



Texas AFT

*A Union of Professionals*

# Texas Teacher

Fall 2012



**San Antonio local helps  
restore custodian jobs**

**And why that makes food service  
workers happier and safer! p. 10**

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battle for the pay  
they're owed, p. 3**

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## Your chance to share your knowledge with other members

### Workshop proposals sought for professional-issues day

Mark your calendar now to attend the Texas AFT convention June 21-23, 2013, in Houston. The gathering serves primarily as a policy-making body for the union, but it also includes a full day of professional issues workshops on Saturday.

Here is where you, our members, come in for the planning stages. Do you have a particular workshop you've developed or presented that has been helpful to your colleagues? If so, whether it is cutting-edge or tried-and-true, we invite you to consider presenting it to other Texas AFT members on June 22, 2013.

Your proposal will be reviewed by our Paraprofessional and School Related Personnel (PSRP) committee and/or our Quality Educational Standards in Teaching (QuEST) committee, and considered along with other workshop and program ideas.

Interested? Great! We invite you to visit <http://docs.texasaft.org/convention> for more details and to fill out your official

## CONVENTION 2013



June 21-23  
Houston

proposal. Workshops may be geared to any of our constituent groups and should be 105 minutes in length. We'll want a description of your workshop, its basis in research or practice, the desired outcomes for the participants, and a bit about you! If selected, you'll receive a stipend and our enthusiastic appreciation. The deadline for submissions is February 15, 2013.

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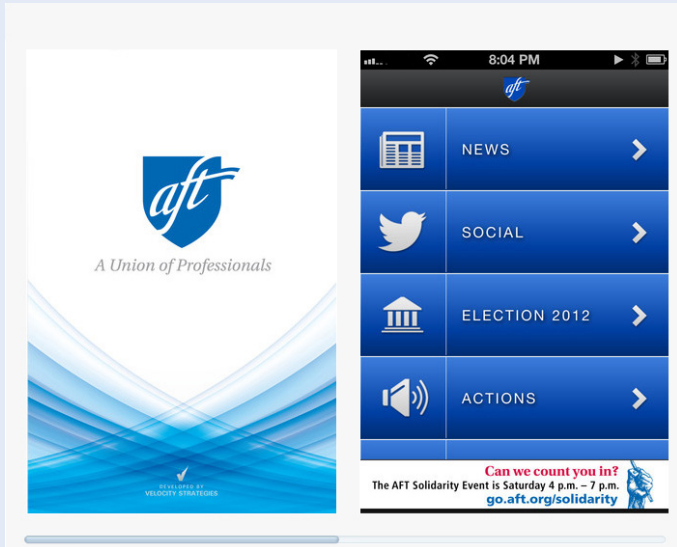


### **Fall spotlight: Mobile phone plan discount!**

Want to save big money on your wireless phone bill and support a union provider? Texas AFT members get a 15 percent discount—an average savings of \$71 a year—on qualified plans from the nation's only unionized wireless provider, and activation fees are waived.

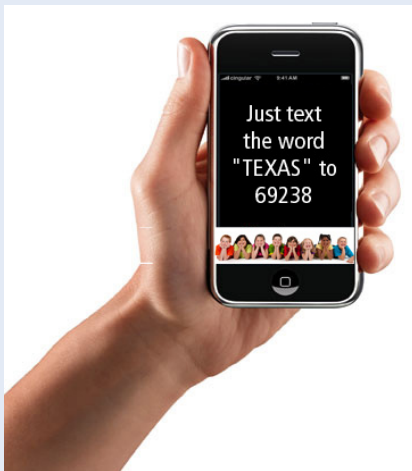
Visit [www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org) and click on **Membership > Member Benefits** for the full scoop.

# Staying plugged in has never been easier



## New AFT app for smart phones

Now you can access the latest news, action campaigns and social commentary from AFT right from your phone. AFT's new app for iPhone and Droids is available now for download on iTunes and Google Play. Or visit [www.tinyurl.com/AFTphoneapp](http://www.tinyurl.com/AFTphoneapp).



## Sign up for the Texas AFT text-message alert system!

Texas AFT has launched a new text messaging program that will help ensure our members make their voices heard on important issues. You can subscribe via your personal mobile phone to receive a text-

message reminder to vote and other important alerts. Just text the word "TEXAS" to 69238 on your mobile cell phone. (Texas AFT does not charge for this service, but normal data and message rates may apply.)

You will receive a confirmation text and voting reminders. You can also receive updates on volunteer opportunities in your area, and you can unsubscribe from this service at any time.

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## Texas Teacher

Texas Teacher is the award-winning publication of Texas AFT, an affiliate of the American Federation of Teachers, AFL-CIO, and is printed quarterly.

To be added to our mailing list, contact Rob D'Amico at 800-222-3827 or [editor@texasaft.org](mailto:editor@texasaft.org). Cover photo by Jody Horton.



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Linda Bridges  
Texas AFT President

Many years ago, I read an article about teaching as a profession contending that in order to consider a job a profession certain standards had to be present. I have looked for the article in vain, but recently had the fortune of running across another look at the topic in the June 2012 Learning Forward Journal. Titled “I am a Professional,” it listed defining the characteristics of a profession:

1. Formal preparation for one’s chosen field, most often through a university;
2. A formal association that holds itself responsible for the quality of services provided by an individual in the profession;
3. A regulated certification process tied to some form of entry examination;
4. A unique set of skills based on a thorough understanding of the knowledge base generated by members of the profession;
5. A service that is both unique and vital to society;
6. A strong sense of service to the clients or recipients of the professional services;
7. A sense of responsibility and service to the profession itself;
8. An ethical code that guides the behavior of individuals;
9. A high degree of respect from the members of society served by the profession.

Teaching has most of these characteristics of a profession, but the article also addresses what’s happening with #9. As the article stated, “It was once a calling that had the same degree of respect given to members of the clergy, but somewhere in the evolution of teaching in the United States, that sense of respect has been diminished, especially by policymakers who impose punitive actions when students fail to meet policy mandates.” I would add that sense of respect has also been diminished when lawmakers attack teachers’ pension plans, due process rights, and undermine the financial stability of our public schools.

The results of the latest MetLife Survey of the American Teacher indicate that teacher job satisfaction has dropped dramatically in just two years. In 2009, 59 percent of teachers were very satisfied with their jobs. In 2011, that number dropped to 44 percent. This represents the largest drop in teacher satisfaction since the annual MetLife Survey of the American Teacher first started tracking teacher satisfaction in 1984, and it’s at the lowest

point in the past 24 years.

Working conditions topped the predictors of job satisfaction for teachers in the recent research paper from The Project on the Next Generation of Teachers at the Harvard Graduate School of Education. The research paper stated, “Teachers who teach in favorable work environments report that they are more satisfied and less likely to plan to transfer or leave the profession than their peers in schools with less favorable conditions, even after controlling for student demographics and other school and teacher characteristics.”

The study went on to determine a link between teacher job satisfaction and student achievement growth. And while safe working facilities, adequate resources, and lesson preparation time are important factors in job satisfaction, the three most important elements of job satisfaction are:

1. Collegial relationships, or the extent to which teachers report having productive working relationships with their colleagues;
2. Leaders are supportive and create school environments conducive to learning; and
3. School culture or the extent to which school environments are characterized by mutual trust, respect, openness, and commitment to student achievement.

According to the 2009 The MetLife Survey of the American Teacher: Collaborating for Student Success, teachers with high job satisfaction were more likely to work in schools with higher levels of collaboration. Of course, we know that collaboration must be real and meaningful. The question then is how to professionalize teaching. Here are a few thoughts.

- Do not equate teaching quality with results on achievement tests. Teacher evaluation systems tied to high-stakes testing programs and well-meaning but harsh accountability systems based on rewards and punishments have no place in defining teaching quality.

- Teachers’ voices must play a vital role in the legislative process. Legislative changes must be done with teachers — not to teachers.

- Collaboration between teachers and management must be real and meaningful. Systems where school employees participate in a democratic process to elect one voice to speak for them are vital to the creation of a collaborative process that addresses job satisfaction.

Teachers are smart, talented, committed, thoughtful, and professional. It is time to engage teachers in the creation of systems and opportunities to enhance job satisfaction and meaningful teacher collaboration that will continue to give the profession the respect it deserves. 🇹🇽

# McAllen AFT continues fight for salary owed

McAllen AFT was in a holding pattern at *Texas Teacher* deadline, waiting to see if the district would continue its legal efforts to stop a pay raise for certified employees, after two state legal proceedings declared that the raise should be awarded.

In July, the commissioner of education—Robert Scott—ruled in favor of McAllen AFT in an important decision requiring educators to be paid local step increases for the 2009-2010 and 2010-2011 school years. The commissioner relied on provisions of the state law implementing a state pay raise in 2009, which said the state raise must be in addition to local step increases based on each school district's 2008-2009 salary schedule. (The commissioner's decision followed an August 2010 ruling by an administrative law judge that also said the district is required to pay the raise.)

The commissioner rejected McAllen ISD's claim that its published pay scale did not constitute a "salary schedule" within

the meaning of the state pay-raise law. The district under this ruling "is required to increase the pay of the specified employees by giving them a raise for the 2009-2010 school year that equals one step increase over what they would have received under Respondent's 2008-2009 Salary Schedule," and "Respondent is required to increase the pay of specified employees by giving them a raise for the 2010-2011 school year that equals a two-step increase over what they would have received under Respondent's 2008-2009 Salary Schedule."

Said Ruth Skow, McAllen AFT president: "Despite having an indefensible position, the district's board of trustees decided to appeal the commissioner's ruling, wasting taxpayers' money and disrespecting the teachers and other employees who are owed proper compensation."

Should the current decision stand, McAllen teachers on average could receive about \$600 in back pay, with



McAllen AFT President Ruth Skow

some receiving more than \$1,000. Other professionals covered by the pay-raise requirement include librarians, counselors, nurses, and speech pathologists.

However, the district could opt to continue its fight in state court if it loses the TEA appeal.

Skow said questions also have been raised about who would receive the pay if the favorable rulings stand, or if the district settles the legal issue, since McAllen AFT filed the grievance on the matter. "Our position has always been that every certified employee—union member or not—is owed the raise, and that the district needs to do the right thing and pay everyone what is owed," she said.

## 100,000 nice words for educators in 180 days

Texas AFT has joined in a new campaign to honor Texas educators, spearheaded by the Texas PTA, and we encourage you to take part yourself and spread the word to family, friends, and all who care about the work Texas educators do for the schoolchildren of our state.

In September the Texas PTA and allied organizations launched a 180-day marathon to recognize as many Texas educators as possible. Representatives of the various groups, including Texas AFT President Linda Bridges and Secretary-Treasurer Louis Malfaro, joined in a rally marking the occasion on September 12 on the steps of the Texas Capitol.

The goal is to have 100,000 teachers recognized in 180 days—the length of the current instructional year. The Texas PTA sees it as a great way for parents and students to say "thank you" to their educators for their hard work and dedication, especially in light of the budget cuts that have swelled class sizes and left teachers with fewer resources in the classroom.

Leslie Boggs, first vice-president of the Texas PTA, reminded participants at the capitol rally that teachers often "go and dip into their own pockets" to make up for shortfalls in the supplies their students need. That's just one small example of the lengths educators go to in the effort to make a difference in the lives of

their students.

The Texas PTA's educator-recognition project gives Texans the opportunity to recognize a teacher, librarian, or other educator with a tribute that will be posted on the project's Web site, [texasbesteducator.org](http://texasbesteducator.org). Already posted there were nearly a thousand tributes to individual educators from Texans who know how much the success of Texas students is due to the educators in this great state.

Invited to come up with a one-word description of their nominee, Texans have responded with a whole catalogue of heartfelt words of appreciation, including: visionary, caring, inspiring, dedicated, passionate, loving, innovative, insightful, patient, trustworthy, engaging, devoted, selfless, thoughtful, imaginative, magical, tireless, tenacious, nurturing, dynamic, brilliant, determined, supportive...and life-altering.

Encourage everyone you know to visit the Web site at [texasbesteducator.org](http://texasbesteducator.org) and to nominate an educator today!



# Private school vouchers? They've got to be kidding!



Louis Malfaro  
Secretary-Treasurer

Last year the Texas Legislature took an axe to our public school system, cutting needed funding by \$5.4 billion and leaving school districts scrambling to close budget gaps by laying off staff, increasing class sizes, scaling back support to struggling learners, and implementing a range of other reductions that teachers across Texas have told us are harming educational opportunities for students.

The cuts to public education came on the heels of a decade of unprecedented growth in Texas school enrollment—more than 850,000 students—equivalent to adding all the school children in the state of Maryland (the 20th largest US state) to the rolls in Texas. In fact, more than half of all school enrollment growth nationally took place right here in the Lone Star State in that decade.

With lots more kids and unprecedented spending cuts, Texas legislators have their work cut out for them when they convene

If a plan to direct public tax dollars toward private education at a time when the public schools have undergone severe cuts is not bad enough, the track record of voucher programs around the country should condemn this idea to the scrap heap.

in January. The good news is that the economic recovery in Texas is stronger than expected and it appears that in addition to an Economic Stabilization (Rainy Day) Fund predicted to top \$10 billion, projections for additional general revenue are way up (by as much as \$7 billion above original forecasts) and will position policy makers to undo the cuts made to public schools last session and still have money to address urgent needs in the areas of health care and higher education.

Given the challenges faced by our state's public education system and the opportunity to reverse course from two years of deep cuts, the state leaders should be discussing ways to best invest in and improve upon our vast and fast-growing system of public schools. And yet we are hearing from some on the fringe (and sadly from some of the so-called leadership in the Texas Legislature) that the time has come for Texas to fund private school vouchers! We are left to wonder whether we should laugh out loud or weep!

If a plan to direct public tax dollars toward private education at a time when the public schools (which currently serve more

than 5 million Texas children) have undergone severe cuts is not bad enough, the track record of voucher programs around the country should condemn this idea to the scrap heap. An overwhelming amount of research has consistently demonstrated that vouchers do not improve student achievement. Substantial research also shows that vouchers provide no cost savings to state governments, and in fact result in greater government bureaucracy and inefficiency.


Examples of private voucher experiments that have failed include Milwaukee, where a three-year academic study (2007-2010) showed that the Milwaukee voucher program did not raise student achievement. Voucher advocate Patrick J. Wolf from the University of Arkansas found in March 2011 that “there are no statistically significant differences in student achievement growth in either math or reading between [voucher] and [public school] students three years after they were carefully matched to each other.” In the Washington, D.C., public schools, after studying the voucher program there since its beginning and collecting data from 2004 to 2009, the same researcher found that “there is no conclusive evidence that the [voucher program] affected student achievement.”

Voucher supporters claim that enrolling students in voucher schools will result in a savings to the taxpayer, since the cost of the voucher is generally lower than the “average” per-pupil cost. However, just as there are no “average” children, there are no “average cost” pupils. Vouchers are most often used for students who are less costly than average to educate. According to data released by the state of Wisconsin in March 2011, just 1.5 percent of the 21,000 students enrolled in voucher schools there were in need of special education, compared with 19 percent of public school students. Since private schools (and not parents) have the choice about which students to admit, special-needs students and other students who cost more to educate (like English-language learners), are underserved in private schools.

When students leave public schools for private schools, they don't do it in an orderly manner that allows public schools to reduce costs easily by reducing staff, closing buildings or cutting bus routes. Fixed costs like electricity or heating for a building don't go down if five or even 10 students leave a school, and the cost of a teacher remains the same whether she has 30 students in her class or 27. A study of voucher students who left Cleveland public schools found those students came from schools throughout the district, not from a small number of schools that the district could simply downsize or close, so public schools lost funding without a similar change in their overall operating costs.

Let's review. Fastest-growing public education enrollment in the country; recent deep cuts to school funding; mediocre

academic track record of vouchers in Milwaukee, Cleveland, Washington D.C., and higher costs for public schools and taxpayers. Add to that the historic rejection of private school vouchers by the public, parents, faith leaders, advocates for special-needs students, educators and legislators in Texas over the last 20 years and we come to a very basic but important question. Why would Texas elected officials throw tax dollars at a voucher program for private schools instead of focusing on

the education of all 5 million Texas public schoolchildren? With the largest demographic cohort of school students in our state's history enrolling in our public schools right now, vouchers are at best a distraction from the task at hand; at worst, they are a false panacea that will divert scarce resources from our public schools and delay the vital work necessary to ensure a high-quality public school education to every student in every neighborhood in our state. 

## Partnership with First Book to bring a million 'Books Across Texas'

Texas AFT will be working with First Book—a nonprofit devoted to providing free books to children—to distribute a million “Books Across Texas” throughout the state in the coming months.

“We’re working with our local unions and other groups to plan for what promises to be a challenging, but definitely rewarding, project,” said Linda Bridges, Texas AFT president. “Can you imagine a million Texas children with new books?”

At the AFT convention in Detroit on July 28, President Randi Weingarten challenged the union’s members and local affiliates to partner with First Book to distribute 5 million new books to children from low-income families over the next year. During the last six months, in more than 20 pilot programs across the country, AFT affiliates have joined with First Book to give away nearly a quarter of a million books to students and families in need.

“AFT members and affiliates have already ensured that thousands of children have books at home that they otherwise would not have had. Having books of their own can open children’s minds to learning and literature, and introduce them to worlds beyond their own,” said Weingarten. “This is our new challenge. Today I am calling on AFT members to partner with First Book to distribute 5 million new books this year to students in need.”

The challenge launches a major expansion of the union’s partnership with First Book, a national nonprofit organization that has distributed more than 90 million books over the last 20 years to kids who could not otherwise afford them.

“Our partnership with First Book ensures that children have access to an

essential building block of literacy—their very own books,” said Weingarten. “It’s another way the AFT is advancing solution-driven unionism—connecting the people we represent to the people we serve, linking arms with community, building bridges and tackling challenges.”

In the week leading up to the July convention, the AFT and First Book partnered to hold a book distribution at a Detroit-area warehouse. AFT volunteers helped ship nearly half a million books to participants nationwide, and AFT members personally picked up more than 30,000 books to give to their students.

In America’s poorest neighborhoods, statistics show that the average number of books at home is just one for every 300 children. A recent Harris survey found that interest in reading nearly tripled in children who received books through First Book programs.

Any school or program serving children from low-income families (where the low-income enrollment is at least 70 percent), or that is Title I or Title I-eligible, can participate in First Book. After registering at [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org), teachers and other staff who work with children can order free or greatly discounted new books for their students.



Children taking a peek at books ready for distribution by members of the Toledo Federation of Teachers in Ohio. (Jim West photo)



To sign up for book distribution, contact your Texas AFT local union or 800-222-3827. (You can also register individually to distribute at [www.firstbook.org](http://www.firstbook.org))

# VOTE 2012

## General Election provides opportunity to undo damage from state budget cuts

*Also on the ballot: SBOE races and local trustee, bond elections in some districts*



The next Texas Legislature convening in January will have available a large cash balance (of as much as \$7 billion or more, according to credible estimates) and an even larger and growing Economic Stabilization Fund (likely to exceed \$10 billion) to help fund public services in the next state budget.

That upbeat budget snapshot should spur officials to look for opportunities to restore the \$5.4 billion in cuts to public education and fully fund new enrollment growth in the coming years. But as we've noted before, sometimes you

have to change the players to get the job done. That's why the election on November 6 will be crucial for electing lawmakers at the state and federal level who will have pledged to fully fund education.

Texas AFT members also should be on the lookout on the local level for school board races, community college district elections and bond elections in their areas. Contact your local union for more information, or visit [www.texasisd.com](http://www.texasisd.com) to look for news on local issues in your area.

All 15 State Board of Education Seats are on the ballot as well. The Texas Freedom Network closely watches the SBOE and its candidates. You can find a list of SBOE candidates, links to their Web sites and more at [www.tfn.org](http://www.tfn.org) (click on "State Board of Education").

## A few dollars a month can make all the difference

Are you a Texas AFT member who wants to help change the political landscape so that it favors our schoolchildren and makes public education a priority?

We pride ourselves in being an organization that works to mobilize members to make their voice and actions count. But you can also make your dollars count by joining thousands of other members who donate to the Texas AFT Committee on Political Education (Texas AFT COPE).

Texas AFT COPE provides members with an opportunity to contribute voluntarily to support education-friendly candidates, regardless of party.

For more information, contact Texas AFT COPE at 1-800-222-3827, or by e-mail at [cope@texasaft.org](mailto:cope@texasaft.org).

*(Note: This opportunity is advertised here for members and their immediate families only. Texas AFT may not and does not solicit COPE contributions from non-members.)*

**Committee on  
Political Education  
(COPE)**

## Election Resources

Get a list of questions to ask candidates at [www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org).

### Important Dates for November 6 General Election

**Last Day to Register to Vote**  
October 9, 2012

**First Day of Early Voting**  
October 22, 2012

**Last Day to Apply for Ballot by Mail (Received, not Postmarked)**  
October 30, 2012

**Last Day of Early Voting**  
November 2, 2012

### Web sites for election information

**AFT**  
[www.aft.org/election2012](http://www.aft.org/election2012)  
Information on national races, ways to get involved and in depth information for AFT members.

**State of Texas**  
[www.votetexas.gov](http://www.votetexas.gov)  
Election dates, voter registration information, candidate lists

**BallotPedia**  
[www.ballotpedia.org](http://www.ballotpedia.org)  
Comprehensive ballot information

### Volunteering / Getting Active

**Texas AFT  
Educator-To-Voter project**  
[www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org) (Click on Election 2012) Send postcards to educators urging them to vote in key races.



# Texas AFT and allies tell state leaders: Stop pitting education and health care against each other!

Concerned that state leaders plan to impose another austerity budget on the people of Texas, Texas health-care and education advocates stood together at the state Capitol on September 5 at a press conference calling for state leaders to make both children's health and learning a priority.

Texas AFT and the other groups involved announced a petition, already signed by more than 2,100 Texans, calling

**"It's wrong to mislead Texans into thinking they have to choose between health care and education or any other public service, when this is really a matter of whether our officials will make children a priority."**

— Montserrat Garibay,  
Education Austin Vice President

for state officials to stop pitting education and health-care funding needs against each other and instead to plan to meet the pressing needs of Texans in both areas.

Texas AFT and other participants came together under the umbrella of Texas Forward, a broad coalition focused on properly funding today's needed public services and preparing Texas for future demands through public investments.

"Texans want a bright future for our state, and that includes both a good education and decent medical care for our children," said Eileen Garcia, whose

organization, Texans Care for Children, is a member of Texas Forward. "The choice ahead doesn't need to rest with either depriving Texans in the classroom or in nursing homes and doctors' offices. The real choice is whether to keep our communities strong, healthy and primed for success."

With a growing cash balance (potentially as much as \$7 billion or more) and an even larger and growing Economic Stabilization Fund (likely to exceed \$10 billion), the budget is poised to help fund public services. Yet in recent months, Texas officials have suggested repeatedly that funding for public schools may decline if Texas is not allowed to cut Medicaid, which serves low-income children as well as Texans with disabilities and seniors in nursing homes.

"It's wrong to mislead Texans into thinking they have to choose between health care and education or any other public service, when this is really a matter of whether our officials will make children a priority," said Montserrat Garibay, vice president of Education Austin, the Austin ISD affiliate of Texas AFT. "We should use the state's growing cash balance and Economic Stabilization Fund, fix the hole the legislature put in our school finance system in 2006, and address the long-term erosion of the state tax base that has cost our schools and health services billions."



**TEXAS**Forward  
A BALANCED APPROACH TO A BALANCED BUDGET

[www.txforward.org](http://www.txforward.org)

Added Garibay: "Don't let anybody tell you that the resources aren't there to restore funding for both education and health care next session. The legislature will have the wallet, if it has the will."

A physician speaking at the press conference stressed the direct connection between children's health and learning. "Healthy students learn better, and education leads to better health and future success," said Dell Children's Medical Center pediatrician Stephen Pont, who is also medical director for Austin ISD. "We can make no better investment than in our children. If Texans want improved public health and a stronger workforce tomorrow, the solution is making sure both our schools and health systems have the resources they need."

## TAKE ACTION! for the Education Aide Tuition Exemption Program

Texas AFT urged the Texas Senate Higher Education Committee in September to help restore funding for one of the state's most effective programs of teacher recruitment and retention—the tuition exemption for educational aides that since 1997 has made it possible for classroom paraprofessionals in large numbers to receive state financial aid to pursue a bachelor's degree leading to teacher certification.

Last year the legislature zeroed out funding for the program for 2012-2013 as part of its overall demolition of the state education budget. Some participants were left in the middle of their degree program with no scholarship assistance. Over the past year, Texas AFT has received numerous phone calls from eager and qualified applicants ready to seek a four-year teaching degree in a shortage area, if only they can receive the financial help promised under this program. Send an online letter now to lawmakers letting them know the importance of restoring funding to this vital program. ([Click on "Take Action!" at www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org).)

# Committee testimony and member outcry bolster case for protecting retirement

Recent studies show that changing the current pension system for public employees from defined-benefit to defined-contribution plans—an idea being floated by some business interests—would significantly lower the benefits provided to public employees while adding astronomical costs to the state. The studies and further testimony from Texas AFT at a September House Pensions Committee hearing provide a strong case for protecting and strengthening the current pension system for public employees.

“Since 95% of public school employees in Texas aren’t covered by Social Security, the goal for our Texas Teacher Retirement System fund should be simple: provide a secure, reliable pension supported by both employees and the state that makes a career in public education more attractive to high-quality educators,” said Linda Bridges, Texas AFT president. “Unfortunately, when you’ve got a pool of money as large as the TRS pension fund, it becomes a target for all kinds of greed-influenced ideas that threaten the ability to provide for a modest but honorable retirement for our public servants.”

Currently, TRS and the state Employees Retirement System provide a defined-benefit pension, which pays a specified monthly benefit at retirement. In contrast, some business interests and their representatives—such as former Enron trader John Arnold of Houston—are pushing for a defined-contribution plan, which does not guarantee a specific amount of benefits at retirement. In this system, the employee or the employer (or both) contribute to an employee’s individual retirement account—like a 401(k)—typically at a set rate. The retirement benefits then depend on the amount of contributions and an individual’s investment gains or losses.

These individual retirement accounts would also leave retirees at the mercy of private investment managers who could extract costly fees for their dubious services, further eroding the retirement accounts. According to a study just published by TRS, “under a defined-contribution plan, 92% of retirees will ultimately receive less than the current defined benefit. Two-thirds would receive no more than 60% of the current benefit.” And that current benefit is already modest to begin with, because of the lack of a cost-of-living adjustment mechanism to protect the pension’s purchasing power.

The hearing on possible changes in state retirement benefits for school employees, higher-education employees, and other public-sector workers triggered thousands of calls and e-mail messages in defense of defined-benefit pensions from education employees and others to their legislators. (You can add your voice to the outcry by sending an online letter at [www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org). Click on Actions > Take Action.) Lawmakers



## The facts support keeping secure pensions

- A recently completed TRS study makes clear that changes from a defined-benefit to a defined-contribution structure will cost taxpayers and employees much more to deliver comparable benefits—\$1.5 billion per year. (2011, Legislative Budget Board)
- We earn TRS retirement benefits with contributions directly from our paychecks. Our pension is not a “gift.”
- Secure TRS retirement benefits are vital to attract and retain well-qualified teachers and all school and public employees.
- Secure TRS retirement benefits are vital to providing economic security for active and retired education employees—especially since 80 percent of TRS members and 95 percent of public school employees are not covered by Social Security.
- The TRS defined-benefit pension is strong and reasonably well funded, in contrast to some plans around the nation that appear in the headlines.
- TRS provides superior member service, and strong investment returns at a remarkably low cost. TRS retirement benefits are already modest. The average monthly annuity is only about \$1,800 per month—less than \$22,000 per year. In addition, retired public school employees pay health-insurance premiums of about \$100 to \$300 per month to cover only the retiree herself or himself.
- The legislature already made major TRS benefit reductions valued at about \$1 billion in 2005. Retirement benefits were cut even for already-vested TRS members.
- Benefit cuts would make it harder to attract and retain well-qualified education employees.
- Current TRS retirement benefits are limited. For example, there is no automatic cost-of-living adjustment to protect the purchasing power of the annuity. Retirees have not received even an ad-hoc cost-of-living increase since 2001.
- The real need for the TRS pension fund is not a benefit reduction but an increase in state pension contributions, which would help make up for many years in which the state contributed the constitutional minimum while employees contributed a higher share. The lower state contribution has reduced the pension fund’s potential value by billions.

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also heard testimony from a strong group of witnesses, including our own Houston Federation of Teachers member Sharon Goldstein and Texas AFT legislative spokesman Ted Melina Raab.

As reported in the September 17 *Austin American-Statesman*, the message apparently came through loud and clear to the members of the Pensions Committee. Especially noteworthy comments came from Representative Rob Orr, Republican of Burleson and a potential future chairman of the committee, who noted, "It appears to me that the state is doing a superior job compared to a lot of the other pension plans...." He also rejected the idea that moving future employees into a defined-contribution system like a 401(k) would work better than the current defined-benefit model. Said Orr: "I think it will be more expensive to the taxpayers of the State of Texas....Where are the savings? The savings in other states were from a reduction in benefits. Our benefits are already as low as you can get."

Indeed, 2011 figures from the Legislative Budget Board showed the switch would cost \$1.5 billion annually, which would result from continuing obligations to pay the guaranteed benefits promised to current retirees without money from new individual accounts for future retirees, which would no longer be part of the pooled investments that help pay for current benefits.

"When you look at the continuing health and high earnings

of the teacher retirement fund, and when you consider that the average school employee pension is just \$1,800 a month, it's obvious that the problem here isn't exorbitant pensions or an ailing fund," Bridges said. "The glaring problem is that school employees continue to pay their fair share into the fund, while the legislature has been unwilling to keep state contributions at promised levels. The end result is that retirees have suffered while their benefits have eroded over the past decade."

Bridges noted that because of lower state contributions to the fund, TRS retirees have not had a benefit increase since 2001. "Imagine working tirelessly, for little pay, as a teacher or bus driver for decades and trying to retire with the prospect of living frugally, but comfortably, on a small pension," she said. "Now think about living on that pension for more than 11 years while inflation eats away at it. The cost of gas in 2001 was about \$1.40, and now it's \$3.60. But you're still getting the same monthly pension. A regular carton of eggs in 2011 cost 90 cents, and now it's \$1.80. But you're still getting the same monthly pension."

Bridges added: "Our message to the House committee was that any study of public pensions should concentrate on how to provide a decent living for our retirees who served our state and its children, not on ideas that make low-paid public service an even riskier proposition." 🇹🇽

## Solidarity...

Texas AFT organizers in Austin show their support for the successful struggle of the Chicago Teachers Union for a new contract in September by wearing the union's color—red!

You can find out more about the issues that spurred more than 90 percent of Chicago teachers to vote to strike at [www.aft.org](http://www.aft.org).



# Success in San Antonio!



JODY HORTON PHOTO

## Local union's efforts help restore custodian jobs, safety for food workers

When dozens of custodians in San Antonio lost their jobs last year, the layoffs had a domino effect. First, the custodians fortunate enough to keep their jobs soon were forced to work more hours, often without pay, to make up for the loss of their co-workers. Next, food service workers were required to do all the kitchen and cafeteria cleaning on top of their regular duties.

The food workers' new tasks included hauling 55-pound trash bags, moving tables and chairs, damp mopping and lifting heavy buckets of water and cleaning equipment. "We had accidents left and right," said Rachel Martinez, vice president of the San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel.

Cleaning the kitchen between lunch


periods also brought up concerns about contamination of students' meals because the kitchen staff had to dispose of filthy garbage and wash tables and floors, only to begin cooking and serving meals shortly thereafter.

It didn't take long for the San Antonio Alliance to see that these layoffs were much more than a matter of jobs and workloads. What was at stake was the health of the workers and students.

In addition to filing a grievance, the union formed a task force of members to map out an action plan. It created a survey to find out how much extra time custodians and kitchen staff were working. Both groups often were forced to work past their shifts to complete additional assignments for which they were untrained and often unpaid—a clear violation of the Fair Labor Standards Act. They also reported large numbers of injuries, such as cuts, chemical burns and rotator cuff strains. "These weren't accidents," Martinez

notes. "They were preventable injuries." In fact, many of the cafeteria employees had to use their sick days to recover from physical stress on the job.

It took some time, but after a year of consultations with school board members, the district came through—restoring 64 positions and reinstating an eight-hour day for custodians whose hours had been cut. And Martinez was able to insert language into the food workers' job description that will protect them from having to work outside their job classifications. The contract also will provide clearer lines of authority as well as better scheduling, tools and training.

Martinez says this experience confirmed for her the importance of using the grievance process, and asking the state and national unions for help when you need it. "If we hadn't taken advantage of our state and national resources," she explained, "we wouldn't have had the success that we did." 

## Houston teachers win training pay

The Houston Federation of Teachers (HFT) recently won \$125 per day in pay to new teachers for training that they received, after the district first said the work would be unpaid. HFT leaders said they were surprised to discover that the three-plus days for the “New Teacher Academy” in Houston ISD in early August were unpaid, since that seemed to contradict a district policy that all training on days that don’t fall under contract be paid at \$100 for a full day and \$50 for a half day.

“The new teachers obviously were unhappy about it but felt powerless to challenge a new employer over the issue,” said Gayle Fallon, HFT president. “Others were even under the impression that they would be paid.”

Although the district initially said the training was not mandatory and thus shouldn’t fall into the pay policy, HFT pointed out that nothing suggested the voluntary nature of the academy in communications to new teachers. In fact, the academy manual stated that if new teachers had to miss a day, they could make it up, but that only Saturday make-up dates were available.

HFT filed a grievance on the matter, and the district decided to settle without a hearing and pay the \$125 a day.

## Valley locals win communications awards

Texas AFT local unions have been stepping up their communication efforts in the past year to help engage and mobilize members, and two locals recently were honored for their efforts by the AFT Communicators Network (AFTCN).

The AFTCN held its conference prior to the AFT Convention in July and named winners in various categories and classes of communications efforts. McAllen AFT took several awards, including honors in the following categories: Best Design/Layout for Print, Best Organizing Materials, Best Public Relations Activity, Best Web site, Best Feature Story, and Best Profile. La Joya

AFT won an award for the category of Organizing Fliers.

AFTCN supports a wide variety of tools, resources and trainings for union communicators. To find out more, contact Rob D’Amico, Texas AFT Communications Director, at [rdamico@texasaft.org](mailto:rdamico@texasaft.org).

## New Commissioner of Education

Gov. Rick Perry appointed Michael L. Williams as commissioner of education, effective September 1, 2012, following the resignation of Robert Scott in July.

Williams, who as commissioner will head the Texas Education Agency (TEA), is the first African-American commissioner of education in Texas. He previously served as chair of the Texas



Williams

Railroad Commission, was an assistant secretary of education for civil rights at the U.S. Department of Education, and served as deputy assistant secretary for law enforcement at the U.S. Department of Treasury. You can read the full bio on Williams at [www.tea.state.tx.us](http://www.tea.state.tx.us). (Click on “Commissioner.”)

## AFT launches movement for community- and educator-driven reform

To advance a community- and educator-driven agenda for public school reform, AFT President Randi Weingarten and leaders of parent and community groups on September 21 announced a series of town hall meetings, teach-ins, workshops and other events in cities and towns across the nation.

These efforts, which will take place in Chicago, Cleveland, Houston, Minneapolis, New Orleans, New York City, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, San Francisco, St. Paul, Tampa and elsewhere, will empower teachers, parents, students and community members to act collectively to drive public school reform. These voices, which have not always been heard in the education debate, are



AFT President Randi Weingarten

critical to providing all children with the high-quality public education they deserve.

“Real public education reform comes from the bottom up, with teachers, parents and communities working together to help all children thrive,” said Weingarten. “That’s how we can make every school a school where parents want to send their kids and teachers want to teach.”

Weingarten said that in too many districts, teachers and parents have been shut out of the debate over how to transform public schools in favor of top-down reforms that focus on testing and accountability instead of teaching and learning, and on closing down instead of fixing neighborhood schools. And harmful budget cuts have taken teachers out of the classroom, increased class sizes, and slashed art, music, physical education, libraries and other critical subjects and services that help children learn and grow.

Community partners present at the announcement included Brent A. Wilkes, national executive director of the League of United Latin American Citizens; Richard Gray, director of national programs for the Community Organizing and Engagement Group of the Annenberg Institute for School Reform; Dawn Hawkins, parent leader, Action United; and Melissa Erickson, parent leader, Hillsborough, Florida, Alliance for Public Schools.

Texas AFT will launch a similar effort this fall and winter with “listening tours” and other events aimed at community collaboration for meaningful reform. For more information, check “Events” at [www.texasaft.org](http://www.texasaft.org).

# Educator turns entrepreneur to develop mobile apps for school-parent communication

It started with a simple recognition that parents and school districts were falling way behind the times in how they engage and communicate, and that the tools to improve their communication were already in their hands—smart phones.

That realization led Dalinda Gonzalez-Alcantar—a former teacher, AFT member, and current employee at McAllen AFT—to dive into the world of entrepreneurship by working with school districts on mobile phone applications for information dissemination and two-way communication.

Gonzalez-Alcantar said the ultimate goal for her was to increase family engagement—which improves student achievement—by keeping parents plugged in and connected. She said the primary tools used by districts—their Web sites—weren't user friendly for smart phone users, and thus weren't being utilized.

"I polled my students, their parents, and gathered as much data on the Internet

"The journey to learn to create a mobile application for my campus included eight months of insomnia, YouTube tutorials, developer forums, and a lot of comfort food in the middle of the night."

that provided me with sufficient evidence to show that indeed, the smartphone was being used differently for different populations," Gonzalez-Alcantar said. "But what struck me the most was that minorities and those living under low socioeconomic status were using their device as their main or only form of internet consumption and connection. I looked at that and then observed characteristics of at-risk populations and knew that it was imperative that I learn to



Dalinda Gonzalez-Alcantar

develop a mobile application to increase family engagement through mobile devices."

Although Gonzalez-Alcantar was a video and audio arts instructor for AVID technology, she didn't have a clue about what it took to create an app. "The journey to learn to create a mobile application for my campus included eight months of insomnia, YouTube tutorials, developer forums, and a lot of comfort food in the middle of the night," she recalled. She also collaborated with McAllen ISD to make sure the technology was relevant and, after meeting with administrators, forged ahead to create individual apps for all the McAllen schools.


"Our first high school app for my former campus, McAllen High, saw a spike of views at 10,000 views in three months!" she said. "People were viewing information, e-mailing teachers, and consuming more information than they

had through the Web." The apps vary for each district or campus, but usually allow parents and students to check school calendars, homework assignments, course offerings and more. Gonzalez-Alcantar even added a "bully button" recently on one app that lets students report bullying directly to their counselor, having seen the tragic outcomes of bullying when she was a teacher.

Shortly after her work started with McAllen ISD schools, Gonzalez-Alcantar was awarded the McAllen Chamber of Commerce Innovation Grant of \$10,000 to assist with the legal costs associated with her tech start-up, eJucomm. Her business now creates unique mobile applications for districts and schools across the country, and continues to expand its functionality.

Gonzalez-Alcantar has received several accolades for her unique solution to family engagement, including being selected as *Parenting Magazine's* Mom Congress Texas Delegate. This position took her to Washington, D.C., where she gathered with other women education



advocates across the country to discuss educational issues and solutions with Secretary of Education Arne Duncan and other educational leaders. You can find out more about Gonzalez-Alcantar at [www.eJucomm.com](http://www.eJucomm.com). 

# Join us today!

Check below for a local in your area,  
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## Texas AFT Local Unions and Organizing Committees

Aldine ISD: Aldine AFT  
(281) 847-3050

Alief ISD: Alief AFTSE  
(281) 589-6644

Amarillo ISD: Amarillo AFT  
(806) 359-4487

Austin Community College: ACC AFT  
(512) 448-0130

Austin ISD: Education Austin  
(512) 472-1124

Bastrop ISD: Bastrop AFT  
(512) 448-0130

Brazosport ISD: Brazosport Federation of  
Teachers (979) 265-9701

Calallen ISD: Corpus Christi AFT  
(361) 855-0482

Channelview ISD: Northeast Houston AFT  
(713) 453-7500

Corpus Christi ISD: Corpus Christi AFT  
(361) 855-0482

Cy-Fair ISD: Cy-Fair AFT  
(713) 466-1125

Dallas ISD: Alliance AFT  
(214) 942-4663

Del Rio ISD: Del Rio AFT  
(512) 448-0130

Edinburg ISD: Edinburg AFT  
(956) 502-5340

El Paso ISD: El Paso Federation of Teachers  
& Support Personnel (915) 562-3738

Flour Bluff ISD: Corpus Christi AFT  
(361) 855-0482

Fort Bend ISD: Fort Bend  
Employee Federation  
(281) 240-1865

Galena Park ISD: Northeast Houston AFT  
(713) 453-7500

Goose Creek ISD: Goose Creek  
Education Federation (281) 427-2091

Gregory-Portland ISD: Corpus Christi AFT  
(361) 855-0482

Houston ISD: Houston Federation  
of Teachers (713) 623-8891

Houston ISD: Houston Educational  
Support Personnel (713) 660-8435

Killeen ISD: Killeen Federation  
of Teachers & Support Personnel  
(254) 690-2538

La Joya ISD: La Joya AFT  
(956) 682-1143

Lone Star College: AFT Lone Star  
(281) 889-1009

McAllen ISD: McAllen AFT  
(956) 682-1143

North Forest ISD: AFT North Forest  
(713) 672-6788

North East ISD: Northeast AFT  
(210) 227-8083

Northside ISD: Northside AFT  
(210) 733-9777

Pflugerville ISD: Pflugerville AFT  
(512) 448-0130

Round Rock ISD: Education Round Rock  
(512) 448-0130

San Antonio ISD: San Antonio Alliance of  
Teachers and Support Personnel  
(210) 225-7174

Shelby ISD: Northeast Houston AFT  
(713) 453-7500

Socorro ISD: Socorro AFT  
(915) 593-2801

South San Antonio ISD: South San Antonio  
AFT (210) 227-8083

Spring Branch ISD: Spring Branch AFT  
(713) 468-4700

Tuloso-Midway ISD: Corpus Christi AFT  
(361) 855-0482

Victoria ISD: Victoria AFT  
(512) 448-0130

Waco ISD: Waco AFT  
(254) 755-0276

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