



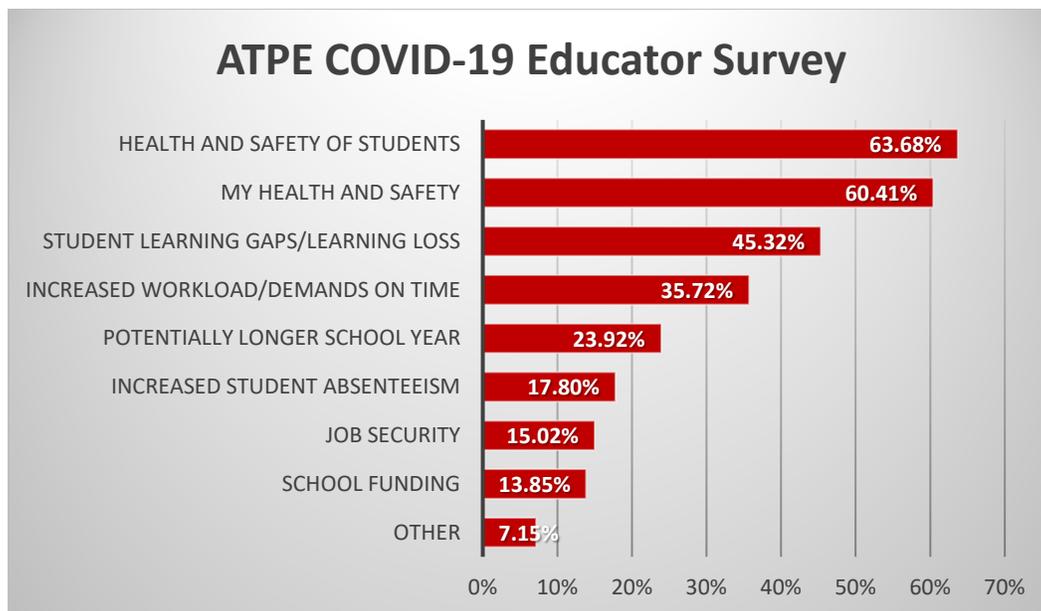
## Response to the House Public Education Committee's Formal Request for Information on COVID-19

September 30, 2020

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) applauds the House Committee on Public Education for identifying the health and safety of schools as a top priority and is grateful for the opportunity to address the committee's interim request for information related to the COVID-19 pandemic. As the state's largest educator association representing approximately 100,000 members, we offer the following input related to school staff concerns about COVID-19 in response to the following questions posed by the committee:

**Question 1. Are Texas public schools ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the 2020 Fall Semester? When applicable, please speak directly to classroom and lab settings, and cafeterias.**

Student and staff safety have been the foremost concerns of educators since the early days of the pandemic. A May 2020 ATPE survey of more than 4,200 educators and school employees from all over Texas found that health and safety topped their list of concerns about starting the 2020-21 school year amid the pandemic. Asked to identify their top three concerns, 63% listed "health and safety of students," and 60% listed "my health and safety."



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

Health and safety concerns led the discussions among the hundreds of educators who attended the virtual ATPE Summit in July 2020. During the summit, the ATPE House of Delegates, which consists of educators representing every region in Texas, adopted a pair of resolutions that directly address the COVID-19 pandemic. The first resolution urged the state to safeguard the health and safety of students and educators by delaying in-person instruction until Texas had demonstrated a flattened curve in the number of COVID-19 cases; to require local school districts to include educators and parents in the development of plans for the safe re-entry of students and district employees; and to allocate emergency funds for substitutes in case of mandatory quarantine requirements for district personnel.

ATPE members continue to voice specific frustration with what many perceive as a lack of educator input in school reopening decisions at the district level. Initial guidance from the Texas Education Agency (TEA) did not require districts to consult with their staff when deciding the degree to which employees would be required to be on campus. ATPE shared this concern with TEA throughout the summer and included it in our *Recommendations on School Reopening for the 2020-21 Instructional Year* released in July ([atpe.org/COVID-recs](https://atpe.org/COVID-recs)).

In August, the agency added language to its public safety guidance that recommended each district develop a plan for on-campus activities and instruction. The guidance stated that such plans “should be developed in consultation with teachers, staff, and parents.” Although this addition was appreciated, it fell short of requiring districts to seriously consider staff input.

**Absent a promise their concerns would be addressed in a meaningful way, educators had little reason to relax their skepticism regarding their school’s ability to resume in-person activities in a safe and responsible manner.**

The volume and urgency of phone calls, emails, and social media outreach received by ATPE increased dramatically as the fall semester approached and instruction began. Educators’ chief concerns have included vague health and safety protocols, inconsistent implementation and enforcement, minimal communication from administrators, and lack of opportunity for educators to provide input.

From September 16 through September 27, ATPE conducted a member-only survey on back-to-school health and safety, which garnered 770 responses from educators across the state. When asked if, “Texas public schools are ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the 2020 fall semester,” 58% of respondents disagreed (28%) or strongly disagreed (30%). Only 31% of respondents agreed (18%) or strongly agreed (13%), while 11% were unsure.

In open-ended responses to the survey, ATPE members shared whether they believed health and safety were being adequately ensured and gave examples related to their classrooms, lab settings, and cafeterias. Educators said their districts were not consistently enforcing health and safety protocols and that many students, staff, and visitors were not wearing masks or wearing them appropriately. Additionally, educators explained social distancing is practically impossible in school settings, especially in special education settings and as more students return to campus. Educators also expressed they did not have enough cleaning supplies or personal protective equipment; many of the supplies that were adequate at the beginning of the year are now exhausted. Many educators commented that COVID-19 testing, contact tracing, and quarantine protocols are not being consistently implemented. Educators also spoke to a new wave of duties and assignments that have overwhelmed their current responsibilities, such as making daily contact with remote learners and documenting the contacts as mandated by TEA,

cleaning, filling in for sick teachers, virtual lesson planning, and dealing with discipline issues related to COVID-19 safety protocols.

As evidenced both in our survey and other member communications, educators feel their own health risks are not being weighed when they are asked to resume in-person instruction. In fact, some of the most frequent concerns ATPE has heard have been voiced by educators who are in high-risk categories for unfavorable COVID-19 outcomes and those with high-risk individuals living in their household. At a time when federal, state, and local public health officials have agreed on the serious health risk posed by on-campus activities in their areas, these educators have been directed by school administrators to report to campus for in-person activities. At-risk educators have even had unpaid leave requests denied. **Many educators report they feel they must choose between their jobs or their lives.**

Fortunately, some educators who responded to our survey did express that they felt their district was ensuring their health and safety and that of their students. Our members report these districts have enough supplies, consistent routines, and stakeholder buy-in. One respondent said, "It helps that the staff, students, parents, and community are on board with the protocols." Another member said, "We are safe only to the extent that everyone obeys." These responses, both promising and concerning, shed light on the vast landscape of how districts are responding to the pandemic and the fears educators face as they return to in-person teaching.

This anxiety carries great potential to negatively impact staff retention. Educators consistently cite working conditions as a top reason for leaving the profession, which bears directly upon Question 5 posed by the committee:

**Question 5. Has there been a noticeable impact on staff or faculty retention with regard to concerns about the pandemic?**

ATPE has received numerous questions from educators contemplating retirement or resignation due to anxiety over working conditions during the pandemic. Many districts did not communicate information to staff regarding COVID-19 protocols or how teaching assignments would be affected until a week or two before requiring staff to report. Much of the delay is likely due to rapidly evolving guidance, regulations, and battles between levels of government that created confusion and uncertainty leading up to the start of school. This placed educators at an unfair disadvantage. If an educator wishes to resign a contract, they are required to do so no later than 45 days before the first day of instruction in order to avoid penalties that can include harsh sanctions by the State Board for Educator Certification (SBEC). **By the time many districts informed educators of the level of exposure they may face upon returning to campus, it was too late for those educators to choose not to teach this year without facing potentially career-ending penalties.** Recognizing the conundrum educators have faced, ATPE urged all school districts to provide reasonable accommodations to their staff and refrain from pursuing SBEC sanctions against educators who resign late because of COVID-19 health concerns ([atpe.org/en/News/ATPE-Blog/2020/August/ATPE-Recommend-Staff-Policies](https://atpe.org/en/News/ATPE-Blog/2020/August/ATPE-Recommend-Staff-Policies)).

Similarly, there have been concerns about the potential for a sharp increase in educators exiting the profession this year because of COVID-19. In response to questions from ATPE, Teacher Retirement System (TRS) of Texas staff indicated that retirements in the month of August were down compared to August 2019, but September retirements show an increase over the previous year and continue to trend upward.

Unfortunately, retirement numbers do not tell the full picture. There can be a significant lag time between choosing to retire and finalizing the process. Only final numbers are reported by TRS. Additionally, for various reasons, many educators choosing not to work this year due to COVID-19 concerns may also choose not to begin drawing their pensions right away. In such a scenario, they would not be classified as “retired” by TRS. ATPE has requested data from TRS on the number of educators who are actively contributing into the pension system as compared with last year. These numbers, which ATPE hopes will be made available soon, may prove more helpful in identifying any trends and analyzing in greater detail the number of school employees not working this year.

Higher attrition rates present both short-term and long-term consequences for our public schools. In the short term, increased teacher turnover will add to the financial burden districts already face in dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic. Replacing a single teacher in an urban school district is estimated to cost as much as \$20,000. Prior to the pandemic, teacher turnover was estimated to cost the U.S. as much as \$7.3 billion annually and districts such as Houston ISD more than \$35 million per year. The same studies show high teacher turnover also negatively impacts student performance.

Additionally, as reflected in an increasing number of media reports around the state, the challenge of locating an adequate supply of substitute teachers places many districts and their employees in an extremely difficult position.

## **RELATED ATPE CONCERNS AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

### **Educator Preparation**

The initial impulse when faced with an actual or potential teacher shortage has often been to relax educator preparation and certification standards, which may provide a short-term boost in staffing levels at the expense of the quality of the teacher workforce. This scenario presents serious long-term consequences as teachers with less training and preparation leave the profession at much higher rates—leading to more severe teacher shortages in the future.

**For this reason, it is critical the state maintain rigorous standards for educator preparation and certification and resist the urge to relax standards in response to any short-term staffing shortages caused by the pandemic.**

### **Workload**

Another prominent concern expressed by educators is the increased demand on educators’ time without a commensurate increase in compensation or similar consideration. Educators report being required to work far more hours under the current instructional environment than they would during a typical school year. This has placed a strain on educators’ mental health and family life. The scope of this issue is difficult to quantify, but ATPE has received extensive feedback on this issue from educators across the state who have been required to devote more time preparing virtual lessons and being “on call” for extended hours to assist students and answer parents’ questions.

One example was provided by an ATPE member in Fort Worth ISD, who reported that the district’s plan for hybrid learning called for teachers to teach both in-person and remote students during the school day, then go home and record additional lessons during the evening for a

flipped classroom environment. The member said her district's educators are not given time to record lessons during contract hours—effectively requiring them to record a second full day's worth of lessons in the evening, outside of contract hours. This is one example among many similar scenarios reported by ATPE members who find themselves often working late at night and on the weekend in addition to their work during the school day since the COVID-19 pandemic began.

**ATPE urges the Legislature to help craft solutions to the near ubiquitous staffing and scheduling issues that force teachers to perform significant amounts of off-duty work and are a significant driver of burnout and educator turnover.** In the short term, TEA should consider guidance that would discourage districts from requiring their staff, whether explicitly or implicitly, to perform excessive work-related duties at home (if not working remotely) or during non-contract hours with no additional compensation.

### **Testing**

In addition to health and safety concerns, educators are deeply worried about the negative impact of high-stakes testing on students who are struggling academically, socially, and emotionally as a result of the unprecedented disruption caused by the pandemic. This concern is particularly acute considering the number of critical components of the public school system influenced by STAAR scores, including, most notably, the school accountability system. ATPE appreciated Gov. Greg Abbott's decision to waive STAAR testing requirements for the 2019-20 school year and the federal waivers that followed. We believe similar testing and accountability exemptions are necessary in the 2020-21 school year. The second resolution passed by the 2020 ATPE House of Delegates formalized this request that the State of Texas and the U.S. Department of Education waive requirements to administer the 2020-21 STAAR and TELPAS due to the disruption of in-person instruction caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The learning environment has changed little since most classes moved to remote instruction in the spring. Students are largely returning to remote instruction for the beginning of the fall semester following campus closures in the spring. The same academic, social, and emotional stresses persist and will continue to impact student learning until they are mitigated by significant improvement in the epidemiological environment.

With a vaccine not expected to be universally available until well into 2021, it is unlikely that these challenges will fade in time for students and educators to effectively prepare for STAAR administration in the spring of 2021. **ATPE therefore urges the state to waive requirements to administer the 2020-21 STAAR and TELPAS assessments.**

Whether standardized tests are suspended this year, ATPE also believes it will be impossible to base high-stakes decisions on data derived from the tests this year. Decisions about student promotion and graduation, school accountability ratings, and educator appraisals, compensation, and continued employment all tend to hinge on student test results, which are not likely to yield reliable and longitudinally comparable data under the extraordinary circumstances posed by COVID-19 this year.

ATPE appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback during this process and invites House Public Education Committee members and their staff to contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or [government@atpe.org](mailto:government@atpe.org) for any additional information.