

**Dear Governor Abbott, Lt. Governor Patrick, Speaker Bonnen,
Commissioner Morath, Commissioner Keller, and Lawmakers:**

June 29, 2020

Texas is a state built on grit, resiliency, and optimism. In the face of the COVID-19 pandemic, Texans are manifesting this spirit and determination in so many important ways, large and small. We are proud that public education in Texas—both educators and students—is at the vanguard of our state's efforts to keep Texas strong and its future bright.

Texas public schools began the year buoyed by your successful efforts to address public school finance reform during the last Legislative Session. A broad-based, bipartisan coalition found common ground, committing to a long-term strategy to invest in public education and improve student outcomes. We thank each of you for your heroic efforts to achieve these reforms and for your continued dedication to seeing the reforms implemented. We are also grateful for TEA's recent efforts in support of HB 3 implementation, providing COVID-19 resources, and the agency's focus on closing the digital divide.

When COVID-19 hit, Texas parents saw first-hand how vital a role quality public education plays in the lives of students and their families. Our public schools turned on a dime to address the educational needs of students in the midst of this public health crisis.

We know that public education serves a unique purpose. Our schools are more than classrooms and textbooks. Public schools educate students, but they also provide structure, safety, and support. While our schools rose to the immediate challenges posed by COVID-19, the pandemic further laid bare the already existing inequities in our school system and the communities they serve. The disproportionate health and economic impacts of the pandemic have reinforced our resolve to provide these students with the knowledge and skills necessary to achieve their full potential in a post-COVID Texas.

For these reasons, we respectfully ask that you create or utilize an existing statewide task force to urgently focus on the following key challenges posed by COVID-19 to public education. Addressing these important issues facing our schools, teachers, and students will require mobilizing the right experts in public education, public health, and technology, to name a few. The task force should provide the necessary tools and guidance for schools and districts as they navigate the new realities posed by COVID-19. In particular, we would urge you to assess six key areas:

Maintaining funding: In June 2019, Governor Abbott signed historic school finance reforms to improve student outcomes and improve equity for Texas students. The state must maintain current education funding levels and allow time for all of the evidence-based reforms of House Bill 3 to be implemented fully. The task force should work with state leadership to maximize federal resources available for Texas public schools and allocate these federal dollars wisely to ensure that temporary revenues do not create new, recurring costs for local districts and taxpayers.

Connectivity, access to technology, and contingency planning: Education recovery and response plans should ensure connectivity for all 5.4 million PK-12 students, including access to reliable, high-quality internet and computers or tablets. School districts need support as they consider a range of possible scenarios that COVID-19 might present, including in-person, online, hybrid, and intermittent scheduling. Further, work must be done to ensure that online and alternative instructional methods are rigorous and high-quality for all students.

Professional development: Taking care of students begins with setting our teachers up for success. Educators are our frontline responders, and COVID-19 requires schools to respond by providing professional development for combined in-person and online instruction as well as equipping them with trauma training.

Assessment and support for students: Teachers and school leaders will need clear and ongoing data to assess students' abilities and progress during these difficult times. This task force should identify and recommend methods of assessing learning loss that leverage districts' existing longitudinal data, maximize student learning time, and provide critical statewide information to lawmakers regarding the breadth of students' loss of learning during COVID-19.

Health and safety: Re-opening or contingency plans should place health and safety first. Public schools will face increased costs associated with purchasing personal protective equipment, refitting school spaces, and altering academic calendars and school days. Schools must have sufficient resources and sound plans to ensure the safety of students, staff, and families.

Acknowledge the economic costs of inaction: If our schools stumble, we all stumble. Failure to support our public schools and generate trust in the state's and local districts' ability to deliver quality education will have far-reaching and long-lasting consequences on our economy, our workforce, and our future prosperity. Today, with an unemployment rate of 13 percent and 2.4 million Texans filing for unemployment in the last 90 days (the vast majority of whom do not have a post-secondary credential), we must ensure our schools are prioritizing college, career, and military readiness more than ever so that students are prepared for in-demand, high-value jobs.

Texas will not recover until our public schools recover. We urge you to act now – for our students, our citizens, and our future.

In dedicated partnership,

