

Largest Texas school districts slated to open without testing anyone

Chase Lawrence
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It has recently been revealed that major school districts in the largest cities in Texas, including Dallas Independent School District (ISD), Houston ISD, Austin ISD, and El Paso ISD, have no requirements or plans for COVID-19 testing for “anyone at any point,” as the *Texas Tribune* put it. Students who are symptomatic will simply be asked to go home for 14 days or until they seem to improve, meaning that students who are still sick could be sent back to school.

Schools that have already reopened, such as Dumas ISD in Dumas, Texas have seen cases since the district first reopened, with the school administration flaunting social distancing measures. The superintendent for the district, Monty Hysinger, said, “We can’t promise, and we haven’t promised, our parents that we can socially distance.” He cited space restrictions applicable to all districts in the state, saying, “I don’t know of a district in the state that has the space.”

All of the major school districts mentioned which are not going to test students are situated in densely populated areas that are also COVID-19 hotspots with rampant community spread, producing thousands of new cases daily. Texas has the second-highest number of cases of any state in the US at roughly 668,787, and the third-highest number of deaths at 13,819.

Harris County, where Houston ISD is located, has a population of 4.7 million and has seen over 111,000 cases and 2,327 deaths. Saturday saw 928 new cases added. Houston ISD has already had multiple outbreaks, with a staff member testing positive after handing out laptops over the summer and student athletes becoming infected during summer training.

Dallas County has an estimated population of almost 2.4 million, and has over 73,000 recorded COVID-19 cases and 944 deaths. On Saturday, 398 additional cases were added, partially due to a backlog of tests.

Travis county, where Austin ISD is situated, has a population of almost 1.3 million, with 26,931 cases recorded in total. AISD has already seen an outbreak over the summer, with nearly 700 staff quarantined and at least 51 infected. El Paso, population 839,238, has recorded 6,265 cases and 157 deaths, with 334 additional cases recorded Saturday.

In all of these counties, youth made up a significant portion of the case numbers. In Harris County, the 10-to-19-year-old age group made up almost 10,000 cases, with children aged 0-9 accounting for over 4,000 cases. In Travis county, the same age groups had more than 2,000 and 800 cases, respectively. Given community spread, all counties where schools are reopening are going to have significant numbers of COVID-19 cases among school-aged children.

In response to mass opposition from educators and parents to the state’s reopening plans, the deadline for in-person school reopening is now set to be eight weeks after the normal start date of schools, which was around August 20.

Dallas ISD, for example, initially set its start date at August 17. Facing pressure from teachers and parents, the district moved the start date to September 8. Following additional protests at a Dallas ISD school board meeting, the reopening date was again moved to October 15, merely putting off the date for the disaster as COVID-19 cases are expected to continue rising well into the fall.

The superintendent, Michael Hinojosa, in an effort to cover up the massive opposition to the reopening, falsely claimed that his decision was solely based on the guidance of the county, despite the fact that the county was previously in favor of the reopening.

A similar series of events have unfolded in other major districts, such as Austin ISD, which shifted its

start date from August 18 to September 8, and Dallas ISD, which moved from August 17 to September 8.

In an effort to divide teachers, the reopening dates have been subdivided among age groups in many districts, including Dallas ISD. The opening dates for elementary, middle, and high school have been scheduled by individual grades, with some elementary grades resuming before other grades in the same schools.

The Texas government and school districts are careening towards disaster with their eyes closed. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) deadline for reopening face-to-face, which is a maximum of 8 weeks following the start of online classes, is little over 4 weeks away. Many teachers are required to return to their classrooms today to give remote instruction, even though their school is not set to resume in-person learning until October.

Despite claims by Governor Abbott that the state government would pay for Personal Protective Equipment (PPE), cleaning supplies, and cough shields, it is common on social media to see teachers erecting their own shields out of PVC pipes and plastic sheets, while buying extra cleaning supplies for themselves and their coworkers after only receiving a single spray bottle labeled “sanitizer” and a roll of paper towels.

Scientific studies have shown that the concentration of COVID-19 droplets in a given room can be lessened by providing ventilation, but studies have also shown that recirculating air aids the virus’s spread by blowing contaminated air in places it might not otherwise reach, thus allowing viral particles to accumulate in the system.

Heating Ventilation and Air Conditioning (HVAC) is essential to the safe operation of indoor facilities. Texas schools often have outdated, unfiltered and breakage-prone HVAC systems, compounding the problem of viral transmission within classrooms.

Just last year, Houston ISD had over 14,000 broken HVAC complaints between September 2017 and October 2019. Austin ISD had multiple HVAC failures in the last year, with schools being forced to set up temporary air conditioners, and 21 Austin ISD schools having issues with heating. Dallas ISD last year had one of its campus’s air conditioners fail at the start of the fall semester in one of its middle schools, with the school going without air conditioning for weeks,

causing the interior of the school to reach temperatures over 100 F (38 C).

Given these conditions, massive infections should be expected on the first day of school. Combined with the complete lack of a testing plan or requirement, wholly inadequate sanitation and PPE, the infections among student athletes and staff over the summer, and the community spread among children in general, it becomes patently obvious that this is a catastrophe in the making.

Completely indifferent to the mounting casualties that stem from its reopening policies, the Texas government is sticking to the policy of herd immunity while absurdly claiming that masks and social distancing alone will stop a massive spread of the virus. Governor Abbott routinely spouts these claims at press conferences.

Just as in other states that have reopened schools and colleges, the government, local officials, and the corporate news, after perpetrating a massive social crime, will claim that it was because not enough people wore their masks, while turning a blind eye to the essential role they played in creating the disaster. The unions are also complicit in the face of the reopening, refusing to call for a strike of educators against the pandemic, while falsely claiming that a “safe reopening” is possible.

Educators, parents and students must take their own independent initiative to stop the drive to reopen schools through the formation of a network of independent, rank-and-file safety committees. Where schools are already open, these committees must ensure that the strictest safety measures are implemented until a successful struggle can be mounted to fully close them. The Texas Educators Rank-and-File Safety Committee was launched today to help coordinate this work, and we urge you to contact us to discuss the way forward and organize a committee in your area.



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