

THE SENATE OF TEXAS

STATE CAPITOL, 3S.5
AUSTIN, TEXAS 78711
(512) 463-0127

1210 W. INTERSTATE 2, STE. 10
PHARR, TEXAS 78577
(956) 787-5227



7 NORTH PARK PLAZA
BROWNSVILLE, TEXAS 78521
(956) 548-0227

700 FM 3168
RAYMONDVILLE, TEXAS 78580
(956) 689-1860, EXT. 230

SENATOR
EDDIE LUCIO, JR.

July 9, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor, State of Texas
State Capitol, 2S.1
Austin, TX 78711

Commissioner Mike Morath
Texas Education Agency
1701 North Congress Ave.
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Governor Abbott and Commissioner Morath:

As vice chair of the Senate Committee on Education, and as a former educator, I respectfully request your intervention in advance of the reopening of public schools in the Rio Grande Valley (RGV). As you are aware, communities in my senate district are struggling to keep our families and children safe from the deadly COVID-19 outbreak. With the RGV a hotbed of community infection, the newly released policies mandating and guiding the reopening of public schools in our region have the potential to accelerate the surge of coronavirus cases. It is with a heavy heart that I implore you to respectfully listen to the outcry of the everyday heroes of our teaching profession and reevaluate the policies mandating an in-person reopening this fall.

Educators across our great state have proven to be one of Texas' greatest resources. Most notably during the onset of the pandemic, Texas teachers offered commendable services in distance-learning which helped avoid a potential catastrophic learning loss to our children. We are all proud of how gallantly our educators stepped up to the plate, well beyond their normal duties.

Educators in my district have shared how they feel left out of the decision-making which led to the declaration and subsequent guidance that all schools must be open for in-person instruction in the fall. The reopening of our public schools is, without question, a complex matter with a great deal of uncertainty. As public servants, I trust we agree decisions affecting teachers and students, especially in relation to their health and safety should be made with teacher consultation, since they bring a unique insight that may not be apparent from the state capitol.

RGV educators feel our state missed a great opportunity to learn from their hands-on experience by not seeking their input on reopening policies. In order to provide these extraordinary men and women who dedicate their lives to improving the quality of life of our children a voice with their state leaders in Austin, I additionally ask you to solicit input from educators and consider their recommendations as you continue to improve and reevaluate the guidance mandating reopening of our schools.



DISTRICT 27: CAMERON ★ HIDALGO ★ KENEDY ★ KLEBERG ★ WILLACY

COMMITTEES: CHAIR, INTERGOVERNMENTAL RELATIONS ★ VICE-CHAIR, EDUCATION ★ NATURAL RESOURCES & ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT ★
VETERAN AFFAIRS & MILITARY INSTALLATIONS ★ SUBCOMMITTEE ON BORDER SECURITY

Under normal circumstances, the case may be made for the need for in-person instruction, especially since the supplemental services many Texas students depend on (e.g., school meals and other health services) are best provided in-person. However, we are living through a pandemic that is worsening by the day, and these extraordinary times require a bona fide, exceptional Texas-sized solution. For these reasons, I wholeheartedly agree with my constituents who have informed me that all these benefits are greatly outweighed by the potential trauma to students contracting COVID-19 at school or passing the virus along to a loved one. Since the families and educators that I represent live in the RGV, which is experiencing an alarming surge of COVID-19 cases that has taxed our local healthcare system beyond capacity, I hope that you agree that our RGV constituents deserve a localized, specialized solution to the reopening of our local public schools.

With the best interests of the families, students, and educators that I represent, I respectfully request that you grant additional flexibility in the reopening of schools in districts located in COVID-19 hotspots, such as those in the RGV. As I have repeatedly shared with you, our front-line communities' leaders (local health departments, hospitals, and school administrators and educators) are best positioned to determine the safest ways for schools to continue their critical educational role. I trust in their ability to implement protocols that keep the best interest of the over 262,000 students they collectively care for in the RGV.

Respectfully, individual educators are best positioned to determine the safest way to continue instruction, both for their students, as well as for their own safety. No children are served by placing teachers in harm's way, especially if doing so also endangers the health of students and, by extension, their immediate families. Please extend the flexibility of conditional reopening to our educators, so they can make choices about instructional practices that place the health and safety of their students at the forefront.

Any reopening strategy must focus on equity, as it is our constitutional and moral duty to deliver an appropriate education to every student in this state, regardless of race, ethnicity, primary language, income, or ZIP code. It is unacceptable to see data verifying educational inequities persisted through the last several months of distance learning, largely due to gaps in technology availability and connectivity in low-income and/or rural areas - conditions that describe a great portion of the district I represent. I thank and commend you for your efforts to provide funding to address these gaps and request your continued assistance in ensuring that lack of access does not widen the already considerable achievement gap should conditions necessitate a default to distance learning.

Finally, in any reopening scenario, it goes without saying that students and teachers must be provided with all the resources they need to best guarantee their health and safety. I commend you for your efforts to distribute personal protective equipment to campuses across the state. As schools begin to reopen and provide a better picture of PPE needs, I ask that you continue to secure this equipment and distribute it to regions that need it most.

I thank you for your leadership in addressing the coronavirus crisis head-on. I trust Texas will continue to be guided by the health and safety of our children and the educators who serve them as we work to overcome the pandemic. If I may be of any assistance, please do not hesitate to call me.

Sincerely,



Eddie Lucio, Jr.
State Senator

ELJ/cwl

