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# ARTICLE III, EDUCATION, THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

*The following are the Texas State Teacher Association's comments on SB30 Appropriation Reduction - SB1 Article III, The Texas Education Agency's 2024-2025 budget*

On behalf of the 65,000 member educators of the Texas State Teachers Association, we appreciate the opportunity to provide input on the Texas Education Agency's 2024-2025 budget in Article III of the SB1 General Appropriations Bill. We want to acknowledge the explicit commitment to at minimum maintain the salary increases provided to employees in the 2020-2021 school year, as well as the stated intent to provide increased funding for school districts. Senate / House bill 3, passed in 2019, was a good start but the governor and the 88th Texas Legislature need to do more.

Texas is facing one of the greatest teacher shortages ever, and 70 percent of teachers are seriously considering leaving the profession.<sup>1</sup> With a budgetary surplus of \$32.7 billion, the money is there to fully address causes for the mass exodus, but it will be incumbent on budget writers and Texas leadership to fully listen to the folks who are walking out the door.

## Educator Compensation

While it's true that the best teachers are drawn to the profession for reasons other than compensation, many Texas teachers can no longer afford not to quit. According to data from the 2021-22 school year, the average Texas teacher salary trails the national average, teachers are at a substantial competitive disadvantage relative to other comparably educated individuals, and Texas ranks 43rd in the nation for average top salary. Competitive teacher compensation is an important part of the solution to recruit and retain a strong and diverse workforce, but Texas teachers also see little benefit to an extended career in education.

## CHALLENGE

- Texas is ranked 26th in average teacher salary, which trails the national average by \$7,510<sup>2</sup>
- When adjusted for inflation, Texas teachers are making 1.54% less than they were in 2012-13
- Texas is ranked 14th for average starting salary but ranked 43rd in top salaries for veteran educators
- Texas teachers are not rewarded for advanced degrees and training relative to other states
- Retired Texas teachers have not seen a cost-of-living adjustment since 2004
- Active educators and retirees cannot afford health care because the state has neglected to increase its monthly contribution to TRS Active Care premiums for school employees

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<sup>1</sup> Texas State Teachers Association and Sam Houston State University Moonlighting and Morale Survey, 2022

<sup>2</sup> National Education Association Rankings of the States, 2021, and Estimates of School Statistics, 2022

- Texas teacher salary concerns are exacerbated for teachers with student debt, which disproportionately burdens educators of color

## RECOMMENDATION

- Texas teachers should receive a pass-through, across-the-board minimum salary increase of \$10,000 above the amount each teacher would have received pursuant to local salary schedules and compensation systems. This is approximately the amount by which the average Texas teacher salary would increase if teachers had received a proportionate share of state funding increases over the past two decades.
- Pay should be differentiated for teachers who pursue advanced degrees, advanced trainings, and teacher-leader roles and duties. This includes a recommendation to amend the Teacher Incentive Allotment to provide that National Board certified teachers are automatically designated as exemplary.
- Texas should offer scholarships and loan forgiveness programs for teachers.
- The state’s contribution to employee health insurance should increase from \$75 per month to \$225 per month districts should be required to maintain a matching local contribution of at least \$225 per month.
- A cost-of-living adjustment should be provided for retired educators.

## ARTICLE III SHORTFALL

### SALARY INCREASE MAINTENANCE FOR DISTRICT EMPLOYEES

TSTA appreciates the commitment to maintain the salary increases to school districts, as specified in Senate Bill 3 (86-R), but Senate Bill 3 was at best just a start. As evidenced by the current educator staffing crisis, this salary increase was insufficient to affect real change, and the emphasis the legislation gives merit pay misses the mark.

TSTA is seeking a minimum salary increase of \$10,000 per teacher above the amount each teacher would have received pursuant to local salary schedules and compensation systems. This is approximately the amount by which the average Texas teacher salary would have increased if teachers had received a proportionate share of state funding increase over the past two decades.

We are also seeking pay increases of at least 7.5 percent for support staff.

### PUBLIC EDUCATION FUNDING INCREASES

TSTA appreciates the intent of the 88th Texas Legislature to provide increased funding for schools, but it is imperative that any funding increase not come at the expense of a meaningful increase in overall teacher compensation that includes: a pass-through, across-the-board minimum salary increase of \$10,000; an increase in the state’s contribution to employee health insurance; and a cost-of-living adjustment for retired educators.

Providing additional funding to the Teacher Incentive or School Safety Allotment alone will not adequately address the true budgetary needs of our schools or salary needs of our teachers.

### LOCAL DESIGNATION SYSTEMS AND TEACHER INCENTIVES

TSTA opposes “incentive” or “merit-based” pay plans, largely based on STAAR scores, which single out a few teachers for extra pay. Governor Abbott has been promising six-figure salaries for teachers, but six-figure salaries through the Teacher Incentive Allotment apply to less than one third of one percent of Texas’s total teacher

workforce. The best way to keep effective teachers in the classroom begins with raising teacher pay in Texas to the national average.

TSTA appreciates that the proposed budget anticipates an increase in designated teachers from the current 1.2 percent, but the estimated number of designations still only represents 4 percent of Texas educators. Moreover, the estimated designations in 2022 exceeded actual designations, and we believe that this is largely due to the lack of capacity many districts have in developing designation plans that both meet agency standards and are reflective of district philosophies of merit.

According to TEA, just 179 districts receive Teacher Incentive Allotment funds. Even in these districts, there are many teachers who are not able to qualify because they teach in positions that are not STAAR-tested. Though designation plans can elect to include all campuses and all teachers as eligible for a designation, many designation plans only include STAAR-tested grades. The fact that designation plans must include a student growth metric such as STAAR means that many districts that want to increase the likelihood of having their plans approved choose to narrow the metric by which “quality” is defined. This has resulted in a system of merit pay where many educators are not even eligible.

Additionally, TEA has recently proposed an amendment to §150.1012(a)(2)(B), which would further exacerbate the inaccessibility of TIA to classroom teachers and deepen the disparity of teacher pay that is unconnected to experience, advanced degrees, or professional development. The proposed amendment would impose a steep renewal fee — \$500 per designated teacher and \$10,000 to renew the plan. This will drastically reduce teachers’ access to better compensation. For many districts, the cost of renewal may exceed the value of allotment funds. Additionally, many currently designated teachers may likely face salary decrease if their district finds plan renewal to be cost-prohibitive.

The proposed change would also exacerbate the problem inherent in incentive pay programs. Better pay for only a small few lucky enough to be employed in districts with approved designation plans, or in positions that qualify for the program, leaves too many behind. Teachers will either flock to districts with the capacity to maintain local designation plans or will leave the profession altogether.

TSTA has been consistent in our opposition to merit pay programs such as the TIA, but because Texas underfunds public schools and teachers earn \$7500 below the national average, educators are left with little choice but to chase the carrot. Unfortunately, as it stands, the TIA carrot is available to a small minority of teachers and does not even begin to approximate a fair or comprehensive salary increase that is necessary and deserved.

The one aspect of TIA that TSTA supports is the fact that National Board-certified teachers automatically receive a designation that is unattached to whether a district has an approved designation plan or to an evaluation tool based largely on student test scores. Currently, NBCTs are automatically designated as recognized, but TSTA and the other three major teacher associations recommend that NBCTs be automatically designated as exemplary. The National Board for Professional Teaching Standards is the most respected certification available in education and is the most rigorous form of professional learning that teachers can undergo. Increasing the automatic designation to exemplary would incentivize more teachers to pursue this rigorous course of study and would encourage our most accomplished teachers to remain in the classroom.

## LITERACY ACHIEVEMENT ACADEMIES

TSTA appreciates the proposed increase in funding for SB 3 Literacy Achievement Academies.

As part of Senate Bill 3, the 86th Texas Legislature promoted multiple literacy initiatives, including the requirement that educators attend Literacy Achievement Academies, or reading academies, and receive training on the science of teaching reading. However, school systems have had insufficient funds to fully support the work of the academies. This oversight has forced districts and teachers to implement low-cost/low-quality models, and it has meant that many teachers are completing the time-consuming professional development in their own time and without compensation.

The reading academies were modeled after the 2018-19 READ Grant academies, a high-quality professional learning exemplar enabled by SB 925 (84-R) that combines in-person trainings with job-embedded coaching. However, because there has been insufficient funding allocated to support the work of the academies, they are falling far short of their intended standard, and many educators are not being compensated for the work.

SB 925 received unanimous support in the Senate and near-unanimous support in the House, and the 84th Texas Legislature also acknowledged the need to put their money where their mouth was; the gold standard literacy academies, upon which SB 3 Literacy Achievement Academies were supposed to be emulated, were very well funded. There was a \$17.8 million budget rider for the SB 925 academies (the governor requested \$30 million), and the legislation also “entitles a teacher who attends a literacy achievement academy to receive a stipend.”

In contrast, the SB 3 reading academies offer districts a false choice between a higher-quality comprehensive model — one more in line with the READ Grant — and the blended model. The comprehensive reading academies replicate the best-practice elements of professional learning, offering individualized coaching in conjunction with in-person trainings. At \$3000 per participant, they are also very expensive and so not a realistic choice for districts. Blended academies, on the other hand, though more affordable at \$400 per participant, lack the meaningful job-embedded coaching and are generally of much lesser quality. Whereas the literacy coaches in the comprehensive model lead a cohort of up to 60 teachers, educators completing the blended model (which are not blended at all but are 100% online) will be one of up to 300 participants that their facilitator is charged to support.

The 87th Texas Legislature had an opportunity to correct the funding oversight of SB3 in its passage of HB 1525 / SB 1536 and to provide districts a real choice. Because it did not, educators have been asked to train themselves, and they are being asked to do so in their own time and oftentimes without pay.

We urge the S/C Article III to ensure there are sufficient funds to make the high-quality model a real choice for every district and to ensure all educators are compensated for their time.

## OPEN EDUCATION RESOURCE INSTRUCTIONAL MATERIALS

TSTA supports appropriating funds for materials that are high quality, but it is critical that the determination of what is or is not “high quality” not be made outside the purview of the State Board of Education and public review.

Under TEC Chapter 31 and 19 TAC Chapter 66, Texas has a several-step process for the review and adoption process that determines whether materials are eligible for adoption by the State Board of Education. The cycle spans two years and includes a rigorous review by commissioner-appointed content experts charged with assessing alignment with Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills and English Language Proficiency Standards.

Materials submitted for adoption are also open for public comment by any Texas resident, and only by majority vote by SBOE are they adopted. There is also a formalized process for developing accessible print materials, for submitting content updates, and for reporting alleged factual errors. Open educational resource instructional

materials are not held to the same scrutiny or public review. TSTA urges the Legislature to require that any external entity developing open education resource materials be properly vetted by the SBOE.

Additionally, districts must have discretion in what materials are adopted, and educators must always have professional autonomy to implement adopted materials in ways that best serve unique student needs. State-developed instructional materials should never be state-mandated, and money appropriated to fund open education resource instructional materials should not be based on the false assumption that all districts will agree the materials are a good match for the unique needs of their community.

## PROPERTY TAX RELIEF

Tax compression, or rate cuts, cost the state \$1.1 billion for the 2022-23 biennium, and the base budget estimate compression to cost \$3.118 billion for the biennium.<sup>3</sup> The proposed additional \$2.156 billion is above what is required in current law, and there are no additional funds for public education in the base budget. Instead, this budget seeks to accelerate tax compression while ignoring the needs of our schools.

## SUPPLEMENTAL SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES

TSTA opposed SB 1716, the legislation that established the Supplemental Special Education Services. Although we support that the bill as passed removed provisions that would have made it a voucher, we still believe the law has caused a disconnect between recommendations made by professional educators that are in the best interest of students and those by for-profit vendors. TSTA made recommendations during rulemaking that we believe would have helped to mitigate this effect, but unfortunately these changes were not adopted.

Admission, Review and Dismissal committees in Texas work collaboratively to determine how to best meet the educational needs of the student and goals of the individualized education plan. Because SB 1716 allows for educational determinations to be made by non-educators, TSTA believes that it is especially critical that ARD committees offer input into which supplemental services are selected. Involving professional educators in the selection of SSES would protect against misinformation from for-profit vendors and uninformed bias by non-educators.

Expanding funding for a program like SSES would be a misallocation of funding because it benefits students selectively. In the context of the Texas Commission on Special Education Funding, the state is on the verge of making some very powerful changes on how the state funds students with special needs. This is where our focus and our funding should be directed. The Texas Legislature has a constitutional duty to provide an efficient system of free public schools. Forcing families to compete for funding for services is a misuse of funding and falls short of constitutional duty to serve all students.

Texas has an unprecedented budget surplus to fully fund comprehensive and meaningful responses to the challenges facing Texas public schools, including the educator staffing crisis. It is incumbent upon the 88th Texas Legislature to appropriate funds to education responsibly and in a manner that best serves students. And who better to ask what students need than a teacher?

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<sup>3</sup> <https://everytexan.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/02/Property-Tax-Compression-Growing-the-State-Share-Without-Improving-School-Funding.pdf>