure a school-wide success.

— **Mateo, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

I do feel incentive pay based on the collective performance of teacher teams and cooperating teachers has been effective, despite the high pressure and competitive environments they create.

— **Stephen, middle school teacher, East Texas**

On a campus level, each campus has such different needs. A universal grading scale that does not take into account these differences puts many campuses at a disadvantage and may make recruiting strong teachers even more difficult than it already is. In the long run, I think this is something that may look possible on paper and sounds good, but in reality would not be effective.

— **Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

Our campus outperformed all other campuses and many districts, so I would have loved it. I do not think it's fair though, because other districts have a different SES [socioeconomic status] than mine. Per peer-reviewed documents, low SES has been proven to cause discrepancies between district assessment scores.

— **Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Rather than incentive pay, several teachers said that they would like to see increased pay for all teachers or based on tenure, rather than for teaching deemed effective or in certain high-needs subjects or schools.

Incentive pay is nice, but I think overall teachers need increased salary across the board. The starting salary for some can be very close to the salary of a veteran teacher that has been there for years. This needs to be corrected! Texas is a mess with making a system to pay teachers. Each school has their own policies and regulations or scales. It's quite disorganized. I worked in one district that based raises off student performances; at a low-income school, the performance is not great, so the raises were terrible.

— *Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

It is frustrating to be basically making the same as a first-year teacher even though I have many more years' experience. I think instead of incentive pay, veteran teachers should be shown they are valued by increasing their step pay and actually giving these steps annually.

— *Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

If there is money available for an incentive-based pay, it should be equally distributed between everyone instead of prioritizing teachers who may have different class makeups and student abilities within their room.

— *Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area*

Pandemic-related impacts

The COVID-19 pandemic influenced how some teachers view the educational system. For many, it expanded views on online learning — both how online learning can be used effectively and its limitations. A few noted how certain students could work well independently, while others “desperately needed the consistency and interaction schools provide” (David, high school teacher, Central Texas).

I think that the educational system was tested during the pandemic and people were forced to think about ALL the ways students could access content that needed to be learned. I think these innovations and changes made me eager to be a part of education because it was exciting to work with the new ways lessons were being delivered. I think the educational system adopted virtual learning and started to evolve in a way that showed traditional education could be bent and stretched to better meet the needs of students and teachers.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

For others, the pandemic illuminated already present challenges, including demanding expectations for teachers, uninvolved parents, out of touch decision-makers, and inequity in available technology.

The pandemic just highlighted an already outdated and broken system in the way that kids are taught and educators are treated in general. ... We are the most undervalued and unappreciated profession STILL even after the past couple of years. Regular people could not have done what we do and still stay sane and present for our kiddos.

— **Imani, middle school teacher, Central Texas**

The pandemic didn't change my view of the educational system so much as remind me of how reactionary it is. I think the system responded in an inequitable way. Those students who had good internet and parents who were able to ensure they were actually attending classes excelled. Those who didn't fell behind.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

The pandemic also showed gaps in learning, brought to light how important social interactions are, and made it apparent how detached from the classroom the people “in charge” really are. I feel like teachers are often viewed as babysitters and not professionals and this also became more apparent during the pandemic.

— *Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

Many said everyone did the best they could in responding to the pandemic, but saw the system as unprepared and reported lingering effects on student learning and social-emotional skills.

Personally I do think my school, like many others, responded as best as they could to what was happening.

The district quickly organized itself to provide technology for all and even provided internet service for students that did not have access to it. Teachers did the best that they could, provided everything that students needed in order to be as successful as they could with the situation that we were put under.

— *Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

I don't think the school system was prepared to handle the pandemic school closures. (Not their fault, because it was never in the plan.) My district tried their best, but I feel that the lessons they provided students were dumb down (at least in my class).

— *Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

The future of public education

When asked how they would like public schools to be different in the future, teachers mentioned resources, services, curriculum, operational aspects, and more. Post-Uvalde, one said, “Foremost, we must secure our schools. Period. I don’t think this needs any embellishment or rationale” (Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas).

Technology was mentioned most as a needed resource, including 1 to 1 availability at all schools and better equipment. Teachers said using technology in the classroom was important to allow students “to master skills they’ll need for the rest of their personal and professional lives” (David, high school teacher, Central Texas). One said that technology can provide both challenge and support (Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth). Another noted that technology can “ease the environmental impact of our campus” by reducing paper waste (David, high school teacher, Central Texas).

One teacher cited a need for more bilingual resources for students; others mentioned issues of equity, especially in terms of resources.

I appreciate the use of technology now in our schools but I would like to see more bilingual resources.

— *Jasmine, elementary school teacher, Houston area*

It seems that students that are in low-income areas are forced to schools that do not have seasoned teachers, the best technology, books, or anything compared to students that live in areas that have money. Students should not be punished for being low income, since this is out of their control, and should be allowed quality education despite who they are and where they’re from.

— *Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

My campus needs better technology. The district has updated the technology at all campuses but

the high school... I would love an interactive board or TV. All we have are computers hooked up to a projector. Most of our rooms don't even have speakers to be able to play videos for class.

— **Elizabeth, high school teacher, East Texas**

Mental health support was mentioned most as a needed service. One teacher suggested a counseling session every six weeks for all students.

Our students need more emotional support. More counselors per capita, etc.

— **Nancy, elementary and high school teacher, Central Texas**

I didn't even think about the emotional support needs that our students have! That is HUGE! Students are struggling more and more these days with mental health issues and need more help in these areas.

— **Sarah, middle school teacher, Central Texas**

Absolutely more counselors are needed for sure!! My district uses counselors like extra admin. Many do not get much time to work with students — even the ones who really need it.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

Loved the suggestion of more counselors — especially post-

pandemic, social skills and just social/emotional stability is lacking in my students.

— **Cindy, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Several teachers reported a need for other services, with one suggesting schools should “return to being focal points of the community” (Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas). Mentioned services include free in-school breakfast and lunch for students, other meal programs, food drives and food closets, clothing drives, credit counseling, and financial planning.

Also, there's no reason schools should be charging kids for breakfast and lunch. That's a taxpayer priority. If they are forced to be there, which they are legally, then they shouldn't be forced to pay more. No rich person will be cackling their way to the bank because of this change and getting one up over people. Instead, no kid will feel hungry in their learning environment, and we can stop having terrifying news stories about kids working to settle others' school lunch debt, which is celebrated instead of seen for the capitalist nightmare that it actually is.

— **Dan, high school teacher, Houston area**

A few also would like to see more before- and after-school programs (with teachers paid for such labor), including late buses. One mentioned offering summer activities.

In terms of curriculum, a few teachers called for tailored learning programs.

I hate the idea of a one-size-fits-all learning system. Students' academic abilities vary from person to person, and it is unfair to assume that information laid out for an entire district will work 100% of the time. Curriculum should be used as a guide as opposed to a standard.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Among other curriculum ideas, one teacher thought more emphasis should be placed on developmentally appropriate learning in lower grades, another suggested language classes should be required at a younger age, and one said curriculum in general should be updated every few years.

My hope is, in the future, appropriate early childhood classes are seen as more beneficial than they are currently. I strongly feel if more emphasis was placed on developmentally appropriate (brain development and benefits of play, social development, and creativity) learning in lower grades, the upper grades would not be playing catch up for test scores.

— **Hayley, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

I think we should start requiring students at a younger age to take language classes because after the age of 7 it is harder to learn a new language.

— **Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

I do feel that curriculums should be updated every few years so that students are getting the most recent education.

— **Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Several said that they would like to see an end to STAAR, Texas' statewide standardized test, though one voiced hesitation.

I believe that many of us already give a fall diagnostic and then monitor progress throughout the year. I think that should be enough to show growth without stressing everyone out with one final high-stakes test.

— **Stephanie, elementary school teacher, West Texas**

State testing needs to go. This only exists for profit — profit that does not benefit teachers or students, but rather some CEO. In fact, getting rid of testing just might open up enough room in the curriculum for teachers to fill in reading and writing gaps.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

I have mixed feelings about abolishing the STAAR because I do think it's necessary to have some kind of universal assessment as a benchmark between campuses and students, but I agree the STAAR is flawed as is currently administered.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

Many said schools should teach life skills, including money management, maintaining a good credit score, building a resume, applying for jobs and college, filing taxes, car care, and cooking.

Many also see value in college- or workforce-readiness programs, suggesting curriculum changes to prepare students for college more effectively.

I don't think our standard curriculum does a great job at preparing our students for life after high school. For the college-bound kids, a bunch of college freshmen struggle their first year because they are not used to the rigor and freedom they receive at the college level. I also feel our curriculum doesn't do a good enough job teaching students how to think. It tries but is mostly ineffective and overly complicated about it.

— **Zachary, high school teacher, Houston area**

Though some teachers favored more college-readiness curriculum, others urged more offerings for workforce readiness.

I think that junior high and high school might start offering more workforce-readiness courses so that once a student graduates high school they can find a job that would help them succeed as they grow older instead of focusing so much on the college level for everyone.

— **Courtney, elementary school teacher, Houston area**

There needs to be more options for kids in school than just college.

Somewhere along the way, college became the only desirable destination and trades are suffering. It stigmatizes these jobs and doesn't provide easy access for students with other interests than going into debt and pursuing a degree instead of building up a skill they could use their whole life. Not to mention even making a career out of it.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

Among operational aspects, teachers raised suggestions including a four-day school week, shorter school days, year-round school, breaks during the day, and online learning. A four-day week was seen as potentially stemming both teacher and student burnout.

The teacher burnout and even student burnout is beyond what people could fathom. Students are not in their right mental state as well and need more care and attention. The Friday off could allow for mental recouping and collaboration. This could allow students to get help they need and even teachers as well to take care of things such as doctors' visits, therapy visits, catching up on work.

— **Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Students are burnt out. I know that it's impossible to expect a reduction in the work week but a four-day schedule would give overworked students and staff the time they need to not only master the skills they acquire at school but offer more time with family/for hobbies/to study, etc.

— **David, high school teacher, Central Texas**

A few also said shorter school days, e.g. with a later start, could benefit students. At the same time, one noted that while teachers feel they need a four-day work week “for their sanity,” she is against it unless hours are extended because “these kids need all the time at school for learning” (Rachel, elementary school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth).

Opinions also were mixed on a more year-round school year. Some favored it, especially to prevent summer learning loss; others saw no need to change from the current schedule.

One suggested a half-hour lunch and an additional half hour each day for recess or a brain break (Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth). Another said that despite teacher shortages, “at no point should a teacher go through a full school day without having a real conference period or break” (Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth).

Other teachers suggested online learning as an option that could benefit both students and teachers. One noted that colleges offer online degree programs and many jobs are remote, so online school should be an ongoing option too.

[Students] could at least stay home and still get the lessons if they were feeling sick as a precaution. But more importantly they could do it for mental health reasons. Sad stuff in their life? Bullies? Boyfriend broke up with them? Failed a test? They could stay home and not be behind or be absent.

— *Dan, high school teacher, Houston area*

COVID is a thing and teachers are “punished” for taking their days off to protect their own physical and mental health. Teachers should have the option to work from home...Virtual learning was a learning curve however there are some students who thrived while online learning and others who preferred to be in person. I think that should be an ongoing option since many jobs these days are remote or work from home along with colleges offering entire online degree programs. Technology is here to stay and I think teaching is a workforce that needs to progress with the times we are living in.

— *Imani, middle school teacher, Central Texas*

Several teachers mentioned class size as a concern, with a majority expressing support for classes no larger than 20 students per teacher. A couple suggested adding instructional aides or teaching assistants to help with student-teacher ratios.

It’s hard to really impact students’ learning when there are so many in the class. It makes it almost impossible to really even give them one-to-one attention at times that they need it.

— *Ruby, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

In considering what else they would like to be different than it is now, teachers continued to mention more autonomy, higher wages, and more appreciation (especially from administration).

Teachers also mentioned a range of other changes they would like to see. Among them: synching school calendars across nearby districts, more communication among districts, committees designed to ensure school needs are being met, stricter discipline for student misbehavior, an up-or-out system for students (with grade promotion tied to achievement), fewer non-teaching duties for teachers, better partnership between teachers and parents, a requirement for general education students to spend one class period every six weeks working in special education, and a life skills pathway offered to special education students (as an alternative to a higher education pathway).

More consistency with the school calendar compared to other districts — we start two weeks earlier than other districts in San Antonio and the problem with that is there are too many kids who are absent for the first two weeks of classes. Makes no sense.

— **Rob, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

I would also like more communication between school districts, because I think that would be helpful for teachers to grow and develop more.

— **Sarah, middle school teacher, Central Texas**

I believe that each school needs different things, and there should be committees in place at schools to ensure those needs are being met. And this does not just pertain to academics.

— **Britney, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

I also believe we have to tighten down on our behavior expectations. My district follows a book and the book explains how to discipline a kid based on the offense but sometimes the book is too nice with the action it states to take.

— **Shanice, middle school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth**

Although it may sound drastic, I think we need an up-or-out sort of system. Kids know they will be passed on eventually. It's happened to their friends and siblings so they know effort is meaningless. Why are we stringing these kids along? I don't mean to sound heartless but we aren't doing them any favors at all. At that point, we are simply babysitting.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

Teachers need to be able to become teachers again. JUST teachers. Not statisticians, counselors, babysitters, surrogate parents, secretaries, etc., etc. This goes back to my previous points about too much responsibility. You want to keep teachers? LET THEM TEACH.

— **Jessica, middle school teacher, South/Southwest Texas**

A strong partnership between schools/ community, parents, and teachers must be part of the educational plan... Education must start at home; so parents should be fully involved as a coach and proactively advocating for their students.

— **Maggie, elementary school teacher, Central Texas**

I wish we had more active, positive parents involved. If kids see that their parents view their school/teacher in a positive light that will carry over to them and they will be more apt to learn.

— *Jen, elementary school teacher, Central Texas*

Every gen ed [general education] student should be required to spend 1 class period per six weeks working in special education. We teach special education students how to navigate gen ed, but we never teach gen ed how to navigate special needs students.

— *Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Special education students need to be placed in either a life skills pathway or a higher education pathway. This should be decided at the student's annual ARD [admission, review, and dismissal]. It's a waste of time and resources when we have to teach students that can't write their name or use a calculator alt Geometry. They are better served learning how to use a calculator so they are not taken advantage of when they go to a store.

— *Mary, high school teacher, Dallas/Fort Worth*

Conclusion

Several themes emerged in these forums: Administrative support and a positive work environment are key variables in retention. Better pay and benefits are strongly desired, but with a mixed assessment of incentive pay. Classroom time and mentoring are key to preparation. Other administrative improvements are needed. And empathy can make a difference.

Still, teachers' individual circumstances differ, and so do their hopes and expectations for the school year ahead, ranging from optimism to an expectation, as one said, that "school will continue to be a stressful tightrope walk that I'll eventually fall from" (David, high school teacher, Central Texas).

Stephen, the East Texas middle school teacher, summed it up:

Throughout much of this forum the theme of teacher pay and recognition has been raised and with good cause. One of my hopes for this year and beyond is for the public's newfound recognition of how essential K-12 teachers and schools are in society, actually leading to opportunities for us to finally command wages commensurate with our years of education, experience, and dedication.

He closed by addressing his colleagues:

My hopes for us all during the challenges we will face ahead is that we continue to be resilient and strengthened by the presence of our students' faces in our classrooms. That we continue to receive and be provided the necessary supports students will need during this recovery and that we hold on to everything we have learned, and the innovations we have pioneered over the last two years. I, for one, will remain joyful, appreciative, and grateful for everything and all of you.

Methodology

The groups

Forum participants were selected to include a range of characteristics. The group of traditionally certified public school teachers included 10 women and four men; five White teachers, five Hispanic teachers, three Black teachers, and one of multiple racial and ethnic backgrounds. They were geographically dispersed, with five each teaching in the Dallas/Fort Worth area and Central Texas, two in the Houston area, and one apiece from the East and South/Southwest regions. Five teach in urban areas, seven in suburban areas, and two in small towns. Seven teach pre-K through fifth grade, six grades six through eight, and three grades nine through 12 (with some overlap). Four have up to five years of experience, four have six to 10 years, and six have more than 10 years in the field.

The second forum, a group of alternatively certified teachers, included nine women and three men; five White teachers, three Hispanic teachers, two Black teachers, and two Asian teachers. Three each teach in schools in Dallas/Fort Worth, in the Houston area, and the Central region, with one apiece in East, West, and South/Southwest Texas. Three teach in urban areas, seven in suburban areas, and two in small town or rural areas. Four teach pre-K through fifth grade, three grades six through eight, and six grades nine through 12. Five have up to five years of experience, six have six to 10 years, and one has more than 10 years in the profession.

In addition to these characteristics, teachers across the two forums reported teaching a range of subjects, including mathematics, science, social studies, language arts, special education, and physical education, adding another layer of variety to their experiences.

Many responses were detailed and thoughtful, demonstrating teachers' interest in sharing their professional experiences and views; the full report includes extensive use of forum participants' own words. Names were changed to preserve participants' anonymity.

Analysis

The research team engaged in thematic analysis to identify, analyze, and describe themes within the data (i.e., the discussion transcripts). The primary researcher performed an inductive process, closely reading the transcripts in full, organizing participants' comments into themes, summarizing those themes with characterizations appropriate to the frequency and thrust of participants' comments and populating the report with relevant quotations. Findings were reviewed and refined throughout the analytical process. After the report was first drafted, a team of auditing researchers then back-checked the work, comparing it to the transcripts to confirm that the report's interpretations and findings were accurately and appropriately derived from the data and well-represented respondents' voices.



Public Opinion Research

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