

ATPE'S PRIORITIES FOR THE 87th LEGISLATIVE SESSION: Give all students access to optimal public school learning environments

ATPE supports initiatives to ensure all Texas students have access to optimal public school learning environments that are safe, supplied with current technology, and adaptable to changing needs, while preventing the diversion of the state's limited resources to unregulated private, home, or for-profit virtual schools.

Texas public schools serve over 5 million students residing across hundreds of miles of diverse territory. It is no small task to meet students' individual needs through a strong state-supported system of public schools while also preserving the Texas tradition of local control. The Legislature must prioritize efforts to ensure every Texas student has access to an optimal learning environment.

The transition to remote learning necessitated by the COVID-19 pandemic emphasized the importance of giving schools and educators flexibility to adapt to rapidly

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changing situations. The pandemic and resulting temporary closures of school buildings also exposed significant gaps in student access to technology. For instance, students who live in rural areas or come from lower-income families

are less likely to have access to a digital learning device and high-speed internet at home. This digital divide has surfaced as a critical driver of educational inequity.

According to the *Texas Tribune*, one in six Texas public school students lack access to high-speed internet, and 30% do not have a "dedicated and adequate learning device." Attempting to address these inequities, the Texas Education Agency has allocated \$250 million to help purchase 716,000 devices and 295,000 internet hot spots through Operation Connectivity. While determining the impact of Operation Connectivity on the technological divide, the state must prioritize a more comprehensive study of the scope and drivers of technological inequity.

The forced transition to fully remote instruction at

the height of the pandemic also confirmed what ATPE has long warned: that full-time virtual instruction is a poor substitute for in-person learning. Although virtual instruction was temporarily necessary to safeguard the lives of students, educators, and families from the COVID-19 virus, it will take years for schools to remediate students whose academic progress has declined as a result. This remediation will only be accomplished by robust investment in physical classrooms and campus resources, including quality educators, support staff, and educational technology.

Policymakers must therefore redouble their opposition to diverting limited state resources toward unregulated private education programs, including private and home schools, along with for-profit virtual schools. Proposals calling for permanently expanding full-time virtual programs—which have a long track record of failing Texas students at the expense of Texas taxpayers—are even more ill-advised this session considering the extraordinary challenges already facing our existing public schools. ATPE members have long opposed vouchers and other privatization schemes that would drain precious resources needed by our public schools, and we urge lawmakers to maintain their history of rejecting these proposals here in Texas.

COVID-19 is only one of the threats to our public schools and their staffs and students. The Legislature must continue the progress made in recent years to protect the school community against violence and ensure our schools are secure learning environments.

Our schools need to be safe, equipped with current technology, and capable of adapting to changing needs. We cannot divert our state's limited resources to unregulated private, home, or for-profit virtual schools.