



**Response to the House Public Education Committee's
Formal Request for Information on
Interim Charges 1[C], [D], [E], and [F]**

September 30, 2020

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) offers the following comments to the House Public Education Committee in response to its formal request for information on Interim Charges 1[C], 1[D], 1[E], and 1[F].

ATPE supports measures to ensure that all educational settings are safe and secure environments where students, school employees, and volunteers can be productive. Safety and security in the school environment means more than just feeling physically safe. They also require knowing the social, emotional, and mental needs of students and adults in the school are being met. The ability for school systems to provide psychological comfort sets the stage for learning and well-being.

ATPE believes mental health resources for students and staff are needed now more than ever due to the coronavirus pandemic. Children have experienced trauma resulting from instability in their households, lack of typical school-based supports, personal loss, and new duties such as taking care of younger siblings or taking on paid work. Children may also find themselves isolated and alone at home. Educators and staff have experienced the adult side of the trauma, enduring increased stress due to personal loss, health-related risks, panic and anxiety associated with uncertain school return policies, financial instability within their families, and an increased childcare burden. To mitigate these stressors and create a safe, secure environment that will facilitate teaching and learning, it is imperative lawmakers prioritize mental health resources in schools.

During the 86th legislative session in 2019, the Texas Legislature passed a comprehensive school finance bill and several other bills that work together to increase mental health supports in public schools. Specifically, House Bill (HB) 18, HB 19, Senate Bill (SB) 11, and HB 906 have provided much-needed mental health infrastructure during this time. However, the implementation of these bills should be viewed as merely the foundation of a robust system of student and educator supports. The 87th Texas Legislature can continue building upon this foundation to lift up the public education community, get Texas students back on track, and fulfill the promise of House Bill 3.

HB 18 emphasized mental health training for educators, principals, and counselors through updated certification and continuing professional education requirements. HB 18 also increased awareness of mental health and substance abuse issues among students through curricular changes. Although these changes are either still in the rule-making process (curriculum) or just beginning to take effect (training and certification), enhanced awareness of mental health and substance abuse will help educators and students identify and work through these issues, a strength needed now more than ever.

HB 19 and the associated \$2.3 million budgeted during the 2019 legislative session facilitated the placement of 20 non-physician mental health professionals at each of the state's education service centers. These professionals provide guidance to districts and serve as a mental health

The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) has been a strong voice for Texas educators since 1980. It is the leading educators' association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, future, retired, and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for the more than 5 million public schoolchildren of Texas.

and substance abuse resource, even providing monthly training to educators. The Legislature should ensure the increases to personnel and training made by HB 18 and HB 19 are continued with fidelity by leveraging state dollars and building upon current collaborations and partnerships among state agencies, education service centers, and other entities working on mental health.

SB 11 made financial and programmatic investments in mental health and school safety, most notably with the \$100 million school safety allotment. This allotment, which amounted to approximately \$9.72 per student in average daily attendance, can be used to employ counselors—a necessity always in short supply in Texas public schools. In the 2018-19 school year, there were 422 students for every counselor employed in Texas public schools, well beyond the 250:1 ratio recommended by the American School Counselor Association. School counselors have been called upon increasingly to provide services to students *and* parents during the COVID-19 pandemic, making the need to increase counselor capacity even more urgent.

SB 11 also created the Texas Child Mental Health Care Consortium (TCMHCC), which was allotted \$99 million to enhance behavioral health telemedicine options across the state, among other initiatives. TCMHCC created a school-based supports program called Texas Child Health Access Through Telemedicine (TCHATT) that provides identification, assessment, and referral services to regions of the state that have existing telemedicine and telehealth infrastructure.

ATPE is committed to suicide prevention. Because of this, it is imperative that any services provided to students are as effective as possible in catching and remediating concerning behaviors. Although the TCHATT program is a valuable resource, especially during a pandemic, the committee should ensure it is effective. Some students, particularly our most vulnerable students, may experience barriers to accessing telemedicine services or following through with referrals to other physicians or mental health professionals made through the program. In those cases, it may be more effective to lessen the complexity of accessing services by having more mental health professionals on school campuses.

HB 906 created the Collaborative Task Force on Public School Mental Health Services, which is tasked with studying and evaluating the state-funded mental health services provided to students, families, and employees in public schools. Part of this evaluation will include analyzing the impact of services on suicide rates. The task force will also evaluate the effectiveness of mental health services and training provided to educators. Although classroom educators are on the front lines of identifying concerning behaviors among students and are the individuals receiving and implementing mental health-related training, HB 906 did not require the task force to include classroom educators. ATPE believes classroom educators should be included in the task force, which is established in statute through December 2025.

ATPE appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback during this process and invites House Public Education Committee members and their staff to contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or government@atpe.org for any additional information.