

Texas Classroom Teachers Association



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The Honorable Greg Abbott
Office of the Governor
By email

June 22, 2020

Dear Governor Abbott,

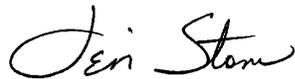
As state leaders finalize guidance regarding the Fall 2020 opening of Texas public schools, the Texas Classroom Teachers Association would like to reiterate our concerns about how these decisions will be made. The health and safety of children, teachers and families are of paramount concern. We fear that policies are being made without adequate input from employees and families, and without sufficient attention to the science and data that must dictate when it will be safe for students and employees to return to school.

Commissioner Morath's recent statement that "It will be safe for Texas public school students, teachers, and staff to return to school campuses for in-person instruction this fall," is not currently supported by the data, which show increasing rates of positive cases, hospitalizations, and deaths in Texas due to the COVID-19 virus. The further revelation that districts would independently make decisions about health issues, such as whether masks must be worn, is also of great concern. TCTA understands that circumstances among Texas districts vary, but it is clear that the quality of decision-making among Texas districts varies as well. Whether and when schools open for on-site instruction should be informed strictly by expert opinions and the trajectory of COVID-19 in the area. This is not a time for "local control," under which decisions may be politicized and made by individuals who likely lack the expertise to develop informed policies on matters of public health.

We urge you, Commissioner Morath, and other state leaders, using the expertise of health care professionals, to establish clear, enforceable parameters that will determine whether and when on-site instruction in a district is appropriate, and how it is to be accomplished safely. These parameters should be based on science, not the urge to "get back to normal" or "keep the economy moving." Our organization would like to see specific guidance that encompasses the number of COVID-19 infected individuals in the county, the trajectory of infection rates, and the time period during which infection rates should be at or below a particular level before schools are allowed to reopen. Districts and parents should welcome clear parameters, determined by health care experts, to inform their decisions. Until it is appropriate for schools to reopen on-site, resources should be devoted to improving distance learning as an emergency measure, ensuring that all students and teachers have access to the technology necessary for remote learning, and planning for accommodations for students and employees who may have underlying risk factors.

How funding is provided to districts is also a key factor in the re-opening of schools. If the state lowers funding for students participating in remote learning, there will be a strong incentive for cash-strapped districts to prioritize in-person instruction regardless of whether it is prudent to do so.

There are times when local control makes sense, but leaving decisions regarding public health to more than a thousand independent districts is dangerous. Texas has long advocated data-based decision making, particularly in the education sector. This is the time to use it. Let's use the expertise and data available in our state to make informed decisions in the best interests of all. We would welcome the opportunity to work with you and your staff if we can be of assistance.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Jeri Stone". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Jeri Stone
Executive Director