



November 11, 2020

The Honorable Greg Abbott
Governor of Texas
P.O. Box 12428
Austin, Texas 78711-2428

Dear Governor Abbott:

The COVID-19 pandemic continues to disrupt the school year, and ATPE continues to hear serious concerns voiced by our members. We have written to you before about the challenges facing the approximately 100,000 educators we represent and the millions of Texas students they serve. ATPE appreciates the efforts being made to keep Texans safe during this crisis, but we are concerned about the inattention being paid to some of the concerns we hear most often. One of the as-yet unanswered questions pertains to the role of standardized testing this year.

As we shared with you over the summer, the ATPE House of Delegates met virtually in July and adopted a resolution calling for cancellation of STAAR and TELPAS for the 2020-21 school year. ATPE applauded your decision to waive STAAR testing requirements for the 2019-20 school year because we know the high-stakes nature of mandated standardized testing places additional unnecessary pressure on our students, parents, and educators at a time when they already face such difficult circumstances. With the current school year well underway and COVID-19 still a major threat, ATPE again urges you to support testing and accountability exemptions.

A growing chorus of educators, parents, and elected officials have opposed standardized testing this year. ATPE and other associations have urged the state and federal government to reconsider testing mandates in light of the unprecedented challenges posed by COVID-19. Testing relief was a cornerstone of many candidates' education platforms in this fall's general election. School boards have even begun voting on resolutions calling for suspension of testing and related accountability requirements for 2020-21. Despite the increasing backlash against testing, state officials thus far have offered the education community little hope for relief.

Commissioner of Education Mike Morath has touted what he deems to be the diagnostic value of administering STAAR tests this year while acknowledging that some modification of the state's A-through-F accountability grading system for schools would be necessary. We have yet to learn the state's plans for how they plan to use such data or make modifications to the accountability system even as many districts are already administering benchmark tests in preparation for the STAAR. School leaders are understandably worried about ratings that will be tied to the tests, and parents—especially those whose children may not be thriving in a remote learning environment—are increasingly voicing their fears about the potential for lower test scores and the impact those will have on students from both an academic and a mental health perspective.

ATPE has long recognized that both diagnostic and formative assessment are integral parts of the learning process and an important tool in helping educators diagnose students' needs and assess their progress, particularly during and after the educational disruptions caused by COVID-19. We know learning gaps must be remediated as quickly as possible to prevent a more pronounced "COVID slide." However, classroom teachers are best positioned to determine how to use assessments in their own

classrooms to diagnose and prescribe assistance for struggling students in a manner that is more direct, timely, and focused than an intervention derived from STAAR data. In fact, ATPE members are already actively engaged in those efforts.

Educators' workloads have increased dramatically this year, with some doing double the amount of work to plan and deliver lessons to students in both on-campus and remote settings. In ATPE's surveys and one-on-one conversations with our members, we hear reports of 12- and 14-hour workdays, not to mention nights and weekends spent on lesson planning, grading, outreach to parents and students, and endless paperwork, all of which far exceed what was considered typical for educators before the pandemic. Attendance tracking alone is taking an enormous amount of time this year because of accommodations that must be made on account of COVID-19. A plea for additional planning time in these unusual circumstances is one of the things we hear voiced most frequently by the teachers we represent. All the time spent on activities not related to direct classroom instruction reduces the time left for educators to give students the individualized attention and support they need and deserve. The current state-level summative testing system only exacerbates this problem because the STAAR demands so much attention throughout the entire school year. Well before the state assessments are administered, schools are planning and preparing students to take the tests, often with time-consuming and stressful benchmarking and drills. After the tests are finished, educators are communicating with anxious students and parents while trying to keep other students engaged for the remainder of the school year once they know the immediate focus on the all-important tests has passed.

With all the energy schools devote to testing, ATPE has questioned whether STAAR can produce data that will be valid and reliable amid the monumental changes we have experienced. The learning environment has improved little since the spring when schools were forced to move suddenly and unexpectedly to a remote instructional model. Many families took advantage of the opportunity to keep their students away from campus for health and safety reasons and continue with a remote learning arrangement this fall. Where schools have reopened—in many cases, only very recently—students have returned to a school setting unlike anything they have ever experienced. We know the physical distancing requirements, restrictions on social interactions, loss of extracurricular activities, and general stress of the pandemic are affecting students in profound ways. There is also the instability caused when students and staff are forced to quarantine or campuses must close temporarily, which can lead to a disruptive back and forth between in-person and remote learning that is hard to manage.

In other words, the same academic, social, and emotional pressures that materialized at the end of the last school year have not gone away, only evolved. They will continue to affect student learning until they are mitigated by significant improvement in the epidemiological environment. But with a vaccine not expected to be widely available for months, it is highly unlikely that these challenges will fade in time for students and educators to effectively prepare for high-stakes standardized tests—even those not scheduled to be administered until spring 2021. In addition, standardized testing presents its own health and safety concerns, particularly as TEA has made it known that remote STAAR testing will not be feasible. Stated simply, requiring all students—including those whose families have chosen a virtual educational environment to be on campus for testing days will aggravate the risks of viral spread within our schools.

Whether standardized tests are administered for diagnostic purposes or suspended altogether in 2020-21, ATPE maintains that it will be irresponsible to base high-stakes decisions on data derived from this year's tests. Your office and the Texas Education Agency seemingly conceded this point with your recent decision to remove the requirement for basing fifth and eighth grade student promotion decisions on

STAAR results—a move that ATPE members appreciate. In many instances, however, decisions about student promotion and graduation, accountability ratings, school funding, teacher and principal appraisals, educator compensation, and even the continued employment of educators remain linked to student test results. Considering the unreliability of STAAR data this year and limitations on its use for longitudinal comparisons, it is patently unfair to allow any of those high-stakes decisions to hinge on how students perform on the tests during this pandemic, which further justifies a waiver.

Finally, ATPE is aware of the testing and accountability mandates with which Texas must comply under federal law. Our association is actively advocating for relief at the federal level, as well, and we will not relent in those efforts. As is the case among the Texas Legislature, we know many members of our congressional delegation agree with ATPE's stance on testing and accountability, and we continue to press for accountability relief to be a part of any future COVID-19 relief legislation. We are also optimistic that the U.S. Department of Education will ultimately announce a reprieve for states similar to the flexibility offered in 2019-20.

Meanwhile, Gov. Abbott, frustrated educators and parents are desperate for relief and answers. ATPE urges you to act as you did this spring to release the pressure valve of standardized testing. We stand ready to reinforce a state decision to waive testing and accountability requirements this year while we continue to lobby for federal action. As always, ATPE would be happy to engage in further discussions about how we can help our public schools, educators, and students get through this difficult year. Thank you for your time and consideration.

Sincerely,



Shannon Holmes, Ed.D.
Executive Director

CC: Texas Commissioner of Education Mike Morath
Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick
Members of the Texas Legislature