



# Opposition to SB 15

Expanding full-time virtual programs

August 10, 2021

As the largest educator association in Texas, the **Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)** appreciates this opportunity to provide input on **Senate Bill (SB) 15** proposing to expand options for full-time virtual schools. ATPE opposes the bill as we believe other, more suitable solutions exist to help students stay on track this school year despite the recent surge in COVID-19 cases.

Educators recognize that virtual instruction was necessary during the 2020-21 school year to prioritize the health and safety of Texas students, teachers, and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they may be temporarily necessary to address the current surge. However, evidence has already shown disastrous consequences for student learning. Although many health care professionals found temporary remote learning to be necessary to safeguard public health prior to availability of a COVID-19 vaccine, remote instruction has been an academic disaster that will take years to remediate. Results from the STAAR test show that Texas students who attended school remotely during most of the 2020-21 school year scored significantly worse than their peers who attended school in person.

The American Academy of Pediatrics (AAP) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control (CDC) both recommend that children of all grade levels should return to in-person instruction for the 2021-22 school year. We nonetheless recognize that parents, especially of children under age 12 who are currently ineligible for immunization, are concerned about the safety of in-person instruction at this time. It is important to note that school boards already have the ability to address parental concerns on a temporary basis under current law by providing a remote option that is narrowly tailored to meet the immediate needs of their local constituents. In addition, Texas school districts have received over \$17 billion in federal funding to combat COVID-19, some of which can be used to fund targeted remote learning until a vaccine has been approved for all Texas students.

During the regular session, the legislature passed HB 3643 that will establish a commission to study virtual education over the next two years and make recommendations for the 88th Texas Legislature to consider in 2023. It would be both premature and wasteful of state resources to implement new virtual school legislation before this commission has time to study the issue. Furthermore, it is highly unlikely that SB 15 would provide a remedy soon enough for use at the beginning of the 2021-22 school year.

The fear expressed by many Texas parents has been made exponentially worse by the governor's executive order tying the hands of local districts regarding mask policies and other mitigation strategies. Granting districts the authority to make decisions on masking that are responsive to the wishes of their local constituents would both honor the long-standing principle of local control and go a long way toward easing the concerns of Texas parents without sacrificing academic progress.

Based on the learning loss already caused by full-time virtual instruction, the recommendations of the CDC and AAP, the availability of federal funding and remedies under existing law, and the timing of proposed changes, ATPE cannot support legislation that permanently expands a model proven to be harmful to most students. Thus, we respectfully urge you to **OPPOSE SB 15**.

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*The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas educators since 1980. It is the leading educators' association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, future, retired and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for 5 million public schoolchildren. ATPE is the ally and the voice of Texas public school educators. For additional information, contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or [government@atpe.org](mailto:government@atpe.org).*