



Representative John Turner

District 114 | Email Update | August 17, 2020

Date: August 17, 2020
Subject: District 114 COVID-19 Update: Schools & Long-Term Care

Dear friends and neighbors,

I hope this email finds you well. In this edition of our District 114 email update, I'd like to focus on a couple of important topics that are greatly affected by the pandemic: the reopening of schools and issues related to long-term care centers.

School Reopening

Since our last update, there have been many developments in the plans for the start of K-12 school this fall. I will start with a summary of guidance at the state level, then address the situation in House District 114 with Dallas and Richardson ISDs.

State-Level Guidance

The Texas Education Agency (TEA), the Attorney General, and the Governor have made several recent statements regarding the reopening of schools. The guidance has changed over time and has caused some confusion. Here is where state guidelines currently stand:

Governor Abbott has stated that all school districts in Texas may open to in-person instruction if they choose. The Governor has also stated that a local county health authority may not pre-emptively order school campuses to close. This statement followed a non-binding opinion by Texas Attorney General Ken Paxton adopting that interpretation of Texas law, and stating that a local county health authority may order a school campus to close only if an outbreak has actually occurred on the campus.

In starting the school year, school districts may either (1) begin by allowing families a choice between in-person and remote learning, or some combination of the two; or (2) decide to start the school year with full remote learning for up to four weeks, with provisions made for students lacking internet access. (Districts may extend this online-only period by an additional four weeks if the school board approves it and the TEA grants the district permission).

After this four or eight-week period, all school districts are required to offer on-campus instruction to any family who wants it. They can also continue to offer remote learning options to families who prefer this format. The date of starting the school year, whether remotely or in-person, remains a decision for each school district to make. For more information about TEA's rules, public health guidance, and supports for special populations during the pandemic, click [here](#).

Dallas ISD

For Dallas ISD, September 8 will be the first day of school. As of this writing, DISD has not made a final decision about whether school will be exclusively online for some initial period of weeks, or whether school will start by allowing families to choose between in-person or virtual learning. A decision on the timeline for on-campus instruction is expected as soon as this week.

A survey will be sent to DISD parents on August 25, in which (assuming the district does not opt to begin the year fully online) families will choose between virtual and on-campus instruction for the initial nine-week grading period. With limited exceptions, families will only be able to switch between instructional models (online v. in-person) at the end of this nine weeks. For more information, visit www.dallasisd.org/reentry, and review the “Dallas ISD Reentry Playbook for Parents” by clicking [here](#).

Richardson ISD

Richardson ISD will start school on August 19. RISD will begin school with 100% virtual instruction on that date, and currently plans to transition to in-person instruction on September 8 for families choosing that option. At the beginning of August, RISD families received a form asking them to decide between in-person and online instruction for their child for the post-September 8 period.

In RISD, families may shift from virtual learning to in-person learning – or vice versa – at designated transition periods every six weeks. That said, families who begin classes in-person will be permitted to move to virtual learning at other times if COVID-19 outbreaks occur, or if health authorities mandate the closure of school buildings. For information about the different instructional models and the precautions RISD is taking, visit web.risd.org/backtoschool and review “The Blueprint Fall 2020 Return to School Plan” by clicking [here](#). For all other COVID-19 related updates, visit web.risd.org/cv19/.

Private schools in District 114 are taking a variety of approaches, and are in regular consultation with Dallas County Health and Human Services.

Bear in mind, the situation is fluid, and this information can change rapidly. Consult the district websites linked above for the most up-to-date information.

The Path Forward for Schools

There is no doubt that beginning the school year in the pandemic presents an enormous challenge. We are tremendously grateful to our district leaders, teachers, and employees who are doing their best under trying circumstances and are ready educate our kids in whatever format they can do so.

Unless we can significantly drive down overall rates of community transmission of the virus, the situation will likely continue to be difficult. Online learning is far from ideal, as many families who experienced it in the spring can confirm. But the virus is not yet under control, and as of this writing Texas still has one of the higher testing positivity rates in the county. The health and safety of students, teachers, and families, cannot be ignored.

As your representative, I will continue to advocate for measures focused on driving down transmission rates now – which would hasten the day when school and school activities can be much closer to normal again. I also believe our state should establish data-based metrics for when schools should and should not be open for in-person learning, as several other states have done, rather than leaving school districts without this level of state guidance.

The bottom line is that we still need a major focus on lowering transmission now, and in the remaining weeks of the summer – for the sake of schools, the economy, and protection of lives this fall.

Long-Term Care Facilities

We know that the elderly, and especially those living in long-term care, are particularly vulnerable to COVID-19. In late April, I joined fellow Representatives in asking the Texas Health and Human Services Commission (HHSC) for greater transparency about the prevalence of COVID-19 in these settings. In late July, the state released facility-level data for COVID-19 cases in both nursing homes and assisted living facilities across the state. To view this data from HHSC, click [here](#). Similar data had previously been available for facilities in Dallas County, through Dallas County Health and Human Services.

When an outbreak happens at a nursing home or long-term care facility, HHSC and Texas emergency management officials can provide help in a number of ways. They can supply testing, on-site assessments, and advice on safety protocols and best practices. They can also help facilities obtain necessary gowns, masks, and other protective equipment.

As of this writing, at least eighteen facilities in District 114 have had at least one confirmed case of COVID-19 among residents or employees. My office has reached out to each of those facilities, in attempt to make sure they are aware of the assistance our state agencies can provide.

Last week, HHSC also announced new outside visitation guidelines for long-term care facilities that are COVID-free and that meet certain benchmarks. HHSC also updated other emergency rules for nursing facilities. You can learn more on HHSC's website by clicking [here](#). The new emergency rules also require regular staff testing for nursing homes that allow visitation. Making regular testing available for both residents and staff at nursing homes and long-term care facilities must be a continuing priority in the coming days.

Testing

A full list of testing sites in the City of Dallas is available [here](#). Certain mobile testing and neighborhood walk-up testing sites are only available for City of Dallas and Dallas County residents. To view additional testing locations across Dallas County visit <https://www.dallascounty.org/covid-19/testing-locations.php>. For a full view of COVID-19 test collection sites across the state, you can click [here](#) for an interactive map.

In District 114, walk-up testing is available at Sam Tasby Middle School, at 7001 Fair Oaks Avenue. The site is open from Monday to Saturday, 7:30 a.m. – 4 p.m. (or until the testing limit is reached).

Emergency Food Assistance

Public and private food banks, pantries, and meal programs continue to provide emergency food assistance to those facing food insecurity. To locate a North Texas Food Bank (NTFB) Partner Agency, [click here](#) to view a searchable map. NTFB also provides application assistance for SNAP, the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program. SNAP benefits can be used to purchase food at grocery stores, convenience stores, and some farmers' markets and co-op food programs. To apply for SNAP assistance, you can call NTFB at 214-330-1396 or email snap@ntfb.org.

Unemployment Assistance

If you or someone you know has lost a job due to the pandemic, our office is available to help in the process of applying for unemployment benefits and communicating with the [Texas Workforce Commission](#). Please do not hesitate to contact us at (214) 234-7625 (Dallas office), (512) 463-0576 (Austin office), or email at District114.Turner@house.texas.gov.

Ways to Help

Earlier this year, my staff compiled a list of volunteer resources we call “Neighbors Helping Neighbors.” The needs described there have not gone away. [Click here](#) for information about how to help local health providers, non-profits, and faith communities that are supporting the health, education, and wellbeing of our community.

The need for continued vigilance is as great as it has ever been. For up-to-date information on virus numbers and trends, you can view the Texas Department of State Health Service’s COVID-19 dashboard [here](#). Dallas County provides local information [here](#) and [here](#). The Texas Tribune also provides helpful graphical information using DSHS data [here](#), and the Dallas Morning News maintains updated local and state information [here](#).

The pandemic makes us weary, but as a community, we must keep up the fight. Thank you for continuing to do your part, by wearing a mask, avoiding unnecessary indoor gatherings, staying home when possible, washing hands regularly, and keeping a safe distance when you are out. Together, our positive efforts will make a difference.

Sincerely,

John Turner
State Representative
House District 114

Our Office’s Contact Information

Dallas Office: 10300 N. Central Expressway, Ste. 198 Dallas, TX 75231 | (214) 234-7625

Austin Office: P.O. Box 2910 Austin, TX 78768 | (512) 463-0576

Email: District114.Turner@house.texas.gov

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