County Judge Lina Hidalgo
DIRECTOR

Harris County
Public Health
Building a Healthy Community

Umair A. Shah, M.D., M.P.H.
Executive Director

July 20, 2020

Dear Harris County Superintendents:

Today, Harris County is facing an extremely challenging time due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Harris County's COVID-19 Threat Level System is currently at "**Red Level 1: Stay Home**", which means there is severe and uncontrolled disease transmission in our community.

We recognize that in-person instruction is vital for the educational development and social well-being of children and young adults. Schools provide much-needed food assistance to many low-income families by offering students healthy meals and access to resources they may not otherwise have. And in-person instruction of children is crucial for many parents to carry out their activities.

However, the prevalence of the virus in our community means that it would be unsafe for schools to return in-person at this time or in the near future. Hospitals are nearing our exceeding capacity as a matter of course. There are over 35,000 active cases in our county - an enormous pool of people able to spread the virus. In-person instruction would inevitably give way to countless interactions and a new wave of cases and hospitalizations. There is no evidence of successful school reopening with this level of community transmission and at a moment where our tools remain severely weakened: the volume of cases has overwhelmed our case investigation and contact tracing capacities and many still face waits of up to two weeks for receiving test results, further weakening testing and containment efforts.

In the absence of a widely available treatment or vaccine, our community must bring the virus under control before in-person instruction can safely resume. That will require bringing hospitalizations and cases well below the current level. Once that happens, the return to in-person instruction must be phased, careful, make use of containment tools to reduce likelihoods of outbreaks, and learn from other communities which have reopened in-person instruction successfully over the longer term. We continue to urge all in our community to stay home except for essential activities. The faster we bring the virus under control and bring the "curve down", the sooner schools will be able to reopen safely and stay open.

Taking everything into consideration as above, we currently recommend the following:

- In-person, face-to-face instruction should not be made available for any grades from pre-kindergarten through grade 12 until October 2020. It should be emphasized that Harris

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County continues to review data trends on an ongoing basis and may update this timeline accordingly.

- School boards should work with local and state governments along with other community partners to accommodate families who lack internet access or devices by providing the necessary tools to ensure access to remote learning. We make ourselves available to continue these discussions.

- All school-sponsored events and activities, including but not limited to extracurriculars, fairs, exhibitions, and academic and athletic competitions, should not take place in-person, on or off campus, at least until school systems resume in-person instruction.

- As recommended in TEA guidance, schools should develop a written plan with safety and health protocols for resuming in-person instruction and extracurricular activities before resuming such activities. School systems should make the plan available to parents and the general public. Consultation with local health authorities during reopening planning will allow for easier communication, coordination, and for the development of strategies that make containment possible.

The Harris County Judge's Office and Harris County Public Health are continually monitoring the impacts of this pandemic by partnering with health experts, educational experts, and the community for a safe and productive educational experience. We appreciate your efforts to educate students while also protecting the public health of our community, and we look forward to continuing discussions and collaborative planning about this incredibly important issue.

Sincerely,

Lina Hidalgo
Harris County Judge

Umair A. Shah, MD, MPH
Executive Director and Local Health Authority
Harris County Public Health