



November 6, 2020

Grover S. Campbell
Texas Association of School Boards
1101 Trinity St.
Austin, TX 78701

Kevin Brown, EdD
Texas Association of School Administrators
406 E. 11th St.
Austin, TX 78701

Dear Mr. Campbell and Dr. Brown,

As COVID-19 cases and hospitalizations surge dangerously across Texas, some public school districts are discontinuing virtual learning. (*See Texas Tribune 10/21/20: [Some Texas school districts are requiring in-person instruction again, leaving parents scrambling for options](#)*)

In districts discontinuing virtual learning, we generally observe all remaining virtual learners are compelled to return to campus face to face for the remainder of the school year. Families who wish to continue virtually are notified their child will be disenrolled unless the child meets medical risk criteria to continue with virtual learning. Families of disenrolled students are presented with the option to homeschool, transfer out of district, or enroll in an online K-12 school.

Physicians are confident that schools are approaching COVID-19 with utmost concern for health, safety, and academic progress of all students. We also understand the significant academic concerns motivating these decisions. Face-to-face instruction is optimal for educational experience and child development. In consultation with a physician, most families will conclude in-person learning is their best choice. For some though, returning to school in person is not compatible with the medical risk of exposing a high-risk individual in the home to COVID-19.

Physicians across Texas have prioritized helping families weigh whether virtual or face-to-face learning is in their best medical interest. Given COVID-19 is a highly transmissible novel disease, families and physicians must account not only for the student's health but also for the health of high-risk household members. Furthermore, physicians advise families that a COVID-19 surge – occurring right now in many regions of Texas – makes their student more likely to be exposed to an infectious person on campus, even if precautions are correctly and consistently followed.

We write to express physicians' reservations about any attempt to completely dismantle virtual learning and disenroll virtual learners during accelerating COVID-19 spread. Our reservations are motivated by these factors:

- While school-age children are unlikely to experience severe COVID-19 complications, they can transmit virus to high-risk household or community members.
- Even when correctly and consistently followed, infection control measures on campus reduce but do not eliminate the possibility of COVID-19. Uncontrolled community spread heightens opportunities for virus to enter and spread within a school.

- Guidelines for 14-day home quarantine after exposure or 10-day home isolation after infection are unlikely to be observed if virtual learning is not available, further undermining public health efforts to extinguish COVID-19 spread.
- Disenrollment jeopardizes access to noninstructional resources such as meals, special education services, and mental health services schools are providing to virtual learners.
- Eliminating virtual learning disproportionately limits the choices of economically disadvantaged and racial/ethnic minority families, who are simultaneously at greater risk for COVID-19 complications and more likely to lose access to internet or devices without school district support.

For these reasons, we would be concerned if abandoning virtual learning becomes a growing statewide trend this fall and winter. The Texas Medical Association and Texas Pediatric Society make three requests:

1. We urge all Texas schools to preserve families' choice between either in-person or virtual learning in district for the duration of the pandemic.
2. If a school district requires medical exemptions to continue with virtual learning, we ask schools to defer medical exemption determinations to physicians. At minimum, medical exemption criteria should permit exemptions for high-risk students **and** healthy students who live with a high-risk household member.
3. If a school district absolutely cannot avoid disenrolling virtual learners, we ask those districts to ensure all families can continue to access appropriate education while protecting their health. This includes facilitating every disenrolled student's transition to an external virtual platform or homeschool option, taking responsibility for associated costs and fees, and allowing students to retain access to internet or devices needed for virtual learning.

We reiterate our belief that face-to-face instruction is superior for student educational experience. However, school policies must not put high-risk members of the community at unnecessary medical risk, disadvantage families advised by a physician that virtual learning remains in their best interest, or undermine public health efforts to slow the surge of COVID-19 already happening in our state. Completely discontinuing virtual learning at this time fails all three tests.

We thank you for your consideration of this subject and remain available to work with the Texas Association of School Administrators, Texas Association of School Boards, and public schools across Texas. Please contact troy.alexander@texmed.org or clayton.travis@txpeds.org with questions.

Kind regards,



Diana L. Fite, MD
President
Texas Medical Association



Seth Kaplan, MD
President
Texas Pediatric Society

CC: Hon. Mike Morath, Commissioner, Texas Education Agency