

Texas Education Agency  
1701 N. Congress Avenue  
Austin, Texas 78701



May 20, 2020

Dear Commissioner Morath:

We commend the Texas Education Agency (TEA) for its leadership in swiftly developing robust guidance and informational resources to assist school districts in launching remote instruction at the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. That same leadership is now needed to ensure that school districts are not only instructing students but are also tending to the social-emotional conditions needed for students to be able to learn from that instruction.

During the 2019 legislative session, the Texas Legislature directed schools to provide students with safe and supportive learning environments and to address student mental health. The COVID-19 pandemic has changed the way schools provide instruction, but the need for schools to address student mental health remains — and is arguably more acute. Without the proper focus on the social-emotional and mental health of students and staff, the most well-delivered instruction or services will not result in students' mastery of grade level standards.

The research is overwhelming and clear. The physiological effects of exposure to prolonged adversities or acute traumas can disrupt a student's thinking, feeling, and behavior - both in the short- and long-term, even once the threats are no longer present.

The number of children and families experiencing adversities during the pandemic is sobering:

- Rates of mental health and substance abuse concerns are projected to sharply rise, continuing to affect children, families, communities, and schools in the coming months and years. As families lose employer sponsored health insurance, children and families lose access to needed behavioral health care.
- More than two million Texans have applied for unemployment benefits in the past two months, highlighting the financial insecurity that is leading to food insecurity and housing instability.
- Just two months into the pandemic, there are reports of alarming increases in family violence in Texas.
- The separation, anxiety, and loss stemming from COVID-19 will continue to rise, along with the number of families who will experience grief and trauma.

These concerns should be front and center given the extent of the trauma, stress, and prolonged adversity that children are experiencing during this pandemic. TEA and its staff have done a lot of great work in recent years to advance the use of school-based practices that support student mental health and provide safe, supportive, and trauma-informed learning environments. It's time to leverage these resources and develop new ones to help school

districts respond to the unprecedented social, emotional, and mental health barriers to learning that students across the state are experiencing.

We call on TEA to set the expectation and provide support for districts to focus attention on the social and emotional needs of students and school personnel. Our organizations respectfully call on TEA to:

1. **Leverage federal funding opportunities, including the Governor’s Emergency Education Relief (GEER) Fund, to help schools implement multi-tiered systems of support to address emotional and mental health barriers that interfere with remote learning.**
  - a. The Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act authorizes the use of GEER funds to support the continuation of learning among all students during COVID-19, including providing for social-emotional support. We urge TEA to encourage school districts to leverage GEER funds to address emotional and mental health barriers to learning stemming from COVID- 19 using multi-tiered systems of support.
2. **Expand the agency’s *Instructional Continuity* guidance and resource tools to include components that provide for multi-tiered systems of support to students during remote learning and upon the reopening of schools.**
  - a. Embed strategies within each phase of the agency’s *Instructional Continuity Framework* and *Planning Guide* that are designed to:
    - i. Foster trusting and supportive relationships between teachers, students, families, administrators, and community providers.
    - ii. Promote school-connectedness and engagement.
    - iii. Build resiliency skills among students, including managing emotions and behaviors, making responsible decisions, and seeking help when they are struggling.
    - iv. Provide higher-tiered prevention and intervention services to students who are experiencing or are at risk for social, emotional, and mental/behavioral health concerns, including providing parents and caregivers with information and resources to help families address their children’s mental health needs.
  - b. Provide guidance to districts on implementing 2019 student mental health and safe and supportive school legislation within a remote learning environment, including:
    - i. Mental health related practices and procedures required by Texas Education Code Sec. 38.351 as amended by HB 18, concerning safe and supportive school climates, trauma and grief-informed practices, positive behavior interventions and supports, and behavioral health and suicide prevention.

- ii. Implementation of the Texas Model for Comprehensive School Counseling Programs required by Texas Education Code Sec. 11.252 and Sec. 33.005 as amended by HB 18.
  - iii. The Safe and Supportive School Program required by Texas Education Code Sec. 37.115 as amended by SB 11, with a focus on a systemic and coordinated multi-tiered support system that addresses school climate, the social and emotional domain, and behavioral and mental health.
  - iv. Providing parents and caregivers with information related to early warning signs of mental health or substance use concerns, suicide risk, and the availability of behavioral health interventions, as required by Texas Education Code Sec. 38.351 as amended by HB 18, and authorized in the Texas Health and Safety Code Sec. 161.325, as amended by SB 11.
  - v. Trauma-informed care policies required by Texas Education Code 38.036 as amended by SB 11, which calls for the integration of trauma-informed practices in each school environment and increasing staff and parent awareness of trauma-informed practices.
3. **Identify resources and expertise developed through the Project AWARE grant and in support of implementation of recently passed student mental health legislation that can be targeted to school district COVID-19 response and recovery efforts.**
- a. Convene experts to assist in developing guidance and resources to assist schools in preparing for reopening. Seek input from district leaders, educators, school counselors, and staff at education service centers (ESCs) with expertise in implementing school-wide and multi-tiered approaches. This includes districts and ESCs participating in Project AWARE as well as districts and ESCs with experience in reopening schools following Hurricane Harvey and the shooting at Santa Fe High School. Utilize the HB 906 Student Mental Health Task Force to assist in developing guidance to schools on supporting the social, emotional, and mental well-being of students and school staff in the longer-term recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic.
  - b. Identify resources within the statewide and regional mental health resource inventories developed in accordance with the Texas Education Code Sec. 38.253 that schools can leverage to meet key needs stemming from COVID-19 during remote instruction and upon the reopening of schools.
  - c. Expand training and technical assistance to districts on implementing effective school mental health practices as part of a multi-tiered system of support, including school-wide and trauma informed practices.
4. **Direct districts to begin planning now for steps they will take to prepare teachers and students to transition back to school.** This includes school-wide practices that create safe and supportive school climates, are trauma-informed, and connect students

to interventions to address social, emotional, and behavioral concerns that are anticipated to increase among students due to COVID-19.

We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with your agency on these goals. We are available to assist in any way we can to help schools in Texas address the social, emotional, and mental/behavioral health of students. If you have any questions or would like to discuss any of these recommendations, please contact Seth Winick at 512-470-2233 or via email at [director@coalitionhealthyminds.org](mailto:director@coalitionhealthyminds.org).

Respectfully,

**Hogg Foundation for Mental Health**  
Dr. Octavio Martinez, Executive Director

**Social-Emotional Learning Alliance for Texas**  
Donna Black, President

**National Alliance on Mental Illness Texas**  
Greg Hansch, Executive Director

**Teach Plus Texas**  
Kevin Malonson, Executive Director

**Association of Substance Abuse Programs**  
Cynthia Humphrey, Executive Director

**Texans Care for Children**  
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**Coalition of Texans with Disabilities**  
Dennis Borel, Executive Director

**Texas Appleseed**  
Andrew Hairston, Director, School-to-Prison Pipeline Project

**Easterseals Central Texas**  
Tod Marvin, President

**Texas Coalition for Healthy Minds**  
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**National Association of Social Workers - Texas Chapter**  
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**Texas Council of Community Centers**  
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**Texas PTA**  
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**Texas Counseling Association**  
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**Texas Family Voice Network**  
Donna Fagan, Policy Lead

**Texas Suicide Prevention Collaborative**  
Lisa Sullivan, Director

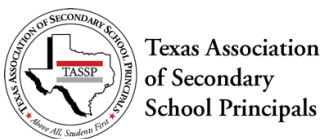
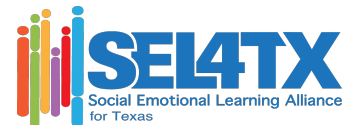
**Texas Association of Secondary School Principals**  
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**United Ways of Texas**  
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**TexProtects**  
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**Association of Texas Professional Educators**  
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**Texas State Teachers Association**  
Richard Kouri, Executive Director



CC: Governor Greg Abbott  
Lt. Governor Dan Patrick  
Speaker Dennis Bonnen  
Chairman Larry Taylor  
Chairman Dan Huberty