



July 14, 2020

We are a coalition of students, parents, community members, union educators, and non-profit organizations from Bexar County seeking to ensure that all decisions about safely reopening our schools center the voices of students, their families, school workers, and the communities they serve. We insist that decisions about reopening our schools include those who will be directly impacted, prioritizing student and worker safety above all else. We write to you to ask you to stand with your community in ensuring that schools remain closed for in-person instruction for at least the first nine weeks of the new school year.

This is not a request we make lightly. Schools are vital to our community and the educational, social, and physical development of our youth. As an inclusive coalition representing educators’ unions, parents, students, community members, and public health experts, we have carried out research on best practices for reopening and created a detailed roadmap for the next steps in safely reopening Bexar County public schools. The conditions laid out in our Blueprint for Safely Reopening Bexar County Schools are necessary but not, in themselves, sufficient to allow for safe reopening. We’re committed to the task of returning safely to in-person instruction in school buildings, but present conditions across our communities make a safe return impossible.

In our assessment, the minimum criteria for reopening schools have not been met, and Bexar County public schools cannot be reopened safely under these conditions.

Public health officials are warning of the risks of premature school reopening. In its CRAFT Schools Briefing Packet, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) states that “schools should be prepared for COVID-19 outbreaks in their local communities and for individual exposure events to occur in their facilities, regardless of the level of community transmission.” As a city and county with high levels of community transmission, we are not equipped to address the anticipated COVID-19 outbreaks that will occur when schools open. We lack the capacity to adequately test, track, and trace the spread of the virus, and the infrastructure to ensure that our schools and school communities are protected.

The spread of COVID-19 in our community has not been mitigated or contained; rather, cases have grown exponentially since the spring semester, when schools were closed to protect our communities from the

pandemic's effects. The current statistics for San Antonio are stark, and, show that the crisis our community faces is much more severe now than it was when all San Antonio schools were closed earlier this year:

- San Antonio has almost 20,000 confirmed cases with 94% of cases from close contact or community spread and 65% of all confirmed cases are still ill as of July 11. (Source: City of SA)
- San Antonio is nearing hospital capacity with 89% of hospital beds in use as of July 11. (Source: City of SA).
- San Antonio added over 4,500 cases between July 4 - July 11. (Source: City of SA).

President Trump, Education Secretary DeVos, TEA, and Governor Abbott have stated that schools need to open in order to provide much-needed childcare to parents who, they argue, need to get back to work in order for our nation's economy to recover. We understand the central importance of our public schools to the economic health of our city. However, as we have learned first hand in San Antonio, we cannot have an economic recovery unless the coronavirus is effectively contained. Premature school reopenings are likely to exacerbate, rather than alleviate the pandemic's effects on our local economy, and make this crucial economic recovery more difficult to achieve. In fact, no other city, state, or country has attempted to open schools while viral spread is uncontrolled, and all other global attempts at school reopening have taken place under conditions of much lower levels of infection and transmission of the novel coronavirus.

We know that school is the safest place for many of our students and risks of continued school closings to our students are undeniable. We must develop plans to provide extensive support for those students most in need of a safe space during the day, but it's essential that we differentiate between a need for safe face-to-face learning and intensive academic support. We are committed to grappling with the complexities of this situation in collaboration with Bexar County district leaders, and to finding solutions that best serve our most vulnerable students and their families. However, these solutions cannot be dependent on the unsafe and premature reopening of schools. In fact, our most vulnerable students are also the students most likely to suffer from complications, serious illness, and death if exposed to the coronavirus.¹ In order to prioritize the safety of our most vulnerable and most directly-impacted community members, we must understand that premature and unsafe reopening plans will be most dangerous for the very students who we seek to protect.

Further, as we advocate for remote learning for all students, we must not allow this pandemic to be used as an opportunity for business interests to profit off the privatization of our public goods. Our public schools have long suffered from twin threats of underfunding and privatization, and in this crisis, we must move to protect them from further attack. Our public schools and their transportation, sanitation, and technological infrastructure must be protected and fully-funded as a public good - held in common by all of us, and for all of our responsible use.

The issues that our communities face are the result of years of racism, underinvestment, and intentional abandonment of our public schools and communities by state and national leaders, who have chosen not to provide us with the resources which educators, youth, and families need to thrive. We cannot ask school workers to risk their lives in papering over the enormous inequities in economic and social policy that this

¹ Turk MA et al., "Intellectual and developmental disability and COVID-19 case-fatality trends: TriNetX analysis," *Disability and Health Journal*, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.dhjo.2020.100942>.

pandemic is highlighting. We are struggling not so much to overcome an achievement gap, but to repay an education debt long owed to our communities - a debt that cannot be repaid by educators and schools alone, but that necessitates a fundamental restructuring of American society in the interests of all. We must fight for not only the public schools, but the fully resourced communities that our students and their families deserve.

No one should have to choose between their health and providing for their families, paying rent, mortgages, and bills. We should ensure that every member of our community is protected, not only from the pandemic itself, but also from its economic effects even as state leaders demonstrate how little they care about working people or their lives. Our leaders should immediately move to provide hazard pay for all those whose work is deemed so essential they must report to campuses and worksites in-person e.g. custodians, cafeteria workers, and educators providing crucial support for special education students or others in dire need of in-person instruction. We reaffirm our commitment to working people across our city, and our solidarity with their struggle - in the richest country in human history - for the means to support their families, and to live lives of dignity and respect.

We are not powerless to push back against poorly conceived and premature school reopening plans that will harm our community. Many cities in the state of Texas, spurred by the collective action of students, parents, and teacher unions, have responded to the statements from the President, Secretary of Education, Governor, and Commissioner of TEA by taking the safety of their communities into their own hands. Below are a few examples of major cities, school districts, and school leaders across the state of Texas who have spoken out regarding the absolute necessity of safety and funding in reopening schools, due to the conditions of COVID-19:

- El Paso health officials have delayed all school openings until after September 7th due to COVID-19.²
- The Texas School Alliance and Texas Urban Council of Superintendents, representing almost 40% of all students in Texas, including Amarillo ISD, Austin ISD, Brownsville ISD, Dallas ISD, El Paso ISD, Fort Worth ISD, Houston ISD, Northside ISD, and San Antonio ISD, among many others, requested on July 11 that Governor Abbott and Commissioner Morath:
 - “Waive student attendance accounting requirements for the 2020 - 2021 school year to ensure school districts receive funding for students who are learning at home due to school closures;
 - Set a floor for average daily attendance for next year;
 - Allow school districts the flexibility to design instructional systems that meet the needs of families and staff given local health conditions.”³
- Point Isabel ISD Board of Trustees proposed a resolution that district schools shall not reopen for face-to-face instruction until the Board deems that it is safe for students, faculty and staff to return.⁴

² Harrison Roberts, “El Paso Delays School Openings Due to COVID-19 Concerns,” KCBD, July 9, 2020; <https://www.kcbd.com/2020/07/09/el-paso-delays-school-openings-due-covid-concerns/>.

³ Texas School Alliance and Texas Urban Council of Superintendents, July 9, 2020; https://www.texasaft.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/FINAL_TSA-TUC-Letter-to-Governor_7-8-2020-005.pdf.

⁴ Point Isabel Independent School District Board of Trustees, “Resolution of the Point Isabel Independent School District Board of Trustees,” July 2020; <https://www.pi-isd.net/cms/lib/TX01918769/Centricity/Domain/4/COVID%20Resolution.pdf>.

We call on you to take the following actions in the best interest towards preserving the lives, safety, and social and economic well-being of our educators, youth, families, and communities:

- Advocate for remote learning for at least the first 9 weeks of school
- Meet with our coalition and center the voices of students, parents, and educators in all discussions and decision-making regarding the safe reopening of schools
- Ensure districts receive funding for students who are learning at home
- Keep schools closed or mandate remote learning until:
 - a. San Antonio/Bexar County meets the thresholds set by public health experts and the CDC.
 - b. San Antonio/Bexar County has the capacity for testing/tracing/tracking
 - c. Schools are fully funded, including newly incurred COVID-related expenses
- Develop and invest in long-term solutions and infrastructure to serve students effectively from a distance, including access to technology, internet, training for personnel, and delivery of wraparound services
- Cancel rent and mortgage payments across San Antonio
- Implement a moratorium on evictions in the city of San Antonio
- Provide direct cash assistance for our community members out of work

As educators, students, parents and guardians, and community members most directly impacted by decisions about school reopening, we ask you to stand with us. We call on you to fulfill your duty to ensure that the students, educators, and staff you serve are provided with the safest possible learning and working environment, and to adhere to the guidance of public health experts as you make decisions about reopening schools during a pandemic. The lives of students, educators, staff and their families must be prioritized above all other considerations, and none of us should be returning to school campuses until it's safe.

Signed,

North East Education Association TSTA/NEA
SAISD Student Coalition
Our Schools Coalition
San Antonio Alliance of Teachers and Support Personnel
Harlandale Education Association TSTA/NEA
Northside AFT
Edgewood Classroom Teachers Association TSTA/NEA
Bexar County AFT
Southside Education Association TSTA/NEA
Southwest TSTA/NEA
North East AFT
South San Antonio AFT
Alamo Heights TSTA/NEA
New Braunfels TSTA/NEA
Del Rio TSTA/NEA

PODER - The Social Justice Caucus of The San Antonio Alliance

Esperanza Peace and Justice Center

Unite Here Local 23

SA Stands

Party for Socialism & Liberation - San Antonio