

July 15, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
1100 San Jacinto Blvd
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Governor Abbott:

The undersigned organizations appreciate the work and countless hours that you, Commissioner Mike Morath, and other state leaders have dedicated to the COVID-19 crisis over the past several months. The groups also appreciate being included in Saturday's meeting with Speaker Bonnen and Chairman Huberty at your request to discuss issues, concerns, and ideas on how to reopen schools safely in the fall while providing high quality instruction. At this time we have not received a response from your office.

As you are aware, the 2020-21 school year is only a few weeks away, and unfortunately, Texas is experiencing a serious surge in COVID-19 cases. The health and safety of the 5.4 million schoolchildren and more than 600,000 district employees is of paramount concern to the members of our organizations. The health and safety of students, teachers and staff must be more seriously considered as we look to provide high-quality education services during the upcoming school year.

We recognize the importance of opening schools to our students and to our economy. That is, of course, what we all desperately want, and it may very well be possible in many communities. However, we cannot open schools in person until our teachers and staff feel safe coming to work and the local conditions warrant it. In order to keep everyone safe, provide quality learning and sustainable funding, we respectfully request your assistance in the following areas:

Extend Transition Period for Schools that Start Online

Current TEA guidelines only allow a three-week period at the beginning of the year for districts to provide full-time remote instruction. The arbitrary limit does not allow some districts to respond to local health conditions, staff availability, and parent and community concerns related to COVID. No one can schedule the pandemic nor accurately predict what will happen. *We recommend extending TEA guidance to a minimum of nine to 12 weeks or more (with a review period at nine weeks), which allows districts flexibility to respond to issues mentioned above and which aligns with standard grading periods. This change will allow for school districts to meet health concerns of students and all campus staff, including teachers, bus drivers, cafeteria personnel and others.*

Allow School Districts to Determine In-Person Instruction Based on Local Health Conditions

Current TEA guidelines require school districts to provide in-person instruction five days each week for any parent who chooses to have their children in a brick and mortar school. This is ideally what all school districts also want, but it may not be possible for many school districts due to health and safety concerns locally. This TEA requirement prohibits districts from being able to limit the number of students and staff in buildings, which is necessary if we are to create a safe environment for everyone. This TEA guidance also seems to be in direct conflict with guidance from the Centers for Disease Control, and it is causing tremendous anxiety and concern among our teachers and parents.

This guidance also essentially prohibits school districts from being able to stand-up flexible or hybrid scheduling systems, which would allow for better spacing and smaller cohorts in buildings. We believe that, in some cases, hybrid models would allow a greater number of students to have at least some face-to-face instruction, which would be a major benefit for our students.

Likewise, in the case of an outbreak in a district, the state has limited the time to shut school down to five days, a time period that seems arbitrary. Schools and local health departments need more flexibility to address the dynamic situations in their communities, and that may include closing campuses for more than five days. *We recommend giving authority to local school boards and superintendents to make decisions that consider local health conditions in order to protect teachers, students and other staff when deciding on in-person learning. Districts should have the authority to determine when in-person learning begins based on local health conditions and safety concerns rather than solely on a parent's decision for their child to attend in-person for five days per week.*

Establish a Hold Harmless for Average Daily Attendance (ADA)

Under current TEA guidelines, there is no assurance for sustained ADA funding after the first 12 weeks of the school year. Predicting student enrollment and mobility during the first half of the school year is nearly impossible, creating a myriad of challenges with budget planning for the 2020-21 school year, opening campuses, and educating children. If districts experience enrollment declines during these unpredictable times, the consequences could include layoffs of teachers and critical staff when they are needed the most and cuts to budgets when the financial burdens on districts are unprecedented. *We recommend establishing a floor for final 2020-2021 ADA that is either based on the student count that was used to build the FSP budget last session and is currently used as 2020-2021 LPE data, or as an alternative, the Near Final ADA count for the 2019-2020 school year. We must have predictability of funding during these chaotic times.*

Strengthen Connectivity and Provide Devices for Families and Students in Need

Under your leadership, the state has made notable progress over the past few years related to internet connectivity statewide. The pandemic has revealed that there is still a huge gap when it comes to access to online educational services for some families and regions, particularly in low income communities. *We recommend fully funding Operation Connectivity as soon as possible so districts can begin receiving those resources and better serve our neediest children.*

Simplify Attendance Accounting for Synchronous and Asynchronous Learning

Current TEA guidelines for attendance accounting for synchronous and asynchronous learning are overly complex and bureaucratic. Teachers are being asked to take on a significant burden of attendance accounting on a daily basis at the same time they are facing unprecedented pressures. The current guidelines will require teachers to focus enormous time and energy to prove they are serving children, which ironically will actually reduce their availability to actually serve children. There is a major disconnect between these guidelines and what is reasonable under these circumstances. We are not aware of any other state that has such an onerous and bureaucratic process. *We recommend significantly simplifying the guidelines to lessen the administrative burden on teachers by reducing attendance checks to one time per week. Simplification would demonstrate an understanding of the burdens teachers face.*

We recognize the tremendous pressure you are facing from many directions. We want to work with you and be a thought partner during this crisis. We all recognize that this is a health crisis, education crisis and economic crisis. We want our students to be in school to the greatest extent possible, and when not possible, we want their virtual learning to be high-quality.

This is personal for us. The children and staff are not just data points to us. They are human beings whom we love and serve and work alongside. We want to serve them educationally and protect them from harm. When we can do that effectively, we can all get through this crisis. To that end, we ask for your leadership and support in these areas.

The 12 undersigned organizations appreciate your time and attention to this very important matter. Please feel free to contact Amy Beneski (TASA), 512-917-5089, if you have any questions or need additional information or clarification on the issues and recommendations above.

Sincerely,

Texas Association of School Administrators
Texas Association of Community Schools
Texas Rural Education Association
Texas Association of Midsize Schools
Texas School Alliance
Fast Growth School Coalition

Texas Association of School Boards
Texas Association of School Business Officials
Texas Association of Rural Schools
South Texas Association of Schools
Texas Urban Council
Texas Elementary Principals and Supervisors
Association

cc: Lt. Governor Dan Patrick
Speaker Dennis Bonnen, Texas House
Sen. Larry Taylor, Chair, Senate Education Committee
Rep. Dan Huberty, Chair, House Public Education Committee