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ATPE Weighs in on Updated TEA Guidance, Attorney General's Opinion

AUSTIN, Texas—The **Association of Texas Professional Educators** (ATPE)—the largest association for educators in Texas—has reviewed the guidance documents released Tuesday by the Texas Education Agency (TEA) and Texas Attorney General **Ken Paxton** and shares the following statement:

"ATPE has urged state officials—as outlined in our July 14 recommendations and referenced in [our July 17 statement](#)—to provide straightforward guidance that will help school districts and educators implement plans to reopen school campuses safely for the new school year, now mere days away.

ATPE appreciates that TEA is providing school districts with additional suggestions for planning the new school year, such as those featured in the agency's updated guidance. These include protocols for responding to suspected infections on the campuses and topics for discussion with local health authorities prior to the start of the 2020-21 school year.

With this updated guidance, TEA has at least provided some clarity surrounding the transition periods in which districts may move from virtual to in-person instruction, as outlined in its initial guidance document, and a framework for necessary, collaborative discussions that should have taken place weeks or months ago but are 'better late than never.'

That said, at a time when school districts must decide what is best for their employees, students, and community and are navigating a maze of executive orders and recommendations, **ATPE believes the letter issued today by the Texas Attorney General only serves to hinder or confuse matters as districts and educators work toward reopening campuses successfully and safely.** Describing in vague terms the circumstances under which a local health authority may issue an order that deviates from the governor's prior orders does not provide our school districts with any clear or concrete guidance to help them make the difficult decisions they are facing.

ATPE has previously stated that school districts, acting with the help and advice of local and state health experts, should be empowered to make their own reopening decisions without the threat of losing funding. Texas public schools need demonstrated leadership, input from educators and parents, and simple criteria for opening their campuses that are based on measurable, objective health-related data at the local level rather than being steered by political pressure or competition between various local and state officials.

Unfortunately, local school officials have been given inadequate guidance and are struggling to draft plans that will satisfy a convoluted maze of local, state, and federal directives. ATPE recognizes that COVID-19 has created fluid situations that demand frequent updates and revisions to plans. However, with multiple directives and guidance being issued by different branches and levels of government, it is no surprise that school leaders and educators are frustrated. The state should do everything in its power to protect the lives of Texans and support a safe and productive learning environment, not create needless confusion.

ATPE will continue to analyze and share details on state and federal guidance as it is issued and offer our recommendations for decisions on returning to campus. We encourage educators to visit ATPE.org/coronavirus for updates and answers to frequently asked questions."

Background:

- TEA's [SY 20-21 Public Health Planning Guidance](#), which is part of what it is calling the Strong Start 2020-21 plan, addresses on-campus and virtual instruction, public health considerations, non-UIL extracurricular sports and activities, administrative activities by teachers, staff or students, and more.
- Texas Attorney General **Ken Paxton** issued a letter of non-binding legal guidance ([readable here](#)) at the request of Stephenville Mayor **Doug Svien**. The attorney general states that "nothing in the law gives health authorities the power to indiscriminately close schools—public or private..." through "blanket quarantine orders" without evidence of an actual infection within the schools.

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About the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)

Founded in 1980, ATPE is the leading educators' association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, and future, retired, and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for Texas' five million public school students. | atpe.org

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