# "An Impossible Situation"

## Why Texas Educators Are Struggling to Serve Students During COVID-19—and Pathways State and District Leaders Can Follow to Correct the Course

**ATPE SURVEY ANALYSIS**

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ATPE has conducted multiple surveys to assess the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on Texas educators. Three complementary surveys are discussed in this report: a May 20–June 3 survey completed by 4,266 educator respondents, a follow-up ATPE member-only survey conducted October 8–23 and completed by 1,886 respondents, and an ATPE member-only "Back to School: Health and Safety" survey conducted September 16–27 and completed by 770 respondents.

As the May and October surveys included a similar question allowing for longitudinal analysis of a shift in educators' top concerns, these two surveys have been analyzed together. In spring 2020, respondents' top concerns were students' health and safety and their own health and safety. As the 2020-21 school year began, top concerns shifted to respondents' own health and safety along with increased workload and demands on their time. In fact, in the October survey, 85% said their work hours had increased this year, with 53% attributing the increase to the extra planning necessary in the new educational environment. Furthermore, over 75% of respondents to the October survey were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with state leadership (41% "very unsatisfied"), and 53% were "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with their school district leadership. Many respondents felt district and state-level COVID-19 policies had not been designed with educators in mind, leading to impractical and unreasonable job expectations and extreme stress. Although

educators are concerned with students' overall well-being, they also believe in-person instruction must be safe, well resourced, and effective.

The September "Back to School: Health and Safety" survey found that 58% of respondents did not feel Texas public schools were ensuring the health and safety of faculty, students, and staff during the fall 2020 semester. An analysis of this survey's open-ended question reveals this sentiment is rooted in educator perceptions that health and safety policies have been inadequately developed or implemented, including policies on physical distancing and class sizes, mask-wearing, COVID-19 testing and notification protocols, sanitation, and health screening procedures. Additionally, teachers are experiencing mental health concerns stemming from the stress of increased workloads and not seeing their health and safety reflected in the priorities of state and district leaders. Ultimately, teachers are concerned about the pandemic's negative impact on student learning, but they feel the state should not force unsafe levels of in-person instruction by requiring it for school funding.

These surveys offer indications of paths state and district leaders can take to increase the number of educators who feel safe on campus and thus ensure the most effective teaching and learning environment. The state must provide the resources for districts to effectively implement policies such as mask-wearing and physical distancing, hire additional staff to reduce class sizes and teacher

workloads, and ensure educators have adequate planning time. Additionally, the state must recognize and meet the long-term need to remediate students who have fallen behind due to the pandemic by providing ample state resources and support for educators to accomplish this task.

In addition, as ATPE has advocated since the early days of the pandemic, educators' voices must continually be included in decision-making processes at every level. By meaningfully communicating with educators who hold the ultimate expertise in teaching and learning, the state and districts can navigate the pandemic in the most effective way possible and mitigate its future negative effects.

## ATPE's COVID-19 Survey Results: Comparing Educators' Views from May to October 2020

ATPE conducted two surveys regarding the impact of COVID-19 on educators using SurveyMonkey: a May 20–June 3 survey open to all Texas educators and an October 8–23 survey open to ATPE members. The May survey and the October survey garnered 4,266 and 1,886 responses, respectively. The May survey consisted of four questions, three of which were descriptive and one that asked specifically about the respondent's concerns with COVID-19. The October survey consisted of nine questions to gather descriptive information about the respondents and specific respondent experiences related to COVID-19 and the return to school.

In both surveys, the majority of respondents were classroom teachers (72.5% in May and 75.5% in October), while the rest of the participants identified themselves as district-level administrators, campus-level administrators, counselors, librarians, diagnosticians, para-educators/support staff, or other (instructional coach, student teacher, substitute teacher, etc.). All Education Service Center (ESC) regions were represented in both surveys, with most respondents from the more populated Regions 4, 10, 11, 13, and 20.

To allow for longitudinal analysis, both surveys asked educators to select up to three top concerns regarding the current school year amid the pandemic. In May, educators' top concerns, in descending order, were the health and safety of students, their own health and safety, student learning, and increased workload and demands on time. In the open-ended "other" option for this question, educators elaborated that they were concerned with a new learning environment being socially, mentally, emotionally, and academically effective for students (especially for those with special needs) and that they worried about the health and safety of their families, among other things.

By October, the No. 1 concern chosen by respondents was their own health and safety, and many elaborated on this by choosing "other" to explain that they were also concerned with the health and safety of their families. The second-most chosen option was increased workload and demands on time. Throughout the survey, educators expressed that they have had to take on extra duties and that lesson planning has multiplied due to remote learning. The third-most chosen concern was the health and safety of students, and the fourth-most chosen concern was student learning gaps and learning loss. Using the "other" option for this question, some respondents expressed that they were concerned for the mental health of students and teachers and that students were not learning effectively in the remote environment.
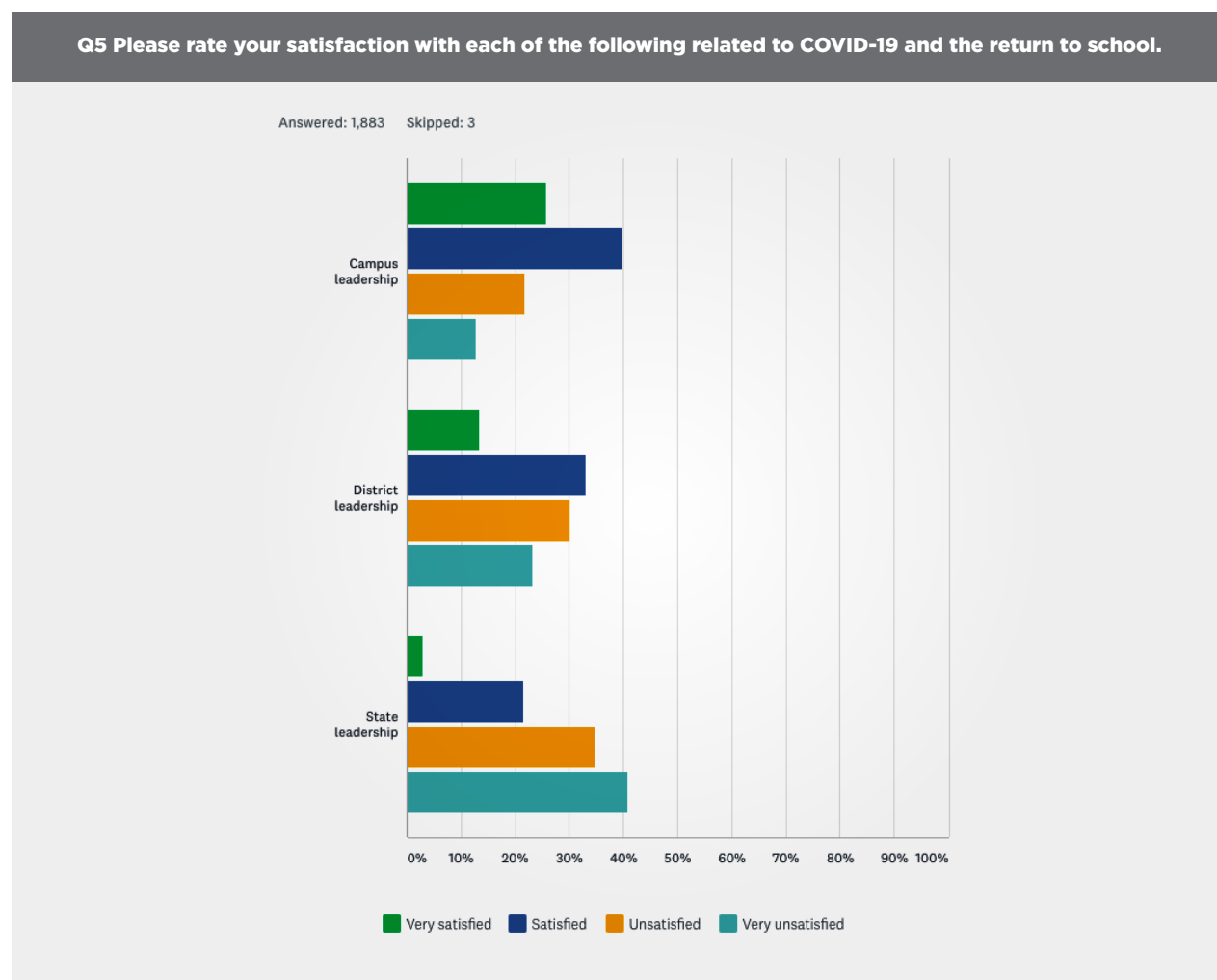
The shift in respondent attitudes from May to October shows the stark realities teachers are facing. Initially, they were most concerned with their students' well-being and how the pandemic would impact their profession day to day. They knew extra planning and precautions, such as smaller class sizes and adequate personal protective equipment (PPE), would be needed to effectively teach children while keeping educators safe. When the fall rolled around, the state and some school district leaders failed to implement adequate health and safety policies, and the concerns of respondents shifted. A great burden was placed on educators to prepare and plan for multiple modes of instruction and additional duties outside the scope of teaching and learning. Many were required to enter school buildings without assurance of proper safety protocols, even as their students were opting to stay home for remote instruction. These shifts in workplace conditions have caused extreme stress for educators, moving their concerns for their own health and work demands to the top of the list.

## Other October Survey Results

Through additional questions related to COVID-19, ATPE's October survey sheds light on the increased work demands placed on respondents. Over 70% of respondents indicated that they were working in some sort of remote environment, whether fully remote or a combination of face-to-face and remote instruction. Only 11.7% were teaching fully face to face. Some indicated that they were not in any instructional environment because they had resigned or taken leave, in some cases after their district had denied their request for medical accommodations and ordered them to return to school to provide face-to-face instruction.

Eighty-five percent of respondents indicated their workload had increased. Among those, 52.7% said this change was due to increased planning needs, while 26.5% chose "other," and 14.2% chose "paperwork." Respondents who chose "other" cited the source of their workload increase as "all of the above," or they responded that they wanted to choose both planning needs and another option, such as instruction or paperwork. Others attributed their increased workloads to grading and a need for increased communications with parents and students to ensure remote students are participating in class and completing their work.

In the October survey, respondents also indicated their level of satisfaction with campus, district, and state



**Q5 Please rate your satisfaction with each of the following related to COVID-19 and the return to school.**

Answered: 1,883    Skipped: 3

Campus leadership

District leadership

State leadership

0%  10%  20%  30%  40%  50%  60%  70%  80%  90%  100%

■ Very satisfied  ■ Satisfied  ■ Unsatisfied  ■ Very unsatisfied

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leadership as related to COVID-19 and the return to school.

The results showed that 75.5% of respondents were either "unsatisfied" or "very unsatisfied" with state leadership. Respondents were more satisfied with district leadership, with 46.5% either "very satisfied" or "satisfied." Finally, respondents were most satisfied with campus leadership, with 65.4% either "very satisfied" or "satisfied." The additional comments provided for this question reveal that respondents do not see district- or state-level policies as adequately or consistently addressing their health and safety concerns. In general, many expressed that policymakers did not have a grasp of what those policies look like in practice. Additionally, the requirements the state has placed on districts and educators to return to in-person instruction has caused respondents to feel that their job constantly changes and is impossible to perform. This has led to extreme mental stress among educators. Some respondents also shared that their accommodation requests are not being honored by their districts and that district leaders are bending to the will of the community, putting the health and safety of educators low on the priority list.

In a question asking whether respondents had an opportunity to provide input or feedback to their campus or district administration regarding the return to school, 52% said they were not given such an opportunity. Although it is promising that just under half of respondents *did* have an opportunity to provide feedback, ATPE believes this number should be 100% as educators are the practitioners who implement policies and provide an educational environment to students. It is clear from the ATPE survey results that many policies were not developed or implemented with educators in mind; otherwise, educators would feel safer and less stressed in the current environment. In fact, some respondents said their school boards had completely disregarded teacher input when making back-to-school decisions.

The final question on the October survey asked respondents to share any additional thoughts or concerns they had regarding the pandemic's impact on public education. The 901 responses to the question were analyzed to generate nine themes, giving greater insight into the experiences of educators during this time.

The most common concern expressed by educators was staff safety; over 26% of responses included some expression that respondents felt their health and safety were not being adequately prioritized and ensured. Additionally, a concern for increased demands and workload was included in 25.0% of the open-ended responses, with respondents commenting on premature teacher burnout, not having enough time to feel effective in their jobs, and the added stress of unnecessary standardized testing this year. The third most-mentioned concern, poor local support, was stated in 21.0% of responses, as respondents expressed that their districts were not heeding educators' feedback and concerns, had poor planning and implementation strategies, or, in general, were not including educators as an important part of solving COVID-19 education problems.

Other concerns expressed in response to the final open-ended question included student safety (19.6% of responses), student learning (16.9%), stress/anxiety (11.2%), educator retention (9.7%), COVID-19 case reporting (5.7%), and poor state support (4.0%). For instance, some respondents spoke of inadequate sanitation practices in schools, unclear case reporting, and quarantine protocols that have led to school-based spread of COVID-19. Respondents were also concerned for the well-being of students and their continued academic progress, citing that remote instruction was not ideal but that it was the safest option for their community amid the pandemic. Without clear state guidelines and resources that can create safety and clarity, these conditions cause some educators to feel at a loss.

The added worries of the day to day—whether COVID-19 is spreading in the school, how to manage extra duties and responsibilities, whether the educator will bring COVID-19 home to their family, whether students are learning effectively during the pandemic, maintaining contact with hard-to-reach students and families, and fulfilling students' individualized education plans (IEP) and Section 504 accommodations in a constantly changing environment—have all led to extreme stress, anxiety, frustration, fatigue, and other mental health concerns among educators. Those who can retire or take an extended period off from working in the school have done so while others fear that a big wave of retirement is coming at the end of this school year due to the lack of attention to teachers' concerns.

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The concerns expressed by respondents in ATPE's October survey are similar to those shared in our September survey, which is discussed in the following section. Although a sizeable portion of ATPE members answered each survey, a comparison of the two is limited by the difference in open-ended prompts; the October survey asked for concerns while the September survey asked for policies that made the respondent feel safe or unsafe. The October survey reinforces the state and local policies and practices that caused September survey respondents to feel that their health and safety were at risk, such as COVID-19 case reporting protocols, inconsistent implementation, and lack of resources. Additionally, both surveys show that respondents are concerned with educators' mental health, student learning, and human resource issues that force educators back on campus despite documented medical conditions.

The following analysis of the September survey, which was conducted through ATPE's Advocacy Central tool, brings the top concerns of educators within the context of state and local policy. Understanding the specific policies that enhance or inhibit health and safety in schools is crucial to making changes that will lead to greater job satisfaction among educators, less risk of attrition, and, ultimately, greater effectiveness in achieving student academic progress.

## ATPE's September "Back to School: Health and Safety" Survey Results

ATPE conducted a "Back to School: Health and Safety" member-only survey September 16–27 through our online Advocacy Central tool. The survey, to which 770 members responded, contained only two questions, each mirroring language used in a request for information posted August 19, 2020, by the Texas House Public Education Committee. ATPE used the responses to these two questions to provide specific, member-focused input to the committee. The survey questions were as follows:

1. Please choose your level of agreement or disagreement with this statement: "Texas public schools are ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty,

and staff during the 2020 fall semester." (Strongly agree, agree, unsure, disagree, strongly disagree)

2. Thinking about policies your local school district has implemented in response to COVID-19, do you feel that your health and safety and the health and safety of your students and colleagues has been adequately ensured? If possible, please explain which district policies are making you feel safe/unsafe and what changes, if any, would make you feel safer. When applicable, please speak directly to classrooms, lab settings, and cafeterias. (Open-ended)

ATPE Governmental Relations analyzed the survey results to present an overview of how teachers are experiencing the back-to-school transition during the COVID-19 pandemic in Texas. While the first survey question is based on a simple scale, the open-ended responses to the second question were systematically analyzed into seven themes as described below.

### Question 1

Survey respondents were split on whether they felt their district was ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff in the return to school. Fifty-eight percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed that schools are ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the 2020 fall semester, while only 31% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement. Eleven percent were unsure, possibly because they were not working in an in-person school setting at the time of the survey, have resigned, or are recently retired.

**Please choose your level of agreement or disagreement with this statement: "Texas public schools are ensuring the health and safety of students, faculty, and staff during the 2020 fall semester."**

| Item | Responses |
|------|-----------|
| Strongly agree | 98 (13%) |
| Agree | 137 (18%) |
| Unsure | 87 (11%) |
| Disagree | 219 (28%) |
| Strongly disagree | 229 (30%) |

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## Question 2

Responses to Question 2 provide more detail on how educators are feeling, what the return to school looks like, and what educators need to feel safe. Additionally, the open-ended responses provide a glimpse into the practices of districts whose employees report feeling safe. The seven themes that emerged in our response analysis were positive reactions, feedback on school district COVID-19 policies, views on the implementation of such policies, personal concerns stemming from the pandemic, human resource issues, impressions of state leadership, and concerns about academics. The section headings in quotation marks indicate actual statements made by survey respondents.

### Positive Responses — "My district is doing the best it can"

Although responses ranged from educators feeling that they were not a priority at all to others feeling "over-safe," many conceded that their district was doing the best it could with the resources it had. Approximately 25% of open-ended responses were positive about their district, though some still offered suggestions on how the district could improve.

Educators who felt relatively safe expressed that their district had well-enforced policies in place, such as policies related to social distancing, mask-wearing, COVID-19 notification protocols, and stringent sanitation practices. Additionally, educators who were satisfied with their district seemed to have effective lines of communication with district and campus leaders. Many even listed their district's exact protocols, an indication that these had been clearly communicated to the staff. Furthermore, teachers who felt safe noted that there was community buy-in regarding the district's policies.

*"Yes!!!! Our school installed the UV/oxidizer systems in our vents. Social distancing is practiced in every way every day. Masks are worn even though we are a county with fewer than 20 active cases. Extra sanitizing cleaning is between classes as well as before and after school. Every staff member and student uses hand sanitizer when changing classrooms and at the end of every period desks and equipment are wiped down. Our cafeteria capacity is not over stretched as we have modified schedules to adapt to the proper number of students who can safely*

*be in the cafeteria with social distancing. Temperature are taken before staff and students can enter the building. Parents cannot go past the vestibule and must wear masks. It helps that the staff, students, parents, and community are on board with the protocols."*

The positive responses often highlighted the very policies and practices requested by educators who did not feel safe in their districts. The rest of the feedback comprised responses in which educators expressed feelings of unsafety, mental stress, and general lack of satisfaction with their district's COVID-19 policies and implementation of those policies.

The remaining themes, derived from the negative responses, are presented in order of prevalence, starting with the most frequently expressed concerns among the responses.

### Policies — "Social distancing is virtually impossible"

A lack of physical distancing was the top concern among respondents. Although some believed physical distancing was impractical for school-aged children, particularly in younger grades, respondents indicated that physical distancing was one of the most important policies their districts could adopt. This concern often accompanied comments that class sizes were either inconsistent or too large to maintain proper distancing in space-limited classrooms. Furthermore, many respondents feared enforcement of distancing rules would become harder as more students returned to campus following the end of limited in-person transition periods afforded by the Texas Education Agency (TEA).

*"My concern is that essentially we haven't reduced class sizes, in fact mine increased in size, to even make it seem like we are trying to implement social distancing, which is our best defense against this virus. My desks are barely 18 inches apart and I have 25 of them in my room."*

The second-most cited policy respondents said would make them feel safer is mask-wearing by students and staff. Respondents felt that mask protocols, in addition to physical distancing, were particularly neglected in district policies pertaining to special education settings. Mask-wearing was also a distinct concern in the cafeteria

setting, referred to as a "petri dish" by one respondent. Teachers expressed feeling exposed while on lunch duty when students take off their masks to eat.

> *"It is impossible to provide social distancing at school. Students eat in cafeteria 2 feet apart. It is a constant struggle to have all students wearing their masks properly. I see many students with masks falling off their noses."*

Respondents also expressed frustration with their districts' lack of transparency and communication regarding COVID-19 testing, quarantine, contact tracing, and notification protocols. Respondents often felt left in the dark when it came to students or staff who tested positive, sometimes even hearing from fellow staff or the parents of students who had tested positive before being notified by the district—even though they had been in close contact with that individual. Some expressed their district seemed more concerned with "bending to parents' wishes" and maintaining attendance than stringent contact tracing and quarantine procedures.

> *"I have a student who has been absent for 3 days. I just happened to find out she was sent home to be tested for COVID. No one informed me. I don't understand why more can't be done to ensure the health and mental health of teachers during this time."*

Another concern was sanitation and the lack of regular cleaning occurring in respondents' schools. Although some applauded the efforts of custodial staff, others felt that regular cleaning procedures were unchanged from pre-pandemic times and needed to be enhanced. Some felt the sanitation protocols in place were ineffective, such as relying on sprays that do not reach all surfaces. Others were concerned with air quality and the inability to circulate fresh, clean air through their classrooms.

Respondents shared that screening procedures, particularly temperature checks, for staff and students would make them feel safer. Respondents also said they do not trust self-screening. Some felt that the demands on working parents create tremendous pressure to send a sick child to school.

In general, some respondents felt that their district's plan was lacking. In these situations, respondents were not sure of their district's policies, did not feel included in the decision-making process, thought the district had glaring gaps or inconsistencies in its policies, felt the district was not taking the pandemic seriously, or perceived a lack of leadership in their district.

### Implementation — "We are safe only to the extent that everyone obeys"

Although the policies a district has in place are extremely important for creating a safe school setting, the implementation of such policies is just as crucial. Respondents ranged from feeling that their district was doing a fantastic job at implementation to feeling that the district was only "great on paper."

When it comes to implementation of district policies, the top concern among respondents was access to PPE and supplies, particularly cleaning supplies. Many responded that the initial provision of cleaning supplies had already been exhausted, while others expressed that the state-provided masks were of low quality or did not fit children properly. Respondents often commented that they had to purchase their own supplies.

> *"We do not have the cleaning supplies to properly clean our schools. Custodians are short-handed so deep cleaning is not occurring. I have had to purchase a lot of my own supplies just to ensure my students and I are safe."*

Many respondents also stated their districts did not consistently implement or enforce the policies that were important to them, such as physical distancing and mask-wearing. For instance, athletics programs in some schools did not follow the same protocols as academic programs, which teachers felt hampered their efforts in the classroom. Additionally, some respondents indicated that distancing and mask-wearing policies were unevenly enforced from classroom to classroom, while some said campus principals did not enforce these policies at all. This lack of consistency caused respondents to feel frustrated and unsafe.

> *"Staff are inconsistent about wearing masks. Some only put on a mask if they see someone coming who also has a mask on. Some teachers allow students to take off their masks during class discussions. Administration is trying their best, but they're inconsistent about enforcement*

*and tend to look the other way a lot of the time rather than confront people. They're also inconsistent about enforcing social distancing. For example, we social distance at athletic events, but kids talk without masks in close proximity while eating in our cafeteria. We also do things like have potluck lunches in our teachers lounge on Fridays, which does not seem like a good idea."*

The pandemic has also necessitated that teachers take on extra duties to a greater extent than in a typical school year. Respondents said they had taken on cleaning duties, nurse duties, and extra teaching duties due to staff absences and a hybrid in-person/virtual teaching environment. Several respondents noted that just a few weeks into the school year, teachers are already "exhausted" and "overwhelmed" as they feel they are working "two full-time jobs."

*"Our campus is working diligently to social distance, wear masks, and disinfect/sanitize regularly. My only complaint is no more staff was hired to make these changes, so all of the extra work falls to me and the other teachers—including extra monitoring before school and during lunch time for students needing to be spread out."*

Implementation of any policy without communication to those it will impact will lead to a less effective policy. One respondent shared that they "were not included in any discussions and then told the rules at the 11th hour before the students returned to class." Similarly, others said they hadn't been informed when students were returning to campus, couldn't get clear answers to their questions, had no instruction from leadership, had received inconsistent information, or felt that their concerns were not being heard. Others were afraid to speak out or had been admonished for asking questions.

### Personal Concerns — "An impossible situation"

The amount of mental stress and anxiety educators are experiencing in the return to school is at an all-time high. Even those who are not as worried by the pandemic are frustrated. Respondents expressed fear for their lives, depression, and a feeling that teachers "were an afterthought" in the COVID-19 planning process. One respondent said, "Teachers are having panic attacks, breakdowns, and feeling inadequate, [and] overwhelmed," just as the school year is ramping up. Some said the conditions were causing even veteran teachers—often the most effective—to leave or consider leaving the profession. One respondent asked, "How in the world are we expected to care for ourselves when everything in the world is being thrown at us?" Another commented that teachers were being "sent into an impossible situation."

Much of the mental stress respondents expressed was related to feelings that in-person instruction is unsafe and elevates the risks of exposure to COVID-19. Respondents were particularly stressed when envisioning an increased number of students on campus as schools transition into a higher capacity for in-person learning. Similarly, many also said they did not feel like a priority to their district.

### Human Resources — "Even if we have a doctor's note ..."

Many respondents commented on the actions or inactions of their districts' human resources departments, including decisions pertaining to sick leave, disability accommodations, and family medical leave. Most notably, respondents who commented on leave and accommodations typically shared that they or a loved one was at high risk for complications related to COVID-19. These respondents wanted options to work from home but expressed that their district was ignoring their request or had rescinded a previously approved request.

*"I am required to be on campus every day, just like everyone else who is not disabled, risking my health because [my] ISD said NO one will be allowed to teach remotely (from the safety of their home) even if they have requested an ADA accommodation.*

*To date I cannot even get the district to acknowledge that I have a medically documented disability for which I provided documentation to them so that I could be afforded an accommodation to teach remotely."*

Some educators who responded to the survey had already resigned because their district would not accommodate them. Others feared they would have to resign if conditions did not improve. Many expressed they should have the same choices offered to parents of their students

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as to whether to return to an on-campus environment.

### State Leadership — "Is it about the money or our health and the students?"

Some respondents were keenly aware of the interplay between state, federal, and local entities regarding COVID-19 policies. Some were thankful for state leadership decisions, such as the governor's mask order, while many felt that educators' well-being was of little concern to policymakers. One respondent said they felt "like a pawn piece in a deadly game of chess," while another commented that they felt people's lives were being risked because they perceived state officials wanted to "just try it and see what happens.'"

Many respondents directed their comments at the Texas Education Agency (TEA). One educator called the agency's COVID-19 guidelines "grossly inadequate," while another responded, "Thankfully my principal did more [than the TEA guidelines required] and our campus has kept cases very low." Most commonly, respondents were aware of the state's insistence on tying district funding to in-person instruction, often stating that the resulting emphasis on getting students back on campus was putting their health and safety at risk.

> "We were even told that because TEA was considering not funding schools, that it is more so about making sure we are open than making sure we are safe. We have been asked to soldier along and to pretend as if nothing is going wrong so as not to alert other employees or the community into panic."

Others referred to the state and TEA as the entities that should be providing adequate PPE and cleaning supplies, particularly for those teaching students with special needs.

### Academics — "Their education is suffering"

Although health and safety issues were the primary concerns expressed, respondents were also concerned about the quality of education their students were receiving, both on campus and in virtual settings. Although some respondents commented that learning in a virtual setting was not healthy for students, one respondent added, "Some parents are taking the child's tests while other parents haven't logged on yet as their child has missed the first four weeks of school." Another respondent noted that a student had not been able to access online learning for several weeks due to connectivity and device issues.

Some respondents pointed to their time spent on extra duties outside of the classroom as a factor contributing to having less time to provide individualized learning. One respondent said: "Our janitorial staff is overworked and teachers are having to do most of the cleaning. This takes time out of class that we could be spending on educating students." Another educator said: "I will continue teaching virtually from the school, and I have been given so many duties and substitute assignments (due to teachers in quarantine) that I have less than half the school day to engage with my virtual students."

Additionally, those who teach in bilingual and special education settings were particularly concerned for the unique needs of their students. As one teacher described it: "With special ed kids it is impossible to socially [distance] and still provide the instruction that they need. PPE helps but that also reduces the effectiveness of the instruction especially for deaf ed students that I work with."

### Conclusion

In these ATPE educator surveys, most respondents expressed that the health and safety needs of students, faculty, and staff were a top concern. In addition, the responses show that teacher workloads must be managed to create an optimal teaching and learning environment during this pandemic. Meeting these needs should take center stage if we are to maintain the integrity of the public education system for future generations. Furthermore, failure to meet the health and safety expectations of faculty and staff threatens to significantly increase teacher attrition to the detriment of school budgets and academic performance.

The positive responses to ATPE's surveys indicate that some districts are navigating the pandemic successfully, largely due to clear, transparent communication that involves educators. It is important for all districts to listen to educators because, as one ATPE member said in response to our September survey, "WE know our STUDENTS." Leaders should strive to create an environment in which educators feel that they are a priority and their input is

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valuable; lines of communication are always open; and policies are clear, consistent, and enforced. This helps to ensure a stable environment that leads to the most effective policy implementation and the highest degree of learning possible during a chaotic pandemic.

Educators who responded to the ATPE surveys indicated that clear policies on such matters as social distancing/class size, mask-wearing, effective screening and COVID-19 testing, quarantine, contact tracing, and notification protocols are critical to ensuring a safe and healthy learning environment. Consistently communicating and enforcing these policies were equally important in the minds of respondents.

These surveys show that schools can improve educators' effectiveness by providing the supplies necessary to stay safe (such as cleaning supplies and PPE), the time to carry out their duties, and remote work options when doing so is medically warranted. Teachers have shouldered myriad extra duties during the pandemic, which can detract from the time available to teach students. Furthermore, many educators who are at high risk for developing complications if infected with COVID-19 feel their only options are to either risk their health by returning to in-person teaching or to leave a profession they love.

Educators who responded to ATPE's surveys felt as though their districts' hands were tied by the state's insistence on in-person learning and TEA's funding mechanism that forces districts to teach students on campus. Although they expressed reservations about the effectiveness of virtual learning, many respondents felt that in-person learning is unsafe during the pandemic. Furthermore, the anxiety, panic, stress, and depression associated with educators' fear of COVID-19 exposure, believing they are not a priority to leaders, feeling that there is no option but to return to an unsafe environment, and a general increase in job-related duties are taking an enormous toll on teachers.

## ATPE Recommendations
### The following are ATPE's recommendations based on the results and analysis of these surveys:

1. Educators should be included in school districts' COVID-19 planning.

2. Districts should be transparent and consistent about COVID-19 policies and their enforcement across all school programs, including maintaining a confidential, trustworthy line of communication between employees and district leaders.

3. Class sizes should be limited to enhance the effectiveness of physical distancing in mitigating the spread of the virus.

4. The state should ensure districts have adequate cleaning supplies and PPE.

5. The state should provide resources, such as funding for substitute teachers, custodial staff, and additional teachers, to ensure districts can accommodate increased staffing needs to relieve educators from extra duties, both during the pandemic and after when students have increased learning needs.

6. Districts should ensure educators who need medical accommodations are being appropriately served under applicable federal law, such as the Americans with Disabilities Act.

7. The state should not tie district funding to a requirement for in-person instruction and should instead allow districts to make the best decisions for their communities.

8. Educators' mental health must be prioritized through all policy decisions, including providing funding that affects staffing levels and the ability of districts to allow educators to focus on a reasonable workload.

9. To reduce the risk of viral spread and alleviate fears of exposure, the state should reconsider current standardized testing requirements that will increase the number of students required to be on campus for testing days.

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