



March 29, 2021

The Honorable Harold Dutton
Chair, House Committee on Public Education

Dear Chairman Dutton:

On behalf of the four statewide teacher membership organizations, we appreciate this opportunity to provide input on Representative Bell's House Bill (HB) 1468 relating to curriculum and eligibility requirements for the provision of local remote learning to qualify for state funding and calculation of average daily attendance. Educators recognize that virtual schools have been necessary in order to prioritize the health and safety of Texas students, teachers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic, and that they may be necessary to address other emergencies in the future, but experts agree that there is no substitute for in-person learning.

Although there is an important place for the responsible use of technology in the classroom, technology should not be the classroom. Students have suffered considerable learning loss and emotional trauma as a result of school disruptions, and we urge caution before instituting a model that has proven not to be in the best interest of students. For this reason, we respectfully offer recommended edits to HB 1468 that would clarify student eligibility requirements, offer program quality protections, and sunset the provision in order allow time and space for review.

Student Eligibility

In order to best meet the academic, social and behavioral needs of all students, it is critical that remote learning not be an entitlement program. The following recommendations would more clearly delineate student eligibility and the process for entry and exit to and from the program.

- Remote Placement Committee: Before being determined eligible for instruction by remote learning, a student must have been recommended for placement by the student's Remote Placement Committee, which must consist of the student's parent or

legal guardian, classroom teacher, counselor, and when applicable a special program coordinator.

- Student Performance Standards: Students participating in remote learning must maintain at minimum a passing grade in each course taken remotely. Additionally, the student must adhere to local criteria established by the school district or open-enrollment charter school. The Remote Placement Committee must assess individual student performance at least once per grading period and recertify that virtual placement is in the best academic, social and behavioral interest of the student. The Committee can return the student to in-person instruction at any time, and if it is determined that a student is not successful in remote learning then they will be unable to return to a remote setting in the same school year.

Quality Protections

Student well-being must remain central to curriculum and eligibility requirements for the provision of local remote learning. As drafted, HB 1468 fails to delineate program standards necessary to ensure a quality school experience. The following recommendations would correct this.

- Synchronous Component: We have learned during the COVID-19 pandemic that no virtual learning program can be successful without some amount of time spent meeting with an instructor in real-time. It is therefore critical that the bill language require a synchronous component.
- Hybrid Provision: Districts and charters must be required to combine virtual instruction with attendance at a school facility where necessary to meet the individual academic, social and behavioral needs of a student as determined by the Committee. The schools must therefore be able to provide transportation to the physical campus for this purpose and for the purpose of taking an assessment.
- Educator Assignment: It is well-documented in the literature that full-time virtual learning programs tend to exceed the recommended student-to-teacher ratios to the detriment of the student. Additionally, as evidenced by this school year, assigning educators to remote and in-person learners simultaneously is unduly burdensome and not in the best interest of students. Bill language must therefore better stipulate ratio requirements and teacher assignment.
- Not Subject to Waiver: No provision of this section may be subject to a waiver by Districts of Innovation.

Expiration and Review

Educators value the role of technology as a supplement to in-person learning experiences, and remote learning has proved vital to protect the health and well-being of students, teachers and communities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Texas must maintain prudence moving forward and must afford time to fully assess the value of expanded remote learning options before

encumbering the Legislature to funding them indefinitely. The program should therefore expire and be subject to review.

We hope these recommendations from the four statewide teacher membership organizations will assist the work of the committee in considering Representative Bell's HB 1468 and the place for remote learning in the Texas education system. It is critical that all instructional programs foster an environment that allows all children to reach their highest potential. We appreciate your consideration and look forward to working with you.

Respectfully,

Texas State Teachers Association

Association of Texas Professional Educators

Texas American Federation of Teachers

Texas Classroom Teachers Association

CC: Members of the House Committee on Public Education