Pandemic Public School Perspectives

The Response of Texas Education Leaders to Exacerbated Inequities

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Jacinto Ramos, Jr.
Fort Worth ISD Board of Trustees
MASBA President

Sometimes you have to "roll with the punches." On February 20-23, 2020, one week after the first COVID-19 case was confirmed in San Antonio, Texas, the Mexican American School Boards Association (MASBA) convened there to celebrate its fiftieth anniversary. Then, only three weeks after I was sworn in as President of MASBA at that conference, our Texas public schools were temporarily shuttered by a once-in-a-century pandemic we didn't fully understand. As educational leaders, we found ourselves in uncharted waters, wondering what to do. The disruption was considerable, and we knew that this pandemic would only exacerbate the gaps and inequities that existed prior to the pandemic. So, we quickly mobilized to deal with the adverse circumstances in which we found ourselves.

MASBA showed incredible leadership as our nation slid into the pandemic, as many cities enforced shelter-in-place orders, and as we scrambled as school districts to take instruction from our brick-and-mortar classrooms to virtual platforms in a matter of days. MASBA collaborated with the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members and Leadership ISD to bring together superintendents and school board members to discuss several issues related to the pandemic, always with a particular focus on the most adversely affected students. Over 900 champions of public education participated in that conversation series.

As if one pandemic were not enough, we also lived through racism of pandemic proportions in summer 2020 with the murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Ahmaud Arbury, Vanessa Guillen and countless others in communities throughout the nation. Protests and demonstrations brought attention to the racism, hatred and xenophobia propagated by individuals in the highest leadership positions in our nation. MASBA responded with its publication of *Seats at the Table: School Board Members' Perspectives on Race & Racism*, which was featured on the main stages of the National School Boards

Association's annual equity symposium and the annual conference of the Texas Association of School Administrators and the Texas Association of School Boards.

After over 400,000 U.S. deaths due to COVID-19, our public schools began to emerge from the first pandemic under new national leadership. MASBA again displayed incredible leadership by hosting a second conversation series on the gaps that were exacerbated by the pandemic and how we might best advocate for our *Latinx* students and Emergent Bilinguals during our biannual, 140-day legislative session. The "oxygen" of this 87th Texas Legislative Session was largely consumed by pandemic and winter storm relief efforts.

Regrettably, we continue to live under the cloud of the pandemic of racism, which tenaciously clings to life while claiming more lives than any of us can imagine.

Now that we've "rolled with the punches" of these past thirteen unprecedented months, it's time for us to "roll up our sleeves" and to tackle the gaps that have widened and the racism that is still all-too-prevalent in our world. This work sheds important light on both issues.

I share my gratitude with the many equity warriors and co-conspirators who contributed to the conversations in this work. As education leaders, may we all be challenged by their words and wisdom, recommit ourselves to fanning into flame the conversation on race and equity at the local, state and national levels, and do all that is in our power to eradicate racism and inequities from our public schools and our world.

If not us, who?

If not here, where?

If not now, when?

If not for the sake of the millions of students entrusted to our care, why?

¡Así derechito!

Good Governance in Crisis

Dr. Drew Howard
Senior Director of School Governance & Leadership
Texas Education Agency

Jacinto Ramos, Jr.
Fort Worth ISD
MASBA President

April 6, 2020

Ramos: As a result of this COVID-19 pandemic, our Texas public schools have now been closed for three weeks. On March 25, during a conversation of our MASBA Board, we sensed a pattern: that school board members would enjoy the opportunity to share how their districts are responding to this pandemic and to learn from one another.

The following day, on March 26, we piloted a conversation of 27 trustees from throughout the state. Some of the questions we raised were:

- How are you holding up?
- What can we, as school board members, do right now?
- What should we prepare for in the coming months?
- How can we better support one another?
- How can we give our superintendents and administrators the space they need during this crisis, while holding them accountable—now that all the performance indicators that we had formulated for our superintendents are "out the window"?
- Should we, as school boards, continue with "business as usual," or are there certain things we should be focused on during the coming weeks and months?
- What are we hoping for from our superintendents and our districts, particularly if our country follows a

curve similar to other countries, and our public schools aren't able to reopen anytime soon?

- What emergency powers should we cede—or not cede—to our superintendents?
- How will we ensure that our actions aren't an obstacle in the future, when proponents for the privatization of public education suggest that our districts operated just fine when our Boards of Trustees took a step back during this pandemic?

Here at MASBA, we decided to partner with the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members and Leadership ISD and explore together how we, as school board members, might govern in the midst of crisis and model good governance during challenging times.

I am privileged to work with Dr. Drew Howard through the Lonestar Governance coaching and support system. During a call with him and a number of others from around the state last week, he was addressing several of these questions. We're pleased to have him in this space with us, to help us understand the aspects of our role that are hindered by this pandemic, and the opportunities that might be presenting themselves. Some districts have been boldly addressing inequities and were better prepared for this pandemic. Other districts are experiencing great challenges. Dr. Drew Howard, thank you for being with us today!

Howard: Thank you for the opportunity to be among some of our great school leaders. It's a privilege to look around the state and see how quickly educational leaders have come together to take care of the needs of our students. This is an unprecedented situation, one that we haven't had to deal with in education for a very long time.

One day, we'll look back on this opportunity and say how much we learned and grew. We need to take the knowledge and skills that we learn during this time, to move forward. We'll be challenged to deal with equity issues.

I want to preface my remarks with some positives. One day, we'll look back on this opportunity and say how much we learned and grew.

We need to take the knowledge and skills that we learn during this time, to move forward. We'll be challenged to deal with equity issues among our students. We'll be challenged to provide for the safety and security of our students, our families and our communities. We'll be challenged to provide education to our students, with all the challenges we face and with them now being isolated from each other.

In a time like this, where do school boards fit in? Many of the big decisions during times of crisis are managed as part of the day-to-day operations. You hired your superintendents to handle these day-to-day, operational decisions. At the same time, we have to create accountability, maintain governance, and make the decisions that fall to us as school boards.

You hired your superintendents to handle these day-to-day, operational decisions. At the same time, we have to create accountability, maintain governance, and make the decisions that fall to us as school boards.

We need to ensure that our superintendents and the people we trust with operational actions are still accountable for the decisions they make. We need to be supportive. We talk about a school board and superintendent being a "Team of Eight." During times like this, we need to be that team. We need to be supportive.

Normally, in our school board meetings, we take time to reflect on the progress toward the goals we've set and to ask if we're seeing the results we want to see. As Jacinto pointed out, many of these have now been thrown "out the window." Many of our goals are around the STAAR test and performance measures. Those data may not be gathered this year, or they may not be as reliable and accurate as we would like.

During times like this, school boards need to create and focus on emergency priorities. Two emergency priorities that rise to the top of my mind are

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maintaining the safety, security and well-being of our students, and providing for the continuation of educational services to students outside of normal school operations.

Every district in Texas will have a different situation, so emergency priorities may differ, but all districts will want to ensure the safety and security of our students and the continuation of their education. Boards do well to focus on equity issues around those two priorities. During times like this, accountability looks more like a conversation, than a report that's given or received. Question might include: How are things going? What are the safety and security needs of our students? What is our plan for continuing their education? What is our plan for ensuring equity among students? Which students have internet access, and which students don't? What about our special education students? How will we provide for the needs of our Language Learners, our students with learning disabilities, and those who need 504 services? Those are great questions for boards and superintendents during times like this.

Emergency priorities may differ, but all districts will want to ensure the safety & security of our students and the continuation of their education. Boards do well to focus on equity issues around those two priorities.

We're closer to those answers today than we were two weeks ago, and we'll saying the same thing two weeks from now. In the meantime, focus on emergency priorities, especially the safety and security of students and providing for their needs. Some districts are providing food to students. Others are providing daycare services for essential employees in the community.

Understand the needs of parents and teachers: Some teachers are at home with their own kids, and they're still preparing lessons. Some teachers are teaching through online platforms; others are creating and delivering instructional packets. School systems are engaging in

constant communication. All of these components influence the continuity of education.

Down the line, when it's more appropriate, we'll be able to reevaluate with our superintendents the goals for our school systems and the progress measures we might put in place. Those may look very different from the goals our districts had six weeks ago.

During times like this, it's very important to maintain communication. As circumstances change, we need to communicate with our communities. Boards can assist with communicating with the community and providing consistent communication over time. People will hear different things, so it's important for boards to have good communication, a unified message on priorities, and a message that you're acting as a "Team of Eight" to serve students and families, even in a chaotic time.

It's important for boards to have good communication, a unified message on priorities, and a message that you're acting as a "Team of Eight" to serve students and families, even in a chaotic time.

Ramos: Our first question comes from Rubén Cortez of the State Board of Education.

Cortez: I don't have a question. I want to note that what we're going through is unprecedented—in our communities, in our state, and in our country. I want to applaud the work you're doing as trustees. Be proactive about the concerns we're talking about, and see this as an opportunity. You've probably called an emergency meeting or special board meeting during these past few weeks, probably through virtual means, likely to allow your administration the discretion they need to operate your district. We now have a shelter-in-place order throughout the state, and our kids will need to adapt to a "new normal" of at-home school. I have four kids in my home, all in different rooms, doing online instruction with teachers. This is possible because of the leadership you provide by allowing your administrators to use district resources to buy necessary technology.

We're identifying the technology gaps that have existed, and we're going to learn some lessons from this as a state. We need to figure out how to fix those gaps.

We're identifying the technology gaps that have existed, and we're going to learn some lessons from this as a state. We need to figure out how to fix those gaps.

Some districts are paying time-and-a-half to food service personnel.

Our Commissioner of Education, Mike Morath, has stepped up and is hosting daily calls with superintendents from across the state. The Texas Education Agency staff has stepped up and is helping schools. State and federal agencies are establishing guidelines, modifying rules and obtaining waivers. There are so many things going on, and I have been supremely impressed with the leadership of our Education Commissioner, Mike Morath, during this crisis. He's keeping everyone well-informed. He's trying to be as transparent as possible. He's thinking about things we hadn't thought about: special education, the arts, accommodations, and all the things we need to dealt with. Everything will be interrupted. We won't have proms. We'll need to figure out virtual graduations. I don't anticipate that any of us will go back to school this year.

Through July, Google is offering Google classroom for free, for anyone in the state who wants it. Many companies, like Apple and Microsoft, are offering free professional development for school districts.

School board members are pooling resources and giving superintendents discretion, raising the spending caps of their superintendents—some even to a half-million dollars. Superintendents don't have time to call a school board meeting and wait 72 hours. They don't even have 24 hours to call an emergency meeting. They need to make decisions on the fly, and school board members have really stepped up. I'm grateful for your leadership.

What's happening is scary. We had a scare in my home: My daughter came into contact with someone who tested positive for COVID, and she is in quarantine. She's fine,

but this pandemic is striking close to home, and we need to be vigilant.

As school board members, think about the gaps that could be created by this situation, and figure out how to make sure those gaps don't exist when our kids go back to school—in the summer or fall.

Think about this "new normal" for your teachers. Give them the latitude they need.

Think about this "new normal" for your teachers. Give them the latitude they need. Some school districts have gone too far, requiring teachers to be available until 8:00 or 9:00 p.m. Value them and their time. Provide them the technology they need.

Finally, if you aren't tuning in for the Commissioner's daily calls, please do so. Get information from the TEA, and learn about the most granular things that need to be modified—things we haven't even thought about. I learn something new every day, as we transition to at-home schools!

Ramos: Thanks for bringing up those calls, Rubén. Dr. Howard, is there a way for us to chime in on those calls with the Commissioner? Are those calls open to all?

Howard: The dial-in information has been provided to all superintendents. Because of the volume of people on these calls, they are one-way. They're a way for the Commissioner to share daily information. You can also find several resources at tea.texas.gov/coronavirus, ranging from state and federal programs, to board actions and trainings.

I want to thank Rubén Cortez and Keven Ellis of the State Board of Education, for working with my department to relinquish trustees from the stress of required board trainings at this time, so that we can focus on what's best for our students and communities.

Ramos: We have a question from Trustee Linda Griffin of Garland ISD.

Griffin: Dr. Howard, the two priorities you've given us are excellent. Rubén talked about the policies that need to be revised, so that superintendents can do their work. What's the best and most positive way for us to share

with other board members that we're meeting virtually and things are not normal. There are things hitting our agenda that are not of importance right now, in light of circumstances. As board members, we can't get the goals that we've established out of our heads How do we begin that conversation?

Howard: That's a great question. Board members across the state have different mindsets. The best thing to do is to take action as a board to suspend the current monitoring of your goals, then focus on the priorities at hand. Have a conversation. Expect the reports from your superintendent later. Now, ask: How many students have access to technology and internet? What are their needs, and how can you provide for them? What policies need to be changed to allow your superintendent access to funds to purchase new equipment, to move buses around and provide internet access in the community.

Suspend the current monitoring of your goals, then focus on the priorities at hand. Have a conversation. Expect the reports from your superintendent later.

During this time of emergency, take action to suspend your current monitoring practices. We'll go "back to normal," hopefully sooner than later. In the meantime, focus only on emergency priorities.

Ramos: We go to Trustee Trish Bode of Leander ISD.

Bode: Mr. Cortez talked about giving food service personnel time-and-a-half. Do you have any comments on that?

Howard: That's not something that we're doing at the TEA, but I've seen local school boards do it for food service personnel, security officers, those who are maintaining IT systems, and all classified staff who report for duty. Most districts are paying their employees, even though they're working from home, and they're providing supplemental pay to administrators and certified staff. Those are local decisions that you, as school board members, can make.

Ramos: We go to Trustee Anne Sung of the Houston ISD.

Sung: The Houston ISD Board will be considering emergency priorities on Thursday. How long should these priorities

extend? We're coming up on the end of the school year. Should we pay attention to these priorities through the summer? Should we anticipate possible disruption in the 2020-2021 school year? How do you see emergency priorities evolving over the next months and next year?

Howard: I suggest emergency priorities for at least the next quarter. Set them, and evaluate them over your next three board meetings. It's a fluid situation. You'll sense in a few months if you can start migrating back to "normal." Keep in mind that many of our goals are aligned with the STAAR and other assessments given at the end of the year. Those will likely be disrupted. Nothing replaces a teacher in a classroom, in front of kids daily. To mitigate gaps as much as possible, make continuity of instruction a high priority. I'm not optimistic about going back to school to finish out this year—but different districts are in different situations. There will be a lot of time for reflection later. In the meantime, focus on getting kids back together with their teachers.

Nothing replaces a teacher in a classroom, in front of kids daily. To mitigate gaps as much as possible, make continuity of instruction a high priority.

Ramos: The next question is from Kay Douglas of TASB.

Douglas: Trustee Linda Griffin's question had to do with board dynamics. Even though trustee training requirements have been put off till September 30, team-building needs to be ongoing. We're all making this up as we go. We're finding our way as we go, and we still need avenues to talk as trustees about fears and concerns, and not just whether students are eating or how our staff is doing. You could do this during a formal, virtual meeting, or you can just reach out to individual trustees and not talk about district business. My emphasis is to show empathy and reach out to team members—within or without the meeting.

Ramos: Thank you, Kay, for bringing humanity into this crisis. We can't forget that we're all servants to the community, with the best of intentions to serve our young people. Checking in with one another is absolutely a great idea.

Next, we go to Trustee Armando Rodriguez of Canutillo ISD.

Rodríguez: In regard to graduation requirements, some states across the country are looking at the previous semesters and allowing graduations to continue without any penalties. How is the TEA addressing this issue? Many of our kids are going through difficult situations and are now engaged in remote, distance learning. How will we address this issue, so that we can move forward?

Howard: The website I referred to, tea.texas.gov/coronavirus, has resources on this, to help you, as a board, decide. The situation is fluid, and the specifics will look different in different situations. The Commissioner's daily calls are also addressing issues of graduation and GPA. Because the situation is evolving and ever changing, I encourage all of you to join those calls.

Ramos: Our friends from TASB also have links and resources for school board members on their website. Let's go to Trustee Jesse Rodriguez of Grapevine-Colleyville ISD.

Rodríguez: Here in Grapevine-Colleyville, a lot of our educational partners and publishers are offering access to a lot of their online instructional resources at no cost through the end of the school year—and some into the summer. If you're looking for resources, check out the resources that publishers are providing at no cost to school districts.

Ramos: We go to Trustee Dawn Miller of Cedar Hill ISD.

Miller: I have a two-part question. Our high school seniors will soon be completing their studies. Are there any conversations going on regionally or nationally with colleges and universities, on college acceptance requirements? The parents of seniors are panicking about whether their children will now qualify for acceptance. My second question is about charter schools: I heard someone suggest that there are some advantages for charter schools during this time, but I'm imagining they are at a disadvantage because most of them aren't as technologically adept as we are. What is your perspective on that?

Howard: All organizations—including the College Board, NCAA and UIL—are having conversations on these issues. Districts are asking what impact there will be on college admissions if they switch to pass/fail grading for this year. I'm not aware of any decisions that have been made yet, but everyone in public education, higher education, and private schools is talking. There are all sorts of things that we didn't think about in the past, that we're having to think about now!

Ramos: Our last question is from Trustee Corinne French of Valley View ISD. Our district is very small and very rural, and we were not prepared for this, but our teachers and administrators are doing a great job. We did a technology survey, which asked about devices—and cell phones were considered a device for learning! Where can we find information on how many students in Texas truly have access to online learning?

Howard: That's a great question, and I wish I had an answer. Every local school system is trying to determine which kids have access, and which don't, to ensure equity and continuity of education. Some districts are putting hotspots on buses and parking the buses in different parts of the community. They're setting up places where parents who have the time and availability can park and have access for their kids. It's a struggle.

Every local school system is trying to determine which kids have access, and which don't, to ensure equity and continuity of education.

I'll end on a positive note. The superintendents that I've visited with around the state are doing a remarkable job. They're being very creative and finding ways to provide education for our students. We all know that nothing will replace a teacher in a classroom, in front of kids—but how can we do the next best thing, and how can we judge the effectiveness of what we're doing to get access to everyone?

Ramos: Thank you, Dr. Howard, for sharing your expertise and information. Now it's time for us on this call—and our friends and colleagues that we serve with—to model

adaptive leadership as we take our school systems online, find ways to feed our students, and get them access to resources and support systems. We've seen an increase in domestic violence these past few weeks, as a result of what's going on in homes, so we also have to be conscious of the mental health of our students, our families, and our entire community.

Finally, let's be sure to take care of ourselves and to lean into the work, not becoming overly-involved and distracting our superintendents and their administrative teams from doing their jobs. Let's go back out into our communities and practice good governance!

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Balanced Governance in Crisis

Dr. Phil Gore
Texas Association of School Boards

Jacinto Ramos, Jr.
Fort Worth ISD
MASBA President

April 13, 2020

Ramos: These are unprecedented times, and nobody really seems to have had a complete grip on how best to respond to this pandemic, so we're bringing in the power of community, to share ideas. Our conversation this week with Dr. Phil Gore of the Texas Association of School Boards goes hand-in-hand with last week's conversation with Dr. Drew Howard of the Texas Education Agency. Dr. Gore is very knowledgeable—he knows the theory—but he's also a practitioner. He served as a board member, and he worked with the National School Boards Association. I regularly reference his work, *Balanced Governance*, in which he describes three types of boards: the disengaged board, the micromanaging board, and the informed oversight board. We need to avoid being micromanaging board members who get in the way of our superintendents and their leadership teams, prohibiting them from doing their jobs. Nor can we be disengaged board members, being completely hands-off. As Dr. Gore suggests in his book, we need to find balance.

We need to avoid being micromanaging board members who get in the way of our superintendents & their leadership teams, prohibiting them from doing their jobs. Nor can we be disengaged board members, being completely hands-off.

Dr. Gore, we'd love to hear your thoughts and ideas in light of what we're dealing with. We'd love to "lean" on your words of wisdom!

Gore: Thank you, Cinto, for setting the stage with words on balance. In a crisis, superintendents and their administrative teams need to accomplish some very critical things. The school board needs to work hand-in-hand, to collaborate and reduce confusion, and to promote a sense of calm and confidence, whenever possible. With all of the uncertainty around COVID-19, this novel coronavirus, many school district communities—your constituents, parents, families, students and staff—are looking to the school district for leadership and a unified message.

In a crisis, superintendents and their administrative teams need to accomplish some very critical things. The school board needs to work hand-in-hand, to collaborate & reduce confusion, and to promote a sense of calm & confidence, whenever possible.

Meetings, events and normal routines are disrupted all over the world. We need to act at the local level, exercising our best judgment, sharing our best governance, and doing all we can to bring out the best of ourselves. Especially during this time of crisis, I encourage all Texas trustees to bring your best self to the table.

Later this week, we'll hear again from our Governor about the possible extension of shelter-in-place orders, or even the possible relaxation of them. At the local level, you have a great opportunity to ensure that such communications get to all the corners of your district. Specifically, I think of non-English-speaking families that may need translated messages.

Our districts have an obligation to maintain individualized instruction for students with disabilities, providing related medical services for our most vulnerable students. That's just "the tip of the iceberg" of what districts are facing across the state of Texas. There's

a lot of uncertainty and disruption—but we're also seeing beautiful examples of adaptation.

It's really important that board members know their role, stay within their role, and fulfill their entire role. In a time of social distancing, they also have to stay connected—by email, phone and video conferences. I'm not talking about violating the Open Meetings Act; I'm talking about checking in with fellow board members, asking how they're doing, letting them know you're thinking of them, and asking what you can do for them.

It's really important that board members know their role, stay within their role, and fulfill their entire role.

During times like this, it's important to let your superintendents lead. Let them feel empowered. Help them be "out front." Recognizing that your local community has elected you as their representatives, your board president and superintendent might release a statement or host a webinar together for your community. It's important that all trustees know what the message is and to share the same message individually and collectively. Stay connected with your superintendent and his/her staff, so that you'll know what the message is.

During these shelter-in-place orders, the Governor has waived requirements for in-person meetings, making virtual meetings a little easier. I see, in our poll, that 85% of you on this call have had a virtual board meeting.

At the top of our TASB website is a red banner with coronavirus resources, which include details on how to conduct virtual meetings. Some of them are simple tips: like making sure you have enough light in front of you and not too much light behind you, so that you're not "greyed out" on the screen.

For those who have conducted virtual meetings, we see that 40% say those meetings have gone extremely well. Here at TASB, we even had a virtual training with a board last week—and it went better than people

expected. Many districts are using Zoom to allow trustees to connect and focus on the content at hand.

At TASB, we're sending a biweekly email to all trustees in the state; at least half of all trustees are opening and reading those messages. In those messages, we talk about conducting virtual meeting, and the laws around that. We also talk about how board members retain their oversight during times like these.

We also had a poll question on whether your board have passed resolutions to relinquish oversight or grant emergency authority to your superintendent during this crisis. We see that 81% of you have passed a special resolution like that. We want to encourage all boards in the state to be careful with this. Texas now allows for virtual meetings, and emergency meetings can be called with a one-hour notice, so it's difficult to think of decisions that superintendents need to make without calling their boards together in an hour. If you relinquish authority, be mindful of what you're relinquishing and whether it's necessary.

If you relinquish authority, be mindful of what you're relinquishing and whether it's necessary.

Stay connected—not only with your board and superintendent, but also with your community. Inform yourself of the resources on the TEA website, on the Governor's website. Share with your neighbors what you're hearing, what you're thinking, and what might happen.

Stay connected with other trustees. These Monday webinars by MASBA, the Black Caucus and Leadership ISD will help you stay connected with other trustees across the state. When schools close for weather-related incidents, we advise that districts in the area work together. During this time, districts might work together on online learning needs, special accommodations for students, meals, any special services. If your district is thinking of doing something unique or special, check in with the districts that border you and coordinate efforts for the sake of your students and their families.

Let your superintendent lead in his/her role of management and operations. Your superintendent or communications director will typically be your district's designated spokesperson. Stay in contact with them. Have emergency board meetings, if you need to. Consider meeting more frequently during this crisis. You might think that you don't want to take away time from the superintendent and his or her work, but you also need to stay informed. Schedule opportunities to hear on an ongoing basis what's happening. Many superintendents have the practice of "Friday notes," of sending a summary on Fridays of the things they did during the week. You might consider having such "notes" more often during a pandemic—perhaps even a short update, daily or every other day, where the superintendent can keep the board apprised of their response to issues as they arise. It's easier to support our superintendents in their role when we know what they're doing.

Consider meeting more frequently during this crisis. You might think that you don't want to take away time from the superintendent and his or her work, but you also need to stay informed.

Keep your community connected and informed. Share positive messages. Be ambassadors of hope, gratitude and compassion. Give clear, calm, reassuring, factual messages. Acknowledge that there are some bad things happening, and extend hope. Don't merely communicate about school business. Communicate about health practices. Schools are the largest employers in many communities and are often the primary source of information about health and nutrition in a community. Make your district a hub for best practices. Talk about social distancing. Point people to credible resources.

Share positive messages. Be ambassadors of hope, gratitude and compassion. Give clear, calm, reassuring, factual messages.

Cinto began with a reference to my book on balanced governance. Don't overmanage or micromanage, but also don't be disengaged and merely "rubberstamp." We

desperately need balanced governance now. Stay engaged, ask informed questions, and create a sense of calm and hope for your community!

Ramos: Our first question comes from Trustee Trish Bode of Leander ISD. She says, "We gave our superintendent powers in the event that he cannot meet with us, but we also said that he will let us know if he uses those powers. Any comment on that?"

Gore: That sounds balanced. It sounds like a great way to enact a resolution in the event that the superintendent can't meet with a quorum of the board in a reasonable time.

Ramos: We now go to Trustee Winford Adams of Spring ISD.

Adams: The model resolution by the TEA had several "whereas" statements and several "therefore be it resolved" statements. When I read it, I thought, Why do you need a school board, if the superintendent can do all this? I was concerned, and I wonder if anyone else felt that way.

Gore: Our attorneys at TASB had similar concerns. The resolution seemed to ask boards to "turn over the keys" to the superintendent and walk away. I like what Trish said about wording the resolution in a way that, if the superintendent and board cannot meet for some reason, the superintendent will report to the board. Texas law allows for emergency meetings to be called by phone in an hour—but we also don't know the full extent of this virus and how it will affect communities and disrupt services. If, God forbid, a majority of your board is sick with the virus, you want the work of your district to move forward, but be sure you have strong language to limit superintendent authority to those times when your board cannot meet.

Be sure you have strong language to limit superintendent authority to those times when your board cannot meet.

Ramos: Trustee Judith Cruz of the Houston ISD asks where we can find the TEA resources for boards and community engagement.

Gore: The TEA is updating its website, often posting information on its home page, to get information out as quickly as possible. By informing ourselves of that

information, we can share accurate information with our communities.

Ramos: We go now to Trustee Linda Griffin of Garland ISD.

Griffin: To the TEA's emergency resolution, we added that, if our board can't be assembled, our superintendent has emergency authority to act on a number of issues, but that he needs to report back to us, so that we can track what's going on and exercise oversight of his emergency actions.

Gore: That sounds like a great example of balance.

Griffin: I'm also curious about how districts are handling the digital divide. We're rolling out e-learning or distance learning, but hotspot providers are telling us they can't get us hotspots for 60 days. Has anyone found a solution for overcoming the digital divide?

Gore: Districts are being creative. The Austin ISD is distributing mobile hotspots and has partnered with a company to place high-powered mobile hotspots in apartment complexes. The Lockhart ISD recently approved the purchase of towers for Wi-Fi availability. Perhaps we'll benefit by the survey at the end of this conversation.

Ramos: We go to Trustee Laura DuPont of Clear Creek ISD.

DuPont: We have released a modified grading policy. Parents are asking about the impact of grading and GPAs on college admission. This is a great opportunity for us to communicate to the community about these types of things. As trustees, not only do we need to change the policy; we need to understand the issues involved and educate people on the implications of these policies.

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Gore: As we go through this crisis together, we're experiencing social and emotional challenges. It's like a grief cycle. Community members are angry about the uncertainty caused by this virus, about the mixed messages, and about the fact that we have to go through this. The grief cycle culminates in acceptance of a new reality, but at the moment, we've lost a sense of normalcy. To your point, Dr. DuPont, many community members didn't reflect on what "normal" was—until it began affecting them and their children. They haven't thought about the implications of grading policies and state tests. This is a great opportunity to educate the community and to recognize the emotions, like anger and uncertainty, that people are experiencing. If they lash out at you, it's nothing personal; that's simply where they're coming from right now.

This is a great opportunity to educate the community and to recognize the emotions, like anger & uncertainty, that people are experiencing. If they lash out at you, it's nothing personal; that's simply where they're coming from right now.

Ramos: Trustee J.D. Rodríguez of Dilley ISD notes, "It seems like Texas districts are going in different directions in regard to student grades, with some districts recording grades and attendance, while others are not. Should all the Texas districts be "on the same page" in regard to such local issues?

Gore: Six weeks ago, I published an article in *Texas Lone Star* on the importance of local control. This pandemic has really pushed my thinking on local control versus centralized governance. Six weeks later, many of us are thinking more about centralized control—about centralized practices around sheltering in place. It doesn't make sense for one county to shelter in place and practice social distancing, if those around them are not. As locally-elected trustees, we generally advocate for local control and decision-making. Should there be a statewide system of grading? In ordinary circumstances, we would

It's a deeper philosophical question on what we value and what we want the state to tell us to do. Do we want consistency, or do we want to be Independent School Districts?

emphatically say, "No!" In an unexpected situation like this, we find ourselves saying, "Wouldn't it be great if we were all doing the same thing?" It's a deeper philosophical question on what we value and what we want the state to tell us to do. Do we want consistency, or do we want to be Independent School Districts?

Ramos: Trustee Leigh Crenshaw of West ISD is noting that as we have these conversations, best practices will emerge on how to serve our students during this pandemic. She says that school buses are being used in rural districts to circulate instructional packets, information and meals for families. She says we can talk all day about what we can't do, but that, as board members and administrators, we need to show leadership and ask what we *can* do. In another comment, she notes the challenge of multiple students sharing a single device, or of students and parents needing to share personal devices.

We also have a question here from Trustee Dani Hernández of the Houston ISD. She asks, "What are your thoughts about adding employees to emergency priorities?" Let's unmute Trustee Hernández.

Hernández: We're creating emergency priorities that focus on students. I'm wondering if there are districts that have any emergency priorities around employees.

Gore: I'm sure there's a very specific context for your question. There are many emergency needs throughout the state, and many employees are in crisis mode. Making sure their needs are met should be one of our concerns.

Ramos: Our next question comes from Trustee Ty G. Jones of Lancaster ISD, who asks whether TASB be sharing updates or recommendations regarding policy CKC Local and Legal on Emergency Operation Plans.

Gore: I can certainly forward that suggestion. I assume our Policy Services is already looking at that.

Ramos: Our last question comes from Kay Douglas of TASB, who asks, "How do you recommend that boards whose members have previously been divided use this time to heal rifts and work more cohesively?"

Gore: That's a great question. Crises and challenges are a time for us to come together around common goals. In a country that's divided politically, school boards can be an example of high functionality and conflict resolution. It's critical that we set aside petty differences and figure out how to work together. During our last webinar. Kay mentioned the opportunity for ongoing team building. The law requires that all boards in Texas have team building once a year--but building a team isn't a once-a-year endeavor. Keeping our team together always has to be top of mind. Either on our own or with outside help, we need to ask ourselves how well we're working together. Certainly, this is a time for folks to come together and set aside or talk through differences, so that we can do what's best for kids.

In a country that's divided politically, school boards can be an example of high functionality and conflict resolution. It's critical that we set aside petty differences and figure out how to work together.

Ramos: We go to Trustee Armando Rodríguez of Canutillo ISD.

Rodríguez: It's great for board members across the state to have this type of dialogue. Not only should we be talking about team building as board, but also about inequities. A minority on our board is interested in talking about the inequities that we're seeing in our communities as a result of the current situation. I'm interested in ideas for helping boards move forward as a team to address such issues.

Gore: At the root of many of our conflicts are value differences. We all suffer from the predicament: We know what we know, and we don't know what we don't know. When there's a conflict or misunderstanding or difference of opinion among board members, we always encourage trustees to address it one-on-one through means like virtual "coffee"—fully within the limitations of the Open

Meetings Act, of course, where you can have a conversation with a colleague you disagree with and extend the grace of saying, "I don't understand. Tell me your side of the story. Help me hear where you're coming from." Ask open-ended questions. Control our emotions. Don't be angry, judgmental or accusatory. Come with an open heart and mind. Just as in family life, we sometimes have long-term, underlying conflicts, which can sometimes turn into very ugly and public conflicts. We always challenge you to ask: "How can we stay out of the newspapers? How do we stay out of the realm of drama, and create a space for folks to share their perspectives and their opinions, which may be different from ours?" A lot of that starts with listening.

When there's a conflict…, extend the grace of saying, "I don't understand. Tell me your side of the story. Help me hear where you're coming from." Ask open-ended questions. Control our emotions. Don't be angry, judgmental or accusatory. Come with an open heart and mind.

Ramos: Our second-last question comes to us from Trustee Natasha Butler of Alief ISD, who asks whether school boards need to change grading policies, or whether superintendents can do so as part of their administrative responsibilities.

Gore: Typically, all policy changes come to the school board. It likely depends on whether we're talking about capital-P Policy, or "policy," as in the way we do things around here. It would be my expectation that all policy challenges come to the board.

Ramos: Finally, let's unmute Al Velarde of El Paso ISD.

Velarde: Here in ESC Region 19, in the El Paso region, we have a group of board members who are talking about the idea of pulling together a local association of school board members, to be able to discuss issues. I do have some concerns. For instance, if more than three board members from one district attend such meetings, are we creating a quorum issue? If so, how do we select people to go? Does TASB have any thoughts on this?

Gore: There is a West Texas School Boards Association, and Armando Rodríguez likely has more information on that. I think such organizations are a great idea. As far as a quorum of the board being present, it's no different than when you go to trainings or events. You do well to announce that a quorum of the board may be attending a meeting, even if you're not conducting business of the district.

Ramos: Dr. Gore, we appreciate you and your wealth of knowledge. I want to thank all our essential workers, our employees, friends and family members who are on the front lines—here in our state and throughout the country. The food service workers of the Dallas ISD were on the cover of a national magazine this week.

I also want to note the collaboration we're seeing. We're getting together, sharing ideas, and not losing focus on "the main thing": our students and families and the challenges they're going through. Dr. Gore, we'll give you the last word.

Gore: Our thoughts and prayers are certainly with the heroes who are on the front line now: nurses, firefighters, police officers, our educators and trustees. Folks are stepping up and asking, "What can we do to help?" Let's serve each other in any way that we can!

COVID-19 Superintendent & Trustee Panel

Cindy Anderson
Austin ISD Trustee

Juan Cabrera
El Paso ISD Superintendent

Mark Estrada
Lockhart ISD Superintendent

Dr. Kent Paredes Scribner
Fort Worth ISD Superintendent

Dr. Martha Salazar-Zamora
Tomball ISD Superintendent

Dr. Rudy Treviño
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD Chief Academic Officer

Holly Maria Flynn Vilaseca, Moderator
Houston ISD Trustee
MASBA Vice President

April 20, 2020

Flynn Vilaseca: Today we have a panel of superintendents and trustees who will provide us an overview of they're doing to meet the specific needs of their respective communities and school districts. They are very talented folks, who are working tirelessly to navigate this COVID-19 crisis. Let's invite our panelists to introduce themselves and tell us of the innovative things they're doing to address the needs of their school districts—thing that may very well become the "new normal" for us.

Salazar-Zamora: Like everyone, we're discovering the "new normal" during these unprecedented times when we very quickly turned traditional brick-and-mortar instruction into remote learning accessible to all students. When this started, we were deciding what might be appropriate for our communities. We're now working to ensure that all students have access, which, of course, brings to mind issues of equity and access for all students. Not all students have parents at home who have the ability to sit with them and work with them, or who have the tools for instruction. Like many districts, we were deploying Chromebooks and other devices by week two, including hotspots and park-and-learns, where large signs indicate that anyone can come to our parking lots and have internet access. Here in the Tomball ISD, we've been very specific in ensuring that remote learning is accessible to and inclusive of SPED students, who, as a group, need additional at-home instruction. We have a weekly communication and a help desk, a specific website and an on-demand YouTube channel. We started the distribution of meals: Before the pandemic, we provided breakfast and lunch for students five days each week, and we now have a one-day distribution of meals for five days. We're focusing on the social emotional piece for our families, knowing that parents of young children now have to be parents and teachers, in addition to their jobs, and knowing the effect on students who now miss their friends and teachers and are unable to go back to their learning environments. Our tele-therapy services are providing remote, social emotional support. We're providing more outreach to families in need. 98% of our students are now on remote learning platforms, and we're looking for ways to reach out to the students who have not been regularly

We're now working to ensure that all students have access, which, of course, brings to mind issues of equity & access for all students.

logging in. We're also looking at our grading system in a different way, which is super-important for equity, to ensure that we have a grading system that emphasizes grace before grades.

Paredes Scribner: Like everyone else, in the Fort Worth ISD, we're focused on setting up virtual learning and our virtual classrooms, and meeting students' basic needs, which include security and social emotional support. This is a very different and difficult time for our students and families, and we're reaching out and making contact with our students on a regular basis. We've learned a lot about the needs of our students—and of the hardware and infrastructure disparities that exist in our community. In urban environments and probably throughout the entire state, this situation is shining a light on the disparities—in health care and the digital divide. We've told our philanthropic community that the concept of getting thousands of hotspots or laptops is a short-term solution that will get us through the next two weeks or the next two months. We don't simply want laptops; we want appropriately-funded public schools! What we really want to focus on is Wi-Fi towers in areas of economic disadvantage. In the context of not letting a good crisis go to waste, this is a great opportunity for us to really start a community-wide equity conversation around the need to invest in our students and communities and to address basic needs like food insecurity, social emotional support, and the digital divide.

We don't simply want laptops; we want appropriately-funded public schools! …In the context of not letting a good crisis go to waste, this is a great opportunity for us to really start a community-wide equity conversation around the need to invest in our students and communities.

Flynn Vilaseca: We are faced with all these inequities that are now magnified, so we want to manage the crisis on a short-term basis, but also think strategically about what we need to do as a broader community to

address these inequities. Speaking of Wi-Fi towers, let's hear from Superintendent Mark Estrada of Lockhart ISD.

Estrada: Before I talk about Wi-Fi towers, I want to say we're doing everything possible to ensure that our kids are fed and taken care of, and that they have social emotional supports, before talking about teaching and learning, which is extremely important. We started using our transportation routes to deliver breakfast, lunch and dinner Monday through Friday. Our buses deliver food at over 250 stops. In a school district with 6,200 students, we're distributing well over 10,000 meals every day. The need is great, and we're making sure our kids are well fed. You've heard that our board approved the purchase of Wi-Fi towers. We evaluated getting hotspots, but over 30% of our rural county doesn't have access to any internet service provider—so even if we had hotspots, students wouldn't receive internet access. There's nothing for the hotspots to connect to, which is the case in many rural communities. We had been looking at the possibility of Wi-Fi towers for two years, as a way to ensure that our community and school district are more resilient, and we never anticipated that this crisis would happen. Construction begins this week on our internet towers. We're placing seven towers around our county, covering all 300 square miles. If you have questions, I'm happy to connect you with our vendor. We talked to a lot of folks, and we finally found a partner who saw the value of building the infrastructure in our county. It's good for them—they have an opportunity to get more customers—but it's also good for the district, because we're now able to provide internet access to all of our students for free. Even students in the city of Lockhart will receive free internet access. It's

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a huge game-changer. It will ensure that our community is more resilient in times of crisis, and it will keep our students connected when things are going well. Now that our students have internet access at home, our one-to-one plan, which we've been planning for four years, is much more effective. This crisis certainly lit a fire, clearing the way for us to make some very bold decisions for our kids and our families and helping us create a long-term strategic plan to address equity issues in our district.

This crisis certainly lit a fire, clearing the way for us to make some very bold decisions for our kids and our families and helping us create a long-term strategic plan to address equity issues in our district.

Anderson: I'm really excited to hear what's happening in Lockhart, because we, too, in the Austin ISD, have been looking for a solution to the hotspots that don't, in any way, shape or form, really bridge the gap. We've been temporarily using 110 of our 500 buses as mobile hotspots—at campuses and at housing complexes, apartment complexes, and other areas where we know of significant gaps. We have increased student access to technology, and all students in grades three through twelve now have access to one-to-one technology via Chromebooks. We have a two-pronged approach: Because we know that technology doesn't reach all kids, we've also delivered 60,000 packets with hands-on learning materials at 37 schools. We're trying to provide multiple options, in order to best meet all students' needs. We have a bilingual help desk, and we've implemented a "Let's Talk" platform, to field questions on a wide variety of options and topics for families. We have a computer curbside program, where parents can switch out technology and pick up chargers, and we're getting ready to launch a new touchless repair center that services and maintains computers. We've had some pretty incredible community partners step forward. KLRU, our local PBS channel, is supplementing our

curriculum through their programming: with a segment for pre-K through third grade from 6:00 to 8:00 a.m., fourth and fifth grades from 8:00 to 11:00 am., and grades six through twelve from 11:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. This provides additional instruction to students without devices. Many of our families suffer from food insecurity and housing insecurity, so we are very concerned about our students' social and emotional health. We've seen increased incidences of domestic violence, and we want to holistically support our students. Our mental health clinics and Vida health clinics offer online services for students, families and staff, and we've partnered with our local food bank. During these past few weeks, we've served 307,478 meals. The Austin ISD is a majority-minority district, with a majority of students from lower socioeconomic levels, so our families are having difficult accessing food. We have a number of partners who are supplementing our efforts, and we can't thank them enough!

Flynn Vilaseca: In the Houston ISD, we track the best practices of other districts, and we know that the Austin ISD has been a leader in wrap-around services.

Treviño: It's awesome to hear a statewide, concerted effort on social emotional learning components. I was in the Houston ISD after Hurricane Harvey, and we learned some really tough lessons, as we are now. COVID-19 is "equal opportunity": It's affecting all our students, from the most impoverished families, to those with a greater quality of life who now have family members who are unemployed. It's also raising challenges for our teachers, and we need to support them. Like many of you, in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD, we're creating a plan, a concerted, holistic

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approach to provide all the wraparound services and social emotional support systems. We're focusing on our students, teachers and staff. It's National Librarians Week, and all our librarians are Google Classroom certified; they serve as added resources in our support of our students, with all the virtual challenges we're all having. And it's been great to see them, you know, do some phenomenal work as pertains to gathering, my own type celebrations and many other celebrations that are purchased.

Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you for recognizing the librarians who are supporting our schools reaching out to students in virtual ways. Let's go to the Superintendent of El Paso ISD, Juan Cabrera.

Cabrera: I'm here in my backyard: Like many families trying to manage home spaces, I have two college kids at home and a ninth-grader, and we all shift around the house, for different spaces.

As superintendents & trustees, we're addressing a hierarchy of needs, including food insecurity, health, safety and well-being.

As superintendents and trustees, we're addressing a hierarchy of needs, including food insecurity, health, safety and well-being. The first thing we did was to have every teacher call every student. We also partnered with the United Way to reach out to the students we couldn't find. Of our 60,000 students, we quickly contacted about 45,000. We've now whittled down that list to 8,000 students. It's not necessarily our fault: Many of our families—especially families of poverty—move so much, and, as districts, we don't do a good job of getting the last current address. Some families move two or three times before they update their address with us. We have a lot of kids who have gone to Mexico or who go back and forth between families in the United States and Mexico. We're trying to contact all students, to make sure they're okay. We're operating 50 meal locations three days a week, and we're offering technology

outreach, support and service. We don't want to force our teachers to go out, to schools or to homes, so we have volunteers from local nonprofits, like United Way and AmeriCorps, who are willing to do that. Another big focus has been setting up our virtual schools, making sure our kids have the ability to go online, and getting resources to those who aren't online. It's a very investigative process.

At first, I got pushback from some administrators and staff members, who said we were going far outside the scope of academics. I said, "We're going to have to wear two hats!" In addition to the academic requirements of our school districts, we are social service agencies. We've tried to shift the culture: We're not just about academics, but also about the health, safety and well-being of our students and our staff. We've made that shift, and I've noticed people have come up with a lot of creative ideas about outreach. In urban districts, we know that if kids aren't safe and healthy, they're not going to be able to learn. This is more important now than in the "brick-and-mortar" days.

We're going to have to wear two hats! In addition to the academic requirements of our school districts, we are social service agencies.

As a result of this crisis, a lot of work was funneled to our principals, principals, supervisors, teachers and counselors. I made it very clear at the cabinet level that no one is allowed to give any projects to anyone touching kids. I don't want to distract them from working with kids. All projects now go to non-student-facing staff, who are setting up virtual summer school, imagining graduation, and coordinating our outreach program. We're developing a playbook for the fall and to enable us to open or close a school within 24 hours. Handling this crisis has been like peeling an onion: Every time you peel back an issue, you find another layer of issues that you hadn't thought of. It's challenging: The more we dig, the more needs we find that we haven't even touched yet.

Now that we've set up virtual instruction, which was like the equivalent of setting up and opening a school building, we're talking about quality, continuity and increased rigor. We've put together webinars where our best and most creative teachers are teaching other teachers. I told them, "We only have five weeks left until the end of this school year, but we can't just crawl across the finish line. Let's cross the finish line getting better and better, improving our art and the quality of our virtual school, improving our outreach and engagement, and ready to start summer school the week after this year ends. Hopefully, we'll get back to brick-and-mortar soon, but, God forbid, we're also ready to continue this into the fall with continually-increasing rigor and quality.

Hopefully, we'll get back to brick-and-mortar soon, but, God forbid, we're also ready to continue this into the fall with continually-increasing rigor and quality.

Flynn Vilaseca: It's great to hear how our districts are addressing the whole child: getting food out to the students, providing SEL supports, and making sure their needs are met, in order for them to learn. I like that you refer to the investigative process, of really trying to figure out needs and next steps. Let's open our conversation. We begin with a question or comment from Dr. Stan Paz of the Texas Association of Latino Administrators and Superintendents.

Paz: Thank you for this outstanding panel, for the work you all are doing, and for the excellent leadership you're providing. I especially appreciated Dr. Salazar-Zamora's willingness to address our special needs students. I have a granddaughter who benefits from those services. I want to ask about the recent announcement to keep our Texas public schools closed through May 15. Is that date flexible?

Paredes Scribner: On Friday, Commissioner Morath announced that all schools will remain closed through the nd of the

school year. The conversation is now pivoting to summer school, particularly for those students with special needs, students who require one-on-one contact in their educational experience, and students with severe special needs. The sense was that we probably won't have in-person instruction in our urban districts until at least June. Summer school will likely be a jumpstart program. We're all getting better at this every week, but we really need to continuously improve. Our school may reopen in August or September, but they may need to close again, so we need to think about how we build what we've learned from this one-time experience into our "new normal."

Salazar-Zamora: Many of us throughout the state were ready to call off in-person learning through the end of the year, but we wanted to make sure there wouldn't be any potential financial implications if we did that. In the Tomball ISD, we're looking at a virtual summer school as well. There are a lot of take-aways that we need to learn from, because this history may repeat itself—and we are told that it likely will. We all need to ask ourselves: What are the great lessons learned from what we've done? What are the "nuggets of gold" that we can take and move forward into traditional brick-and-mortar instruction or online, remote learning? What are the things that have come out of this that our students continue to benefit from—our gen ed as well as our special education students? We're now hosting remote ARD meetings, for instance, which allows both parents to be part of the meeting, whereas before maybe one parent couldn't be part of the meeting due to work or other commitments.

There are a lot of take-aways that we need to learn from, because this history may repeat itself— & we are told that it likely will. We all need to ask ourselves: What are the great lessons learned from what we've done?

Flynn Vilaseca: We go now to John Gatica.

Gatica: I have a few questions: What components do you feel need to be in place before we open the doors of our school buildings again, what are some of the specific challenges that you foresee for the 2020/2021 school year, and what are you doing about the conflicting messages that we hear in the media about COVID-19?

Treviño: We need to prepare plans to address the non-academic needs that our families will have when they walk into our schools. The Commissioner suggested the other day that we may need to be ready to wear gloves and masks as we welcome students and parents—and that shook me up a bit. We all deal differently with trauma, stress and change, and we need to be ready to address all the psychological and sociological needs that our students and parents from diverse backgrounds have as they walk into our schools. The dynamics and interactions in our schools will change.

Paredes Scribner: We should also anticipate a "summer slide" of unprecedented, historic level. The last day that students of the Fort Worth ISD attended school in a school building was on March 6. If we don't open until August, that will be eight months without school, which disproportionately impacts our most fragile students. From a school performance framework, we really need to focus on economically-disadvantaged students who have historically struggled, and we need to roll out our resources with an equity lens to those students first.

We really need to focus on economically-disadvantaged students who have historically struggled, and we need to roll out our resources with an equity lens to those students first.

Estrada: I agree. As educational leaders and school board members we need to maintain a balance of supporting our students and families and teachers, tending to their social emotional needs while maintaining high expectations and not making

excuses for them. It's going to be a difficult challenge for us: Our kids are developing gaps, and the gaps that were already there are widening.

Anderson: So many things have changed in the delivery of education and supports for our students and their families during this. Practices are shifting, and some of them may become the "new normal." We're seeing the needs of our staff members, in terms of their job duties and responsibilities. We're also seeing increased participation from our families and our community, who are learning how to attend meetings now without physically showing up at a campus. A huge concern for us is the bridging of gaps due to lack of access and the inability of our students to focus because of the trauma their families are experiencing. Displacement has significantly increased in urban areas like Austin, and we're still tracking down students who have moved multiple times. The unemployment rate in Austin is expected to hit 25%, which is absolutely unprecedented, so we expect lower enrollment as a result. The fear and trepidation over the spread of COVID will also affect enrollment. There will be massive changes to education that we can't even anticipate.

A huge concern for us is the bridging of gaps due to lack of access and the inability of our students to focus because of the trauma their families are experiencing…. There will be massive changes to education that we can't even anticipate.

Flynn Vilaseca: Let's go to Chloe Sykes of IDRA.

Sykes: I'm the Deputy Director of Policy at the Intercultural Development Research Association, an educational nonprofit in San Antonio, and we're adjusting our policy priorities for the 87th Legislative Session here in Texas. We've talked about connectivity, and Dr. Scribner noted that hotspots are a Band-Aid that just won't cut it. How might organizations like IDRA best assist you in

advancing a statewide strategy around increasing Wi-Fi connectivity?

Paredes Scribner: When HB 3 passed in 2019, the narrative was that the state of Texas was taking more responsibility for public education. The state now needs to live up to that responsibility. No one anticipated what has happened now: with the turning off of sales tax for three months or longer. Gas and oil prices are going through the floor. We're looking at a very difficult Legislative Session next year with respect to infrastructure and supporting our schools. We're all going to have to pull together, with a unified voice on the importance of investing in our public schools.

We're looking at a very difficult Legislative Session next year with respect to infrastructure and supporting our schools. We're all going to have to pull together, with a unified voice on the importance of investing in our public schools.

Cabrera: Dr. Scribner hit the nail on the head when he said we should never waste a good crisis. The issue of connectivity is on our mind, and the digital divide has been exposed, but those are of less concern to me than the larger issue of required financial resources. We'd better get our briefcases and data together for January 2021: The next Legislative Session is going to be a big fight, and legislators will not hesitate to make education bear the brunt of the budget challenge. Big picture, we need to focus on and prepare for the big fight for financial resources at the big picture. Next spring, I plan to spend a couple of weeks each month in Austin, because this will be one of the most important legislative sessions in the last 20 or 30 years.

Estrada: From a policy perspective, we also need to push for E-rate changes at the national level. This would help school districts all across the nation to close the digital divide.

Flynn Vilaseca: We have a question from my fellow colleague from Houston ISD, Trustee Elizabeth Alba Santos.

Santos: Thank you for focusing on what's best for our kids. I have a twofold question: What type of data are you collecting with respect to our students' needs, including food insecurity and their social emotional needs? In the Houston ISD, we have a 91% contact rate for our students—but that doesn't tell me anything. What do the data you're collecting tell you? My second question is: In light of the conflicting messages and beliefs about COVID-19, what do you think social distancing will look like when our schools open again? What measures should we take to keep our kids safe?

Cabrera: That's a great question. If we don't capture the data, we'll never solve the problem. Once our teachers reached out to all students, we had a subset of students who didn't respond—and we dedicated our operational teams to them. For about five years now, we've had 20 social workers on staff. It hasn't always been easy to keep them on staff, but we need them focusing on the non-academic issues that keep our children from showing up. We're working on solutions and on trying to support them in their particular situations. We might think of it like a bell curve: Perhaps some 10% of kids will blow through virtual learning; they're so far ahead of the curve that they might become disengaged from virtual learning. The vast majority of our kids will be engaged. We'll need to focus on the other group of kids who won't respond to virtual learning due to their personal situation, homelessness, or myriad issues, including issues of safety and security. We'll need to dig into their situations one-by-one—and that's where we make the transition from an educational entity, to a social services entity. We might also think of it in terms of the 80/20 Rule: Whereas social services were 20% of what we did prior to the pandemic, it's now 80% of what we're doing, and education is

Whereas social services were 20% of what we did prior to the pandemic, it's now 80% of what we're doing, and education is maybe the fifth thing on the list for some kids.

maybe the fifth thing on the list for some kids. Though it's not our charge from the state, in the El Paso ISD, we're going after those kids—and we hope to share data, ideas and solutions that can be utilized in other cities.

Treviño: Educational leaders will be challenged to analyze data, in the same way that we analyze data on student outcomes or content mastery. It's a transferable skill set that we can use to impact our communities. That's the mind shift we need right now, the same concerted effort to group kids into different categories and analyze the data on their non-academic needs—from trauma and death in the family, to domestic violence and sexual abuse. Those traumas will impact academic achievement. So, let's shift the conversation on the analysis of data.

Educational leaders will be challenged to analyze data, in the same way that we analyze data on student outcomes or content mastery.

Flynn Vilaseca: Let's go to Trustee Page Rander of Clear Creek ISD.

Rander: What have your districts done for grading and GPA, and how have your communities responded to changes? Did any of you go to pass/fail for high school students? Will you count the third nine weeks toward GPA?

Paredes Scribner: That's exactly what we did. We had pass/fail and ended GPA at the end of the third nine weeks.

Anderson: In the Austin ISD, we truncated the ranking of GPA at the end of the first semester, and the second semester is pass/incomplete.

Flynn Vilaseca: Let's go to Trustee Linda Griffin of Garland ISD.

Griffin: With so many changes occurring, what changes would you like to see going forward with your Team of Eight? That is, what can trustees do as we plod through this new territory?

Salazar-Zamora: In the Tomball ISD, I wouldn't ask for a change, but for continued support. I'm grateful that our board continues to support the district and the decisions that I and my team are making, whether it's grading policy, what we're doing for graduation, or

It's important that districts throughout the state have cohesive Teams of Eight making important decisions for the betterment of the community, regardless of whether that's traditional brick-and-mortar instruction or virtual learning.

decisions of whether to open our schools prior to a decision by our Governor. It's important that districts throughout the state have cohesive Teams of Eight making important decisions for the betterment of the community, regardless of whether that's traditional brick-and-mortar instruction or virtual learning.

Estrada: I agree. The speed at which everything is moving requires a lot of trust. I would hope that every school district team has the necessary trust and communication to enable us to make quick and good decisions.

Paredes Scribner: Our communication structures are different now and require more flexibility. Our chief of staff has done a wonderful thing: In addition to our biweekly board meetings, we now have weekly small-group meetings of trustees, in groups of two or three, to go over current events or important issues that might require a deeper dive. That has been a great, great avenue for the two-way flow of information.

Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you all for this conversation on what your districts are doing to address this pandemic and what may become the "new normal." We really appreciate your leadership during this time, your honesty in sharing, and all that you're doing!

Disparities of Pandemic Proportions

Sherry Breed
Fort Worth ISD Chief of Equity & Excellence

Dr. Stephanie Hawley
Austin ISD Chief Equity Officer

Verjeana Jacobs
National School Boards Association Chief Equity Officer

Zach Thompson
Dallas County Health & Human Services Director (Retired)

Ty G. Jones, Moderator
Lancaster ISD Trustee
TCBSBM President

April 27, 2020

Jones: As we begin today, we thank all who are on the front line, helping us through this time. Let's start off by defining equity. The NSBA website shares this somewhat-simplistic definition of educational equity: "Equity is achieved when all students receive the resources they need, so they graduate prepared for success after high school." We'll ask our panelists if they have any thoughts on that definition.

Jacobs: We have a much deeper definition of equity on the NSBA website. In December 2017, our NSBA Board embarked on a journey to go deeper into that definition and focus on the fact that "every child can, will and shall learn." It speaks of disparities in race, gender and students with different abilities, calling out that we need to identify and eradicate those disparities. It puts more teeth into what equity really means in this country.

Breed: When we started the conversation about race and equity in Fort Worth ISD, we were very clear that "equal" does

not mean "equitable." So often, we use those terms interchangeably. "Equal" is giving everyone the same, and "equitable" means giving our students the help they need to be successful.

Hawley: In the Austin ISD, we use the definition from the National Equity Project, which speaks of building on the strengths and talents of children. When we talk about equity, we need to make sure we're not speaking from a deficit mindset—that students are needy—but that students and communities have strengths. Equity is about policies, practices and structural change, not just distributing resources in an equitable fashion. It's about changing policies and practices that create disparities. As Ms. Jacobs said, equity demands that we eliminate disparities.

Equity is about policies, practices & structural change, not just distributing resources in an equitable fashion. It's about changing policies & practices that create disparities.

Jones: It has now been six weeks since we have been sheltering in place. What have been the greatest impacts of this pandemic on communities of color, students of color, and socio-economically disadvantaged students?

Thompson: I want to begin by commending all our public school teachers and administrators for all they're doing during this pandemic. I volunteer at a food pantry in South Dallas each week, and we see how African-American and Hispanic families are greatly impacted by this pandemic. Our communities face health disparities, in heart disease, cancer, stroke and, of course, diabetes. Now African Americans and Hispanics in Texas are dying of COVID at alarming rates. I don't want to come from a deficit mindset, but I want to be realistic: We need community education in our neighborhoods. We just had 40 cases of COVID at one of our homeless shelters. I'm focused on the lasting mental health concerns as well. We're going to get through this, but it's going to take time, and let's be very clear: Without a vaccine, what can we do?

Breed: Our superintendent, Dr. Scribner, and his leadership team, including our teaching and learning division and our maintenance and operations divisions, have been working very closely with our community to take care of necessities, like the meals that our students depend on. To address the trauma that Mr. Thompson refers to, our restorative practices team has developed social emotional resources for our educators, parents and families. They're helping us with how to talk about this pandemic. Knowing that we can't go back to school, we have to think about what we are going to do differently, and our Assistant Superintendent of Teaching and Learning recently shared with us an article that asks, "What if school *needs* to look differently?" We have developed racial equity chats, to stay connected and keep racial equity at the forefront. We won't be able to come back to school and simply say, "Get out your books." We just can't do that. We need to do something different to ensure that we are taking care of and hearing from our communities—and in Fort Worth ISD, 80% of our students are students of color.

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Hawley: I am super-proud of our district. You may have seen us in the national news: We've mobilized our school buses as hotspots for our students. Austin is a tech capital, and we've spent a great deal of energy distributing devices, like Chromebooks. Our Office of Equity is a very small team, but we have connections with grassroots organizations outside of the United Way and chambers of commerce. They have "boots on the ground," with masks and gloves on every day. We're seeing that this pandemic is a magnifying glass for disparities. Before this pandemic, we were aware of disparate outcomes and the conditions that create them, but this pandemic has been like Hurricane Katrina—when we saw Black people crying out from the top of the Superdome—at a global level. People ask me about equity all the time. I tell them

equity is not an office; it's what we're doing right now. It's a mindset of engaging the most marginalized groups, including transient families and students who are now working at grocery stores because their parents have lost their jobs. Some of our students are stocking shelves to pay the rent! Others are experiencing the trauma of not being with their classmates. Every day we're learning more about who we're missing. We're learning about students with asthma who live in apartment complexes with terrible air quality, who are now threatened by this pandemic. We hear how immigrant families are bearing the brunt of this pandemic. We're finding that transportation and public transportation are the single-biggest obstacle for us now. We're doing amazing work. We're being creative and resourceful—but we're not yet "knocking it out of the park" in terms of all our marginalized communities.

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Jacobs: From a national perspective, we have been following what's happening across the country, and we've had conversations. Every Monday, we talk to our executive directors throughout the states, so we hear updates from New York, Georgia, Colorado, Idaho and Washington. I echo that a lot of great things are happening in our communities. People are stepping up to support students and their families. I won't belabor the point, since it's been pointed out, but we need to come to terms with the fact that we need to get beyond traditional notions of how we educate students. In public education, we've shied away from distance learning. The reality is: Children learn in different ways. The disparities that existed pre-pandemic are exacerbated by this pandemic. We need to ask, "What next? How do we catch up? How do we get our kids access to opportunity, when families across the country are being impacted?" This weekend, the *Washington Post* shined a light on my community: a

The disparities that existed pre-pandemic are exacerbated by this pandemic.

community supposedly of wealthy, Black people who have the highest death rate in this region. We need to dig deeper into the inequities and broaden the conversation on what equity really means.

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Jones: What are the greatest disparities that we might expect to see as a result of this pandemic?

Hawley: We going to see that some student have access to devices, internet connection and parents who enjoy the privilege of staying home and helping their kids navigate online learning. They will continue their learning—and there's nothing wrong with that. Other students lack Wi-Fi, haven't gotten devices, or have parents who are deemed "essential" and/or who don't speak English. We need to take all students where they are. We'll need to look at personalized and blended learning. We'll need to make sure that devices and online learning are a natural part of the way we do education. We can't decide on this new model of education without bringing the most marginalized families to the table. When we speak with them now, we hear their despair and trauma. It's crucial for us *not* to work with our students—particularly Black, Brown, and low-income students—as if something's wrong with them. Before the pandemic, I heard the word "interventions," and I responded, "The babies aren't sick; the system is sick." Let's engage those who are most adversely affected. Let's build on their resilience. Let's understand that they learned things during this pandemic, even if they weren't online. Many of them are learning survival skills. I often hear the term "grit": Our children have grit! They sometimes have to catch two buses to get to school. They have to figure out how to eat.

Before the pandemic, I heard the word "interventions," and I responded, "The babies aren't sick; the system is sick." Let's engage those who are most adversely affected. Let's build on their resilience. Let's understand that they learned things during this pandemic, even if they weren't online.

Let's hear their stories and learn from them. Let's build on their strengths and move forward, rather than making comparisons, which is what we typically do in education. That's how we get the term "education gap": We're comparing our kids to White, middle-class kids, and, if you don't have the outcomes of White, middle-class kids, there's a gap. I get all that, but it doesn't help us to see the generational strength that Black, Brown and immigrant children bring into the space. Let's learn firsthand from our students. They're going to tell us stuff that we'd never even think!

We're comparing our kids to White, middle-class kids, and, if you don't have the outcomes of White, middle-class kids, there's a gap. I get all that, but it doesn't help us to see the generational strength that Black, Brown & immigrant children bring into the space.

Thompson: From a statewide perspective, we're hoping the Legislature is committed to funding our school districts. Now's the time to educate our legislators, and we know the challenges. We have a "rainy day fund." Nobody wants to touch it, but it's past "raining" now, and we don't want equity to take a backseat because of a funding shortfall. I'm wondering if school districts will recoup the monies they've utilized for support services as part of this COVID response. Those are the kinds of issues we have to bring to the table. At the end of the day, our teachers and administrators need to be properly funded.

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Jacobs: It's definitely about resources, but I want to be clear: It's about the *intentional* allocation of those resources. At the national level, that is one thing that we constantly push when we talk about equity. If we weren't paying attention to how we were allocating resources before the pandemic, we definitely need to be doing that now. Throughout the U.S., we're allocating resources for devices and broadband access, but what about trauma-informed practices and social emotional learning? They have to be part of the fabric of how we do business. Of course we need to advocate at the state level and federal

level for necessary funds, but I always say, "Politics are local." Locally, we need to intentionally allocate resources so that we're not singing the same songs over and over again.

We're allocating resources for devices & broadband access, but what about trauma-informed practices & social emotional learning? They have to be part of the fabric of how we do business…. "Politics are local." Locally, we need to intentionally allocate resources so that we're not singing the same songs over and over again.

Breed: This pandemic has highlighted the inequities that we see all the time in our districts, in our cities, and all across the nation. I hope that we can learn from the lessons of this pandemic and have a change in mindsets about conversations on inequities. Our equity team is asking what our district will change when we go back into our schools. We need to go back and ask our communities what they need after this pandemic. We often think we know. We come from a place of "Whiteness." Let's listen to our communities and hear what they need! Maybe they need help with utility bills or access to SNAP. Even in the middle of this pandemic, we can offer them information on these services.

Jacobs: We need to acknowledge that the lack of trust is real in communities and in our country—which means that we have a greater responsibility in our own communities. It's our job to educate and bring people along. We still have people who don't go to the hospital for different reasons. That lack of trust in our communities has to be addressed.

Jones: I totally agree. We need to engage and educate our communities. My final question is this: If we were to imagine a quadrant of suggestions for district policies for school board members, and suggestions for district practices for superintendents, both during and after this pandemic, what suggestions might you offer for district

policies and practices both during and after this pandemic to address disparities and issues of inequity? What policies and practices do we need to put in place to address the concerns and issues we've raised?

Hawley: I've been in education for 39 years, but I've only been in the Austin ISD for nine months. My staff and I find that you can't change mindsets without giving people tools. If you're African-American or a person of color, you're thinking, "This pandemic is certainly going to change minds!" In fact, two or three weeks into this pandemic, our staff was seeing people doubling down. We went into a frenzy, with an urgency of distributing things, which is understandable from a human standpoint. But all of our districts need leadership development for equity. It has to be an ongoing part of the culture. It has to be pervasive. We need to give people tools. Otherwise, the question we really need to ask ourselves is: Are we engaged in equity or charity? If you engage in emergency charity, you'll go back to the same mindset when this thing is over. You might feel bad for others, but, if you haven't changed your policies, your budget or your strategic plan, then you're just doing real nice things while feeling real bad. I encourage all districts to implement policy for leadership development in racial equity. This includes board members and senior leadership. Look anti-racism in the face. We use words like "implicit bias" to skate around the fact that our systems result in racist outcomes. When our Title 1 students come back, will we send them to our newbies and inexperienced teachers, or will they have the most experienced teachers and a culturally-sustaining pedagogy that won't do them further damage? Our communities don't trust big systems that haven't served them well. We engage in charity because we feel bad, we feel like we're doing equity, and we call it "equity"—but we slip right back into our old habits.

The question we really need to ask ourselves is: Are we engaged in equity or charity? If you engage in emergency charity, you'll go back to the same mindset when this thing is over…. That's not useful for children.

That's not useful for children. We need people to set high standards and build on their strengths—but we need to build that into our policies.

Jacobs: We know that 80% of the teaching force in this country is White and female—and that 78% of school board members are White males. They have an average age of 59 years, and, on average, they make over $100,000 per year. They are the ones sitting in the seats and making the decisions. That is not to say that people that are not of color don't "get" this work. We have a lot of work to do. We may not like the term "implicit bias," but we have to start somewhere to make sure that the decisions that are being made are in the best interests of children. In order to do that, we need policies around cultural competence, social emotional learning, and trauma-informed practices. We need to ask "What does the child need?", not "What does the system and what do the adults need?" And we need to stop bullying children for how they show up in the classroom.

We may not like the term "implicit bias," but we have to start somewhere to make sure that the decisions that are being made are in the best interests of children.

Breed: In Fort Worth ISD, we were among the first districts to develop a racial equity policy. I encourage all districts to be equally bold and unapologetic. Talk about race. Talk about the inequities and lessons learned from this pandemic. Put it on the table, and have a frank conversation.

Pandemic Policy Perspectives

Dr. Carrie Sampson
Educational Leadership & Innovation
Arizona State University

Dr. Julian Vásquez-Heilig
College of Education
University of Kentucky

Holly María Flynn Vilaseca, Moderator
Houston ISD Trustee
MASBA Vice President

May 4, 2020

Flynn Vilaseca: Today we're focusing on the impact of policy during this pandemic with two professors of education who will speak with us about the policy implications of their research. I begin by introducing Dr. Carrie Sampson, a professor at Arizona State University, who has done a lot of important research on the effectiveness of school boards and the inequities in representation for school boards and how they often misalign with the students they represent. Dr. Sampson, tell us about your background, why you entered academia, and why education has been your research focus.

Sampson: Thank you for inviting me today. With these webinars, you're really ahead of the curve and paving the way for conversations. I am from the Southwest, from Arizona and Nevada. I come from a working-class family. My mother is *Chicana*, and most of her family is from New Mexico. My father is African-American, from Arkansas. I landed in this space of education research, policy, leadership and equity in a very roundabout way. I have a degree in economics, and I thought I would go into corporate

America until I realized that my calling and my commitment to social justice would not allow that. My belief that education is one of the cornerstones for achieving social justice led me to this place, and the academy has allowed me the freedom to focus on the complexities of the current context of education. I am a mother/scholar: I have a four-year-old and a seven-year-old at home, as a result of this pandemic, so I'm juggling my full-time work with being a full-time mom, educator and housekeeper—so it's been a really interesting few weeks!

Flynn Vilaseca: As elected officials, many of us identify with managing our day jobs, being parents and caretakers, and checking in on our neighbors and loved ones during this time. In my house, we're habituating in different corners and making the most of this situation. Tell us about your research, particularly about the piece of work that you're most proud of.

Sampson: My research on the history of school desegregation in Southern Nevada led to my work on school boards. In school desegregation cases throughout the United States, I wondered how school boards expand and/or hinder equity. I started researching school district policies and practices for English Learners. I found a lot of less-optimistic literature. School boards confront a lot of barriers and challenges, both contextually and within their boards and districts, so I co-authored an optimistic pieces called "Putting the Public back in Public Education: Community Advocacy and Educational Leadership under ESSA." We examined the major factors that help school boards to push equity. We looked at three school boards in three states, all serving a majority of low-income students of color, and community advocacy was important in every district that

Community advocacy was important in every district that possessed equity initiatives. Even school boards that are not proactive on equity issues often react to community advocacy.

possessed equity initiatives. Even school boards that are not proactive on equity issues often react to community advocacy. Some community advocates who pushed for equity even became school board members! We offered concrete recommendations to school board members on leveraging community advocacy: through partnerships, by inviting community advocates into districts and schools, by opening up public comment during community school board meetings, and encouraging boards to address equity issues and concerns. That's the piece I'm most proud of.

Flynn Vilaseca: We also welcome Dr. Julian Vásquez-Heilig of the University of Kentucky College of Education. Dr. Vásquez-Heilig, tell us why you entered academia and education, and which work you're most proud of.

Vásquez-Heilig: My career actually started at The University of Texas at Austin, where I was tenured. After eight years there, I ended up in California, as a chair of education leadership and policy. Now I'm here at the University of Kentucky, one of the top 30 public colleges of education. With 2,500 students, we produce several hundreds of teachers every year. I got into this work because of my passion for education as the compass of democracy. The work we do as academics and school board members is key for a vibrant democracy. The historically-underserved students in our schools fuel my passion, especially students of color, *Latinx* students, African-American students, and other Brown and Black students. The desire to create future leaders and educators drives me to work very hard each day.

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Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you for that introduction. What piece of research are you most proud of?

Vásquez-Heilig: I'll share with you a true story. I attended an academic conference in Rome, Italy, with ministers of education, politicians and researchers from all over the world who talked about how great No Child Left Behind was. They said, "We need No Child Left Behind in every country in the world!" I was really flummoxed by the idea. I began my career in the research and accountability department of the Houston Independent School District. I also conducted research in the *Río Grande* Valley: in Brownsville, La Joya and Donna, Texas. Long before I became an academic, I knew there were real challenges with high-stakes testing and accountability, especially for English Language Learners and Special Education students. I believed it was important for us to formulate a new approach to accountability. Steve Jobs once said there is no new idea: Most ideas are small ideas that are borrowed from other good ideas. I started writing on community engagement in education policy development, multiple-measure approaches to assessment—both formative and summative—and none of those ideas were new, but I brought them together in a new idea called Community-based Accountability. I assembled a work group at UT to work on the idea, and I shared a summary in 2012 with Dr. Linda Darling Hammond, my advisor at Stanford. Because of her connections in the California Legislature, Community-based Accountability became the law for the entire state of California! In California, districts and schools develop strategic plans together with their communities as an alternative, bottom-up approach to post-NCLB accountability. Some six years ago, Texas began to adopt some of this work with the High Performance Coalition, and community-based accountability is now being piloted

Education reform doesn't have to be about privatization and private management of our education system…. It's important for us to think about education reform in community-engaged, community-relevant, community-driven ways.

across the state. Education reform doesn't have to be about privatization and private management of our education system. Yes, one person can make a difference, and it's important for us to think about education reform in community-engaged, community-relevant, community-driven ways. That's probably the work I'm most proud of: the implementation of community-based, community-relevant, community-engaged education policies!

Flynn Vilaseca: I'm hearing overlap in the findings of the research that both of you have done: We need to engage and listen to our communities! Let's pivot to this COVID-19 pandemic in which we find ourselves. What types of policies and practices might have the greatest impact on our students and communities during this pandemic?

Vásquez-Heilig: First, we need to be concerned with school finance. After the last recession, education was the first thing cut from the Texas budget, with a loss of some six to seven billion dollars from our public schools. Cuts happened in other states, too. Only recently was Texas beginning to return to pre-recession levels of funding. We need to be thinking about the temptation to cut public education during tough times. We need to talk with policymakers: The brunt of this pandemic should not fall on the shoulders of our children. As a nation, we cut our virus taskforce a few years ago, and now we need a virus taskforce more than ever. The same happened with online learning in our districts: We focused on in-person delivery of education and stepped back from online pedagogy. We need to rethink instructional design, pedagogy and how teachers can deliver curriculum through alternative modes, and we need to be prepared for these types of eventualities. Health professionals are saying that COVID-19 is not a one-month thing, but will be a one- to two-year cycle. We need to prepare for the long term. We've been locked

Health professionals are saying that COVID-19 is not a one-month thing, but will be a one- to two-year cycle. We need to prepare for the long term.

in our houses for six weeks, and we're itching to go, but nothing has really changed, and we need to be prepared to deliver K-12 education in alternative formats.

Sampson: You make a great point about school finances. This pandemic will be devastating for many schools in terms of budget cuts. We need to be diligent and push an agenda that will fight back against cuts in education. We also need to reimagine how we co-create educational opportunities with families and communities. In Arizona, mothers of color are having varied experiences, with our kids being flooded with tons of emails and assignments. None of our schools have reached out to us to see how things are going, outside of making sure that we have access to food and technology. A lot of schools have done a really good job of that, but they're not really checking in with families and finding out how they're doing. They're not asking how they can create a humanizing curriculum that is responsive to needs. Before this pandemic, schooling was nothing without families, and it certainly can be nothing without families now. We need policies and practices that address the need to engage our families and communities. I agree that this pandemic will last longer than a month, so let's engage our families and our community in really co-creating and co-design humanizing curricular opportunities and learning spaces for our kids. And let's partner with higher education institutions, which have been doing online learning for a long time.

We need to be diligent and push an agenda that will fight back against cuts in education. We also need to reimagine how we co-create educational opportunities with families & communities.

Flynn Vilaseca: Do you recommend taking on—or scaling up—initiatives outside of health, safety and learning right now?

Vásquez-Heilig: We need to scale up, but the question is whether we can afford to scale up, particularly in light of "school choice." I also research market-based school choice: charter schools and vouchers. U.S. Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos is suggesting that states can receive extra money for charter schools and vouchers. Many of us like Starbucks, but, when times get tough, we cut our budgets and become more efficient. With charter schools and vouchers, we're currently funding three separate education systems: With vouchers, we fund private schools, and we're also funding charter schools, which are privately-managed. In California and Texas, we fund two separate systems. States with vouchers fund three systems. It's an inefficient use of funds, and we need to ask ourselves whether we can really afford to fund two to three systems of education in each state.

With charter schools & vouchers, we're currently funding three separate education systems…. It's an inefficient use of funds, and we need to ask ourselves whether we can really afford to fund two to three systems of education in each state.

Sampson: School districts also need to be proactive with respect to the health and safety concerns of our kids, our families and our communities. My research showed that school boards tend to be reactive. State and federal policies react to community advocacy as well. As educational leaders, we need to be proactive, and not simply continue the same initiatives. We need to think about what education will look like a year from now, or five years from now. How will we proactively address and prioritize equity? This will likely depend on context. Perhaps more than scaling up, our priority should be on proactive planning.

How will we proactively address & prioritize equity? This will likely depend on context. Perhaps more than scaling up, our priority should be on proactive planning.

Vásquez-Heilig: On the other side of this crisis, we'll want to be careful that we haven't exacerbated inequities. Before this crisis, having an iPad and high-speed

internet was a luxury for many people. Access to technology and the internet is now essential to education. The UK as widely criticized last fall for providing iPads to every student; those iPads are now essential for our students' education and communication. I'm not suggesting that districts buy iPads—L.A. Unified took a lot of heat for that some years ago—but we do need to think very carefully about how the current mode of learning can exacerbate inequities.

Flynn Vilaseca: Systemic inequities are evident in high-stakes accountability, segregation in schools, and the lack of representation. Given the constraints and many unknowns in the national debate on public education, what can we do to be stronger, more resilient, and more focused on equity?

Vásquez-Heilig: School boards, especially in large-city districts, look a lot different than they did 20 years ago. The school board in the Houston ISD, for instance, looks very different now, than it did when I was an employee of the district back in 1989. It's important that we elect school board members who are engaged in the community. We have to hold each other accountable for difficult decisions, knowing the political cost that comes with difficult decisions. We need to select superintendents who can build consensus within our communities and who don't ignore the voices of our communities. We need superintendents, principals and other district leaders who are aligned with the values of our school boards and who are engaged and community-driven. This era requires a new kind of leader, one that is interested in the things we care about.

Sampson: My work suggests the importance of creating pipelines for school board members—Black and Brown school board members—who are representative of their communities, who hold equity as a priority, and who have the capacity to be on a school board, since serving large, urban districts

My work suggests the importance of creating pipelines for school board members – Black & Brown school board members – who are representative of their communities, who hold equity as a priority, and who have the capacity to be on a school board.

is a time-intensive, volunteer position. Serving on a board is tireless, thankless work. How can we help working-class mothers of color, who understand and have experienced inequities, to have a voice at the table? School boards are largely comprised of super-privileged, retired real estate agents who have the flexibility for board service. How do we expand the pipeline for board service and tackle the real issues faced by families and communities?

Vásquez-Heilig: My mother always said, "Show me who your friends are, and I'll show you who you are." We have to be careful about the coalitions we build, and we need to remake the coalition that existed in the 1960s and 1970s between teachers, academics, "squeaky-wheel" parents, neighborhood associations and organizations involved in the civil rights movement. Inequities persist in our schools for Brown and Black boys and girl, while our communities are craving for alternatives. Let's build community coalitions for innovative ideas. The privatization of education has risen to its prominence over the last 20 to 30 years because parents are searching for innovative alternatives. Let's be sure those alternatives can happen within our districts—as they are in Miami Dade, with the small-school movement in New York, and with magnet schools in Houston.

Flynn Vilaseca: What should board members and administrators *not* lose sight of as we navigate this pandemic?

Vásquez-Heilig: We can't lose sight of the importance of telling the stories of our schools, our students, our families and our educators. There's often a lot of negativity around public education and "achievement gaps," and that is creating teacher shortages. We need to

tell our story better and to different communities. We need to tell our story better to the African-American community. We need to tell our story better to the *Latinx* community. As educators, we tend to believe that folks will magically find out about our good work. Let's use social media to tell the story of public education, even amid this crisis.

We need to tell our story better to the Latinx community. As educators, we tend to believe that folks will magically find out about our good work.

Sampson: And we need to hear and partner with our families. That connection is super-important. My second-grade daughter doesn't want to do her school work through Google Hangouts, which has become the norm during these past few weeks. It's pretty disappointing to hear her interactions with her teacher, which are just not validating. Before the pandemic, she was supposed to have lunch with her former teacher from last year, and what got her excited most recently was when her former teacher reached out for a "virtual lunch," where she could spend 30 minutes with her teacher through her Chromebook, showing off the stuff in her room. That relationship, connection and validation are super-important. A former social studies teacher in Sacramento has created "Teaching for Revolutionary Minds," a Black-centered social studies curriculum for 90 minutes on Tuesdays and Thursdays. My daughter has been super-engaged in it now for six weeks, learning about Black history, and I don't have to force or push her to learn. It's really exciting to see the validation she feels and the conversations she participates in—all in a virtual space. Our district leaders really need to prioritize educators making space and connecting with our students and families in ways that really matter, over putting together prepackaged worksheets or videos. In some Arizona districts, district leaders and principals tell teachers not to contact parents.

That creates a barrier. You can open that up through policy and practice.

Vásquez-Heilig: We have a real opportunity here in Texas. The State Board of Education passed Mexican American Studies, modeled off a *Latinx* Studies course in Houston, and now they've approved a Black History course as well. I understand it's the only Black History course in the nation. Oregon and Connecticut have ethnic studies courses. But there's a real opportunity here, and Carrie picked up on this. The latest research out of Stanford shows that kids of color feel more engaged in school and increase their critical thinking skills when they learn about the history of their ancestors. These ethnic studies courses are improving graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and firing up kids to learn about their ancestors!

Kids of color feel more engaged in school and increase their critical thinking skills when they learn about the history of their ancestors. These ethnic studies courses are improving graduation rates, decreasing dropout rates, and firing up kids to learn about their ancestors!

Flynn Vilaseca: Absolutely. Let's take some questions from our audience. We have a question from Superintendent Juan Cabrera of El Paso ISD.

Cabrera: I'm interested in the effects of this pandemic on males of color. We started programs seven years ago here in El Paso, and we'll need to restart them post-COVID. With my background as a technology attorney for 15 years, I'm intrigued by virtual learning and the way we took for granted all the contextual clues and knowledge that we gain by seeing our students every day. I've researched virtual learning for the last three years, and I think there's a place for virtual learning in technology-driven school districts and today's global society, but I'm not convinced that it's good for the vast majority of our kids—especially for kids of poverty, and kids who don't build vocabulary and social emotional connections at home. They will suffer the

most from virtual learning, and, as a country, we'll need to address that.

Vásquez-Heilig: I agree. I don't think virtual learning should be our main mode of education, but we've got to have contingency plans to do this kind of work. I understand that there are more than 200 kinds of coronaviruses, so this is no "once in a hundred years" virus. Another virus could arise in three years, and we need a strategic plan for this eventuality, so that our kids spend more than an hour a day with their teachers, which is what I'm hearing on Twitter.

There are more than 200 kinds of coronaviruses, so this is no "once in a hundred years" virus. Another virus could arise in three years, and we need a strategic plan for this eventuality

Cabrera: In El Paso, we're working on rolling out "micro closures," a game plan for closing buildings or partial buildings on a moment's notice, whether that's in one school or ten schools across the district. I have working groups developing strategies for better handling what we experienced a month ago, so that virtual learning is only a Band-Aid to get us through. I've now started a subcommittee for our TEA Commissioner with two other districts, to create a plan for the reentry into our schools by at-risk and SPED kids. We're developing scenarios where a building that holds 500 people might only educate 75 students, with a six-to-one student/teacher ratio, to help student who benefit the least from virtual learning. I call it my academic regression team, since our "summer slide" essentially started in mid-March. It's our way of responding to this emergency—something we might do around the entire country.

Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you for your leadership, Superintendent Cabrera, and for joining us for these dialogues on creating pathways to navigate this pandemic in the best way possible. We have a question from Trustee Natasha Butler of the Alief ISD, who asks: "We talk

a lot about special populations as it relates to equity policy. My concern during this pandemic is for the students who are in juvenile justice, discipline alternative education programs and mental facilities. What thoughts to you have on addressing the needs of these very vulnerable populations?"

Vásquez-Heilig: That's tough. A lot of things have to be broken for kids to end up in those situations. We talk about poverty as a variable, as a statistical predictor of test scores, because it represents the instability in kids' lives. The first thing we need to think about is how we keep kids out of those situations. Restorative practices and youth courts are certainly alternatives to the history of punitive discipline that is ingrained in Texas culture. We also need to be more restorative in addressing the kids in those situations. These special circumstances are causing us to consider a different tact, and I'm not sure that policymakers are asking that question for students in DAEP. Because of the close proximity of incarcerated individuals, we're seeing higher numbers of COVID-19 cases. Maybe we need to consider early-release programs for our students, which seems the right thing to do.

We talk about poverty as a variable, as a statistical predictor of test scores, because it represents the instability in kids' lives. The first thing we need to think about is how we keep kids out of those situations.

Sampson: We need to bring together educators, social workers and mental health workers to navigate these problems and prioritize kids in all extremes. I have a friend who runs mental health facilities: We need to collaborate and partner with the folks who run these spaces—and the solution will look different all over. If those conversations aren't happening, they need to be happening.

Flynn Vilaseca: We have a question from Trustee Linda Griffin from Garland ISD, who writes, "In the Dallas Metroplex area, we want to know more about community

engagement for African-American communities." Can you briefly address that issue?

Vásquez-Heilig: I served as Education Chair of the California NAACP, where we focused on this and community-based education reform. We asked how to involve communities and get information to communities. We asked how to build consensus, which takes a special kind of leader, superintendent and school board member. We need to formulate a community-based vision, work within our networks to realize those visions, and pressure our policymakers to make that vision a reality. Let us be a resource to you, as we were after the Civil Rights movement 30 to 40 years ago.

Sampson: There's a lot of anti-Blackness and explicit racism in Arizona schools, which led to the formation of the Black Mothers Forum. With the help of the NAACP and the Alliance of Black School Educators, they push school board members and district leaders to address inequities that would otherwise be ignored. The Arizona Association of Black School Educators has joined this alliance of mothers, grandmothers, aunties and cousins, and they're addressing anti-Blackness in schools and districts throughout the state. It takes coalition building and community engagement to create equity for kids. I'm interested to know how school boards are creating a virtual space now for engaging their communities.

It takes coalition building and community engagement to create equity for kids.

Vásquez-Heilig: We need leaders who can create interracial coalitions for the sake of our children and their families.

Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you both for your time today and for your lifelong dedication to addressing inequities in education. Together, we can create a better, stronger and more resilient education system for our community!

Speaking with Students
about the COVID-19 Pandemic

Alexis
Dallas ISD Student

María
Dallas ISD Student

Serenity
Garland ISD Student

Will
Garland ISD Student

Karla Guadalupe García
Dallas ISD Trustee

Linda Griffin
Garland ISD Trustee

Johno Oberly, Moderator
Leadership ISD

May 11, 2020

Oberly: I'm Johno Oberly, the Director of Student Voices at Leadership ISD. I came to the education world by way of Teach for America in 2013, in Dallas-Fort Worth, and I've had the pleasure of working with Dallas ISD students on a number of projects. The one I'm most excited to share with you is helping coach educators, administrators and school board members to authentically engage students in the process of co-creating their learning environment. When I first came to education, I recognized that I did not look like the students I taught, and I certainly didn't share their background, so I engaged them and encouraged them to develop agency, belonging and capacity. Trustee Jacinto Ramos of Fort Worth ISD and Trustee Karla García of Dallas

ISD asked me to help facilitate a conversation with students today and to demonstrate what it looks like to authentically engage our students in conversations about their daily experiences. Hopefully, we can use what we gain in these conversations with students to make better decisions for ourselves. I direct your attention to a handout titled, "Honest and Open Questions for the Student Experience." The protocol we're using today is meant to help adults in positions of power to authentically engage with students in a way that allows student voices to be heard and that allows adults to come away with concrete and tangible next steps that they can take in their positions of power. Today, we have six panelists: two trustees and four students. I'll ask them to introduce themselves by sharing their name, their school district, and, as an icebreaker, which dessert they would eat if they could only eat one dessert for the rest of their lives!

Griffin: I'm Trustee Linda Griffin from the Garland ISD, and my one dessert would be a pound cake.

García: I'm Karla Guadalupe García of the Dallas Independent School District, and my dessert would be chocoflan.

Serenity: I'm Serenity of the Garland ISD, and my dessert is strawberry shortcake.

Will: I'm Will, representing Garland ISD, and I would want to have pound cake as well.

Alexis: My name is Alexis, and I'm a senior from the Dallas ISD. My dessert of choice would be a fruit bowl.

María: I'm María from the Dallas Independent School District, and my dessert is cheesecake.

Oberly: Thank you all for joining us today. We're going to talk about your experience of transitioning to distance learning and your thoughts on how adults ought to engage with students in order to improve their educational environments. I have two jobs today: to make sure you feel you're supported during this conversation, and to help keep us on track with our "Honest and Open Questions" protocol. For our participants who are following along with me, we're going to first open the space and encourage our young people, letting them know that this is an opportunity for them to be

authentically heard, and that they can share their experiences—good, bad or indifferent. Secondly, I'm going to use this opportunity to tell our students that I acknowledge that a lot of times when adults speak with students, they do it in a way that doesn't necessarily honor and respect their experiences—and so there are a couple of things I want to promise our students. First, I promise them that the adults on this call are going to approach them with curiosity first, and that any experiences they share with us are going to be acknowledged and affirmed as their lived experiences. Nobody can argue with them. Then our job is to take those experiences and make really good decisions afterwards. Now I'll invite our trustees to ask questions based on "Honest and Open Questions" protocol. I'll remind our trustees that we're not trying to respond to students today, we're not asking them to quantify their experiences, and we're not trying to solve or mitigate the challenges they've experienced during this time today. When a lot of adults hear student challenges, they ask, "Have you tried this?" or "Have you thought about that?" Instead, this is our opportunity to hear their challenges and to acknowledge that they've been heard.

When a lot of adults hear student challenges, they ask, "Have you tried this?" or "Have you thought about that?" Instead, this is our opportunity to hear their challenges and to acknowledge that they've been heard.

Griffin: Thank you, students, for spending some time with us. We're interested in learning about your experiences. My first question is: How have school closures impacted your academics?

Serenity: School closures have had an impact on me emotionally. This is my senior year, and everybody looks forward to being a senior, but I didn't get the full senior experience.

Alexis: This pandemic brought everything to a halt for me. As Serenity said, it ruined the end-of-the-year experience for me as a senior, but I also felt lost and unsure whether classes were going to continue or how we were going to proceed.

When schools closed, we wondered, "What's the next step?"

Will: Going online was difficult for me. Even before the pandemic, I had teachers leave during the school year, and we were left with permanent substitutes. Then we had to switch between different "classrooms," and I was getting zeros for work that I was doing, so it affected my grades.

María: The closure of schools was stressful. We go to school to learn, but then everything closed down—just as AP exams were coming. It was difficult.

Griffin: I hear that school closures had an emotional impact on you, with a feeling of loss and a combination of other things, like permanent substitutes already. You and your teachers had to change to distance learning, where the whole atmosphere was different. There's a lot that we can learn from this moving forward.

García: I really would like to know more about how at-home learning is different from the classroom experience—and how this will affect you moving forward,

Will: Learning at home is different. In the classroom, you can always ask questions, and you get a response. Now we have to email our teachers, and we don't know when they'll respond. We have to check our phone or email all day, to see if they've responded. Some teachers respond more quickly, and others take longer, and I don't even want to do the work anymore when they respond. When you're in the classroom, teachers can respond, and you get to work. At home, I often lack motivation.

Alexis: At-home learning is a double-edged sword: There's definitely a lot more flexibility with deadlines and the amount of work, but you also need more motivation outside the classroom setting—and there are a lot more distractions and responsibilities at home that don't allow us to focus as much as we'd like.

At-home learning is a double-edged sword…. There are a lot more distractions and responsibilities at home that don't allow us to focus as much as we'd like.

Serenity: I agree. Learning at home takes away from your focus and motivation. I'm usually on top of my studies, but now we're

not able to ask teachers questions, like we used to. We're searching for answers online and communicating with teachers through Google Hangouts. Some respond, and some don't. It's just different.

María: The focus has shifted, and teachers are not giving us work, especially in AP classes. I'm worried, and sometimes I just want it to end.

Oberly: All four of you mentioned motivation. Tell us more about that.

Serenity: When we're in class, we have teachers to push us and make sure we're doing our work, and if we're looking at our phones, they'll come over and say, "Start doing your work." When we're online, we have no one to push us to grow. It's our responsibility to get our work done on time.

Will: Now we get as many as six assignments on one day, and, if they're not due anytime, we say to ourselves, "I'll do this in a couple of days." That wouldn't happen in school, where we get maybe two assignments, because we have time to work on them in class, where other students are working at the same time. Now we're all by ourselves.

Alexis: As a senior, I feel "senioritis," and the teachers don't push us to do things. In some classes, assignments are given simply to get a grade. It's not about learning or understanding the material. It's simply about getting a grade out of it, and we wonder, "Am I doing this to learn, or am I doing this simply to get a grade?"

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María: At school, teachers push me to do better, but not at home. Teachers don't even text with reminders of little things, so we don't even know what's going on.

Will: We don't know what's going on, so we just go to our Google Classrooms and get a long list of stuff we have to do—and we don't understand it, so how can we do it? We try to push it back, but we still have to get it done eventually, even when we're not motivated. In class, we can ask our friends, "What exactly are we supposed to do?" And they'll know.

They tell us, and we knock it out like that. We can ask our friends over the phone, but it's not the same. We don't really have the one-on-one with teachers, and we don't know when they'll respond. When they do respond and try to break it down, one-on-one, we don't always understand what they're saying.

Oberly: That sounds frustrating.

Griffin: Why do you think the timelines and rules kept changing as we responded to COVID-19?

Alexis: Every single person has had to react—and, two months into it, we don't know how COVID is working yet. We don't know how it affects us. During spring break, we heard that we were extending spring break for another week, and we thought, "Hey, it's just another week." But then we started the lock down, and the time started adding up, and there was a snowball effect. Two months later, we still don't know much about COVID.

During spring break, we heard that we were extending spring break for another week, and we thought, "Hey, it's just another week." But then we started the lock down, and the time started adding up, and there was a snowball effect.

Serenity: I agree. It seems the timelines and rules kept changing because teachers want to make sure that this experience benefits us and doesn't hurt us.

García: Students, how has COVID impacted your plans after high school?

Serenity: It has totally changed my plans after high school. It has given us more time to figure out where we want to go to college, but we no longer have that one-on-one help from our counselors. We don't have them pushing us and helping us to fill out applications for scholarships. I feel stuck.

Will: It hurt me because I needed more letters of recommendation for college scholarship applications. I was also going to attend a summer program at Prairie View A&M University, to get my entire first year out the way, but now I can't because summer programs are closed, so that affected me, too.

Alexis: The week after spring break, I was supposed to hear about a very important scholarship in person, and I ended up hearing about it through an email instead—which isn't as exciting. I committed to Texas Christian University in March, and I should be excited about going. They've proposed August 24 as the first day of in-person instruction, but now I'm worried that it might not happen with the way COVID is going right now. If it doesn't happen, that could be very dangerous to my academics, because the classroom setting is important, especially during the transition to college. I don't know how I'll do if I have to start my first semester of college at home.

María: I need help figuring out which college I'm going to. I want to study criminal justice, but I just got an email from my college advisor, saying that we're probably not going to start school in August. It's confusing and causes so many emotions, and I don't even know if I'll be a college freshman in the fall.

Griffin: Where are you all at in terms of finishing high school? Are you all on track for that?

Alexis: This is actually my last week as a senior, and my last assignments are due on Friday, so I'm in the final push this week, on top of AP exams. I went to pick up my cap and gown today, and I got to see myself in it for the first time. I'm in the final push, and I'm ready for it to end.

Will: I'm in the final stages, too. I have a few more assignments, then I'm done, so I'm trying to knock those out this week.

Serenity: I'm trying to knock out assignments and finish strong, and it's just actually starting to hit me now that my senior year is ending, that I'm in the homestretch, and that I'll soon be out of here.

María: I'm finishing off and trying to make a final decision about what I'm doing next. That's what I'm thinking about right now.

García: Tell us about the impact of COVID on you, your family, and your local community. What has changed, and what looks different for you?

Serenity: I'm spending more time with my family. We're bonding, but we're also getting on each other's nerves, since we're in

the same place. And the economy in the community is going to look real different, too.

Will: I'm spending a lot more time with my mom because she's a teacher, and we get on each other's nerves. My grandmother is older, so she stays in her house all day, and she's not going to come down for our graduation anymore. I'm having a drive-by graduation celebration, but she doesn't even want to come to that—and I can understand why. So, it's affecting my family.

Alexis: I've been very fortunate that my father has a steady job. He's considered an essential worker, and he's actually been working overtime, so we still have food on the table and a roof over our heads. I'm very introverted, so I would be at home anyway. I'm taking advantage of the time to help my mom out with the chores: with cooking and doing whatever I can around the house. The biggest change is in the community. This pandemic has brought the community to a halt. The highways are empty, and it's different seeing everyone in face masks. In a way, things are kind of normal, but, at the same time, they're not.

This pandemic has brought the community to a halt. The highways are empty, and it's different seeing everyone in face masks. In a way, things are kind of normal, but, at the same time, they're not.

María: I have valued my family more. I've spent more time with my younger siblings and more quality time with my mom, when my dad and older brother go to work. We used to always go outside and say hi to others, but no one is outside anymore. People are scared, and things are changing.

Griffin: How would you react if our country and our schools opened next week?

Serenity: I'd be very surprised and thinking that they're opening too quickly. The timing isn't right yet. There are too many unknowns, and people are scared. Everything would be back open, but it wouldn't be safe.

Will: I definitely wouldn't go out right away, until at least June or July. The damage is already done, and we can't go anywhere now without precautions.

Alexis: I would feel both concerned and betrayed. This is my last week as a senior, and it'll be a kick in the gut if school open after we finish. If schools open next week, I'll be concerned for the safety of my younger brother, who's in the seventh grade, because we still have a high infection rate in the United States.

María: We're just barely getting used to online learning. If we had to go back now, it would be like, "Really?"

García: With the drastic switch to at-home learning, I'm curious to know who you looked to for comfort, peace and motivation.

Will: I look to my friends, because we're all going through the same thing.

Alexis: I look into myself for that reassurance. I'm still a senior, even though I'm at home, and I still have the responsibility to finish as strong as I started. I have to do the same thing that I've always been doing.

Serenity: I'm looking into my life, too. This pandemic has given me time to reflect, and it has given us all a little taste of what life will be like after school.

María: I talk with my best friend and some of my teachers. I enjoy their points of view.

Griffin: Can you tell me more about distance learning?

Oberly: As a follow-up to that question, we have a whole bunch of folks here who make decisions at various levels in districts all across the state. Next year, schools will likely have to use some form of distance learning, for at least some part of the year. Imagine that you have the power to make decisions for school districts: What types of decisions would you make, and what types of questions should decision makers be asking students now?

Alexis: I would definitely ask students, "Are you actually learning at home?" If I could influence how this will be next year, I would definitely make sure that teachers focus on the purpose of their

Ask students, "Are you actually learning at home?" …Make sure that teachers focus on the purpose of their assignments & classes, so that students don't feel like they're simply completing "busy work."

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Serenity: I feel like teachers are just giving us lots of work to fill time. We now have all sorts of assignments for each class, our teachers are giving us a lot of work, and we don't even have our classmates to help us anymore. It's all about turning in assignments now, instead of learning the material.

Will: It would be better if teachers just took videos of themselves teaching lessons, so that we can rewind and take notes and actually learn something.

María: Videos would help. Maybe teachers could do a video call on Fridays, to help us understand the point of the week.

Oberly: I imagine having a lot of "busy work" can be pretty frustrating. How can you tell the difference between something that is "busy work" and something that is valuable for you.

Alexis: To me, the biggest giveaway is the length of the assignment. If the assignment looks way longer than the assignments that we got during the normal school year, you get the sense that the teacher has changed the workload. We know how our teachers assign and grade things. There's a lot more work now, as opposed to a little bit of work given throughout the week, which makes it more manageable. Now we're just trying to complete big assignment before deadlines.

Will: When you get a lot of work from a teacher, and it's out of character, you know it's "busy work."

García: We're getting a sense of what's working for you. What are we *not* understanding about what you're going through, particularly as seniors?

Serenity: Everyone else has had a senior year with graduation and all the senior activities. They don't know what it feels like to miss all that—like we're missing it. They're trying to be there for us, and we appreciate that, but we're missing out on a lot during a big year, and it's really, really stressful.

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Will: By the second semester, we're really not motivated to do any work, then, with only a couple of months left, our routines were broken, and we had to start over and do something else. This will affect us for the rest of our lives. We won't go to prom. Many of our family members won't be able to attend our graduation. We won't have graduation parties. It'll have a big impact on our entire life.

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Alexis: Many of our teachers don't understand that, even though we're at home, we don't live and breathe schoolwork at home, as we normally do at school. Our parents are working, and we have responsibilities at home. You don't have to fill our free time with a lot of work for us to do.

María: As seniors, these last weeks were going to be about creating our last memories with friends. Now it doesn't feel right. People say they understand us, but they really don't understand what's happening inside of us.

Oberly: Let's move to the next section of our protocol. We're now going to give our trustees an opportunity to say out loud what they heard you say and to synthesize one thing they heard. Students, this is your chance to make sure they're getting it right and that their takeaways are actually what you said.

Griffin: I heard you say that we haven't understood the time that you have at home and how we should deliver distance learning. We assumed you would do schoolwork at home, which isn't always easy.

García: I also heard that this is a very difficult experience for you emotionally and that you need the support of other people in a meaningful way—and not just as a show of support.

Oberly: Trustees, the last part of this protocol is to say what you are going to do now. Based on your new insights on students and their emotional needs, what are your next steps, particularly at the district level?

García: It seems the immediate future of our districts is at-home learning. In the Dallas ISD, we've canceled in-person summer classes. I really want to focus on this piece of motivation that each of you touched on, especially for our younger students. I would like to extend the conversation in my district on the way that our educators are considering the needs and responsibilities of students at home while they're being asked to learn and complete assignments.

Griffin: In my next conversation with my fellow board members, I hope to be a little more understanding and a little more visionary in looking at the effects of what we roll out. We need to recognize that we're educating the whole child, and not just that part of the child that's academic. As we continue to roll out distance learning, we need to support academics, but also the social and emotional needs of students, including athletics and extracurricular activities.

Oberly: Students, thank you for participating in this conversation. Zoom out for a second, and tell us how this conversation today was different from other conversations that you've had with adults?

Alexis: Sometimes we feel that adults hear us, but that they don't listen to us. I definitely felt I was listened to here, and, outside of my friends, this was the first time that I voiced what's wrong with at-home learning.

Serenity: I actually feel like I was heard, and I really appreciate the opportunity. I feel like these adults heard us and that they're actually going to do what they said they're going to do.

María: This conversation was different. I was able to talk and hear other perspectives also.

Will: Adults often tell us what we need to do. Sometimes we just need them to listen and not try to find solutions.

Oberly: How would things be different in our school environments if students were routinely engaged in this way by curious adults?

Serenity: As students, we like it when our voices are heard

Will: We would have a better learning environment if students voiced their opinions and educators catered more to us.

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Alexis: Having conversations like this would make sure that our teachers are actually on the same level with us. They would better understand their students and what they're getting out of virtual learning.

Oberly: I really appreciate the way in which you've all been frank, genuine and authentic today. Let's ask our trustees what they thought about this process.

Griffin: For me, this was a more structured approach that required us to listen more intensively. Thank you, students!

García: To really intensively listen is the reason that I suggested that we have a panel of students as part of this webinar series. As trustees and superintendents, we're making decisions without hearing from the "end user," our students. You've talked about at-home learning, motivation, and the need to understand the work you're doing. We wouldn't have heard those things otherwise. Hearing from you is exactly what we need to do to get this right for the thousands of seniors all across our state—and across the country!

Addressing the Needs of Diverse Students

Kay Douglas
Texas Association of School Boards

Dr. Mary Fertakis
Washington State Board of Education

Angela Herron
Grand Prairie ISD Curriculum & Instruction

Jacinto Ramos, Jr.
Fort Worth ISD Trustee

Dr. Phil Gore, Moderator
Texas Association of School Boards

May 18, 2020

Gore: As part of the virtual graduation ceremony this weekend for Historically Black Colleges and Universities, President Barack Obama shared, "You're being asked to find your way in a world in the middle of a devastating pandemic and a terrible recession. The timing is not ideal. And let's be honest: A disease like this just spotlights the underlying inequities and extra burdens that Black communities have historically had to deal with in this country. We see it in the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on our communities, just as we see it, when a Black man goes for a jog, and some folks feel they can stop and question him, and shoot him if he doesn't submit to their questioning." The Former President went on to say, "Injustice like this is not new. What is new is that so much of your generation has woken up to the fact that the status quo needs fixing, that the old ways of doing things don't work, and that it doesn't matter how much money you make if everyone around you

"A disease like this just spotlights the underlying inequities & extra burdens that Black communities have historically had to deal with in this country."

"Our society and democracy only work when we think not just about ourselves, but about each other."

is hungry and sick, that our society and democracy only work when we think not just about ourselves, but about each other."

We recognize the current pandemic is shining a bright light on the inequities within our country. These inequities highlight the contrast between the world that the rich and powerful live in, and the world that most of us live in. My own children have been unable to get testing, both for COVID-19 and for the antibodies.

We want to spend our time today not massaging the problem, but actually exploring and moving forward to solutions. Today we have a respected panel of experts who are going to talk with us about solutions for how we can improve access and outcomes for students of color.

Many of you know Mary Fertakis. I met Mary at a state school boards association conference in 2002. At the time, Mary and I were both school board members in King County, Washington. She is now an elected member of the Washington State Board of Education, as well as CEO of M Fertakis Consulting, which focuses on equity and inclusion in the PK-12 education system and the intersection it has with housing, health and well-being, workforce, transportation, and economic policy. Mary is a Past President of the Washington School Directors Association, and she served for 22 years on the Tukwila School Board. When she served as President of the Tukwila School Board a few years ago, the New York Times identified Mary's district as the most ethnically-diverse district in the nation. She has a Bachelor of Arts in Political Science and International Studies, a Master's in Education Policy from the University of Washington, an ELL teaching certification from Seattle University, and she served in the Peace Corps as a rural community development specialist in Senegal, West Africa.

I met Kay Douglas at one of my first national school board trainers conferences in Chicago in 2009, Kay is a senior consultant, mediator and trainer working for the Texas Association of School Boards. Prior to coming to TASB, she

served for 16 years on the Huntsville ISD Board of Trustees, and she is a graduate of Leadership TASB. Kay received her Bachelor of Arts in Psychology from Columbia, and her law degree from the University of Houston. After working in the General Counsel's Office of the Texas Department of Criminal Justice, she was a prosecutor for 13 years in Walker County and trained prosecutors across the country.

I first met Jacinto Ramos, Jr. about six years ago at a TASB conference, but he really got my attention when I heard him speak at one of our summer leadership conferences four years ago in Fort Worth. Cinto is a national, state and community leader on educational policy, racial and ethnic equity, and school district governance. In 2019, he was elected Chair of the Council of Urban Boards of Education (CUBE). He also serves as President of MASBA. He was born and raised on the north side of Fort Worth, a product of immigrant parents from Mexico. He devotes countless hours to the cause of providing a voice to the disengaged and disenchanted youth, bridging silos of activism, leadership and community engagement. He earned a spot on the Fort Worth ISD Board in 2013. Two years, he became the youngest Board President in Fort Worth ISD. In addition to his leadership roles in CUBE and MASBA, he's also now one of the 22 school board members on the NSBA Board.

I've had the pleasure of knowing Angela Herron for three years. Angela is the Executive Director of Teaching and Learning in Grand Prairie ISD. She believes strong public schools serve as the foundation of our democracy, strengthen our economy, and provide the key to unlocking endless opportunities for all students. She is looking forward to seeing how her research will guide board practices across Texas. Angela is a proud graduate of the inaugural cohort of the Holdsworth Center's District Leadership Program. She's also a recipient of one of TASB's scholarships, which encourages research on how governance affects student achievement in Texas. Angela's research explores Board Presidents' perceptions of their Boards' practices of good governance. She has nearly completed that study, which will be available by the end of the summer.

Mary, you asked us to share President Obama's words. Tel s what these words mean to you.

Fertakis: President Obama nailed a lot of key points. Yesterday, the foundation that I started and a coalition of folks put together 450 Iftar food baskets for the Muslim families in our two community. Because of COVID, we organized this in ten days for community members who are having issues with food right now. Ramadan is an expensive month for people who get together with others and celebrate with their traditional, cultural recipes. This year, of course, they can't get together. The Seattle Foundation funded it, but only because we brought to their attention their inequitable distribution of $10.1 million several weeks ago to 225 organizations in King County—but our community and adjacent communities, which are the most disproportionately impacted communities, received nothing. We were invisible! Low-income communities of color get overlooked, so we wrote a three-page letter to the president of the foundation and to our King County Executive expressing our concern and offering solutions. The funding they gave us was a recognition of the fact that they messed up. It's a good example of what we're seeing in this crisis: Expediency is being put above process, and there is no use of data or a racial equity lens, so communities like ours get overlooked. We're seeing this across the country. My Somali sister and I pushed back, organized and put together this incredible event with 72 volunteers who distributed 450 baskets of food in our two communities in an hour and a half.

Our community & adjacent communities, which are the most disproportionately impacted communities, received nothing. We were invisible!

Gore: I'm so grateful to have Mary with us, because she truly is a consummate example of what President Obama was talking about: Our democracy only works when we think not just about ourselves, but about others. We have a slide on the Chinese characters for "crisis. Mary, tell us what we're seeing.

Fertakis: In Chinese, the word for "crisis" is comprised of two characters: The first character signifies "danger," and the second character stands for incipient moment, or a moment in time where things can change. It's a powerful analogy of what we're going through right now. We've got a lot of danger and a lot of things happening, but we've never had an opportunity like this in our lifetimes to impact systems in the way that this pandemic allows us to. We would have been laughed out of the room for some of the ideas we had three months ago—and now we're bringing up those ideas again. We're framing a conversation on this incipient moment and what we can accomplish for our students.

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Gore: Kay, like Mary, you are a consummate advocate for others. Specifically, what steps can school boards and individual trustees take to learn from the inequities exposed by this pandemic, and how can we focus on improving access and outcomes for students of color in Texas?

Douglas: The first thing we need to do is name it. We are all very familiar and comfortable with the conversation, but many boards don't have these conversations—either because they don't think that inequities exist in their district or because they have so few students who fall into particular demographics, that they're often overlooked. It takes a lot of courage to have those conversations. Second, now that we have navigated this school year, we acknowledge that we don't know when this pandemic is going to end. Businesses are starting to reopen, but we don't know how or when this pandemic will end. Let's be frank: We don't even know if we, as individuals, are going to be here when it ends. We need to have conversations. We need to include as many voices as we can. As Mary suggested, we need to fight for

Many boards don't have these conversations—either because they don't think that inequities exist in their district or because they have so few students who fall into particular demographics, that they're often overlooked.

funding. We need to bring more people to the table. We need to listen to the homeless—and we're going to have more people who are homeless as a result of this pandemic. We need to listen to students and allow them to tell us what they need. We have to listen to our staff and let them tell us what we need to do so reopen in a way that students and staff feel safe. The Ohio State Board of Education is involving parents in their decisions. They're asking them three questions: What questions do you have? Are you willing to send your child back when school reopens? And are you willing to send your child back if we require masks? We need to ask similar questions: How do we involve parents of color? How do we involve parents of special ed children? How do we involve our teaching staff—a large part of the teaching demographic—and ensure that those who are immunocompromised are protected? Let's not have these conversations without all the voices at the table.

We need to bring more people to the table…. Let's not have these conversations without all the voices at the table.

Gore: I'm hearing some key takeaways: Name it. Recognize we have a problem. Ensure that all voices are at the decision-making table. Cinto, we appreciate your powerful voice and the leadership you provide in our state and nation. What are you learning and thinking about differently in light of this pandemic, and what improvements with respect to access and outcomes do you envision for Fort Worth ISD and for our Texas public schools?

Ramos: What's true for me is that I know that I can no longer "kick the can down the road." I can't think that I have more time to address inequities revolving around access to technology, social emotional needs, and the basic things that our young people and families need. I realized that I need to go into overdrive to address these needs. In Fort Worth, we recognize that we need to think differently. We don't have a choice. We need to advocate for internet connectivity as a vital utility, like water, electricity and gas. Technology and internet access are conduits of empowerment for our school and districts, enabling basic access to learning for all our children. We need to move

beyond the traditional, 19-century school year. In Fort Worth, we're preparing a huge survey for all stakeholders, to gauge their interest in an inter-session calendar that plays to our strengths and not to the past. We know that we need to engage the entire community, and not just those who traditionally show up. And what that looks like would be very, very different. As a former gang interventionist and juvenile probation officer, I have a street-level mindset: that we need to visit people's homes and hear directly from them. I'm thinking of one teacher here in Dallas-Fort Worth who is using Facebook to engage her elementary school students in innovative ways, in ways that go "against the grain" and against Whiteness. As Kay and Mary has mentioned, ongoing engagement and conversations are necessary, so that public school education doesn't get pushed to the wayside.

We need to engage the entire community, and not just those who traditionally show up.

Gore: It's great to hear an emphasis on true community—and not just an exercise. Angela is doing research on school boards in Texas, but she also brings her background and perspective as a school administrator. Angela, I'm curious to hear what you see happening in our school districts around Texas to address access gaps for internet connectivity and devices.

Herron: In Grand Prairie ISD, we were very fortunate, because four years ago, our Board approved one-to-one devices for our students in grades three through twelve. With that approval, we knew that devices alone were insufficient and that we needed to train our teachers and administrators on how to use those devices to really transform instruction for our students. We also partnered with BrightBytes to monitor how our students and parents engaged with that technology. So, when COVID hit, we had the devices, and our teachers and students were prepared—but we also knew from our BrightBytes survey that 20% of our students did not have access to Wi-Fi in their homes. Our immediate plan was to address that 20%. Like many districts, we kept our Wi-Fi access open on our campuses, so parents could have Wi-Fi access from their cars. We also partnered with

and promoted digital providers with reduced rates. While we were doing all of that research, we did not want students without Wi-Fi access to lose the opportunity to learn and engage, so our teachers created paper packets. Even though we were intentional before COVID, we had to stretch our intentionality and make sure our students were still learning. When I think about what districts are doing across the state, I think it's important to give kudos to Lockhart ISD for their purchase of cell phone cell towers to provide Wi-Fi access to all teachers and students. COVID has unveiled the need for digital, innovative, 21st-century curriculum for our students. Suddenly, with Wi-Fi access, parents can apply online for jobs, they can schedule virtual doctor appointments, and they can have access to health care. Wi-Fi access helps to overcome a systemic denial of opportunities that is much larger than education. Like Cinto said, Wi-Fi access is just as essential for survival as water and electricity.

WiFi access helps to overcome a systemic denial of opportunities that is much larger than education.

Gore: That's really heavy: Even the filing of unemployment benefits is done online now. Angela, because your research is so fresh, I'm curious as to whether you can share of any opportunities for improvement in school governance that we'll soon be able to read in your dissertation?

Angela: The dissertation process is tedious and grueling, but I loved researching school boards. As I think about my interviews and surveys, one question really speaks to what we're dealing with now: What policies in our districts directly speak to student achievement? Over half of the school board presidents that I interviewed spoke of addressing needs and closing gaps through equity-focused policy. They said that equity policy allows them to unapologetically and freely discuss opportunity and achievement gaps, without feeling uncomfortable. They spoke of the good things their districts are doing, the high expectations they have for all students, and I hope to share more in my dissertation. I really hope that the section on equity changes the way that governance is done and

challenges school board members to consider implementing equity policies in their school districts.

Gore: That brings up an excellent topic: What are some essential elements that should be considered in a local equity policy?

Fertakis: First of all, it can't be a boilerplate or template. It can't be something you do simply to "check a box." It needs to be reflective of your local context. There are more and more examples across the country: Definitely look at them. In Washington State, we've done significant work to develop a process for school boards to create their own race and equity policies. Even the title of your policy is important and reflects the kind of work you're doing locally. There is no way to get around the amount of work that's involved in this and the conversations are absolutely critical for developing eventual policy.

We've done significant work to develop a process for school boards to create their own race & equity policies.

Ramos: I'll speak from our experience in Fort Worth ISD. First and foremost, it has to come from community input and true engagement. Young people, educators, parents and guardians ought to be at the front end of this work. We put the data out there, in front of them, and the data share a resounding message, leaving stakeholders wondering who we really serve and causing us to look at ourselves and ask, "What have we been doing?" After the policy is effected, it needs to be connected to the superintendent's evaluation. Then, if achievement gaps aren't closing and if student outcomes aren't improving, then we know our policy isn't working or that the variables aren't there. It's tied into your governance model, through goals and constraints, showing that your whole board is prioritizing it. If your board is directly connected to the community, everything should be in sync. That's not easy, because the blowback—especially the internal blowback—will come. When we actually isolate race and engage in courageous conversations, we take this to a whole new level!

When we actually isolate race and engage in courageous conversations, we take this to a whole new level!

Gore: I really agree: If the Board says something is important, it should give direction to its one employee, so that he or she is evaluated, at least in part, on his or her performance on the Board's priorities.

Douglas: As Mary and Cint said, it's important for us to have these policies. Once we have these policies, we need to ask how we implement them in student discipline, dress code, the assignment of teachers, and other areas. The formulation of the policy is absolutely only the beginning, and is not even close to the end. And we have to listen throughout the process: So many times, we listen to voices at the outset, then we create a policy and tell people, "This is how we're going to do it." There has to be constant, two-way feedback, and the community needs to trust us to the point that it tells us how the implementation is going. Honestly, if people don't think you're actually going to do anything, they'll be less likely to engage. We need to ask how we keep that conversation going. Chicago Public Schools has a Student Voice Committee at every school, and they gather every nine weeks to figure out what they're hearing collectively. They're developing the relationships that will actually give them the input they need.

Herron: The implementation is where the rubber hits the road. As a board member, ask whether you are allocating budget dollars to support this work, and whether you actually have a budget line item for race and equity work. It comes down to money: We fund what is important to us, and we prioritize what's funded.

As a board member, ask whether you are allocating budget dollars to support this work, and whether you actually have a budget line item for race and equity work. It comes down to money: We fund what is important to us.

Gore: Where do we go from here? In an addition to an equity policy, what two or three priorities do you wish that every Texas school board would adopt?

Ramos: First and foremost, we need to adjust our budgets to get our young people as close as possible to a level playing field. That's going to look different in every district. Begin by listening to your stakeholders. In Fort Worth ISD, we have a parent hotline, and we respond to every phone call. We want to be transparent and build trust. When we announced online graduations, for instance, we received severe blowback from the community. As a colleague in Dallas said, we don't want to turn the triumph of graduation into a tragedy, where people become sick and we increase our COVID numbers. The most dominating conversation I've had during recent weeks with trustees and board presidents across the state and the country has concerned fear: We have been entrusted with the power to make decisions, and we don't want to make decision that will cost lives. At the same time, the community wants in-person graduations. We've made clear that our focus is on meeting basic needs: technology, food, mental health and social emotional needs. We can't underestimate the extreme needs: in juvenile justice, counseling and therapy. As trustees and superintendent who are in the line of fire, we need to take care of our health, too. I have purposefully implemented mental health breaks in my day, because of the exhaustion of being on Zoom and phone calls. With virtual meetings, we no longer have the breaks when we used to drive from one place to another. Another priority with respect to governance is revisiting our goals and strategic plans. The game has changed. One of my mentors says, "You can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you don't go." Now we're all going where no one has gone before. Case studies will be written and research will be done on this situation. We'll be able to look back and ask whether we prioritized the right things for our communities, whether we met their basic needs, whether we kept our sanity and mental health, and whether our students felt loved, appreciated and connected by a big school system that they depended on.

"You can't teach what you don't know, and you can't lead where you don't go." Now we're all going where no one has gone before.

Gore: Thank you for bringing up the subject of mental health. Sadly, as a country, we have tended to avoid having courageous conversations about something that affects us all in different ways. How do you suggest that superintendents and school board members take care of themselves and their mental health, so as to be of value to others?

Douglas: That will be differ for each of us. We need to recognize that it's okay to *not* be okay. Every time someone asks us, "How are you doing?", we respond, "fine," "perfect," "couldn't be any better." When we hear enough people say that, we don't want to say, "Oh, my God, my life is falling apart! I was on the ledge yesterday!" If I told you I had a physical illness, you'd say, "Go to the doctor." If I tell you I have something going on mentally, you say, "I thought she was tougher than that." Let's give ourselves the grace to *not* feel okay, and let's give others that grace, too. I'm so glad Cinto brought up SEL and mental health, because we'll need to think about them when we go back. We're on Day 65 of lock-down, and my children will literally not let me leave the house. I'm an introvert, so I'm in "hermit heaven," but I also recognize that there are people who *need* to get out. This is affecting us all differently—and however it's affecting you is okay. My daughter works 14-hour days on the front line, in a prison system, so I'm teaching my grandson, but if I had to teach five kids at home, at five grade levels, with five different packets and Zoom calls, I'd go nuts! We all need to find our "therapy" during these days. Mine is cooking: I'm cooking like a crazy woman! What is *your* therapy? How do you get more of it? For Phil, it might be getting out of the house and walking or running. We're all different, and we all need to give others the grace to say, "This was a bad day." Our kids are losing their teachers. Our teachers are losing their parents. People are literally dying. How do we tell others it's okay to cry and be sad?

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Herron: Leadership is really about people, and our organizations are built upon people, who are our greatest resource. I try to instill in the people whom I have the privilege of leading

that it's okay to stop and take care of themselves. With back-to-back Zoom meetings, we sometimes need to stop and take a walk around the block. A lot of people are trying to perform their best. They're trying to be everything to everybody—and we can't do that unless we take care of ourselves. I say to all leaders: Take care of the people you lead, and give them permission to stop, give them permission to say they're *not* okay. Encourage them, let them know it gets better, and give them grace to do the best that they can.

Fertakis: I heard a really great analogy for how we're all experiencing this pandemic differently: We're all in the same storm, but we're not in the same boat. Some people say, "We're all in this together," but everybody is experiencing this differently. If you're in a battleship, you're barely feeling the waves coming against you, but, if you're in a rowboat, it's a completely different experience. That's what's happening within our historically-marginalized communities. We know where the disparities are. We know who is contracting and dying from COVID-19. We see the inequities in the faces served by our systems, and it's making it tough for us to pivot from this, as we have for far too long.

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During the Zoom meeting that I have with several groups, we give people a "gracious space." We take a big chunk of the meeting to ask, "How are you doing?" It has been very powerful. At one meeting, this took 45 minutes, but it was very cathartic to hear how each person express his or her experience of this storm. Then, after we did that, we could focus on the meeting. Our brains react to the burdens we carry. We experience a physiological reaction to crisis, stress and trauma, which so many people are experiencing now and which is impossible to learn. I head our workgroup for social emotional learning in Washington State, and we're talking about the conversations we need when we come

back together in school: Even before talking about academics, we'll need to address the social emotional learning aspect of what our students and staff have experienced.

Gore: This is the heart of the matter. This is where the rubber meets the road. We need to ask how we move from here, how we transition, and what we need to do differently. The Commissioner has started to talk about something that is very near and dear to Kay's heart: a shift in our academic calendar, from the 18th-century agrarian calendar with its two or three months off each summer.

Douglas: This is my signature scream: the agrarian calendar! None of my children or grandchildren have ever picked any crop, so why do we have a calendar that's based on the need to bring in the crops? What we're experiencing now is "summer slide" on steroids. When our schools are closed, kids don't eat, kids are abused, kids are in homes with no books or resources, there are no eyes on some kids, which is especially concerning when it comes to students with disabilities and English Language Learners who are not exercising certain skills. There is just no upside to the agrarian calendar and three months of loss of skills. Gaps have grown during the two months of this pandemic. We can't even imagine the gaps that will exist when our students come back to school. The TEA has shared some possibilities, and people are saying, "Oh, no, we *can't* go back to school early—and we can't stay longer in the spring! We *can't* do things differently!" We *are* doing things differently now. We didn't think that we could turn this huge ship—and we literally turned an entire ship in a matter of days and weeks. We are doing school differently now. I hope we take this opportunity to say that the old "normal" wasn't working and that it's not coming back. What will we learn from this experience, and how will we put those learnings to use for the benefit of our kids, their teachers, and our entire community? It's not as if we haven't

None of my children or grandchildren have ever picked any crop, so why do we have a calendar that's based on the need to bring in the crops? What we're experiencing now is "summer slide" on steroids.

done this before: My daughter had a balanced calendar when she was in school 20 years ago. Some districts are trying new models. I don't want to mandate a one-size-fits-all approach, but I do want every board to ask whether any portion of this might work for their community.

Herron: Like Kay and Cinto, we're excited about the possibility of an extended year in the Grand Prairie ISD, to address achievement gaps, improve college readiness, and make sure our students are prepared for the TSI. It's an opportunity to be extremely intentional about closing gaps for students, so that they can be successful moving forward.

Gore: Cinto, as a result of this pandemic and the light that is being shone on inequities, is there anything else that we should stop doing, or continue doing, or do differently?

Ramos: As Kay said, it's important that people know that it's okay to say that they're not okay. In my role at Leadership ISD, we have begun phone calls between board presidents and board members, and we've been learning from one another. We model good leadership when we acknowledge that it's okay *not* to have answers in an unprecedented time—and still we reach out to others who are in similar situations, and we began to create a network. We hosted our first conversation the week after this pandemic began, to try to figure this thing out sooner than later. As school board members, we signed up for a job. We are leaders in our communities, and we now face greater challenges than any of the colleagues before us had to deal with. Some of us have been leading conversations on inequities long before it was cool, and now the inequities are coming to the forefront. There's still a heck of a lot more work to be done, so we can't rest—even though we may not necessarily know what we're doing. We need to keep the conversations on inequity going!

Some of us have been leading conversations on inequities long before it was cool, and now the inequities are coming to the forefront…. We need to keep the conversations on inequity going!

Gore: We have an audience member asking about resources for helping Spanish-speaking students, particularly with

respect to the reporting of abuse. Since the largest percentage of the students in our Texas public schools are *Latinx*, what insights might we share on services for those who are stronger in other native languages?

Ramos: In Fort Worth, we have several local resources to address gaps, like community agencies, churches and faith-based partners, but many of them are overwhelmed. I'm concerned for our undocumented population, who have less access to resources and are often frowned upon. When I worked as a community organizer for the juvenile department, I learned that our community is our greatest asset. Our people have been taking care of each other for generations. We need to tap into that space and acknowledge the power and resources of communities. Our school districts can lean into that work, see who the champions are who are gathering and sharing resources, and be part of those conversations.

Gore: Thank you, Cinto. Mary, you've been thinking deeply about equity for decades. What might you expound on here, or what hasn't yet been said that might encourage more equitable outcomes and access here in Texas?

Fertakis: Our response to this pandemic is a matter of will—and *not* resources. We have the resource, if only we prioritize them. Our first diagnosed case of COVID-19 in this country occurred here in Washington, about 30 minutes from here, and I'll be honest: My first thought was, "Dear God, please let it be on the east side—the affluent side—of the county. If it happens there, it will get attention, but if it happens in my part of the county, people won't pay attention." I'm just being honest. The institutionally-racist structures we all live in allow this. As it turned out, the first death occurred on the east side of the county, and public officials tackled in a matter of days issues over which they had wrung their hands for years! For years, they said, "We don't have the resources to provide housing for the homeless," and suddenly they were able to buy a motel and convert it

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in a few days for the needs of those in need. Where did they put it? In our part of the county, and not on the east side, where the nursing home deaths began happening. We have the resources to do what's important to us. It's a matter of will. I encourage us all to fight the fight, to bring attention to inequitable approaches, and to think in terms of intersectionality. If we want high-speed internet access to be a public utility, we'll need to ask who we need to work with to make this a reality. If we want additional funding for social emotional learning and the mental health piece of this pandemic, we need to ask who needs to be at the table. If we want to make sure that our families are not displaced during this pandemic, so as to avoid homelessness and other issues, we need to bring together the necessary sectors to ensure this. Education leaders sit at the intersection of many institutionally-racist systems. We have an unprecedented opportunity to address things that have been happening for years!

Top COVID-19 Legal Issues for the 2020-2021 School Year

Elizabeth Neally
Walsh Gallegos Treviño Russo & Kyle

Tony Reséndez
Walsh Gallegos Treviño Russo & Kyle

Vincent Tovar
MASBA Associate Executive Director, Moderator

June 3, 2020

Tovar: Today we're excited to have experts address the top COVID-19 legal issues for the 2020-2021 school year. Elizabeth Neally focuses her legal practice on assisting school districts with employment, civil rights contracts, student and liability issues, as well as offering training for board members, administrators and staff. After having practiced in the *Río Grande* Valley for many years, she now practices law in San Antonio with our friends from Walsh Gallegos Treviño Russo & Kyle, where she continues to represent school districts throughout Texas. Tony Reséndez represents school districts throughout the state, with an emphasis on board governance, employment matters, and general school law issues. Tony has assisted districts with superintendent searches, construction litigation matters, and has served as bond counsel for several districts. He has experience in general corporate law, chapter seven bankruptcy, and general civil litigation. Welcome, Elizabeth and Tony!

Neally: It's a pleasure to be here. One of the joys—and I use the term "joy" loosely—of practicing law during COVID is that we're working remotely, and I feel like I'm back in school: I've had to learn so many new things! The laws change daily, so this is a very interesting time. Superintendents and school board members throughout

Texas are struggling to figure out what's next, what 2021 is going to look like, and what they should be focused on. Let's start with the Open Meetings Act!

Superintendents & school board members throughout Texas are struggling to figure out what's next, what 2021 is going to look like, and what they should be focused on.

Reséndez: It's been a challenging time, and a lot of districts are trying to figure out what to do and where to go. Many districts just finished graduations, which is a big deal and an important moment of closure for our graduates. As we move forward and prepare for the summer and for the next year, we want to give you some practical tips on how to how to proceed during this interesting time.

With respect to the Open Meetings Act, our Governor, in an effort to stop or slow the spread of COVID, suspended some rules of the Open Meetings Act, to allow districts to do business during this challenging time while still being transparent and sharing information, allowing the community to be involved. It is no longer required that a quorum be physically present with the presiding officer at a specified location. As long as you have a quorum, you can conduct meetings by video, telephone, conference or in person, or a combination of these. You still need a quorum, but you don't have to be physically present at the same place. Meeting notices no longer need to be physically posted, so long as they're posted online. The telephone or video conference meeting does not have to be audible to members of the public who are physically present at the meeting. There are several statutes that require face-to-face meetings, but the governor suspended some of these in an effort to keep people from having to interact while performing district business. Technology glitches happen, so be patient with your administration. A number of Open Meetings Act requirements are still in place, to maintain transparency and order. Written notice is still required before telephone or video conference meetings, but can be posted online. You have to record the meeting, and, for transparency, be

sure to post the agenda and the minutes. The public must still be able to participate, to address the governing body. A lot of districts are allowing public comments through email before meetings and even at meetings. They're setting aside time for community members to call or videoconference in and comment. It's important to make sure your community has the option to be involved. The meeting notice must include a toll-free number or a video conference link, to allow the community to participate. This has worked pretty well so far for all the districts I've seen. It's important to maintain a quorum throughout the meeting, to make sure that you're able to legally get district business done.

Neally: There are questions about what this will look like during the coming year. We'll have to monitor as the Governor opens up the state. Because of the health risks associated with COVID, we might expect this flow to continue during the coming year.

Reséndez: We have no specific, clear indication yet from the Governor or the Attorney General yet as to when this might end. The initial order was signed by the Governor in March and remains in effect until the Governor determines that social distancing is no longer required. There's no real end in sight yet, until the numbers go down or until we have a vaccine. In the meantime, some districts are meeting in person and ensuring that everybody is wearing a mask and is at least six to ten feet apart.

There's no real end in sight yet, until the numbers go down or until we have a vaccine.

Neally: I don't anticipate a change in this unless the public complains that they're not being given access to address the board—that they're not able to share public comments in an effective manner. Public complaints about not being able to access elected officials would certainly get the Governor's attention.

Reséndez : That's why it is important to go the extra mile to make sure that the public is participating—through emails before board meetings or through the toll-free telephone number that you provide.

Neally: Let's talk about employment considerations. The Texas Education Agency and the TEA Commissioner have recommended that districts be as flexible as possible when it comes to student instruction. Of course, student instruction should be the focus of every school district, even amid outbreaks and periods of quarantine. Suggestions include starting the school year earlier, or going to year-round school. This will affect employees. Many districts adopted their calendars for 2020-2021 in January. Work calendars are different and provide more flexibility with regard to duty days for employees. We recommend that districts no longer write months into employee contracts, to enjoy more flexibility with respect to duty days. Give your administrators some wiggle room to respond to COVID-19. Add language that the contracts are subject to change based on possible school closures and on the instructional needs of students, to limit grievances and complaints. The TEA Commissioner has said that contract employees must be given written notice of any change in salary or duty days that might affect salary at least 45 days before the first day of instruction, in order to allow the employee to resign without penalty.

Student instruction should be the focus of every school district, even amid outbreaks & periods of quarantine.

If you determine that you need to close your district again, you'll need a board resolution to authorize the continued payment of employees.

The Commissioner of Education is allowing districts to waive the annual appraisal of superintendents, principals, campus administrators and educators. This is a local decision. Most of your districts have already done this. If you haven't, you should do it as soon as possible, to be certain that it's effective. Many of you have adopted resolutions authorizing your superintendent to pursue waivers with the TEA, as necessary, due to COVID. And if you've done that, it may be all well and good. In some cases, the Commissioner has accepted these resolutions; in other cases, the TEA requires the board to adopt the waivers. In that case, you'll want to ratify the decisions of your superintendent. If you haven't adopted such a

resolution, your board must adopt and approve those waivers. It's unclear for whether waivers will be issued for the 2020-2021 school year. Be prepared to request waivers, as needed, in response to COVID-19.

Reséndez: I want to emphasize that we need to remind all staff—all teachers and employees—that we're not exactly sure how the next year will play out with regard to workdays and the calendar. Make sure your contracts give you the flexibility to make the adjustments that we've recommended. Tell your employees that you need them to be flexible and to understand that the calendar year and work hours may change.

Neally: If you're thinking about starting school earlier or changing to year-round school, that's really difficult to do at this point in time, unless you are a District of Innovation. Any increase in duty days for contractual employees will likely not be found favorable by your contractual employees, unless you include additional pay. With regard to financial concerns, we don't know where the money will come from next year, so we don't recommend making promises that you can't keep. Everything is in flux, so be sure you have flexibility in your work calendar and that you provide your employees documentation with regard to salaries and duty days.

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The Family First Coronavirus Response Act (FFCRA) was passed to provide additional leave to families through emergency, paid sick leave and through extended family medical leaves. In addition to creating new types of leave, it also states what you're required to pay employees, which is not included in the Family Medical Leave Act. As board members, be sure to discuss with administration how your district will apply this. It's currently in your local policy DEC and DECA. TASB has indicated that they don't expect an amendment for these in the near future. Your board will need to adopt

the FFCRA. In consultation with your board, your administration will need to determine whether to allow intermittent leave or whether you're going to allow additional paid leave that they may already have accrued. That's what we call "topping off" or "making whole" above the $200 per day or of the two-thirds pay. Those are some issues your board needs to be aware of when it comes to the FFCRA.

The other big change that has nothing to do with COVID but will begin in the 2020-2021 school year is that the U.S. Department of Education just released its final version of new regulations under Title IX, which go into effect on August 14, 2020, unless someone requests a restraining order that prevents them from going into effect until a later date. All districts will need to educate staff on these new regulations regarding student investigations into sexual harassment. Investigations into sexual harassment are under your FFH, and sometime under FFI, under Bullying. FFH deals with discrimination, retaliation and harassment. These new regulations redefine how you investigate sexual harassment complaints. It expands the notice requirements, so that the notice to any school district employee puts the district on notice of the sexual harassment and the need to investigate. If we don't investigate, we can be found deliberately indifferent, in which case the district can be held responsible. We have to be really careful to investigate any claim of sexual harassment that we get notice of. The law had stated that it had to be a school district employee with authority; now it's *any* school district employee. When this goes into effect, if a janitor sees something, he will have the duty to report it to an administrator, and, if he doesn't, the school district is on the hook. Speak with your district's attorney for specific advice on the details of these new regulations and how to put your district in the best position to investigate sexual harassment complaints next school.

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Reséndez: Tite IX is a big deal. There are significant changes, and it's important for your board and staff to learn about the significant changes that are coming.

Neally: We talked about the fact that many districts have adopted a resolution to delegate authority to superintendents during this COVID response. Our firm drafted deadlines for details in local policies, like grievances and investigation, Public Information Act requests, and what a business day looks like. If you have suspended deadlines, you'll need to determine whether you need to take action to restart local policy timelines and go back to business as usual. The Attorney General offered guidance with regard to Public Information Act requests, stating that deadlines for requesting an Attorney General opinion with regard to Public Information Act requests were suspended when skeleton crews aren't able to access documents. If you can process public information requests, even if you're not currently open, we recommend that you do so, so as to avoid getting behind. Even if you're not currently open, we recommend that you go back to the normal deadline, which is ten business days to request an Attorney General opinion if you're objecting to responding to a public information request. For the Public Information Act, the Attorney General has said that days do not count as business days if the governmental body has closed its physical offices for purposes of a public health or epidemic response, or if a governmental body is unable to access records on a calendar day, even if staff is present but directly involved in the public health or epidemic response. If you require your employees to return to work, the exception may no longer apply, and your district needs to respond to PIA requests.

Let's talk about the calendar. Districts should anticipate disruptions during the next school year, resulting in significant student absentees. The Commissioner recommended an intersessional calendar, with longer breaks dispersed throughout the year. The TEA recommended six

Districts should anticipate disruptions during the next school year, resulting in significant student absentees.

weeks of intersessional breaks, in addition to the regular calendar, to make up for unexpected closures. It's late in the game to do that, but this is not a normal year. If you are going to adopt a new calendar, there are two options: Under the District of Innovation exemption, you can work with your legal counsel to amend your DOI plan, to start school earlier, or you can also seek year-round system designation. Either option requires board input and approval. We fully anticipate that we'll have online learning in 2020-2021, at least intermittently, as we deal with outbreaks, quarantines, and social distancing guidelines and requirements. This has created some problems with regard to FERPA and confidentiality. Be sure your administration reviews those and is ensuring FERPA and confidentiality.

We fully anticipate that we'll have online learning in 2020-2021, at least intermittently, as we deal with outbreaks, quarantines, & social distancing guidelines & requirements.

Another question is whether districts can allow recordings of classrooms, and whether such records could be considered student records, and how long the district need to keep those records. It is legal for a teacher to record the entire classroom, which is not true in the case of a single student. That does not violate FERPA, but you have to ensure confidentiality, and the recording could become a student record, and therefore protected by FERPA, if it is used for disciplinary purposes. Be sure that all the student records your teachers are generating in their homes are stored by the district.

Reséndez: Most districts are planning to have online instruction as part of their plan for the next year, to be able to quickly pivot and go from the classroom to online instruction in the event of another surge in this pandemic. They are asking for flexibility as they anticipate transitioning back and forth between the classroom and online instruction.

Tovar: We'll pause for a few questions from attendees. One attendee is asking a question on the Open Meetings Act: If the majority of the board wants to begin in-person

meetings, but one or two members want to continue virtually, can they still join the meeting via video conferencing?

Reséndez: It would not be a good idea for the majority of the board to limit any board meeting, say, by insisting that board members be physically present for a meeting. At the end of the day, the majority is the majority: They can set such a rule, even though it may not be the best thing to do. Some board members will be more susceptible to this virus than others, so, as a common courtesy and a good way to continue to work as a team, I certainly recommend virtual options for meeting attendance for board members who may have been exposed to the virus or who aren't comfortable attending in person. In Texas, though, the majority does rule, and that can create some tough decisions.

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Tovar: We have another question: Is Zoom in violation of FERPA, since it has identifying student information?

Neally: No. Holding instruction through Zoom is not a violation of FERPA. The classroom itself is not protected under FERPA, but what's going on in the classroom is *not* a student record necessarily; it becomes a student record if a portion of the video of the Zoom meeting was used to discipline a child or as part of an academic record.

Tovar: We have one more question: Will the changes in Title IX result in changes to policy? If so, is TASB working on revising these policies?

Neally: They will absolutely end up with some policy, which will predominantly be in FFH and in the FF series. There are definitive changes that have to be made. There will be changes to due process and the notification chain, and I'm sure TASB is working on it. We do anticipate that there may be a restraining order that's will prevent it from quickly going into effect, so we're not sure that it will be rolling out before the start of the new school year. These are federal regulations, and federal law trumps state law, so we have to give them a lot of credence. If there is no

national restraining order that affects Texas, this will go into effect on August 14.

Neally: We talked a little bit about remote instruction. Let's talk about in-person learning for the next school year. Many district administrators are working on this, trying to figure out campus and classroom configurations that allow for social distancing. They're asking questions about busing. The CDC, as well as the Texas Department of Health and Human Services, continues to maintain the need for distance from others outside of your household, so a lot of people are talking about half-and-half scenario, where half the students have in-person instruction and half have online instruction on alternating days, to avoid overcrowding. Your communications with parents shuld emphasize the need for flexibility. Superintendents are creating as many scenarios as possible. Some are hosting town halls with parents, to get input on what worked and what didn't work during these past three months. Parents don't want to go through what we went through this semester. The good news is that we had a few months to "get our ducks in a row," to figure out what we're going to do for the next school year. We have time to see what comes down from the TEA, the Governor and the federal government. We have the summer to look into online learning platforms and to think through remote student discipline and the evaluation of staff. My hat goes off to every district that transitioned to an online platform in the space of a week and to the auxiliary staff that provided meals and homework for kids. That was incredible. Now we have to be better prepared for next year. We made changes to GPA, addressed graduating seniors, and figured out how to select valedictorians and salutatorians—but we have three more years of high school students who were affected this spring semester. We need to make sure that student grading complies with new technology. We need to revise technology contracts for districts employees and students and ensure that our acceptable use forms include FERPA protections and disclosure statements.

In Texas, though, the majority does rule, and that can create some tough decisions.

Tovar: We have a question: How are districts handling social distancing in school buses?

Neally: There's not an easy answer to that question. Districts are wondering whether they will receive additional monies. Buses that were full of kids last year will now run at a quarter or a third capacity. We're waiting on TEA guidance. Online learning will be important, since many districts won't effectively be able to get students to and from school without larger fleets. Many of our districts have invested in technology for the next school year; we need to ask whether we need to invest in school buses, too.

Reséndez: It's going to be hard to socially distance kids on the bus—but we'll have to figure out a way to do it. There will be a cost involved, due to more runs or buying more buses. It will be toughest for mega-districts that need every seat on every bus. Until we have a vaccine, social distancing is going to be important. Then, when flu season comes, a lot of parents may not want their kids on the bus. We'll need the flexibility for online learning.

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We turn now to financial considerations. We know the circumstances of our economy, with oil and gas prices, unemployment, and rising property values. These circumstances will likely continue into next year, when the Legislature is in session. Our districts will assume many costs. We talked about buses. We'll need to make sure our facilities are clean and that air conditioners have proper filtering. Districts will be looking to maximize the dollars they have. Some districts are finding no buyers for their bonds. Meet with your financial advisors about possible savings and options for financing and refinancing projects. Some districts are going forward with building projects that they've started. Be proactive with your contractors and project managers. Look at what your contracts say with regard to timelines and delay damages. Ask about the financial considerations that will

affect the district. Many districts have had hail damage, and now we're approaching hurricane season. Personnel reductions will be another issue. Many districts paid premium salaries—time and a half—to the at-will employees who fed our kids and did extra cleaning. Now many districts are ending that premium pay: The school year has ended, and we have a better idea of this pandemic. Many districts have put a freeze on hiring and are focusing on necessary positions. Others are dusting off their reduction in force policies, knowing that that reality may be coming down the road. Every district has a policy on reduction in force based on performance, which is why documentation of reprimands and growth plans is important. Performance, certifications and tenure are all important when it comes to reductions in force.

Neally: We don't want to end on a negative note—but we know that next year will be a struggle, and we stand ready to assist!

Responding to COVID-19 Mental Health Issues

Chad Castruita
Care Solace

Dr. Grenita Lathan
Houston ISD Interim Superintendent

Celina Muñoz
Ysleta ISD Director of Counseling

Holly María Flynn Vilaseca, Moderator
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MASBA Vice President

June 8, 2020

Flynn Vilaseca: Today we're talking about the mental health and social emotional needs that we need to address as leaders within our respective districts. Our panelists have been on the front lines of social emotional needs during this pandemic. Let's ask them to introduce themselves.

Lathan: I'm Dr. Grenita Lathan, Interim Superintendent for Houston ISD. I've been in this district for five years and am excited about the opportunity to provide social emotional supports for our students—both prior to COVID-19 and now during this pandemic.

Muñoz: I'm Celina Muñoz, the Director of Guidance and Counseling for the Ysleta Independent School District in El Paso, Texas. This is my 21st year in the district. Prior to being the Director of Guidance and Counseling, I served as an elementary school counselor, an elementary teacher, a school counselor and an administrator at the elementary, middle and high school levels.

Castruita: My name is Chad Castruita. I'm the founder and CEO of a mental health organization known as Care

Solace. We link students and families with community-based resources within an hour. Our whole mission is slicing through the barriers and red tape that a lot of families and school counselors when they try to navigate or get linked up to care. We currently serve 1.5 million students in 109 school systems.

Flynn Vilaseca: Let's invite our panelists to share their philosophy on mental health services and social emotional support.

Lathan: My philosophy on mental health support for students actually started when I was an alternative school principal in the southwest suburbs of Chicago, where all our students had behavioral and emotional issues. We provided support through social work, art therapy, music and counseling. We ensured that students had everything they needed to be successful academically. I'm now able to see that through here in the Houston ISD, where we have wraparound specialists, counselors and social workers in our district who provide students the resources they need. Our philosophy is ensuring that we fill in the gap of what students need socially and emotionally.

Muñoz: Social and emotional learning (SEL) has always been dear to my heart. When I was in the classroom as a second-grade teacher, I truly loved teaching, and that's part of the reason I got into counseling: to serve, help and support students in another capacity. I had the opportunity to work with faculty and staff throughout the school to ensure that students were being supported socially and emotionally. When students aren't doing well socially and emotionally, it's very hard for them to thrive academically. This is my second year in this position, but this is our third year implementing a districtwide social and emotional learning program. We've trained district administrators, counselors, teachers and instructional specialists on SEL. The goal of this

When students aren't doing well socially & emotionally, it's very hard for them to thrive academically.

training is to teach and equip adults with the skills and best practices to best support the students in this area. This will definitely be a big goal and focus for us as we prepare for the new school year.

Castruita: This is personal for me. I have personally been involved in the battle with mental health, so my philosophy is simple: Families and students need timely access to quality, community-based mental health resources. It pains me to see students and families navigating the mental health system on their own, not knowing where to turn or where to go. Our organization tries to make that a lot easier. We want people to get help when they need it, without any barriers whatsoever. We want to involve community resources and partners. Our mission is to aggregate and push forward in a productive way all of the great work that our communities do in mental health, and to scale it so that family, student and staff member who is personally struggling can get timely access to community-based mental health resources.

Flynn Vilaseca: With the current state of our country—and now with Black Lives Matter and the death of George Floyd the week before last—how is mental health impacting students of color?

Lathan: For a long time, the African-American community didn't seek out specialized, professional services due to the stigma. When we did, it was through our pastors and churches. COVID-19 is a major crisis for Black and Brown communities, and now we have the incidents of the past two weeks. Sadly, services are often not immediately available. Our families wait and wait for referrals or for someone to call them back. It's a major challenge for Black and Brown communities—which is why school districts need to step up and provide the services that children and their families need.

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Muñoz: Here in El Paso, we've definitely seen the difficulty of connecting families and students to the mental health resources they need. The demand has been great for counseling, therapy and mental health services in our community. It's been difficult because of the limited resources out there. Some therapists and agencies have long wait lists. With this pandemic and everything that is happening in our country, mental health will continue to be a priority, so we'll definitely need the resources and outside services and agencies to help our families and students to receive the support and services they need as quickly as possible.

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Castruita: The amount of phone calls we receive has tripled, largely due to the stress that is placed on kids when their parents lose their jobs. The financial trauma has caused kids as young as five years of age to reach out to us with their concerns. Now with the Black Lives Matter movement, people are angry and want to talk about what they're feeling—which is what we're seeing in protests. People are searching for healing. Our efforts must be year-round and not merely during May, which is Mental Health Awareness Month, and they need to cut across all income levels, races and genders.

Flynn Vilaseca: Given the restrictions of social distancing, it's difficult for us to engage face-to-face unless we have proper personal protective equipment (PPE). How does this limit the services that we could offer?

Lathan: In Houston ISD, we launched a 24-hour mental health hotline staffed by a licensed district staff member during the day, and by a counseling agency after hours. This ensures that students and families get the services they need without being face-to-face. Before COVID, the greatest issue was suicide, but now we're

seeing issues related to unemployment and to people being confined indoors. We also share information through our EAP, our Employee Assistance Program, including a 24-hour hotline to ensure that our staff and students are safe and healthy. It's making a difference.

Muñoz: When our district closed in March, we knew that we had to quickly put systems and supports in place—for our counselors and for our students and families. Our district's counselor leadership team, which is comprised of elementary, middle and high school counselors, quickly got working. We discussed what our role as counselors would look like in a virtual setting, since this was the first time that we would all work remotely. We developed an online counseling referral form, which we made available on every campus homepage, so that families can request counseling services. Campuses also shared the form when disseminating information to families. This online referral process has been a great tool and has allowed our counselors to connect with students and families and provide them the support and services that they've needed. We've also connected to local agencies, to leverage their resources during this time.

Castruita: From my standpoint, the essential question is how to get students and their families out of isolation. How do we get them to open up and speak about what they're dealing with? We, for instance, give them the opportunity to anonymously connect to a telehealth therapist within minutes. That seems to be working, and thousands of people are taking advantage of that. There are many technologies out there, including online groups for parents and families. We can even connect students and families from one city with therapists in another city. Those telehealth resources seem to be working pretty well.

The essential question is how to get students & their families out of isolation. How do we get them to open up and speak about what they're dealing with?

Flynn Vilaseca: We've been talking about coordinating and connecting resources to students and families in need. Dr. Lathan, elaborate on what the Houston ISD is doing outside of the hotline that was set up before COVID. In the Houston ISD, we have a philosophy of educating the whole child, through wraparound service and supports for our students. How has that escalated during these months, and how have we implemented this in a more profound way?

Lathan: Our board set a goal three years ago to ensure that every campus would have a wraparound specialist by 2022. We have invested some $10 million into our wraparound specialist program, and some campuses have more than one wraparound specialist. They connect parents and students with resources in the community. For example, we had a family that lost its home to a fire, so our wraparound specialists connected them with resources: They helped them relocate and find furniture and food. Our wraparound specialists conduct home visits, ensuring that students have what they need, including technology devices or paper-based instructional packets.

Our board also focused on emergency constraints during this time of COVID-19. We paused our current board goals, and we're focused on those emergency constraints or priorities around students and staff safety and wellbeing and the instruction of students.

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We partnered with the Houston Food Bank to ensure that we were providing meals for families. Now that the school year is over, we have transitioned back to serving family meals at 71 sites, where families can pick up food for three or four days at a time.

Our board was also very concerned about the social emotional learning of students. Within our emergency constraints, they established progress

measures for nurses, wellness checks, counseling wraparound specialists and social workers.

We also provide a live SEL webinar in English and Spanish on Wednesdays.

We created a trauma toolkit for district educators to provide resources & support to students during this crisis.

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Our school year ended last Monday, June 1, but our emergency constraints will carry us through August, when our board will decide whether to continue them or to revert back to the board's goals.

We're also providing free COVID testing and ensuring PPE for staff.

At every board meeting, I provide our board an update on these efforts.

Flynn Vilaseca: In the Houston ISD, we've been working for several years to invest in and support our students basic and mental health needs. Dr. Lathan has done an outstanding job of ensuring that our wraparound services are expanded across the district and that they're now the focus and priority during this unprecedented time. Celina, share a more of what you're doing in Ysleta ISD.

Muñoz : We were very fortunate last year to develop a close partnership with the Emergence Health Network, which collaborates on our district's mental health initiatives. We've coordinated district-wide training on mental health and first aid for district counselors, administrators and departments, in an effort to educate everyone on the signs and symptoms of mental wellness and mental illness. We also had an extremely beneficial training for helping children in crisis to get the help they need. As a department, we developed a mental health and mental wellbeing module for our district counselors last year. Our counselors were trained on that component, so that they could train campus faculty and staff. Self-care

and mental wellbeing definitely have to be priorities. This is now our third year of implementing a districtwide social and emotional learning program. This year, each campus established a campus SEL team to sustain best practices at the campus level. Moving forward, one of our biggest goals is to continue implementing those best practices and working with each campus and each campus SEL team to sustain those practices districtwide.

Flynn Vilaseca: Thank you, Celina. Chad. I'm curious to hear what your experience has been on the service delivery side when interacting with partners and partner districts.

Castruita: Care Solace has infused innovative approaches into navigating the mental health system, in terms of linking students and families to community resources. We have implemented a "care concierge." Every family gets its private and anonymous "care concierge" dedicated to them. The "care concierge" comes to understand their needs, then connects them to school counselors, school social workers, committee liaisons, parent liaisons, student liaisons, and licensed therapists. The second thing we do is the "warm handoff," where we facilitate the introductions to the 93,000 vetted resources in our system, regardless of whether families have insurance. As part of the "warm handoff," we ascertain the situation, and we match families with resources within an hour.

Flynn Vilaseca: It sounds like you're identifying gaps and making sure that students and families receive the care they need right now. A question for all of you: What should board members and administrators not lose sight of as we navigate this pandemic and these times?

Lathan: We need to remember that there are brighter days ahead, that we are going to get beyond COVID-19 and be able to focus on student

We need to remember that there are brighter days ahead, that we are going to get beyond COVID-19 and be able to focus on student achievement.

achievement, ensure that every child in all our school districts receive a quality education, and focus on the whole child. There are better days ahead for the children we serve.

Muñoz: Now more than ever, it's critical to support students' mental, behavioral, social and emotional needs as we prepare for the new school year. This has been a challenging time, but we'll get through this together. We won't be able to do it alone, especially with the mental health demands that this pandemic has created. Reestablishing a sense of safety and connectedness with everyone will definitely be key this coming school year.

Castruita: Unfortunately, there will be an increased demand on our school systems as a result of this pandemic. In Texas last year, 544,000 students in grades nine to twelve consistently reported sadness and hopelessness every day for a two-week period. Students are not alone in facing such feelings; families and staff are feeling the pressures as well. We need to find innovative solutions, new ways to bring people out of isolation and get them talking. When our school open again, the demand will be greater than ever on school staff and parents and students.

In Texas last year, 544,000 students in grades 9-12 consistently reported sadness & hopelessness every day for a two-week period.

Flynn Vilaseca: What suggestions do you have for the self-care of trustees and superintendents?

Lathan: We use humor a lot. Our Team of Ten knows that we have to stay safe and take care of ourselves. We share a daily SEL question and check-in with our high school students. It's important that trustees and superintendents take a step back and check in on one another. Taking care of ourselves and putting ourselves first is difficult for some of us.

Muñoz: We're all really good at preaching SEL and mental wellbeing, but we all struggle to practice it. We noticed that our counselors were struggling to balance their work and their personal lives as spouses

and parents. One of the most important things we did from the start was to put systems and supports in place for our counselors, so that they can support our students, families, faculty and staff. We talk about connectedness and the importance of relationships so much; we have to make sure we're practicing what we're preaching.

Castruita: With a group of superintendents the other day, I suggested three things: that they literally go outside and take a short walk, that they pause multiple times throughout the day to pause and breathe, and that they check in on how they're feeling prior to various engagements, in the same way that we check in with our teachers and students to see how they're doing.

COVID-19 Healthcare in Schools & Beyond

Allen K. Horne
Aetna Government Affairs

Sally Imig
Aetna Public & Labor

Mary Ann Pérez, LCSW
Aetna Resources for Living

Stacy Restucci, R.N.
Aetna Health Solutions

Heidi Shafer
Aetna Public & Labor Center for Excellence

Simone Simon Gardner
Aetna Head of Community Activation

Vincent Tovar
MASBA Associate Executive Director

June 10, 2020

Tovar: It's my pleasure to introduce an all-star team of speakers!

Heidi Shafer is a senior business consultant for Aetna's Public and Labor Center of Excellence. She served as Shelby County Commission Chair in Tennessee's largest county while simultaneously working full-time as Chief Marketing Officer for a medical practice and as Chief Operating Officer for a startup aesthetic practice.

Simone Simon Gardner is the Head of Community Activation for the Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico markets for Aetna. In her role, she is responsible for leveraging resources to create local experiences that build trust with members, customers, brokers and communities.

Mary Ann Pérez is a Licensed Clinical Social Worker with almost 20 years of experience in the Employee Assistance

Program industry. Mary Ann joined Resources for Living in 2001 as a clinician and elder care information and referral specialist.

Sally Imig is Market Sales and Service for the Public and Labor Segment of Aetna, where she leads a dedicated team of sales and accounting professionals who sell and service all public and labor customers in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico.

Stacy Restucci, R.N. is the Health Solutions Lead across the Public and Labor Segment, with a national focus. Stacy is responsible for helping customers and prospects understand Aetna's well-being portfolio and for creating population health strategies.

Allen K. Horne is Vice President of Government Affairs at CVS Health. He joined CVS Health in 2003 and currently leads a team that oversees lobbying and advocacy activities in 13 states and Puerto Rico.

That's right: An all-star team of presenters today. Thank you, Team Aetna!

Imig: We are excited to be with you! We hope we've put together information that is helpful to you. We met Dr. Jayme Mathias and his staff two years ago, and we're super-impressed with MASBA's mission and what you're doing to close gaps and lift up *Latinx* students and the next generation of leaders. So, kudos to MASBA! We went to your conference in San Antonio, and it was fantastic, and we hope to be part of MASBA for many years to come.

Since January 2019, Aetna is now part of the CVS Health family. We're a very big company, so there are a lot of things that we can do because of our size. We're dealing with a lot of the same questions as school districts: When will we bring employees back to work? How will we do screening and testing? How will we help lower-income employees who work with us, and make sure they get their medications and the behavioral health services they need.

We're dealing with a lot of the same questions as school districts: When will we bring employees back to work? How will we do screening & testing? How will we help lower-income employees who work with us?

Let's start with COVID testing, since that's on everybody's mind. Allen Horne, our Vice President for Government Affairs, is very knowledgeable on where we are today.

Horne: I'm happy to share CVS Health testing initiatives that we rolled out six weeks ago, with five mega sites in Georgia, Massachusetts, Rhode Island, Connecticut and Michigan. These are not at CVS pharmacies, but are in large parking lots that can accommodate and test a significant number of people on a daily basis. To date, we've tested almost 200,000 people at those sites with Abbott rapid testing machines. Four weeks ago, we rolled out our ambitious plan of establishing 1,000 testing sites across the U.S. You can make an appointment online at cvs.com, then go to the pharmacy drive-thru at your appointment time to receive a swab by a technician or pharmacist. To date, we've tested almost 200,000 people in our CVS pharmacy sites, including 20,000 people across 86 sites here in Texas. Additionally, we have opened two community sites in Texas, one in Houston and one in Fort Worth, where we'll work with our community partners and really get into the communities. We expect testing to continue through the summer. We don't know what the fall will bring, but we have certainly learned a lot over the past three months, and I'm happy to say that CVS responded to the need for testing across the country.

Imig: Many people are asking, "Should I be tested?" I'm asking the same question: I'm about to go and enjoy the birth of a granddaughter in Los Angeles in the next few days. Visit cvs.com to see if you meet the CDC testing criteria. If so, we have testing sites all around. We'll bill your insurance, or, if you don't have insurance, it's covered. We don't want lack of insurance to keep people from getting tested. How will we test people going back to work? CVS product now has a new product, Ready Return, for on-site screening

Horne: Thank you for mentioning that there is no cost to patients. That's key to our testing.

Imig: It's all covered! We know that Hispanics under-use health and mental health services. They're less likely to see a doctor and get the preventive screenings, like blood pressure checks, mammograms, cervical exams, prostate

Hispanics under-use health & mental health services…. Of all Hispanic people, Mexicans have the lowest reported use of all services. This is largely due to cost & inconvenience.

exams, or colonoscopies. They're also less likely to be hospitalized. Of all Hispanic people, Mexicans have the lowest reported use of all services. This is largely due to cost and inconvenience. Since 2000, the Hispanic or *Latinx* population has grown 65%, compared with 22% for Blacks and 5% for non-Hispanic Whites. Why is that important? Nine out of ten adults lack the health knowledge and resources to manage their care, which is why they need a primary care physician and why they need to be tied to a clinic they can trust. For this reason, we have materials in Spanish, to help people live the best and healthiest possible lives. We have also introduced CVS Health Hubs to address inconvenience. CVS has 11,000 stores around the country. Many of them now have a Minute Clinic, an urgent care center staffed by professionals. They are open longer hours than regular doctors' hours, and they're designed for those who have a hard time going to the doctor eight to five, Monday through Friday. With Health Hubs, CVS is addressing convenience, and confusion. Every Health Hub has a care concierge, someone to help people navigate the healthcare system, help them find their medications and supplies, and they're out the door! We've had outstanding feedback on this, and it's a lower cost than emergency rooms or freestanding clinics, which are usually out of network and higher in cost. We have Health Hubs all around the state of Texas.

Mortality rates also inform our programs. The *Latinx* population has higher rates of death by chronic liver disease, diabetes, HIV/AIDS, and unintentional injuries, compared to the Whites, who are more likely to die of heart disease, stroke, cancer or pneumonia.

Mary Ann will now address behavioral health and helping people "connect the dots" and get the information they need.

Pérez: I work out of our Austin office, so I had the pleasure of participating on a panel at your MASBA conference in San

Antonio earlier this year. COVID has impacted everything around us: everything we touch, and everyone around us. When schools and businesses started to close in mid-March, we immediately switched gears, from "business as usual," and began pulling together toolkits with resources and information. We also created relevant webinars on COVID. Not everybody closed, so we provided on-site response to our customers who remained open. We also transitioned our own staff, from working at work sites, to working from home. Since March, we've received over 13,000 calls related to COVID, and we saw a 5,000% increase in telemedicine utilization. People have called about unemployment, meals, supplies and masks, where to get tested, and relationship issues at home. Because everybody's been at home since stay-at-home orders began, there's been a lot of imbalance and stress. We have helped to connect people with resources. Many school districts are offering meals, so that is absolutely one of the resources that we share.

COVID has had an economic and financial impact on the Hispanic community. Unemployment in the Hispanic community is now 18.9%, higher than the overall unemployment rate. Many of the calls we receive are due to frustration and fear: Quite honestly, local unemployment offices aren't picking up the phone, and their websites were overloaded with applications. People were confused and worried about getting unemployment benefits. 70% reported not having emergency funds to cover three months of expenses, and 44% reported that they could only make partial payments towards bills. This had a strong impact on the Hispanic community. People are dealing with a lot of stress, anxiety and depression, and, from a mental health standpoint, 67.1% of Hispanics with a mental health condition do not seek treatment, compared to 56.7% of the general U.S. population. Over 20% say that they are feeling anxious about COVID-19, and nearly 12% have reported gaining weight during the pandemic. One in three *Latinas* will experience domestic violence in her lifetime, and alcohol sales—which are a key predictor of domestic

Unemployment in the Hispanic community is now 18.9%, higher than the overall unemployment rate.

violence—have increased 234% since shelter-in-place orders began in mid-March. The National Domestic Violence Hotline has reported a significant increase in calls during COVID, and keep in mind that many abusers are now unemployed and unable to leave their homes in many cases. They're stuck at home with their families and other impacted people around the clock.

Regarding COVID case rate inequities, 16.4% of the U.S. COVID deaths are among the *Latinx* population, compared to 5.9% of the White population. Only 17.8% of COVID cases among the *Latinx* population are covered by health insurance.

16.4% of the U.S. COVID deaths are among the Latinx population, compared to 5.9% of the White population. Only 17.8% of COVID cases among the Latinx population are covered by health insurance.

I want to end by talking about the importance of self-care and caring for each other. This is not "business as usual," and many of us are more stressed than we may realize. A few ideas to help alleviate stress include physical activity, practicing mindfulness, connecting with your support system, and having a routine.

Imig: We'll now turn it over to Simone.

Simon: At Aetna, a CVS Health company since January 2019, we understand that connecting people through community transforms healthcare on the home front. We understand the importance of going to the grassroots, of going into the community and engaging people where they live, work and play. Before coming to Aetna, I served Medicaid clients. They are some of the most underserved members of our community. They deal with the very real issues that Mary Ann spoke of: food insecurity, housing insecurity and health concerns. They don't know where they'll get their next meal or how they'll pay their rent—so their diabetes or high blood pressure becomes secondary. For them, 2-1-1 is an important resource. It's a service in 80 languages that's available 24 hours a day, seven days a week, to connect people to resources within their local community. If your constituents need assistance with information on transportation, childcare, employment, free health care

clinics, counseling services, legal assistance or other services, please call 2-1-1.

I'd like to speak briefly about Project Health, a no-cost program that CVS Health has been committed to for over 13 years. From September through December, they offer free glucose checks, blood pressure checks, information about diabetes, smoking cessation programs, and other resources to help our minority communities identify and address chronic conditions before they become life-threatening illnesses.

Imig: I had mentioned that confusion and inconvenience often keep *Latinx* people from accessing healthcare. One of the powerful aspects of Project Health is that they don't keep any records—which is important for people who are scared to come in and talk about their health.

Simon: Project Health keeps no records and doesn't ask for insurance cards or other information. You don't need to provide anything to participate in this program, which removes the barriers for those who are reluctant to seek out help. We even have bilingual staff, so that people can feel at home. In the African-American and Hispanic communities, we often have problems with blood pressure and diabetes, which are often undiagnosed until we're hospitalized after a stroke or a significant incident.

In the African-American & Hispanic communities, we often have problems with blood pressure & diabetes, which are often undiagnosed until we're hospitalized after a stroke or a significant incident.

Tovar: Have you observed any shifts in communities during the last three months, especially in the *Latinx* community? Do you find, for instance, that they're seeking out the services of CVS?

Imig: Since the start of COVID, claims are down, which means that people aren't going to the doctor. This is across the entire population, and not just for *Latinx* folks. Even before COVID, though, there was a hesitancy to seek necessary care, so we've attempted to make our services simple and easy to access. Our testing site in Houston, for instance, is located in a very dense *Latino* or Hispanic population, and

our site in Fort Worth is located in an African-American community. We're trying to pick spots where we can reach different parts of our society and get people the services that they need.

Tovar: Are there certain services or resources that are dependent upon folks being documented "legal" citizens?

Simon: Absolutely not. What makes Project Health so great and so unique is that there's absolutely no documentation needed. People access our services at no cost, and they receive a $5 gift card for CVS services, all without providing any information.

Imig: Our Minute Clinics do charge, like any other urgent care facility, but people can pay cash if they don't have insurance. If they need pharmacy assistance, the dieticians, clinicians and social workers at our Health Hubs often hook them up with coupons. Our CVS stores are now full-service clinics, where a person, for instance, can be diagnosed with high blood pressure, immediately get medications, and speak to a dietician about diet and exercise. It's our way of serving the 20% of our population that has no primary care physician relationship. We've "connecting the dots" and helping people to avoid the $1,000 bill they'd receive from the emergency room. *Latinx* people are the largest and fastest-growing part of our population: We need you to be our leaders of the future, and we need you all to be healthy!

Race Isn't Rocket Science;
It's *Harder* than Rocket Science

Micah Ali
Compton USD Board of Trustees

Erika Y. Mitchell
Atlanta Board of Education

Quinton Phillips
Fort Woth ISD Board of Trustees

Jacinto Ramos, Jr., Moderator
Fort Worth ISD Board of Trustees
Chair, NSBA Council of Urban Boards of Education

June 15, 2020

Ramos: I have the pleasure and honor of introducing three amazing human beings. Erika Mitchell serves on the board of the Atlanta Public Schools and is a member of the CUBE steering committee. She also serves as secretary of the National Black Council. Quintin "Q" Phillips serves as Second Vice President of Fort Worth Independent School District and is part of the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members. And Micah Ali serves as President of Compton Unified School District in California. He is the Immediate Past Chair of the Council of Urban Boards of Education and has been instrumental in the California Association of Black School Educators. These three individuals are proven equity warriors. They have "receipts" when it comes to advocating and fighting for young people. Let's begin by inviting our panelists to check in as human beings. How are you feeling today and how are you holding up?

Mitchell: I'm feeling hurt and anger and pain. You've seen on the news and on social media that citizens and residents of Atlanta are being shot and killed. Rayshard Brooks was killed this weekend, one day before celebrating the birthday

of his oldest daughter, who attends Atlanta Public Schools. His life could have been spared had the situation been approached differently and with more training and education. Atlanta—and especially the African-American community—is reaching a breaking point. How many of our Black men and Black women must be killed before we say, "Enough is enough"? So, I'm feeling pain and anger. I'm raising a Black son and a Black daughter. My father is 79, and he lived through the turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, with Jim Crow and segregation. I have a younger brother. I have cousins. We experience this type of behavior every day. How will we fix it? How will we change it? What are *we* going to do to break systematic racism?

My father is 79, and he lived through the turmoil of the 1950s and 1960s, with Jim Crow & segregation…. We experience this type of behavior every day. How will we fix it? How will we change it? What are we going to do to break systematic racism?

Phillips: I feel I'm on a roller coaster. A special shout-out to Ty G. Jones of the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members and to the Mexican American School Boards Association, pillars in our communities who are doing the work and making sure that Brown and Black folks are heard and are "at the table," as we're supposed to be. My condolences to Sister Erica and to her community for Rayshard Brooks, another Black man killed at the hands of law enforcement. I'm trying to move past negative thoughts and feelings. I'm trying to suppress the hate that I sometimes feel rising in me when I see what's happening to my people, in order to exude leadership and wisdom—for the community, for two Black sons, and for 83,000 young people in the Fort Worth ISD, 90% of whom are Black and Brown.

Ali: My word today is confluence, which underscores what we're experiencing today in this country—not just with respect to the racial injustice, but also with disparities. We're see disparities relative to the impacts of coronavirus on the Black community. We're see the disparity of how justice is administered within the Black community. We see the racial disparities and inequities that exist within public education which has been ground zero for the fight for

racial justice in this country. We see where unbiased light is shown upon places where people are to receive promise. Many folks on this call are religious: Malachi 3:10 talks about the promise and the provision, where people are afforded the promise and the hope of getting exactly what they see. We see the reactions of Black, Brown, Yellow, White and even Red men, and we ask, "Why are folks acting this way?" It's because we've failed them. We've failed them as a society. We've failed them as public educators. And we've consistently failed them. Instead of asking, "What do you need?", we talk about what we want to give them. We have all sorts of ideas of what we believe folks ought to have, including jobs and justice, but the reality is: We've been talking about the same thing for far too long. We now see direct confluence, a convergence of race with respect to fighting injustice, with allies stepping up to the plate and showing their support because they, too, have witnessed what we see each and every day. Now we're looking at a pandemic crisis. We're looking at racial injustice and the inequities that are faced each and every day by people of color. We see it's people of color who are losing their jobs and getting coronavirus at such high and alarming rates. We hear that we are "essential workers"—that we essentially go to work, to provide for those who sit at home. We see the confluence of disparity!

We see the reactions of Black, Brown, Yellow, White and even Red men, and we ask, "Why are folks acting this way?" It's because we've failed them.

Ramos: Thank you all for speaking your truth. When we first visited about this webinar, the shooting in Atlanta had not yet happened. Let's begin by asking Erika for her thoughts on the events that happened in Atlanta this weekend.

Mitchell: Over the weekend, we saw people take to the streets and protest the unjust killing of Rayshard Brooks. We saw the pain and anger lashing out in burnings. Atlanta has been the center of chaotic frustration, and I hope our mayor can lead us through this turmoil. Our community is broken and requires mending. The majority of African Americans in Atlanta live in underserved areas, where people are trying to survive to the next day. They live in food deserts where

We need to move forward and step up accountability for all elected officials to create a better situation for our African-American population. We need to work with *the people, not* against *the people.*

they sell water in the street to feed a brother or sister. So much barriers affect the African-American population, and our kids are at the bottom. We need to move forward and step up accountability for all elected officials to create a better situation for our African-American population. We need to work *with* the people, not *against* the people. People are upset, and they want change now. Not tomorrow. Not in ten or twenty years. They want it now. That's the feeling across the city, and this took place only two days ago.

Ramos: Thank you, Erika. Q, you and I go back a couple of decades, and our conversations have always been about social justice. What thoughts come to mind for you as you see the revolution, as you see young people of all walks of life take to the streets? And tell us about your work with Community Frontline on this topic?

Phillips: I feel a sense of pride right now. We're seeing demonstrations and protests all over the nation, and our young people are there on the front line, leading the charge and wanting their voices to be heard. I'm proud to be one of the founder of Community Frontline, a nonprofit that looks at the transition when the news cycle dies down, when the protests are no longer prominent, and how we can help decision makers to make the best decisions. For me personally, as a Black man, and for the Black and Brown people I have the luxury of knowing, we assume that when a Black body drops at the hands of an authority, nothing is going to happen to the individual who just took the life of our family member. The judge or jury will send them home, they'll patrol the streets of another town, and the systemic racism will continue. Someone could take *my* life, be uncomfortable for a little while, then get right back to it very shortly. It doesn't make sense. Community Frontline helps make our city a better place by speaking with those who are "at the table" right now: our mayor, city council, police chief, county commissioners and school board members. We talk about how to move forward and put policies,

practices and procedures in place to curtail racism. I'm encouraging our young people to get on that side of the "table" as well.

Ramos: I would be remiss if I did not state the obvious: We have the president of Compton Unified with us today. The very name "Compton" captures people's attention, particularly around topics of race, law enforcement and police brutality. Micah, speak your truth and help us transition to the topic of systemic racism.

Ali: Compton connotes a tremendous amount of feelings and emotions within individuals throughout the world. I boast the fact that we've done very well academically, but we're of course known for some serious heavyweights in sports and entertainment, including gangsta rap. Yes, "F*** tha Police" originated in Compton. People in those worlds understand how economics can lift people. Having been elected by the people of this community for well over ten years, I talk a lot about financial literacy. We who understand the economy know that we need to continually build our students to be more than servants and workers. We need to create individuals who can be in a position to negotiate something better for their families and communities. The reality is very simple: If the police pull you over, and you tell him, "Carry on. My lawyer is on speed dial," I'm quite confident that he is going to think a little deeper. They know they can harass and intimidate the less fortunate: those who've been subjugated into poverty, individuals who are voiceless or who struggle with drug addiction. We have to take advantage of this moment to empower our students to be social justice warriors and ambassadors, fluent in the language that drives economies, politics, judicial systems and police departments. Our educational system needs to instill the necessary values, principles and beliefs within young people, to empower them to transform their community. Most people throughout the world—overwhelmingly people of color—are subjugated to poverty. We need to

We have to take advantage of this moment to empower our students to be social justice warriors & ambassadors, fluent in the language that drives economies, politics, judicial systems and police departments.

uplift people in a way that is more than mere bloviating. We need more than verbosity to lift people out of poverty. Folks need money, opportunity and thoughtful education.

Ramos: Let's just stay with that for a little bit. Many in our society don't understand that racism is a social construct, a human-made phenomenon. That's the reason this webinar is titled, "Race Isn't Rocket Science. It's *Harder* Than Rocket Science!" The reason it's harder is that, even though we can teach about rocket science, our K-12 systems across this nation have purposefully and intentionally *not* taught about the social contract of race. That's why these conversations are taking place. Any thoughts on the role that law enforcement and police will continue to play in our school systems?

Our K-12 systems across this nation have purposefully & intentionally not taught about the social contract of race. That's why these conversations are taking place.

Mitchell: Some districts have ended their contracts with their city police department, so that they have more flexibility with respect to the discipline of their students. In Atlanta Public Schools, we have our own police department, and we have the flexibility to structure that department and their response and approach to our students. We're always looking at ways to rehabilitate our students, to give them options to turn around their behavior. Our police departments need to be trained to handle different types of student personalities. They need to be trained on trauma-informed restorative justice. We all need to ask ourselves this question: Do we want our students to be policed? As boards, let's have conversations about our police departments and the policing of students. Students are in school to learn—so let's help them learn through restorative justice.

Phillips: It's crazy how quickly the conversation has shifted, from wanting police in our schools to protect our students from school shootings, to a conversation now on the necessity of police on our campuses and how they can be of most use to our students. The Fort Worth ISD is predominantly Black and Brown, and my single-member district is definitely

Black, so everything I'm hearing is, "Get the police out of our schools!" Colleagues from other sides of town can't even fathom not having officers present in our schools. It's not that one side is right, and the other is wrong. We're challenged to create environments where people on both sides are heard. Our conversations on policing are helping people to understand that police departments were not crated to oppress people, but to protect the land and property of White people. We need to reimagine the role, responsibility and authority of police in our schools. We need to have actual, openminded dialogues to see the other side of the equation, in order to make good intellectual decisions based on what the people we serve tell us that they need. Everything that we do as school board members ultimately affects student outcomes, so we need to ask, "What will make our young people feel safe coming into our buildings, and what's going to give them the best environment to absorb knowledge and walk out a little better?" Policing absolutely plays a role in that, and every agency and program we contract with and all the policies and procedures we have need to be viewed through that lens. We need to reimagine the relationship of every organization to our schools, including police.

Police departments were not crated to oppress people, but to protect the land & property of White people. We need to reimagine the role, responsibility & authority of police in our schools.

Ramos: I've had many conversations about what school boards can and should be doing, so let's tap into the action quadrant. For our friends who might be new to this protocol, it's important for us to talk about feelings, in the feelings quadrant, and about beliefs—what's true for us. When we feel less on certain topics, we tend to rush to the thinking and action quadrants. People of color are experiencing a lot of feelings right now, and we have the opportunity to listen to one another. Now, we take the knowledge that we've gained through listening, and tap into the action quadrant. Those conversations are often very uncomfortable, and Leadership ISD, one of the co-sponsors of this series, is unapologetic about its racial and ethnic equity work. We

can't always lean on our state and national associations in this work. Micah, you've been on the frontlines of pushing the issues of race and equity among school boards, superintendents and leadership at the state and national levels. What ideas and solutions do you have for action items?

Ali: The first thing I encourage folks to do is read. It sounds very basic, but it seems the hardest thing for people to do. Most people want things synthesizes. They want the CliffsNotes, the idiot's version. So, I encourage folks to read and understand. Second, stop *talking* about policy. The school board meeting is a bill-pay session. You're paying bills at the meeting. You're not there to arbitrate or adjudicate, which happens within committees or within the committee of the whole. You passed an equity policy? Great! Go, wave your flag! Now, is your equity policy actually tied to measurable student achievement? Does your equity policy talk about the distribution of resources, special education, student nutrition services, social and emotional learning, speech and language, etc.? If you just say, "Black Lives Matter, and I stand with you, Ali!", I say, "You live in a $20 million house; you don't stand with me. You just want me to know that you feel guilty." Read and understand that you already have a tremendous amount of policies on the books: Take that, massage that, and understand how to work it to drive systemic change within your school system. The other thing is this: The school board runs the show. You are the governing legislators responsible for managing the public's trust and the public education construct of that respective community. If you are abdicating all of your power to the superintendent or to the executive cabinet, then you ought to leave and resign. Get off. Go home! At the end of the day, the folks elected you to drive the change that they want and that they seek through representative democracy. *You* serve as the people. You're the people! We possess a government where elected officials serve

If you are abdicating all of your power to the superintendent…go home! At the end of the day, the folks elected you to drive the change that they want & that they seek through representative democracy.

in their positions and in their capacity to advocate for the masses.

My other point: You have attorneys and associations; now understand the legislative process and the connectivity of the legislative process and the judicial system. As an example, Compton Unified School District and I were involved in a lawsuit against the University of California System to abolish the SAT and ACT. Children within the Compton Schools have been historically marginalized and relegated to the California State University System and to community colleges, which are not the pinnacle. The pinnacle institutions in California are the schools of the University of California System. That lawsuit will benefit the whole entire state.

Concurrent and dual enrollment. The school board in this school district advocated for concurrent and dual enrollment, because we believe that if you give students an opportunity within the collegiate environment, you give them a chance to understand what it feels like to be involved and engulfed in that system, they can appreciate college, which is a system that's designed for independent operators; there's no compulsory nature within the collegiate system.

The other point is Early Middle Colleges, which we've led the charge on. We understand that it's extremely expensive to go to college. Why do I give students an associate degree and a high school diploma at the same time?

We're talking about English Language Learners. We've reclassified more students than many school systems within our immediate community because we understand that if children cannot effectively communicate in English, they're going to have a very difficult time trying to navigate the construct and the channels of this very elaborate government system, which involved so much reading and so many forms.

You pass a budget, and you're talking about equity—but it is not a line item within that budget?

Let's talk about school district finance: You pass a budget, and you're talking about equity—but it is not a line item within that budget?

How do we look at implicit bias training? How do we look at restorative justice policies? How do we look at positive behavior intervention solutions? All of this needs to be understood at a top level by the school board, and, if you don't understand anything I'm saying right now, resign and let somebody else serve in your seat who really wants to do the business of managing the public's trust.

At the end of the day, it's good to post on Facebook, and it's good to tweet, but you want to have a body of work to run for reelection on. Anything short of that is bloviation. It's puffing and running your mouth—and the protests in the streets during these weeks have shown us that people are sick and tired of talking. They're sick and tired of listening to bureaucrats and those who are charged with managing the bureaucratic order give elaborate speeches while students are still underachieving—which has been the case since folks left their plantations down in Georgia, Mississippi and South Carolina. We have an opportunity today for school board members to drive the ship. If you're not driving the ship, jump off and don't even bother swimming back to shore, because you're hurting the lives of children!

Ramos: You're wild. That's why we love you, Micah. I've had conversations with a number of amazing individuals who are feeling that a lot of the doors have opened, and we need to walk through them before they close. So, what else can school boards be doing right here, right now?

Mitchell: Micah hit it right on the nail. When we think about what school boards can do, we have to look at what we're responsible for. Atlanta Public Schools was built on segregation, and policies were put in place to make sure that Black students couldn't learn. We've made a lot of strides throughout the years, but we still tend to blame poverty: that kids in poverty can't learn. Kids in poverty *can* learn! We need to look at how we're teaching them and what supports we're putting in place for them. We need to peel back the layers of the system and construct a system that

We need to peel back the layers of the system and construct a system that will work for all *kids, especially those who need additional help and support.*

will work for *all* kids, especially those who need additional help and support. Policies aren't enough; we need implementation and accountability. What good is a policy if you don't implement it and see measurable outcomes? Rather than skip and dance around the real problems, we need to ask what we can do to make our systems better. We are failing our kids. Our kids are hurting. We have to do better—and it starts with looking at the systems we run, giving direction to our administration on what we want to see, and not taking excuses for why the change we want to see can't happen. I've visited school across the U.S I remember visiting one underperforming school in Houston that turned around in two or three years. It doesn't take six, seven or eight years to turn around a school; it takes a fearless, assertive board that stands in the truth of what needs to happen. It starts with board ownership.

It doesn't take 6, 7 or 8 years to turn around a school; it takes a fearless, assertive board that stands in the truth of what needs to happen. It starts with board ownership.

Phillips: For boards, the "easy" part is putting it on paper and saying in a resolution that we're not racist. The work has to happen with our White brothers and sisters, who have to preach to their constituencies about what is right. We can say, "equity, equity, equity" in our districts, but will we actually be about that work? Are we going to shift resources so that those who need the most receive the most? When we disaggregate academic data by race, we always see Black kids at the bottom of the list. What are we doing about that? Our Black kids are the ones who are suffering the most. Are we willing to shift our resources and dollars towards them—which will piss off the constituencies of our White brothers and sisters, who will say that resources are being taken away from their young people? Our White students will shine, and we want their success—but we also want success for our Black and Brown students. Gaps are absolutely there for Black and Brown students: What will we do about them? We need to attack those gaps, and we attack anything that's worth attacking through dollars. Our

Our Black kids are the ones who are suffering the most. Are we willing to shift our resources & dollars towards them?

budgets need to reflect our values: If we say Black Lives Matter, then we need to be investing in and taking care of Black lives! I invite our White brothers and sisters to come to "the other side of the tracks" and to stand for what is right. Our White students will be okay; they've been okay for centuries. It's time for us to be unapologetic anti-racist, to prioritize Black and Brown students, and to eliminate achievement gaps!

Ramos: We're clearly hearing that it's not enough these days for us to say we're not racist: We need to bring an anti-racist mindset to all our conversations. To all our White brothers and sisters, I say: We don't need allies; we need coconspirators! We need you to talk about race. We need you to look at the data with us. We need you to fight with us as we try to shift the system in the direction of equity. Let's conclude with the hopes, dreams and aspirations of our panelists for our children of color, who have typically been at the bottom of student achievement.

To all our White brothers & sisters, I say: We don't need allies; we need coconspirators! We need you to talk about race. We need you to look at the data with us. We need you to fight with us as we try to shift the system in the direction of equity.

Mitchell: I envision our students receiving the resources and opportunities to fulfill their full potential and be the best in every aspect of life. Our African-American students confront these challenges with race and education, and they don't have the resources to face barriers day in and day out. I sometimes check in with them, to see how they feel or what they're thinking. I sometimes see them lose hope: when they're not able to college or trade school or do what they have a passion for. I don't want these kids to lose hope or give up. When people give up and have nothing to lose, they become very dangerous, which is part of what we're seeing in Atlanta.

Phillips: Our educational system is designed to do exactly what it's been designed to do, and our young people are walking out of our school builders learning exactly what we wanted and didn't want them to learn. So, I'm hoping for a shift in what

they learn. In the past, we wanted them to learn to a state examination or an end-of-course exam. Imagine if we wanted these young people to walk out, better knowing who they are and whose they are, knowing better about their history and heritage, in addition to their academic work in science, math and reading. Let's have these young people walking out of our buildings understanding the role they play in this world, understanding our history, and building a society where we're not doomed to repeat our past. We think that we have educated these young people, and, in some ways, unfortunately, we have miseducated them. Let's educate them to create a future that we can all be very proud of.

Ali: I don't want to shy away from that fact that governance is important, but governance, as it's espoused by many of our associations, is simply flawed. It's an old way of managing school systems that have failed students throughout this country. We need a revolution, where school board members see themselves as talking about more than crayons, pencils and notepads. We need to talk about transformative leadership and every aspect of every facet of the management and administration of a public school entity that's charged with more than simply educating children. Our school systems are economic hubs and catalysts within our communities. Let's have a subsequent session to really delve into the essence of what governance means and how members of school boards ought to be empowered. Because school board members don't really understand their role, I've watched school boards devolve into nothing more than chaotic cesspools of cacophony and hedonism. If we're going to lean forward and transform our districts, we need to tie everything we do to governance, assessment and evaluation. In our attempt to keep folks accountable, we can't be afraid to fire people. Never get married or wedded to anybody to the point that you can't let them go for the good of the pupils in your community!

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Leading in Turbulent Times

A Panel of National School Boards Association Council Chairs

Devin Del Palacio
Tolleson Union High School District, Arizona
NSBA National Black Council Chair

Jacinto Ramos, Jr.
Fort Worth ISD
NSBA Council of Urban Boards of Education Chair

Armando Rodríguez
Canutillo ISD
NSBA National Hispanic Council Chair

David Snyder
Fremont County School District #21, Wyoming
NSBA National American Indian/Alaska Native Council Chair

Dr. Jayme Mathias, Moderator
Austin ISD Trustee
MASBA Executive Director

June 22, 2020

Mathias: We have four tremendous national leaders joining us today, representing the National Black Council, the National Hispanic Council, the National American Indian/Alaska Native Council, and the Council of Urban Boards of Education. Let's invite them to introduce themselves by sharing their name, a sentence about their district, and their three favorite shelter-in-place pastimes!

Del Palacio: My name is Devin del Palacio, and I serve as Chair of the National Black Council. My district is comprised of seven predominately Black and Brown schools, and we're home to University High School, which is ranked 20th by *U.S. World News* in terms of academic

achievement. My favorite quarantine pastimes are spending time with my family and the kids, trying to get some exercise to the burn off what I gained during this quarantine, catching up on Netflix, and hanging out and watching movies.

Ramos: I'm Jacinto Ramos, Jr., but everyone calls me Cinto. I'm super-proud to serve on the board of the Fort Worth ISD and also to chair our Council of Urban Board of Education. My three favorite quarantine pastimes are family time, golfing, when I can squeeze it in, and being out on my boat on the lake.

Rodríguez: I'm Armando Rodríguez. I chair the National Hispanic Council. I serve the Canutillo ISD, in El Paso, Texas, where we have 6,000 students in seven elementary schools, two middle schools, one early college high school, and one high school. We're proud to have an A-rated district and a blue ribbon school. My favorite socially-distanced pastimes are being close to family, catching up on rest, and enjoying fresh air in my backyard.

Snyder: My name is David Snyder of the National American Indian/Alaska Native Council. I'm a board member here in Fort Washakie, Wyoming. Our county has more landmass than Delaware! We have nine school districts in our county, and I belong to one of three Native-only boards on the reservation. Several students go off the reservation to non-Native schools. We just celebrated graduation on Saturday in a socially-distanced way, since we still have a stay-in-place order by order of the Council. I work for a USDA food distribution program here, which means I haven't had a day off since this pandemic began. In my spare time, I have a shop out back with a lot of projects, and I like to do carpentry and mechanics.

Mathias: I often conclude conversations with a lightning round—with quick, rapid-fire questions. Today, let's begin with a lightning round! We might call it "speed-dating" for those who might not be acquainted with your NSBA councils. As part of this lightning round, let's invite our

panelists to briefly speak of the history, membership and leadership of their organizations.

Del Palacio: The National Black Council serves as an advisory council to the NSBA on matters of policy and on various programming issues. In 1970, the NSBA hired its first Director of HR Minority Affairs. Five years later, in 1975, a group of Black school members formed the Black Caucus—then the Hispanic Caucus was formed shortly after that. Our National Black Council definitely stands on the leadership and sacrifices of those who came before us and established a space for us to be able to advocate on behalf of the 7.7 million African-American students in our nation's public schools. We empower our board members to be the best board members they can be. You don't have to be Black or Brown to join the National Black Council. For the sake of our students, we welcome everybody, and we want White folks to be part of the conversation, access resources, and be the best board members they can be, too.

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Rodríguez: Devin touched a bit on the history of the National Hispanic Council. I'll talk about the primary purposes of the council, which include promoting and advancing equal educational opportunities for Hispanic children, and becoming actively engaged in the national dialogue on educational problems, issues and concerns. We are grateful to the National School Boards Association for its commitment to the continued growth and development of minority children and for allowing us to sit as an advisory board to the NSBA Board on issues that deal with the Hispanic community. As Devin suggested, you don't have to be Hispanic to be part of the National Hispanic Council. If you have Hispanic children in your district, please consider joining us as we continue growing our organization and addressing the needs of educational equity for all children.

Snyder: The National American Indian/Alaska Native Council has been an NSBA council for about four years now.

We're glad to finally have a seat at the table. We are a voice for Native students. You don't have to look like me to be on our council. If you serve Native students, please join us. We need everyone to be educated and understand what our students need to succeed.

Ramos: The Council of Urban Boards of Education is comprised of 108 school districts across the country that are focused on urban challenges. One of the biggest misconceptions is that you have to be part of a monster school system to be part of CUBE. We have urban districts of all types and sizes, and, as demographics continue to shift, we'll continue to see more of the challenges faced by urban children in other districts. At CUBE, we've been unapologetically talking about and pushing equity since day one. Now that equity is becoming part of our everyday conversation, we need to continue to learn and grow in that space and ensure that we are actually closing the achievement gap. It's one thing to define gaps; it's another to actually close them!

Now that equity is becoming part of our everyday conversation, we need to continue to learn and grow in that space and ensure that we are actually closing the achievement gap.

Mathias: To finish out this lightning round, go ahead and give us your pitch: Why should school board members consider joining your organizations? What is your value proposition, and what strengths could we bring to our districts by being members of our NSBA councils?

Rodríguez: By joining the National Hispanic Council, you're connected to an expanded advocacy network, especially at a federal level. We seek to understand the federal issues that affect our kids. We offer opportunities for learning and networking, and we bring back to our districts what we learn at the national level. This year, for example, we modeled our commencement exercises on a blueprint provided to us by our colleagues across the country. We also receive timely news on federal issues, like e-Rate, which provides access to communities of color; the Every Student Succeeds Act, which NSBA played a pivotal role in the reauthorization

of; and now the funding of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. The NSBA communicates a lot of these important issues and helps us to network with others at the national level.

Snyder: The National American Indian/Alaska Native Council is a great network of people and a clearinghouse of great ideas. We tackle issues, like the recent example of a young lady who was not allowed to wear her regalia at graduation. We hear several stories of students who are held back from that because they want to dress up and show who they are. We push these issues at the national level, since they're not just local.

Ramos: That story of students not being able to wear their regalia at graduation really gets me. The technical answer to why people ought to join CUBE is on our website: We support school boards through professional development, legislative advocacy, and other resources to address urban challenges. As Mando said, we also provide a network and the ability call others on issues. Dr. Steve Gallon, III just passed an anti-racist curriculum in his district, and everyone in CUBE is seeing that right now. These conversations cause us all to reflect on how far we've come locally. In Fort Worth ISD, we have a racial equity policy and an equity division, but now Miami-Dade outdoes us with an anti-racist curriculum! It's a way in which we gauge ourselves by others and realize that there's a heck of a lot going on. We check on one another, we get to support one another, and CUBE is the only conference I've attended, apart from MASBA, where race is at the center of the conversation.

Del Palacio: The National Black Council also provides this connectivity, and we have some great value-adds, including research, white papers, a podcast and webinars. We're connected, and we "keep it real." We connect with subject matter experts, and we bring what

If you're a school board member who just shows up and "rubberstamps" with a smile, don't join us. We don't want you. We want people who actively want to be better school board members.

we've learned back to our communities. If you're a school board member who just shows up and "rubberstamps" with a smile, don't join us. We don't want you. We want people who actively want to be better school board members. When you know better, you do better, so, if you want real change for your community and better outcomes for your students, join us and be a part of our movement!

Mathias: Let's talk racism, and inequities. What you all have in common is that you lead national organizations for school board members who identify with the values you represent and the issues on which you advocate. Take us to a 40,000-foot view of racism and inequities, and of your organizations' efforts to address these. In what ways are racism and inequities evident in public school governance at the local, state and national levels?

Rodríguez: We saw two major victories last week from the Supreme Court, and the NSBA has taken a strong stance on both issues: the DACA decision, which addresses over 800,000 DREAMers in our communities, and the LGBTQ ruling. I credit our new CEO and Executive Director, who also took strong stances on civil rights and the death of George Floyd. Her statement is on our NSBA website. I think we'll see issues of inequity and social justice addressed more at the national level.]

Del Palacio: We have to understand the inception of our public schools, which weren't created for everyone. They weren't created for the board members you see here today. We need to have an honest conversation on the fact that, from the start, we are operating or governing in a system that was not built for the majority of students now in our public schools. We must now work to tear down these systemic issues, including our hiring practices, our curriculum, our budgets and priorities. We govern systems that have been upholding these inequities for generations. As Cinto said, this isn't

anything new. Our grandparents and great grandparents suffered under these systems, and now we have an opportunity to actually do something, and there's a huge wave of momentum. Everyone's jumping on the boat and awakening to see the inequities, particularly as a result of this pandemic and the recent killing of unarmed Black men in our streets. This isn't new, but now the country is behind us, and we have the opportunity to take down some of the systemic barriers that exist within our own schools.

Ramos: People might be tired of me and say that I sound like a broken record on the social construct of race. For me, it always begins with an understanding of how race was designed. Awakening is part of the work. White students tend to Brown, Black and Indigenous students, whose performance has almost flatlined in our country. The Center for the Reform of School Systems suggests that, at this rate, if White students remain at the same level in math and science—and no one is asking for that to happen—it will take 96 years to close the achievement gap for Black students and 111 years to close the gap for *Latinx* students! That's beyond our lifetimes. It's unacceptable. Indigenous children have flatlined, so there's no indication that we'll close that gap. Our councils are anxious to close gaps as quickly as possible. We acknowledge that the NSBA was on the wrong side of history on *Brown v. Board of Education*. It falls to us to make things better by including the voices of people who have been marginalized and left out. Now that more children of color are served by our public schools, the way that they are being disenfranchised is by shifting dollar away from public school education. That's why our legislative agenda is so important, and we don't take that lightly. We need to lock arms as an entire country for public education and say, "Stop taking our dollars!" Let's engage with White people and people of biracial, multiracial backgrounds, and imagine what our economy will look like if all these

Now that more children of color are served by our public schools, the way that they are being disenfranchised is by shifting dollar away from public school education.

children walk out of our school systems unprepared. Inequities exist, and the numbers bear this out. As school board members across the state and country, let's delve into courageous conversation. As my friend, Shawn Lassiter of Leadership ISD says, we need to flex and strengthen our "muscle" on inequities, so that we can get to a really strong place where we can make better-informed decisions.

We need to flex & strengthen our "muscle" on inequities, so that we can get to a really strong place where we can make better-informed decisions.

Snyder: As school board members, we need to educate people at the national level. We don't know what we don't know. I know a gal here in Wyoming who didn't even know that we have reservations here. People don't know what tribes are about, or why we have treaties. Even I wasn't aware of some of the treaties we have on the East Coast. We need to have conversations, so that people who don't understand us or who are afraid of us, understand that our students are currently not moving forward. It's a sad reality.

Mathias: How are your organizations responding to current events outside of this pandemic? It's Juneteenth weekend, and the Black Lives Matter movement has been activated during recent weeks. The U.S. Supreme Court ruled in favor of DACA on Thursday. Other events are affecting our American Indian and Alaska Native communities, as well as urban areas. What perspectives might you share as we consider our own responses to current events?

Del Palacio: I've seen districts—even conservative districts—passing resolutions and acknowledging that Black lives matter. The momentum is building, and we need to continue to water that seed to watch it grow. As school board members, we need to lead by example and share best practices. Our National Black Council is sharing resources on anti-racism, curriculum and mental health, specifically for Black children.

Snyder: We need to be putting policy in place at the state and local levels to protect our Brown, Black, Red and Yellow

children. We need to welcome Caucasian allies; we can get a lot further if they're not fighting us every step of the way.

Del Palacio: I hear the word "ally" thrown around a lot. But I'm looking for co-conspirators. Cinto speaks a lot of this distinction.

Ramos: Allies will say, "I'm with you. I want to support you. I want to be there for you." In contrast, co-conspirators infiltrate systems with us. Many people want to preserve systems as they've been, since all systems benefit certain groups of people, and some people just want to be comfortable. Doing anti-racist work is very uncomfortable for a lot of people. Co-conspirators are conscious of the fact that they have work to do and that our "window" is narrow. We possess positional power and influence only for a time.

Many people want to preserve systems as they've been, since all systems benefit certain groups of people, and some people just want to be comfortable. Doing anti-racist work is very uncomfortable.

Del Palacio: We need co-conspirators to really move the needle and have an impact on our students.

Rodríguez: People are beginning to align with us, hopefully as co-conspirators, and we're no longer in "silos," fighting against one another.

Snyder: This is an election year, so we need to understand where candidates stand on issues, to know whether they will be co-conspirators and push forward legislation that will take care not only of Brown or Black students, but *all* students.

Mathias: Our next question comes from Dr. Phil Gore, who asks what specific governance actions school boards might consider to improve learning and to close gaps.

Ramos: We have to begin with a common language in our boardrooms of what equity is. Many school board members confuse equity and equality. We have to have

We can't shy away from disaggregating the data…. This creates a super-uncomfortable conversation for those who've served on their boards for 10, 15 or 20 years, and who need to ask, "How much have I moved the needle?"

a unified understanding of what equity is. As board members and superintendents, we can't shy away from disaggregating the data and putting it out for everybody to see. This creates a super-uncomfortable conversation for those who've served on their boards for 10, 15 or 20 years, and who need to ask, "How much have *I* moved the needle?" In some of our school systems, the needle is even moving backwards! I say: Create a common language, disaggregate the data, and be real. The demographics have not been changing, they've already changed! As governance teams, let's really lean into courageous conversations on closing gaps.

Rodríguez: I would say: Stop making excuses. Create a culture of high expectations and accountability at all levels. Make sure that issues are addressed. Focus on student outcomes.

Snyder: We need to hold our students to higher standards, and we need to push them to attain higher levels of education. They need to understand that they won't live in their own little community their whole life.

Del Palacio: We need to actually believe that our students can actually achieve and succeed. We need to acknowledge the barriers, without making excuses. Most board members don't ask for disaggregated data. In light of inequities, this is no longer negotiable. Once you've seen the data, address issues through policy. Other critical factors for student achievement include bringing in staff who look like our students; relevant, culturally-sensitive curriculum; and giving students access to the same high-quality, early college access programs.

Mathias: When I served on the CUBE Steering Committee from 2017 to 2020, the NSBA hosted two summer equity retreats for all the leaders of your organizations. The NSBA has funded staff for your organizations and given you slots for presentations at NSBA conferences.

They've improved their division for equity in public education. I have a two-part question. First, what is your assessment of the NSBA's role and efforts in the battle against racism and in the battle for public education equity? Second, we love our friends of the NSBA board, and we also acknowledge that they are predominantly White. They would likely admit that they've enjoyed privileges that many of us on this call have not enjoyed. You, in contrast, reflect the faces of the majority of the students in many of their districts. How are you and your organizations working to inform them and the leaders of predominantly-White state school boards associations on issues impacting our communities?

Ramos: The NSBA has the opportunity to lead, if we want school boards to be high-functioning entities that produce outstanding results and student outcomes for children. We just hired a *Latina*, Anna María Chávez, as our Executive Director and CEO. She is a phenomenal, courageous human being, putting out a statement on Black Lives Matter on day one. She unapologetically put out a statement on DACA. The day of reckoning has come, and we know we haven't produced the outcomes in our school districts that our children deserve. A lot of school systems around the country reflect a fear for people of color and marginalized communities. We need more women and more people of all different categories in seats of power, because those different perspectives will bring us to a different level of functioning as a body.

The day of reckoning has come, and we know we haven't produced the outcomes in our school districts that our children deserve.

Rodríguez: We're seeing a growth mindset at the NSBA—for our colleagues on the NSBA Board and for the overall organization. We're growing in our ability to address issues like Black Lives Matter and the Supreme Court decision on LGBTQ issues. Our new CEO has hit the ground running. So, let's get out of our silos, and let's work together and address the needs of every student. William Butler Yeats said that education is not the filling of a pail, but the lighting of a fire. Let's ignite that fire in

all our kids, so that way they can be the best and brightest and contribute to our society!

Del Palacio: The NSBA has a real opportunity to live up to its moniker as the leading advocate in education. With the momentum we have and with everything that's happening in our country, we have a real opportunity to be leaders and advocates in education—but we're not here to be tokens. We're not here simply to be Brown and Black faces on boards. We're here to educate, motivate and activate others to take action. The NSBA can set the tone for how we move the needle as a nation. Equity and anti-racist work is no longer negotiable. It's not an option. You're either on board, or you're not—so let's lead!

We're not here to be tokens. We're not here simply to be Brown & Black faces on boards. We're here to educate, motivate & activate others to take action.

Snyder: The NSBA has come a long way. The very fact that my seat is no longer on a caucus, but is now on an NSBA council, shows the NSBA's commitment to equity. We're educating our fellow NSBA board members and letting them know that we're done talking; we're here to make a difference!

Del Palacio: We're at a very pivotal moment in history, and we have a real opportunity to do something about it. In 50 years, when we look back at the events of this year, we want to be ones who say, "I was there on the frontlines." So get involved in our councils, and let's change our communities and our schools for the better!

Mathias: As we thank our panelists, it's my great pleasure to welcome the new Executive Director and CEO of the National School Boards Association. She previously served as CEO of Girl Scouts, the world's largest leadership organization for girls, and as Executive Vice President and Chief Growth Officer for the National Council on Aging. She now leads our national organization and its advocacy efforts for our nation's 90,000 locally-elected school board members and the 50 million students we serve. Please join me in welcoming Anna María Chávez!

Chávez: It's great to see you all, and I loved listening to today's conversation! You inspire me. You keep me going every morning. I'm in my fourth week now at the NSBA, and this is the fifth legacy organization that I've come into. Any time you enter an organization that's already in action, you know that you're standing on the shoulders of people who've come before you. I'm so grateful for their leadership and the work they've done.

I'm hoping that those on the call today hear the clarion call: This is our time! This is our moment! Regardless of their backgrounds, our kids need us—and I need *you*. This is not *my* organization. This is *your* organization. I'm just here to facilitate the issues that are important for our communities. Never hesitate to contact me at achavez@nsba.org or to call my personal cell phone number. We are a family. Let's get this work done!

Hear the clarion call: This is our time! This is our moment! Regardless of their backgrounds, our kids need us.

The Science Behind the Safe Reopening of Schools

Dr. Terry Major-Kincade
Neonatolgist & Pediatrician

Kevin Pearce
Virtual Care for Kids

Dr. Myiesha Taylor
Emergency Medicine Physician

Dr. Guadalupe Zamora
Central Health Board of Managers

Jacinto Ramos, Jr., Moderator
Fort Worth ISD

July 27, 2020

Ramos: Today we're talking about the safe reopening of schools, and there's a heck of a lot of dialogue on this important topic. Right now in Fort Worth, in Tarrant County, there are a lot of folks upset on both sides of the topic, so we're happy that you all agreed to join us and to "speak your truth," and, more importantly, to bring science into the conversation on how we should reopen our schools. Let's get started by inquiring into the current status of COVID-19 in Texas.

Major-Kincaid: This is a very important topic, and I applaud you for leading the effort of sharing with our communities. I am a neonatologist, double board-certified as a pediatrician, and I practice in Dallas, as well as in Fort Worth. I take care of premature babies who grow up and often have chronic conditions, as well as other children. This is very important to me, because I'm in the hospital every day, seeing mothers and co-workers who are affected by this illness. I'm seeing

With Texas breaking records every day, how can we begin to have a meaningful conversation about how to safely get our kids back to school?

the numbers go up every day, and I think to myself, "In the midst of seeing the numbers go up every day, with Texas breaking records every day, how can we begin to have a meaningful conversation about how to safely get our kids back to school?" I have two children, both in college now, and these conversations are challenging. I'm a pediatrician. I care about our community. I'm particularly concerned about marginalized populations and how they fit into these rollouts. We can't have a rollout without a discussion about how it affects different aspects of the community. In short, I'm seeing COVID every day in the hospital, so I know it's real.

Taylor: I live here in Tarrant County, and I'm an emergency medicine physician here in DFW. I get to see COVID and its downward effects as well. I see the chronic conditions that develop, and the other medical conditions that are not being treated. With other respiratory viruses, children tend to be your little "petri dishes." It's normal, and it's how our immune systems become robust and strong. There's a lot of conversation now about whether this respiratory virus behaves the same way. If not, what does this mean for children—and for the family members and staff who take care of children? This conversation is so complicated and multifaceted, especially since we don't have a lot of accurate information coming from the top. We're left to figure it out on our own, which is unfortunate.

With other respiratory viruses, children tend to be your little "petri dishes." It's normal, and it's how our immune systems become robust & strong.

Zamora: I have practiced in East Austin for the last 32 years, and East Austin is a hotbed for COVID. We all know that people of color—in the African-American and Hispanic populations—are at most risk. Many people of color live in food deserts and in medicine/pharmacy deserts, social determinants of health that often result in diabetes, hypertension and

Children will contract COVID at school, then bring it home to their parents and grandparents whom we have to protect, since they are the ones who are most vulnerable to this illness.

hyperlipidemia. As Dr. Taylor said, children will contract COVID at school, then bring it home to their parents and grandparents whom we have to protect, since they are the ones who are most vulnerable to this illness. I appreciate this opportunity because we really need to reach out to our communities and say, "You need to follow guidelines for social distancing. You need to wear your mask and wash your hands. Don't touch your face." These are the things that the CDC and Dr. Anthony Fauci have emphasized.

Pearce: We were one of the first to have access to the rapid COVID test and to have drive-thru testing sites in DFW, Austin and Houston. We're also offering in-school telemedicine to a number of districts throughout the state of Texas, and that has kind of given us a really interesting "window" into how care is being delivered in schools in a way that can improve overall pediatric population health.

Ramos: As board members, superintendents and educational leaders around the country, most of us have a lingering question—so, what are your thoughts about reopening schools, and what should we be mindful of?

Taylor: We're having a big problem getting people tested in a timely way. It takes us a week to get tests back, so testing isn't useful for tracking and keeping people safe. If we could get tests back right away, that could guide the reopening of schools in a major way. If we were to come up with a solution for that, we could actually entertain the idea of reopening schools. With immediate testing, we can isolate a child, so that they won't spread germs to everybody. Temperature checks at the door aren't helpful, since half the people who have COVID don't have a fever. I hear ideas of plexiglass around desks, but multiple studies have

Instead of wasting money on things that we know are not working, let's focus the money on kids who have persons with high-risk conditions in their homes.

shown that air conditioning blows this virus all over the room. Instead of wasting money on things that we know are not working, let's focus the money on kids who have persons with high-risk conditions in their homes. Let's give them the option of a quality online education. If we do reopen schools for those children whose families need them to be at school for whatever reason, they can do the same online curriculum at school, under the guidance of staff. That makes things a little bit more equitable. All kids need access to online platforms, in the event that they're sent home with a fever or cough, so that they don't miss school for two weeks at a time every time they sneeze. The logistics and the step-by-step implementation of this plan is very important. We need to think about our students and teachers and their families, and I don't see enough of these conversations taking place. The reopening of schools can be done, but we need policies and guidelines and certainly more conversations.

Major-Kincaid: I echo Dr. Taylor's thoughts about effective testing. School board members also need to think about rolling out the opening of our schools and how we'll protect students from other students who may be asymptomatic. It's really important that parents, teachers, administrators and school board members understand that the virus can look different in different carriers. Many people focus on fever and other symptoms, but it can also be present in children as a rash. I'm concerned about the screening questions for asymptomatic carriers coming into our schools. If we're going to talk about opening our schools, our schools will need resources to do this differently. We cannot have "business as usual." We need to talk about the wearing of masks by students and teachers. We need to talk about movement from class to class through high-traffic areas. We need to talk about the cleaning of classrooms and doorknobs.

There are many layers beyond the wearing of masks. I'm concerned for parents who need to make sure that their children have masks every day. I'm concerned about the onus on teachers in the classroom—who are responsible for educating our children and who will now be responsible for making sure they're teaching in a germ-free environment and that their students don't mix with other students. Our bus drivers, housekeeping, and cafeteria staff will need guidelines. During this pandemic, for example, we should have open serving or buffets in our cafeterias. Our hospital cafeterias are only serving pre-packaged foods. We also need to think about physical distancing. And we have to do all this knowing that our schools are strapped. Many of our Black and Brown communities live in multi-generational families, so we are protecting—or exposing to risk—entire families through our actions.

Many of our Black & Brown communities live in multi-generational families, so we are protecting – or exposing to risk – entire families through our actions.

Zamora: I agree with my colleagues. With testing, we need to follow the South Korean model: Test often and test everyone. We should also have nurses in every school, who will know how and where to quarantine students until their parents can pick them up. There are a lot of logistical problems related to school reopenings. Yesterday's *Austin American-Statesman* had a story on an internist in the Clinton administration who said that it will be really difficult and costly to open up schools. Every school will need a laser thermometer and immediate testing. We need to think through issues of workers' comp and the liabilities if, God forbid, our employees succumb to the virus. There's a lot involved, and I agree with my colleagues: We need to protect the children and the adults who serve them.

Pearce: It's been said a couple of times that various tools are needed to successfully and safely reopen schools. The TEA has guidelines on symptom trackers and self checkers. A number of pieces need to come together for school districts to safely reopen. We've partnered with a supplier for rapid COVID testing, which provides results in 15 minutes. This will be a big part of safely reopening schools. We'll need to look at policies and procedures, particularly with respect to higher-risk populations. We'll need to figure out how to put cohorts together and determine how closely they're rubbing up against one another, if at all. Cohort testing will be important for athletics and activities, and we'll need testing protocols for situations where students are close to one another or their teachers. I encourage your local district leadership to work in conjunction with physicians to develop protocols. This is a puzzle, and there is no perfect solution for the safe reopening of schools. There's a certain "waterfall effect": Schools need PPE and additional sanitizer and tests—and all of these will require funding. School districts need to determine what will be covered through the CARES Act.

This is a puzzle, and there is no perfect solution for the safe reopening of schools.

Taylor: If we had an inexpensive rapid test, we could use it several times a day, and we would know who to quarantine and keep out of schools. Rapid testing is certainly a first, great step to diminish transmissibility in our schools.

Ramos: Let's talk about the impact on children of color and marginalized communities. The Mexican American School Boards Association, the Black Caucus and Leadership ISD are unapologetic about conversations on equity. I'll put this into context: As a board member, I've received a number of news articles and statements from doctors and physicians who state that our students should absolutely be in the classroom and that we're doing them more harm than good by not allowing them to be in the classroom.

We're mindful that there are teachers who are just horrified at the idea of coming back into a building, even without students. So what are your thoughts? What should we, as board members and superintendents, be mindful of, particularly with respect to marginalized communities?

Pearce: Because of CARES Act funding, all districts should think about expanding their capabilities and medical services to folks who need it. With the development of rapid testing, I'm hoping that we'll soon be able to test children multiple times a day. The real concern will be supply—since we can only produce and deploy a certain number of tests. We'll need to increase the supply of tests.

Major-Kincaid: My daughter is in veterinary school, and her whole class does a rapid antigen test—a nasal swab—every day. It's really quick, and they have a mobile unit. If we have the supplies, that type of testing would be fantastic. Children of color are 90 to 93% of the Fort Worth ISD. There are many social determinants of health for our children and their families, as a result of where they live, work, and play. I remind board members that many of our children in Black and Brown communities are in multi-generational families, often living with family members who are immunocompromised. Physical distancing outside of school is a privilege that many families do not have. They don't have good resources for nutrition or health care. They are predisposed to hypertension, and diabetes. Now we're layering on another disparity. There's a saying: "When America gets a cough, marginalized communities get pneumonia." That's exactly what we've seen with this pandemic. When we send to school children who are already compromised, we compromise their family members who may experience worse outcomes because they are immune-compromised. We must do everything we can to break the cycle of disparities. Instead,

"When America gets a cough, marginalized communities get pneumonia." That's exactly what we've seen with this pandemic.

we're saying, "Let's open our schools and see what happens." Some people are saying, "We didn't realize we were going to have all these disparities!" Yes, we did. We knew that a lot of families didn't have access to technology—and now we're adding another layer of disparity!

Taylor: Systemic racism is prevalent in all our institutions. We see it in education, criminal justice and healthcare. We say that a large proportion of community is "essential workers." If they were essential, we would take better care of them! We send our "essential workers" out like guinea pigs; they don't have the resources that middle-class, White people have. Now we're sending the children of "essential workers" back to school and saying, "We'll see what happens!" I see structural racism in blanket statements, like "Children belong in school." Studies show that Brown-skinned people get worse care in hospitals. They have the worst outcomes. Even when you correct for socioeconomic status and zip code, we still have worse health outcomes! So, it's not just about "food deserts" and multi-generational housing. Racism is entwined in the DNA of this country, and it's disingenuous for people to ask communities of color to believe that institutions have had our best interests at heart since this country was founded.

We send our "essential workers" out like guinea pigs; they don't have the resources that middle-class, White people have. Now we're sending the children of "essential workers" back to school & saying, "We'll see what happens!"

Zamora: Many of our Hispanic and African-American children have not had the resources that other children have had. I can share an anecdote of how one district responding to such inequities: The Del Valle School District here in Austin sent out buses equipped with hotspots so that all children could talk to their teachers through the internet. Our children have always had less; we need to help them where we can.

Ramos: Thank you for putting it out there, specifically with the populations we're serving. I feel we've been missing the counter-narratives of who really needs help, who doesn't need help, and what those disparities look like. Disparities are never by accident. They are systemic. They are pre-designed. The numbers don't lie, and we see that primarily Brown and Black communities are impacted by this pandemic. Our essential workers are on the front lines, and it doesn't surprise me anymore that my neighborhood is most impacted in Tarrant County. I keep asking, "What are we going to do? How are we going to stop this?" We need to bring the counter-narratives to the forefront. I was listening to superintendents and folks from around the country lat week, and they said, "We have educational gaps. We have achievement gaps. We have opportunity gaps. We have, in the words of Glenn Singleton, belief gaps: Do we even believe that our children deserve the absolute best? And now we have a COVID gap that affects all the other gaps." I'd like to open the floor for panelists to anything else related to COVID-19 and the reopening of our schools.

Disparities are never by accident. They are systemic. They are pre-designed. The numbers don't lie, and we see that primarily Brown and Black communities are impacted by this pandemic.

Major-Kincaid: Kids will suffer more from one-size-fits-all approaches to the reopening of schools. Some schools will require more resources than others. Some schools are suffering more than others. Since the beginning of this pandemic, we've seen an increase in the number of calls to poison control centers for children who have ingested hand sanitizer, so we need safety mechanisms in place. We also need to follow science and the CDC. Last week, parents were telling me that their schools were spraying tables and the sandwich bags of their children's lunches with Lysol. Let's not increase the risks to our children beyond being exposed to COVID! Our children are not individual units; they come from and go back to families, and their families are dealing with all sorts

of stressful issues, including mental health issues, economic issues, and the inability to take off from work. The human stress of being in a pandemic, is magnified in our Black and Brown communities. At the hospital, I hear the stories of mothers all the time: They're having babies and are worried about so many other issues. So, remember: Our children come from communities that are challenged, and I'm going to borrow what you said about the belief gap: Do we believe Black and Brown communities are worth the extra effort to ensure their safety? We have to do better.

Do we believe Black & Brown communities are worth the extra effort to ensure their safety? We have to do better.

Taylor: Speaking of belief, NPR was speaking this morning of belief: Many countries have flattened the curve because they believe in their administrations and governments. Unfortunately, we can't always trust our current federal administration. We can't trust our President. We absolutely need to believe the CDC. We have to listen to them.

Taylor: I'll add to what Dr. Major-Kincaid said about hand sanitizers. We wipe down surfaces, then kids touch them with their little bodies. The alcohol and methanol can be very damaging, and it only takes a small dose of the wrong kind of toxic alcohol to make a child very sick. So, now we're telling people to wipe things down, then wait for them to dry before kids can touch them. I also want to offer a positive spin: We now have the opportunity to consider alternative ways of educating our children, like pillars and pods. The very popular idea of tutors is criticized and applauded, depending on which camp you're in. We're also hearing of children learning in pods. Perhaps we'll see a new model where our students gather in pods, where they have internet access and someone to watch over them and help them through their online curriculum. Imagine if we offered a solution like this for parents who can't afford their own private tutors! That would be really exciting if districts could pull it off.

Ramos: Thank you all for sharing your wealth of knowledge and your perspectives. When this COVID-19 pandemic was first announced, it was broadcast all over, on TV and radio. I remember my response: "This can't be as bad as people are saying. This is only impacting the older generation!" Then I noticed how people around me started reacting to it. I'm surrounded by a Brown, *Latinx*, Chicano/Chicana community members, and even my own mother nonchalantly responded, "I'm already 'on overtime.' If God takes me, it's my time." We've now been socialized and conditioned to walk around with our masks, sanitizing our hands and spraying down surfaces. We've come a long way. I can't help but think of the history in this country of distrust of people of color for the medical profession. The Tuskegee experiment is obviously the first one that we always reference. Even three quarters of our brothers and sisters from Puerto Rico—Indigenous people of color—were sterilized by the U.S. government. So, what you've said and done here today is powerful. We lean on you and your expertise to know that this is serious and that we need to be careful as we consider reopening our schools. There's a long history associated with how these decisions are made—and that should not be taken lightly. I'd like to give each of you an opportunity to share closing thoughts and feelings and anything from your heart.

I can't help but think of the history in this country of distrust of people of color for the medical profession…. So, what you've said and done here today is powerful.

Pearce: The American Academy of Pediatrics and others are saying, "We must reopen schools!" They are less focused on the physical—the virus—and more on social emotional learning and mental health. We need to find ways to reopen schools, but those reopenings don't need to all be the exact same. There's not a one-size-fits-all solution for school reopenings, so let's continue to rethink how schools are reopening and how education will be delivered.

Zamora: When we became doctors, we raised our hands and swore first to do no harm. People can trust us. Our faces look like theirs. Like many in our community, I was raised poor. So, please trust us, because we have your best interests in mind.

Taylor: This is great that you're having these conversations, because so often these conversations happen "behind the curtain," with no transparency. Decisions are made, and people live with the ramifications. To have this discussion in public shows our community that we care and that we are coming to you in full transparency, so that we can all talk about and consider all the aspects of school reopenings and how they affect all kinds of different people in different places. Conversations like this are super-duper important!

Major-Kincaid: I, too, want to applaud you for hosting this conversation. It's so important, and we don't have a lot of guidance from federal leadership. Dr. Fauci, our nation's foremost scientist, has been ostracized by our President, so I really appreciate the opportunity to sit at the table today with people who create the policy that impacts our children. What I want to say is: It may seem like those of us who are actively taking care of patients have all the answers. We *don't* have all the answers. We found out about the first case of COVID like you did, and we're learning about it every day. We're learning with you. That's why we're cautiously optimistic. We are learning something new about this every day, and so we're making recommendations as evidence becomes available. I admit that I questioned the wearing of masks in March. I later went on Facebook and apologized to everybody. We're learning with you guys. Our children want to be back in school. Their parents want them to be back in school. 55 million kids in the U.S. were impacted by school closures. So, we are *not* against reopening schools *per se*. We are against the

It may seem like those of us who are actively taking care of patients have all the answers. We don't…. We're learning with you.

We don't have all the answers, but we are committed to getting the answers and finding workable solutions for this "new normal."

unsafe reopening schools. I have nieces, and one of them told me yesterday, "I'm ready for COVID to be over!" Let's work together to open schools in the safest possible way. We don't have all the answers, but we are committed to getting the answers and finding workable solutions for this "new normal."

Ramos: Our school board members and superintendents want children in schools, too. We know there's absolutely a need for that. Our schools are one of the safest places for young people, especially those from working families. Let's prioritize safely getting children into school!

Texas School Districts Emerging from COVID-19

Holly María Flynn Vilaseca
Houston ISD Trustee

Ricardo Pedraza
Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD Trustee

Gerónimo Rodríguez
Austin ISD Trustee

Ann Williams
Alief ISD Trustee
TCBSBM President

Jacinto Ramos, Jr., Moderator
Fort Worth ISD Trustee
MASBA President

January 25, 2021

Ramos: Thank you for joining us. Today we're wearing a splash of #Red4PublicEd as a symbol of our solidarity with the frontline workers in our Texas public schools. We started this webinar series last year in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. As we begin to emerge from this pandemic under new national leadership, we're kicking off a new round of webinars to talk about the gaps that have been exacerbated by this pandemic and how we might better advocate for our Latinx students and Emergent Bilinguals during this 87th Texas Legislative Session. I'll invite our panelists to briefly introduce themselves.

Williams: My name is Ann Williams. I have the pleasure of serving as Board President for the Alief Independent School District in Houston and the even higher honor of serving as President of the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members for a second time. I'm excited

that we have a collaboration with MASBA and can talk about equity and race with a focus on educating students.

Flynn Vilaseca: I'm Holly María Flynn Vilaseca of the Houston ISD. I also serve as Vice President of MASBA. We began the journey of these COVID webinars last year, and I really appreciate the opportunity to come together to talk and learn from each other about what's going on in our districts and how we're dealing with COVID.

Pedraza: My name is Ricardo Pedraza. I'm going on my third year on the Board here in the Pharr-San Juan-Alamo ISD. I look forward to sharing what PSJA is doing to serve students and families during this pandemic.

Ramos: We're learning that Trustee Arlene Parada of Clint ISD, who is a teacher, is no longer able to join us today, and Gerónimo Rodríguez of Austin ISD will join us shortly. At MASBA, we like to talk about "glows and grows," so let's start with the "glows." It's been ten months since our Texas public schools were turned upside-down by COVID. What have you seen in your district and in surrounding districts that has made you especially proud of our Texas public schools?

Flynn Vilaseca: During these incredibly challenging times, we've been able to create a space within governance to talk about priorities and things that really matter, like the safety, health and well-being of our students and staff. We've provided them social emotional support and helped them with psychological needs. We've kept our students fed. Teachers and staff have responded with innovation, quickly learning new technologies and platforms. We saw innovation and collaboration across department and schools. We saw partnerships with nonprofit organizations, cities and counties, to share resources. We've really wrapped our students and staff with the empathy and resources they need to get through these tough times.

During these incredibly challenging times, we've been able to create a space within governance to talk about priorities & things that really matter.

Williams: One of the greatest "glows" for me, from the governance side, has been the opportunity of boards to come together and really think of community as they make plans and decisions. We stood up and exercised local control. We worked alongside our superintendents, to come up with the best solutions. We also collaborated and asked one another, "What are you doing in your district that I can bring to the conversation in my district?" School board trustees put aside the typical things related to trustees and really focused on the work: feeding our students, getting them devices, and helping our educators. I'm still giving our nutrition staff high fives for the phenomenal things they did during this pandemic.

School board trustees put aside the typical things related to trustees & really focused on the work.

Pedraza: The whole community just came together to ensure the health of our students, families and staff. We provided resources, like electronic devices for all students. We made sure they were fed. We put internet access points on our buses, to make sure that students in lower economic areas had internet. We came together and focused on what really matters: educating our students and helping our community and our families during this time. Everything happened so fast, and our teachers worked around the clock. We also leaned on the healthcare professionals in our districts. In PSJA, we rolled out one of the first rapid testing sites and now one of the first vaccination sites. We also leaned on our superintendents and supported them in the decisions they needed to make to ensure that our families were safe.

Ramos: Now I have a question for each of you. I'll begin with the President of the Texas Caucus of Black School Board Members. Ann, we know that our Black and Brown communities have been hardest hit by this pandemic. Give us a perspective on the most pressing issues on the minds of our friends from the Black Caucus.

Williams: We've been in this pandemic now for ten months, or two semesters, so to speak. I am a practitioner, and I work for a school district in the Houston area where I oversee Response to Intervention (RTI) for at-risk students—so I've experienced this pandemic from the ground. I'm responsible for universal screening, for testing all students enrolled on our campus, to find out what their learning levels are. The most pressing issue at this time is the widening of learning gaps. Even before this pandemic, students were coming out of elementary school unable to read on level—and students from our lowest economic areas struggled the most. The gaps are even greater now—so great, in fact, that it's begin to wear on our staff of educators. We've provided them professional development on differentiated learning and supports for specialized populations, but we have entire campuses now where we don't know the levels of students. We have students learning on campus, and others learning at home. Let's be honest: Many who come to our campuses are escaping the situations at home. Poverty is an issue, the social emotional needs are great, and learning gaps exist. We also have a whole group of students who have not been engaged online, so we don't know where they are—but we still consider them to be enrolled. We have many special needs students who aren't attending school or getting the services they need. When those students do come back, we'll need to have the necessary supports for them. Parents are not going to understand when little Johnny is held back and doesn't pass to the next grade because he hasn't mastered the skills. As board members, we'll need to take a stand and address these situations without negatively impacting our students and their parents.

Even before this pandemic, students were coming out of elementary school unable to read on level—and students from our lowest economic areas struggled the most. The gaps are even greater now.

Ramos: At the beginning of our COVID conversations last year, we were rightfully focused on the well-being of our children, our staff and our communities. Now we're facing those learning gaps—and hopefully we'll find some way to address them. Our brother, Gerónimo is joining us. Let's invite him to introduce himself.

Rodríguez: My name is Gerónimo Rodríguez, and I serve as the President of the Austin Independent School Board of Trustees. I was the first in my family to graduate from high school, college and law school, and, frankly, I was getting tired of always being told that I was "the exception to the rule." I decided to serve because I believe that thousands of students should be "the rule" and not "the exception." I'm also radically focused on student outcomes and on ensuring that we're having the right conversation for our students—and not the adult conversations that we're much more comfortable having.

I was getting tired of always being told that I was "the exception to the rule." …Thousands of students should be "the rule" & not "the exception."

Ramos: Gerónimo, I'd like to ask you the next question. You lead the public schools in our state's capital, where our Legislative Session is now taking place. You also work in health care. Can you give us your perspective on this pandemic and its effect on Central Texas, as legislators now convene in your city?

Rodríguez: I'm learning that the theme for 2021 is, "Do not let perfection be the enemy of good." There's so much going on in healthcare and education to address the needs in our community. I want to recognize and acknowledge the hard work in over 1,000 school districts, in hospital systems and healthcare systems across our state, and at the State Capitol. With respect to the Legislature, more than ever it's time for our legislators to "walk the walk." School funding is so important for so many different reasons—but mostly because our kids are suffering and experiencing gaps in their learning. As a student outcomes, we need to

ensure that our kids are prepared for college, life and career—and we have to mean it. We need to break our mindset of scarcity and have a mindset of abundance. Our students bring great strengths to the table, including determination and tenacity. "Pivoting" is the key word: We've learned to pivot and change as we go through this pandemic. Now we need to pivot and be sure we're breaking down barriers, improving student outcomes and supporting their social emotional learning. We have to be very focused on these conversations about student outcomes, versus adult conversations. We need to acknowledge the gaps in broadband, too. You can give children computers, but, if they don't have access to broadband or Wi-Fi in their part of town, that's an issue. Those kids should be the first, and not the last. As a state, we need to invest in broadband, in social emotional learning, and in removing the disparities in our school systems. There is no "silver bullet," and we need to work on all those things together. I hope to see all our colleagues at the Capitol or advocating through virtual meetings to ensure that we have the appropriate funding for our students and our communities.

We need to pivot and be sure we're breaking down barriers, improving student outcomes and supporting their social emotional learning.

Ramos: Rick, give us a perspective from the Valley: How is the pandemic affecting communities in the *Río Grande* Valley, and how have y'all brought together the necessary resources to respond to this pandemic?

Pedraza: The Valley has been hit especially hard, so we closed schools and sent everyone home. After that, we had very minimal staff at our schools, and our facilities suffered—with even the simplest of things, like the cutting of grass. Once we secured personal protective equipment, we were able to stagger staff and get things moving again. In early days, we had issues with broadband access, so we retrofitted our buses with access points then parked them in certain areas

where students could have broadband. We have a partnership with our county, and we're actually trying to set up towers in our school district for use by students and county workers. The city, too, is speaking with legislators about broadband for the entire city. We do need funding. That's one thing that's on everyone's mind. Of our 30,000 students, we were unable to account for 1,000 of them. We've had a difficult time figuring out where they are and what education they're getting, so we're trying to solve that. We have minimal students coming into our schools, since most teaching is online, but that creates a strain on our staff, who place themselves in harm's way. Even though we have air purifiers, they always have in the back of their minds that they could get COVID. We've been "rolling with the punches," adapting and pivoting, and we recently started distributing vaccinations. We'll soon have all our employees vaccinated. We're doing the best we can for our community.

We've been "rolling with the punches," adapting and pivoting…. We're doing the best we can for our community.

Ramos: Thank you, Rick. Holly, you help lead the state's largest district. What have been the greatest challenges in the Houston area?

Flynn Vilaseca: We are a large district. We have 284 schools. We had 210,000 students, but we've lost students and are now hovering around 197,000 to 200,000 students. The impact of this enrollment loss on our budget has been devastating, and we're asking ourselves what we can do to bring students back next year. We've talked today about pivoting. At the beginning of the pandemic, we were focused on the safety, security and SEL needs of our students, but now we're more focused on loss of learning, and we're allocating adequate funding in the upcoming budget cycle for loss of learning. We're also going in the direction of one-on-one tutoring: what that will look like and how much it will cost. We've had issues with data quality. We're a big district, with universal screening, but many of our students aren't being tested. We're

trying to collect data, particularly on the impact of this pandemic on lower grades, but our reports come back saying that we have data quality issues, which is understandable in a pandemic. How can we have robust conversations at the board table without student data? We ask ourselves what else we, as a governing board, can ask from our superintendent and staff to tell us a better story and to give us an understanding of what's really happening with our students as far as learning loss is concerned. Some students are getting additional support at home—with tutors and learning coaches—and, to be quite honest, it's great that they're able to do that, but it's exacerbating the equity gap.

Ramos: We're wearing red for a reason today: We're thinking of and standing in solidarity with our frontline workers, the people who are making things happen on a daily basis. What are y'all hearing and seeing with respect to employees? I'm being blasted for being very vocal on the impact that this pandemic is having on Black and Brown communities. I'm also being blasted because I'm very vocal about the fact that our community does not have health insurance. Texas has the most uninsured children in the nation. The death toll is highest in my predominantly *Latinx/Chicanx* neighborhood. One of our bus drivers just passed away: I grew up with him and worshiped with him. All these factors are taking a toll. What are you hearing and seeing with respect to the welfare of our folks on the front lines?

Rodríguez: Rick, I'm a proud graduate of Pharr-San Juan-Alamo High School, Class of 1986, so my response is somewhat emotional. I had a cousin I grew up, who became a teacher; he just passed away of COVID the last week of the year. This is personal to a lot of us, and, from a policy perspective, we recognize the tension between ensuring that our kids and our communities are safe, but also

We recognize the tension between ensuring that our kids & our communities are safe, but also making sure that we open our schools for those who need them the most.

making sure that we open our schools for those who need them the most. At our last board meeting, our superintendent read out a list of 10 or 12 schools that have over 100 students coming to the school. All those schools are Title I schools, with kids that look like you and me. Their parents are stocking grocery stores and working at construction sites. They are our bus drivers and food service workers in our school districts. I have advocated for our school staff to be vaccinated sooner than later, and, as of today, we've had over 1,200 school staff vaccinated through a partnership with health care organizations. Our county judge, who is obviously our emergency response leader, created a vaccination clinic that helped the Austin, Del Valle, Manor and Pflugerville ISDs with vaccinations . Someone once told me that during a crisis, you have to do the most good for the greatest number of people. I encourage us all to advocate. Speak with your county judges and your mayors, since they are the heads of these emergency operations and are receiving the vaccines. We also need to address the hesitancy issues in our communities.

Williams: I've experienced a death in my family almost every one of the past nine months—and I know that there are people who are experiencing more loss than I am. That's why our conversations on meeting the social emotional needs of our students and staff are so important. We've grown numb to what is happening. We need to safeguard the well-being and mental state of our employees. Let's not pretend that these issues don't exist, and let's stop sweeping them under the rug. Let's address these issues, in the same way that we addressed the issue of hotspots and devices. Let's support the staff who represent us on the frontlines!

Let's not pretend that these issues don't exist, and let's stop sweeping them under the rug. Let's address these issues, in the same way that we addressed the issue of hotspots & devices.

Pedraza: When faced with the problem of not having electronic devices, we rose to the occasion, and we found a way to get electronic devices to everyone. Now we need to rise to the occasion on other issues. In our district, we're hearing of employees who've used all their paid time off, and now they're stressed out—so we introduced policy to help mitigate that. Our community is suffering a pandemic trauma that resembles post-traumatic stress disorder. Our family members, friends and district employees are passing away, and we're trying to be strong for one another, so we don't deal with our emotions—and that affects us all. Everyone is trying to do the best they can with what they have, and now we need a united front to tell our politicians and decisionmakers that we need funding for these issues, especially with gaps in education and this whole year that students haven't been accounted for. This has been traumatic, and it's going to affect us in the future.

We're trying to be strong for one another, so we don't deal with our emotions—and that affects us all. Everyone is trying to do the best they can with what they have…. This has been traumatic, and it's going to affect us in the future.

Ramos: That's right: Trauma has been inflicted When I ran for office, I never imagined having to deal with this. None of us asked for this type of responsibility. So, what are the solutions? Now that our Legislative Session is taking place, what message do you have for state or federal leaders who might be listening to us today?

Williams: Let's get funding right. We've been going round and round about hold harmless situation and whether we'll be funded based on attendance. I am very proud to work along Superintendent H.D. Chambers of the Alief ISD, where we're trying to use our influence and resources. I challenge all board members to "get into the politics." We are elected, so we're already part of the politics. Let's use our political power, advocate to our state representative, and let them

If they're going to hold us accountable for educating our students and for their results on high-stakes testing, then we need to hold them accountable for giving us the funds we need to do this.

know what's important to us. Local control is important, and what's important in the Alief ISD may not be important in the Houston ISD. Let's unite around commonalities and create some leverage. Let's have a real conversation on funding, and let's not play games. If they're going to hold us accountable for educating our students and for their results on high-stakes testing, then we need to hold them accountable for giving us the funds we need to do this.

Flynn Vilaseca: In addition to getting the funding right, we need to make sure our teachers, educators and staff are counted as frontline, essential workers when it comes to vaccine distribution. States like Ohio are prioritizing teachers for vaccinations. Why isn't that happening here? We need a statewide mandate to put teachers at the top of the queue. They daily go to work with fear and anxiety, and this is affecting their health, safety and emotional well-being—as well as their ability to be there for their students.

Rodríguez: We exercise our power by participating in the process, so it's important for us to speak truth to power. The reality is that our educational finance system is broken. The courts have said that it's constitutional, but, politically speaking, Austin ISD is the "canary in the coal mine." We receive $1.6 billion in taxpayer dollars, and we just wrote a check for $600 million to the State for recapture. We need a statewide conversation on equitable funding for every single child, especially those who look like all of us. Until we've achieved that, we need to raise our voices and talk about issues, like hold harmless and our immediate needs. The funding of public education that happened last Legislative Session needs to happen this session, too. We need to raise our voices and ask for the help of our constituents and our elected officials. If we've learned anything from this pandemic, we learned to speak up and ask for help.

We need a statewide conversation on equitable funding for every single child, especially those who look like all of us.

Let's ask for help from our state leaders, to help fund our school systems and ensure that we can address our local needs. In the Austin ISD, we've served a million meals for our kids and our community—and that doesn't even get to the issues of broadband or educational gaps. Let's raise our voices and meet the needs of our community.

Pedraza: This is a perfect time for leaders to rise up and meet the challenge, to get the funding we need from the Texas Legislation. In the words of Jerry Maguire: "Show me the money!" Let's push for the money we need for our school districts.

Williams: The federal government has done its job through the CARES Act, but we need to make sure that the money doesn't stop at the state—that it's released. Our legislators need to understand that the issue of learning gaps is not something we'll be able to immediately solve; it's going to be with us for a while. We've provided the data; now we need the State to pay us back the money we've already spent. We need the CARES Act money to be distributed fairly and equitably to those who need it.

We've provided the data; now we need the State to pay us back the money we've already spent.

Ramos: This is hard work, and we have to advocate on behalf of the young people in our communities. Let's have a "check-out": How are we feeling as we conclude today?

Pedraza: I feel hopeful. We're going to get through this. I'm a civil engineer and a problem-solver, so I believe that, if we all work together, with a common goal, we'll get through this. This pandemic has affected many different aspects of our lives, but, if we persevere and work together, we'll get through this!

Flynn Vilaseca: I'm feeling hopeful, too. I'm just delighted to be here in solidarity with panelists and audience. We know that we have our work cut out for us—but we also know that we have people we can lean on, who are advocating for the same thing: for our students. I'm

hopeful that we'll lift up our voices and work collaboratively to get things done for our kids!

Williams: I'm feeling hopeful. We've gone through enough changes during this pandemic to understand where we need to go next. We're no longer new to this situation. We've built enough collaboration, and we have the tools to push us to the other side of this!

Rodríguez: I'm feeling responsibility. Our organizations all have a mission, vision and values, and they're pretty words on a piece of paper. We put them on our walls and websites. Our challenge now is to bring to life those missions, visions and values during this pandemic and beyond. We have a responsibility to raise our voices and ensure we're living up to those words that we put on paper for as many of our students as possible.

Our organizations all have a mission, vision & values, and they're pretty words on a piece of paper…. We have a responsibility to raise our voices and ensure we're living up to those words that we put on paper for as many of our students as possible.

Ramos: I'm feeling rejuvenated. I'm excited to be back with you, my friends. My shirt today says, "I'm Mexican. What's your superpower?" Let's create a space where we can show up as our truest, most authentic selves and be proud of our heritage, knowing that there's a support system with our friends at MASBA and the Black Caucus—as well as around the country!

Texas Public School Equity Issues and the 87th Legislative Session

State Senator José Menéndez
Texas Senate Hispanic Caucus Chair

State Representative Mary E. González
Mexican American Legislative Caucus Vice Chair

Luis Figueroa
Every Texan

Dax González
Texas Association of School Boards

Fátima Menéndez
Mexican American Legal Defense & Education Fund

Ana Ramón
Intercultural Development Research Association

Ana Cortez, Moderator
Manor ISD Trustee
MASBA President Elect

February 1, 2021

Cortez: Our first guest today is Senator José Menéndez. Senator, thank you so much for being here with us!

J. Menéndez: Thank you very much for having me. What a pleasure and an honor to be with all of you, and especially with my colleague, Representative Mary González, who is a superstar in the Texas House, a tremendous leader at the national level, as well as Co-chair of the Mexican American Legislative Caucus. I commend MASBA for putting together this series on education equity and for remaining engaged in these very difficult and important issues in our public schools—issues that our students are facing every day. This pandemic has

overwhelmed many parts of our society, namely our health system, but our public schools have paid a price—as well as our economy. We all know that this pandemic is disproportionately impacting people of color. Our public school administrators and teachers have done an extraordinary job to continue with their mission of educating and caring for our children. From the start, you've assembled food drives so that our kids wouldn't go hungry. You acquired and distributed technology, to cut short the "learning slide" or gaps caused by this pandemic. I want to thank you for your tremendous work. You remind us of how incredible and necessary our public schools are—how much they are part of the fabric of our community. I'm very honored and excited to be a member of the Senate Education Committee, to work on these issues. As you know, we're looking at ta very difficult budget here in the state of Texas. Fortunately, the last budget forecast that we received had a nice surprise: Instead of being $4.6 billion short, we're only about $900 million short. That's still a lot, but the good news is that the Comptroller has announced that we're going to have about $112 billion in available funds for the next budget, which helps to ensure that we don't go back on our commitments to HB 3. The last few years have demonstrated the needs that we have to diversify our state's funding streams. COVID relief is going to be a tremendous issue, and many of our school districts have made tremendous, unexpected purchases, like devices and hotspots, many of which have not been reimbursed. Many of you are upgrading your HVAC and filtration systems. None of these costs were anticipated. As lawmakers, we need to give you the support you need to meet these big challenges. During our last Legislative Session, we had the political will to make major changes to our public education system through HB 3. We added roughly $6.5 billion in new money for pre-K through 12 education, and it came with many costly mandates.

As lawmakers, we need to give you the support you need to meet these big challenges.

This session, we need to continue to fund those mandates, as well as tackle other inequities, like the digital divide, which is glaringly apparent in rural and urban core communities. We also need to reinforce the advances made last session by providing students with more social and emotional support. I think the time has come for us to have a social emotional counselor at every single school, and we really need to look at adding mental health education, at least in our high schools. We've been in a collective crisis mode for the last 10 years, and our students and educators feel it intensely. Our students are deciding whether to go to work and risk their health and the health of their loved ones. We also need to address the accountability system, which needs to be thrown out. We need to figure out how to measure student progress and use data to address needs for improvement, without using it in a punitive way. After most students have been learning virtually this year, it doesn't make sense, for instance, to require students to come back to school for the STAAR or for end-of-course exams, simply so that we can rate students, teachers and campuses. We need to ask how we can collect information on our students and teachers and hold them to higher standards in ways that actually help them. It's a very tall order for our 5.5 million Texas public school students. 60% of students are economically disadvantaged, 20.3% have been identified as English Language Learners, 10% receive special education services, and 7.6% have been identified as homeless. Your advocacy is critical this session, and access to the Capitol is going to be more restrictive. Organize and use technology to mobilize and engage your communities. I look forward to continuing to work with you, for all of those young

We also need to address the accountability system, which needs to be thrown out. We need to figure out how to measure student progress and use data to address needs for improvement, without using it in a punitive way.

people who depend on us. Together, we will make a difference.

Cortez: Senator Menéndez, we really appreciate you being here with us. We appreciate your advocacy for the public education of our students.

Menéndez: One thing that is critical in the way that I approach things is that *yo soy el hijo de dos inmigrantes que llegaron a este país sin nada* (I'm the son of two immigrants who arrived in this country with nothing). It was my education—*la educación que la escuela me dio, y mis padres nos inculcaron* (the education I received at school and that my parents impressed upon us). That's the only reason I'm here. If so many of us are here because of education, so many other kids can, too. It's up to us to make sure they understand the potential they have.

Cortez: Exactly. My parents used to say, "*La educación es un tesoro. Es lo que no te pueden quita*r." Your education is a treasure; it's the only thing no one can take away from you. State Representative Mary González, thank you for being here!

M. González: I'm super excited to be here with you all today—and with a senator whom I just admire and love so much. We know that education is one of the most critical things we do during the 140 days of each Legislative Session, since we have 5.4 million kids in our schools right now, and four million of them have experienced severe learning loss during this pandemic. For me, one of most critical questions is: What do we do as a state to address such giant numbers? We need to give our school districts and our school leaders the resources to really overcome what could be a generational problem for the future of our state if it isn't appropriately or adequately addressed. We all know and have experienced that COVID has really impacted our communities, with a greater impact on our communities of color. We can't continue

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to address school funding or resources, in the same way we did in the past. The digital divide is a significant problem across the state. A lot of the technology that we ask our kids to use is in English only, so what happens with bilingual family when parents can't co-teach their kids because they don't have the same access to the resources that we're giving them? We really need to be critical and thoughtful about what are we doing. Is it accessible? Is it inclusive? Is it representative of our diversity? How will we address the learning loss of four million kids? 70% of our kids are below grade level. These are issues we need to address this session. I'm hopeful that we can think critically as partners. I really appreciate the role that you play in the advocacy at the Capitol. As hard as we try, our communities often get left out. I'll give an example: Last session, we had only two *Latinos* on the House Public Education Committee, even though *Latinos* are a significant portion of our K-12 system. We need you now more than ever to be their voice, because we know firsthand how this past year has been for our *Latinos* in Texas. In El Paso, specifically, we started last school year a week after a shooting where someone came to our community to kill Brown people. That was really traumatic for our community and our state: that we were the target of racial violence! The responsibility we share, as a collective, is significant and huge. I'm here because I want to continue to be your partner. We only have 140 days to do this for the next two years; it's so much work in such a short period of time. This is our moment to create the change we need. I'm here as your partner, ally and friend, to work in solidarity with you.

Last session, we had only two Latinos on the House Public Education Committee, even though Latinos are a significant portion of our K-12 system. We need you now more than ever to be their voice, because we know firsthand how this past year has been for our Latinos *in Texas.*

Cortez: Thank you State Representative González. I now invite our panelists to introduce themselves.

Figueroa: I want to thank Senator Menéndez and Representative González, who represent my two homes: my birthplace

and where I went to college and worked for a long time. My name is Luis Figueroa. I'm the Legislative and Policy Director for Every Texan, formerly the Center for Public Policy Priorities. We work to ensure that every Texan has the ability to be financially secure, well-educated and healthy.

D. González: My name is Dax González. I am the Division Director of Governmental Relations for TASB. We represent every school board across the state, and we're here to support you and to continue advocacy on your behalf.

Ramón: My name is Ana Ramón. I am the Deputy Director of Advocacy at IDRA. I'm really excited to join this wonderful panel and see such amazing public education leaders with us today. IDRA is really focused on making sure that children have equal access to education and are prepared for college. We're really excited to have a multi-prong approach where we provide education practice, research, policy and action.

F. Menéndez: I'm Fátima Menéndez. I'm a legislative attorney with MALDEF, the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund. We are a nonprofit law firm that works to protect the civil rights of *Latinos* throughout the country and in Texas. We have an office in San Antonio that covers states in the Southwest region, including Texas. We affect change through litigation, policy work, advocacy and community education. We work in four main areas: education, employment, immigrant rights and voting rights.

Cortez: Our first question for our panel is: What are the most pressing issues related to public education that you and your organizations are following during this 87th Legislative Session?

Figueroa: I'll start with the budget. First and foremost, the Legislature is constitutionally-required to create a budget. Senator Menéndez and Representative González spoke of the importance of the budget. Thanks to several legislators, including Representative González, we invested $11.5 billion in public education last session, $6 billion of which is going to the

classroom to enrich the educational experience for Texas students, and $5.5 billion of which is going to tax compression. It's going to be difficult to keep up those funding levels, particularly as property values rise, tax compression steps in, and the state needs to make up the difference for school districts. For us, it starts with the budget and coming up with revenue options—ways to sustain education. We have never fully funded the needs of our students, particularly the ones who have most need, like English Language Learners, economically-disadvantaged students, and students with disabilities. This session, we are advocating for what some people call a "hold harmless," which would ensure that districts don't take a hit for a lack of student attendance or enrollment during this pandemic. Ultimately, it comes down to funding kids—and funding kids in most need. That's where we start, and we appreciate all leaders who are working for that.

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D. González: Hold harmless is a really big deal. We don't want a short-term crisis to have long-term impacts on our schools by short-funding our schools during this biennium based on the kids who aren't here now. That would results in cuts to programs and staff that will be needed when kids come back after the pandemic. We want to make sure that those kids are accounted for in the future. It's important for you to know that, while the Foundation School Program was fully funded in the budget, it's based on a lower enrollment number—some 35,000 to 40,000 kids, rather than 70,000 to 80,000 kids. If the pandemic were to end and everyone were to come back at the same, that could create a challenge. It's a crystal-ball issue that we can't predict right now, but it's a potential issue to be aware of. We've talked about the digital divide. Districts have been really good about getting technology out to kids, but the necessary broadband for those devices is still a big issue. Kids are

having trouble accessing broadband throughout the state. We're also looking into standardized tests. The pausing of A-F ratings is certainly welcomed news, but the requirement to take standardized tests in-person is going to be a big deal. A lot of our kids are already stressed out; another state test may not be the best thing right now. Our teachers know where our kids are on their educational journeys; the state test will likely not tell teachers more than what they already know. We recommend a voluntary administration of the test for those districts that need that diagnostic assessment. It's a tough ask for an education system that's already under a lot of pressure.

Our teachers know where our kids are on their educational journeys; the state test will likely not tell teachers more than what they already know.

J. Menéndez: I want to address standardized tests. I don't have a lot of regrets, but one of the regrets I have is not talking my parents into letting me go to law school. I think that suing the TEA over making kids come for in-person standardized testing could be justified as a good use of resources. I'm very frustrated: Why would we bring teachers and students into a confined space just for testing during a pandemic? What is the greater good? What will we gain from this? I'm just upset about the whole situation.

M. González: Let me add a complexity from our community: *Latinos* are disproportionately impacted by COVID. The latest Texas Health & Human Services report shares the jarring number that 49% of the people impacted by COVID are *Latinos*. We want to know where our students are, so testing them makes sense, but we also need to recognize the complexities of teacher, student and parent trauma. We are in a global pandemic. We need to be more nuanced about how we get that information without inflicting further trauma.

We want to know where our students are, so testing them makes sense, but we also need to recognize the complexities of teacher, student & parent trauma. We are in a global pandemic.

Cortez: Fátima, you work with MALDEF. What are your thoughts about pursuing legal action against the TEA? Many people are frustrated.

F. Menéndez: We're all very frustrated, and Senator Menéndez is spot-on. As Representative González notes, this pandemic is disproportionately affecting *Latino* students and students of color from low-income neighborhoods. We've been monitoring this issue in the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition. I can't reveal whether any litigation may or may not be happening, or what we are considering at the moment, but I can tell you that it's something that we are closely following. Some of our priorities for this Legislative Session include high-stakes, standardized testing. We know that it's been disproportionately harmful to *Latino* students and students of color. We are pushing for an elimination of all tests that are not required by the Every Student Succeeds Act. We know that there's a need for holistic assessment, and we need to protect the safety and health of students and teachers, especially those impacted by COVID-19 or with sick members in their households. We are advocating for students to be able to be promoted to the next grade level and to receive a high school diploma without relying on high-stakes, standardized testing—which is why we continue to advocate for Individual Graduation Committees, which are scheduled to sunset in 2023. Senator Seliger has filed a bill to get rid of that expiration date. There's also a bill filed by a representative to authorize Individual Graduation Committees to approve a student's graduation from high school without consideration of end-of-course assessments.

Some of our priorities for this Legislative Session include high-stakes, standardized testing. We know that it's been disproportionately harmful to Latino students & students of color.

Ramón: I feel like I should just "joint-author" the statements of other panelists. Our work for the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition is really a labor of love: We've spent four to six hours in our meetings just talking about assessment and accountability. Our

concerns are not merely related to COVID; they're been building over multiple years and multiple Legislative Sessions. We're really concerned about statewide access to broadband, for rural and urban communities. We've looked at state broadband bills, which is a major trend in legislation. We want education to be explicitly mentioned in legislation, so that there's equity with respect to bilingual students, students with disabilities, students from low-income families, and students of color in K-12 and higher education. We're also following school finance and advocating for a hold harmless. We heard last week that Corpus Christi will lose $1.5 million if there is no hold harmless. Only one in five Emergent Bilinguals—or English Learners—is served in a dual language program. We're also tracking student enrollment in Special Education services. We're also concerned about the trauma that has been inflicted by this pandemic. We conducted a student-led study of students in the San Antonio area: Students created and shared a survey with 120 students, then they analyzed the data. Over 75% of the students stated that they are suffering from some kind of healthcare or mental health issue that has been exasperated by COVID-19. A day doesn't go by that we're not meeting with someone affected by COVID.

Over 75% of the students stated that they are suffering from some kind of healthcare or mental health issue that has been exasperated by COVID-19.

Cortez: What are some of the things that our superintendents and school boards need to know about the 87th Legislative Session?

D. González: It's really important for our school leaders to talk to their legislators about their efforts to find students who aren't currently in school. We're hearing a lot from legislative leadership, as recently as last week from Chairman Taylor, that a lot of these decisions about funding and hold harmless are going to be made against the backdrop of district efforts to bring back the kids they can't get in touch with or engage. That will go a long way towards making sure that we have that hold harmless.

Ramón: I wholeheartedly agree. We've been looking at April 2020 data on emergency PEIMS codes, and our preliminary study suggests that districts serving larger populations of Black and Brown students possess the highest rates of no engagement. The Texas Counselors Association has taken on the task of trying to find these untraceable students, which is made more difficult by the digital divide. We hope to release a more holistic report soon.

Districts serving larger populations of Black & Brown students possess the highest rates of no engagement.

Cortez: We have a question from Lourdes Davenport of *Proyecto Inmigrante* in Dallas/Fort Worth, who asks: How can we, as bilingual families, contribute to the success of our children in school when their parents cannot assist them at home? Can we put a call out to other family members to assist schools? How can we advocate for resources for them, like online tutoring services?

Ramón: We've worked with ARISE *Adelante* in the Valley, which serves bilingual families, to conduct a few *mesas comunitarias*—roundtables—with Spanish-speaking families. We need the quantitative data, but we're also collecting stories on the human element and how families are unfortunately impacted by COVID-19. We are developing resources on learning loss and on the fears of our bilingual families, which are only exasperated by COVID. Some of us have made it our mission to make sure their voices are uplifted in the Legislature.

J. Menéndez: I was born in San Juan, in *el Valle*, so I'd be happy to attend a *mesa comunitaria.* I assume you do them virtually, because of COVID. *Cuando llegan los padres, no hablan inglés, y no queremos que se sientan solos. Que sientan que hay esperanza, que sus hijos pueden, si ponen las ganas, y que estamos para ayudarles* (When parents arrive, they often don't speak English. We don't want for them to feel alone. We want them to have hope and to know their children can succeed if they have the desire—and that we're here to help them).

Ramón: We're also building out a program for family advocates, so if you're interested in becoming a family advocate, we would love to be in touch with you.

Cortez: My first language was Spanish, and we were not allowed to speak Spanish in school in East Texas. It was really har. We also have a question from Trustee Nedra Robinson of Crowley ISD, who wants to know how her district can recruit teachers from Spanish-speaking countries to fill gaps when they can't find certified teachers.

F. Menéndez: At TLEEC, MALDEF and IDRA, we've been looking at the reality of the shortage of bilingual ed teachers. It's especially difficult to attract and retain bilingual ed teachers in rural areas. We've seen bills filed in an attempt to get bilingual ed teachers to those areas through salary supplements or a change in the funding mechanism for them. We really need to focus on certification and grow-your-own teacher programs to bridge the bilingual ed teacher shortage. MALDEF is also interested in pursuing professional licenses for all Texans, regardless of immigration status.

We really need to focus on certification and grow-your-own teacher programs to bridge the bilingual ed teacher shortage.

J. Menéndez: We have to be creative in recruiting bilingual ed teachers, perhaps through scholarships or loan forgiveness.

Ramón: Exactly. I did some work on an accelerated teacher certification model that operated in 55 school districts. We recruited and prepared over 800 recent graduates. I'm happy to connect interested districts with IDRA's education practice team.

Cortez: It's time for our final question: What are the most effective ways that we can advocate for our students throughout Texas during this unique, pandemic Legislative Session?

D. González: I want to hear from our representative and senator! We've been telling folks across the state to contact their local legislators: They know who you are, and you provide them data on your needs, challenges and

successes. And don't forget their staffs, who are really important, especially when you can't reach your representative.

M. González: Dax is correct: Don't feel bad about bugging us. We genuinely care about these issues, and, even though there are a million issues during this session, don't hesitate to be strategic and intentional in the ways you communicate with us!

J. Menéndez: Many of us are doing local communication efforts. I host "Capitol Connection," a weekly Zoom call on Thursdays at 5:30. It's open to the public, and everyone is invited. Come, and ask whatever you want. Make your statement. Do whatever. My whole team is on there. It's an open platform where we provide updates and gather information. Communicate with your legislators and talk to their staffs over and over—until they say, "Yes, we understand: It's a priority!" Prioritizing is key: If everything is important, nothing is important. Divide and conquer: Not everyone's trying to do everything that you're interested in, so find someone to tackle one priority, then find someone else for another priority!

Prioritizing is key: If everything is important, nothing is important. Divide and conquer.

Leading Texas Public Schools during Tumultuous Times

A Panel by the
Texas Association of Latino Administrators & Superintendents

Dr. Priscilla Canales
Weslaco ISD Superintendent
TALAS Director

Michael Cardona
San Marcos CISD Superintendent
TALAS Director

Dr. Celina Estrada Thomas
Hutto ISD Superintendent
TALAS Director

Dr. Roland Hernández
Corpus Christi ISD Superintendent
TALAS Director

Dr. Verónica Vijil
Fabens ISD Superintendent
TALAS Secretary

Dr. Ricardo López, Moderator
Garland ISD Superintendent
TALAS President

February 8, 2021

López: A sincere thank you to MASBA from our TALAS organization. TALAS has been around for a number of years, and we're growing in numbers and impact. I'm Rick Lopez. I'm the proud superintendent of Garland ISD. We're the second-largest school district in Dallas County, outside of Dallas ISD. We have 55,000 students, and we're a very diverse school district.

Today, we're talking about the impact of COVID with five high-powered superintendents from different parts of the state. You'll get superintendents' perspectives on what's gone well, the challenges that lie ahead of us, and what needs to be done legislatively. Let's ask our panelists to introduce themselves.

Canales: I am Priscilla Canales. I grew up in South Texas, and I've have spent my career—over 30 years—trying to make a difference for children. I was a teacher and administrator in San Antonio ISD. I worked in Del Valle ISD, outside of Austin. I've now been the superintendent of Weslaco ISD for five years. I'm humbled and proud to be a superintendent, since we're able to serve all children and help them reach their unique and full potential.

Cardona: My name is Michael Cardona. I still have to defend my dissertation, so I'm not a doctor yet. I was born and raised in San Antonio, Texas. I am a product of private K-12 education and have spent 30 years working in public education, so I've seen both sides. San Marcos CISD is located between San Antonio and Austin, and has about 8,000 students. We're "a diamond in the rough." We're Rattlers for a reason: We're resilient. We're about 70% Latino, and we're about 74% economically disadvantaged, which most people do not known, since they associate San Marcos with the river and with Texas State University.

Estrada: I'm Celina Estrada Thomas. I'm originally from the *Río Grande* Valley, born and raised in Brownsville, Texas, and proud of it. I've been in Central Texas now for over 30 years. This is my 39th year in public education. I'm the proud superintendent of Hutto ISD, home of the only Hippos in the entire United States. I like to brag that I'm the Head Hippo, and I'm okay with that—as long as I never look like one. I'm starting my fourth year as a superintendent and am really having the time of my life. Like Priscilla, I came up the ranks as a teacher, assistant principal, principal and finally decided I was going to take the reins as superintendent. I'm glad I did, and my

only regret is not doing it sooner. I'm having the time of my life in Hutto.

Hernández: My name is Roland Hernández, and I grew up in Woodsboro, outside of Corpus. I'm in my 29th year. I've had the privilege and honor of serving as superintendent here in Corpus now for seven years. I served as superintendent in Waco for a little over four years and at the Texas Education Agency on two different occasions, which was a great learning experience. I'm very excited to share how we're dealing with this pandemic.

Vijil: My name is Veronica Vijil. I'm the proud superintendent of Fabens ISD, located in El Paso County. I have had the benefit of working in different districts, beginning in Ysleta ISD and El Paso ISD. We've also lived in Indianapolis, Indiana, and in Spring, outside of Houston. It's really nice to be back home and to serve the people of Fabens—and to have Mom and Dad down the road and the ability to reconnect with all of my siblings who still live here. It's wonderful working here, and I just love what I do.

López: Thank you, panelists, for joining us today. Today, we hope to give a flavor of the impact and diversity of thought that have within TALAS. It's now been nearly eleven months since our public schools were turned upside-down by COVID-19. Let's start on a positive note: What have you seen in your district and/or in surrounding districts that has made you especially proud of our Texas public schools?

Canales: COVID-19 has had a tremendous impact on us, and many wonderful things have surfaced. In the city of Weslaco and in the *Río Grande* Valley, all districts and superintendents came together as a result of this experience to talk about the critical issues that we face. We've seen teamwork with our boards, we've established relationships with the City, and we've made sure that every child has access to technology so that they can continue their education in the way that their parents choose. We have formed great

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relationships with health officials and county officials. We set up towers on three of our campuses, allowing 7,500 families to have access to internet. We have worked with the County to set up vaccination clinics. The whole "village" has come together during this crisis and has worked in unison with a common goal.

Estrada: Here in Williamson County, our public health officials have been phenomenal. I can't tell you how important that working relationship is. We have ongoing weekly meetings for the sharing of resources and plans. I'm most proud of the collaboration among superintendents throughout the state. We have really come together as a as a leadership group to share plans, ideas and resource. Here in Hutto, our teachers have been fabulous. Our operations team—our custodians, maintenance staff and technology team who work in the background—was recently recognized with an award for their innovation. We were quick to get out Chromebooks and hotspots. They set up an online chat, and parents submitted tickets and didn't have to wait to get help. We had an army of people handling the chats and getting assistance to our families. They have answered the call of duty and have been phenomenal.

Cardona: Priscilla and Celina really summed it up. I want to focus on the people. We have all experienced a lot of anxiety over the past ten months. We worry about our people. We worry about our students and their families—and our decisions literally impact people's lives. Everyone has done an amazing job of pivoting: our child nutrition workers, transportation workers, technology and maintenance workers, our custodial staff, our teachers, and the administrators in central office. They have modeled resiliency. We often talk of education as an iterative process: Mistakes will be made, but we need to be self-reflective and get better. When we were issuing laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots and serving food ten months ago, it really struck me that we were seeing the neighborhood school concept in action. The Hays County Food Bank, the City

We often talk of education as an iterative process: Mistakes will be made, but we need to be self-reflective and get better.

of San Marcos and Hays County collaborated with us to facilitate operations because our people have the capability of getting things done very quickly. We delivered food and curriculum. On a personal note, in August, as we were preparing to open our schools and there was a lot of anxiety in the community, I was in the hospital—in the emergency room—with COVID. My cabinet and principals ran the district, and I had no anxiety at all. Even our board meeting ran so smoothly in my absence and lasted only two hours, making me think, "Maybe I shouldn't come back." It's not about the superintendent; it's about the people. They stepped up and got work done.

López: You all hit on some beautiful points: the unity, dealing with different factors related to student learning, the anxiety levels of people, and the innovation and collaboration. It's very important for board members to know that superintendents across the state have been continually talking at all hours of the night to formulate the plans that we brought to you. At times we were mentally exhausted, doing what's best for our communities. Now that 2020 is in the rearview mirror, what would you have done differently? What are some of the things that we learned or that we would do differently?

Hernández: As superintendents, we always want to be prepared for everything, but hindsight is 20/20, and we sometimes learn the hard way. Technology needs certainly surprised many superintendents and school districts. Corpus Christi ISD is a very diverse district of 37,000 students, 65-70% of whom are economically disadvantaged. Some areas of our city are very impoverished, so our students didn't have the technology they needed. We had to jump on that and make it a priority, issuing devices and supplies. Then came the training piece with instructional technology and getting our teachers ready to serve our students. We were in a reactive mode, but we are in a much

Technology needs certainly surprised many superintendents & school districts…. Our students didn't have the technology they needed.

better place today. We learned a lot about communication, and that there's no such thing as over-communication. We also saw a team effort, with collaboration between all teams and departments in our district as well as with city and county leaders, to do what's best for our kids and our employees.

Vijil: Michael noted that education is a process. We're always trying to learn from the past, and make things better. In our area, we were not prepared for this, particularly with respect to technology. So, we were very reactive. We ordered Chromebooks and hotspots not really knowing a lot about them. Well, it turns out that the towers weren't very close. Our first set of hotspots kept dropping internet service, so we struggled a lot and had to find a different vendor. It was a huge learning process. I had never taken a class in hotspots—but I know a lot more now! Many of our families live in rural areas and were hearing conflicting messages on TV and in the news, so our communication and messaging were key. Parents are doing what they believe to be best for their families, and we have the challenge of informing them of everything we've done to make our buildings safe again. We are a small district, with only 320 students in our buildings, and only 15% have come back. That has been a challenge.

López: Looking back at the pandemic, I congratulate you all for your consistent messaging. If we "change gears" too much as superintendents, people can no longer predict what will happen in the future. What do you believe will be your districts' greatest post-pandemic challenges, and what do we need to advocate for during this new Legislative Session?

Cardona: Sustainable funding is important for us. Last session, House Bill 3 was great, but now we're all a little anxious about what this Legislative Session will do. Will they put selflessness before selfishness, and do what they need to do? We asked our

We asked our educators & staff members to step up and be "essential." They did. Now it's time for legislative policy to mirror that spirit & to reflect the professionalism of our teachers.

educators and staff members to step up and be "essential." They did. Now it's time for legislative policy to mirror that spirit and to reflect the professionalism of our teachers. Funding is a big deal, and the other thing that weights on many of our minds is social emotional supports for our students and staff. Only 50% of our students are in our buildings. Many of our kids come from traumatic environments, and, as a result of this pandemic, many have spent more time in those traumatic environments. So, in addition to making up literacy and numeracy gaps, we need to provide social emotional supports. We'd like to see something come out of the Legislative Session on that. As a former political science major, I would like to see policy that's better able to adapt to present circumstances—in the same way that our educational practices adapted during these months. There seems to be a disconnect with our TEA Commissioner, who seems bound and determined to test kids. We're having issues with connectivity, and we hear, "Go, rent a hotel ballroom for testing." Imagine the anxiety of going to the Embassy Suites to sit through an exam! That's where practice is out of touch with policy, and we have to take a step back and hold our politicians and our TEA personnel accountable for what they expect of us and our students.

Canales: Our teachers and educators at all levels and in all positions have done a tremendous job, doing whatever it takes for our kids and being there for them. What we've seen during these ten months looks like "summer slide." We'll have students start first grade next year without ever stepping a foot in a school building. Our concern shouldn't be sustained funding from the last Legislative Session; we need *more* funding, and we need the flexibility to do what we need to do at the local level to make up the gaps. We need to accelerate learning and deal with all the social emotional factors. It pains me to think that we have young children and high school students waking up every single

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I can imagine high school students screaming at the end of their senior year, "I haven't been with my classmates! I've missed out on all the wonderful traditions of being a senior!" The challenge is not only academic; it's social and emotional.

day and going to a computer for a Google classroom. It's good that they're interacting with their friends and teachers, but they're missing something in those virtual encounters. I can imagine high school students screaming at the end of their senior year, "I haven't been with my classmates! I've missed out on all the wonderful traditions of being a senior!" The challenge is not only academic; it's social and emotional.

We also have district employees who are "essential workers" on the front lines. Our nurses are supporting county vaccination efforts. Our custodians clean rooms where students have been diagnosed with COVID. Our food service workers never missed a beat and served the community when nobody else was. I could go on and on. All of this needs to be funded and supported. Ideally, we would have the resources and flexibility to share hazard pay with those who go above and beyond to keep our entire community safe. We'll see where this Legislative Session goes. Hopefully, it will put children first.

López: That's a perfect segue to my next question. On January 25, the first Monday after the start of our new federal administration, MASBA announced a day to stand in solidarity with the frontline workers in our Texas public schools. What stories might you share with respect to the well-being of our employees during this pandemic, and what ideas do you have on how we might better show our love, concern and appreciation to the heroes who serve our students every day?

Estrada: We certainly show our appreciation through employee pay. With all of the quarantine measures, the majority of our teachers have been able to teach from home, so their pay has continued. We sing the praises of our operations people: They are largely hourly folks who don't have the ability to work from home. When they have to quarantine for 10 or 14 days, they run out of sick time

really fast—even after our boards have been so gracious in extending emergency paid family leave. In the Hutto ISD last week, we made the executive decision to pay employees in quarantine, even if they have already used their ten days of emergency leave. My assistant superintendent for HR was sharing the story of a woman who was just in tears on the phone because she didn't know what she was going to do: She had already maxed out her emergency leave days, her pay was going to be docked, and she needed that check to survive. We need to extend grace. Any policy of docking pay after ten emergency leave days is not realistic or healing. These very unusual times call for unusual measures. Here in Hutto, our board was fantastic: I told them of this executive decision, and they support what is best for our employees. One or two employees may abuse the system, but we can't let that stop us from doing what's best for our employees as a whole.

Any policy of docking pay after 10 emergency leave days is not realistic or healing. These very unusual times call for unusual measures.

Hernández: We recognize that there's a lot of anxiety and fear out there, and our highest priorities are safety and doing what's best for our community. We started out by reminding all of our employees of our district's employee assistance program. We offer counseling services and the support they need. We, too, extended employee leave after it expired in December. As a district, we are very proud of our board and its responsiveness to the needs of our employees, students, administrators and community. We have worked closely with our county leaders and our health district to prioritize our employees for vaccines. Our in-house COVID testing also made our employees feel better and let them know that we don't take them for granted. Through the Texas School Alliance, we have pushed our governor and leaders to remember how essential our frontline workers are. Just today, I received an expression of appreciation from a district employee who received notice of her eligibility for a COVID shot. She was so excited that she broke down in tears. Gestures like

that show our employees the love and care they deserve during these challenging times.

López: Many of you have talked about the collaboration between superintendents and boards. I need to give a shout-out to my board. Like Hutto, our board adopted a resolution to add additional emergency leave for those in quarantine. We're helping to protect them from something that is not their fault. On Tuesday, we're taking a resolution to our board to approve paid time off for receiving the vaccination.

Cardona: We have even signed up to distribute the vaccine at district sites. It's just another thing that none of us ever thought we would be doing.

López: Our district has partnered with health organizations, and we are using our stadium to distribute the vaccine. That partnership is huge. Which equity issues weigh most heavily on you, and what do we need to do to overcome these issues?

Vijil: One equity issue is the fact that we took the U.S. Census in the middle of a pandemic. Many people are not aware that census applications are not mailed out to post office boxes. We are a town that doesn't have mailboxes in front of houses; we all have P.O. boxes, so we tried to do everything in our power to get our families counted. An inaccurate count will only contribute to the inequities that already exist. We're trying to bring COVID testing and vaccines, but, like the census, there are many factors that keep these from our community. A huge shout-out to my board members, who have been working through these equity issues as they evolve during this pandemic and who have been keeping the focus on student outcomes.

Cardona: I echo those sentiments on the U.S. Census. We saw an 18-point drop, largely in hard-to-reach areas in need of resources. Once again, they'll be hurt by the lack of funding they receive. Gaps in literacy and numeracy weigh on all of our minds. Many of our students have fallen back

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during this pandemic. We hope our politicians figure out the funding and put the needs of kids and communities first in this Legislative Session, but they also need to understand that equity is not equality. All our communities are very different, and you can't simply give everyone the same thing. Garland is very different from San Marcos, and even in a small district like San Marcos, each of our elementary campuses is very unique, and the needs of the kids and the families are very different. I hope we address equity issues around social emotional supports. Many of our districts don't have social workers, and Communities in Schools funds parent liaisons in only four of our schools. Many students lack insurance and nutrition. A legislator once asked me, "Well, what's your solution?" I said, "Education, social systems and the economy are all tied together. The worse we do as an education system, the worse our economy will be and the more jails we'll need to build." We all know the research: We build jail cells based on third-grade reading scores! It's an equity issue: We have no problem spending $27,000 a year on incarcerated individuals who made poor choices, but we won't invest $27,000 a year to educate a child and reduce that expenditure on the back end. Our entire system depends on educated children!

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López: Imagine if we received $27,000 per pupil per year! MASBA is an association of school board members and superintendents. As we reflect on our working relationship with each other, what might school board members do to be more helpful as we recover from this pandemic?

Estrada: What I've appreciated most about my board in this crisis is their willingness to always listen and entertain the recommendations and suggestions that we bring forward. I love their probing questions. They make us all think together about what we're rolling out, and how it will be received by parents and our community. They're

willing to be part of the solution. During these ten months, I've never felt any type of judgment or criticism of our leadership team.

Vijil: Trust is essential when we're in the unknown. Just as superintendents have come together, I encourage school board members to build a strong coalition. I thank MASBA for this platform. The needs of our districts are different, but we all have a huge weight on our shoulders. Sometimes it might help just to speak to board members in other districts.

Hernández: Communication is key. We all appreciate our board members and the fact that they're not afraid to ask questions of us as district leaders, and to listen to our answers. I encourage our board members to listen to community members and administrators and to assist us with consistent messaging from the district, so that we're all "on the same page" and people are not getting conflicting stories.

López: I am indebted to my board for their trust in me: They approved emergency declarations, and I did everything in my power to show transparency and not violate their trust. We needed to move fast, and our boards moved fast with us. What advice do we have for board members as we enter a new phase of education? What should we focus on—both now and during the next school year?

Cardona: I keep saying that education is iterative. My board has been wonderful, allowing us to make and learn from mistakes for the benefit of students. Such a spirit is rare—and is often stifled by policy. Our schools will never go back to the "business as usual" of March 2020. We have moved to a different form of instruction. That can be difficult for board members, cabinet members and administrators, who are tempted to fall back into the way we've done things. Let's be part of the iterative process, accept that mistakes will be made, and trust that we are moving forward and creating a better culture and a better organization. Let's be "the calm in the storm" and protect

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our kids from the turbulence that will help us make our organizations better!

Canales: In the Weslaco ISD, our goals are a true "North Star." I don't think they need to change—but our strategies for achieving those goals do need to change. We will need to be innovative. We'll need to spend money in a different way to accomplish our goals. I'm very fortunate that most of my board members have been educators. They love reading. They love research. They love asking questions. They lift up the entire organization, and I'm very grateful for that.

Vijil: We need to embrace the opportunities, because the opportunities now are limitless.

Estrada: I've been bothered recently by the national news: We see school districts, boards and teachers fighting, and they can't get their school systems up and running. We have shown that we are Texas tough. We are Texas durable. From day one, we tackled this pandemic without skipping a beat. Texas is present, we're not going to give up on our families, and we will never, never give up on our kids. As Priscilla said, our strategies and our means are going to change, but let's not lose sight, amid the concern of children falling behind, that we have kept our eyes on the "True North" of our students since day one of this pandemic.

From day one, we tackled this pandemic without skipping a beat. Texas is present, we're not going to give up on our families, and we will never, never give up on our kids.

Vijil: Our students are worth fighting for. That's why we're in this business, and that's why we'll keep fighting for them!

Canales: I try to get everyone to be advocates for our children and to talk about the importance of numeracy and literacy. If we can get children reading for 20 minutes a day, we will bless them with the power of 1.8 million words every single year! We know how important literacy is to learning and to life success. Let's communicate that to parents, to our boards, and everywhere we go!

Cardona: In San Marcos, we have a saying: that "we strike as one." We are tied together as an educational system, including

our school board and superintendent, all fighting for our students, so that when they graduate from our school systems, they will be college-, career- and military-ready, and *they* will decide what they want to do. Let's create literate, numerate students who can think and advocate for themselves!

López: As President of TALAS, I could not be more proud of all of you. Thank you for brightly shining today and for shedding some insight on what's going on across Texas!

Exacerbated Inequities

Dr. Carol Burris
Network for Public Education

Georgina Pérez
Texas State Board of Education

Dr. Dora Sauceda
Brownsville ISD Curriculum & Instruction

Anne Sung
Houston ISD Trustee

Dr. Julián Vásquez Heilig, Moderator
University of Kentucky College of Education

February 15, 2021

Vásquez: I'm Julie Vásquez Heilig. I serve as Dean of the College of Education at the University of Kentucky. I also have Texas roots: I worked in Houston ISD for three years, back in the 1990s and early 2000s, and I was a professor at UT Austin from 2006 to 2014. Now I'm on a tour of duty here to 3,000 students, faculty and staff in Kentucky. I would like to introduce a couple of amazing folks. We purposefully picked them to provide us perspectives from the local, state and national levels.

Dr. Carol Burris is the Executive Director of the Network for Public Education, the largest nonprofit advocating for public education. I was a founding board member of the Network for Public Education back in 2012, and the organization now has hundreds of thousands of members.

Many of you know Honorable Georgina Pérez, a member of the Texas State Board of Education in El Paso. It sounds like folks in El Paso barely missed the winter storms last week in Texas.

We have Dr. Dora Sauceda, Assistant Superintendent in the Brownsville ISD. I chaired Dora's dissertation many

years ago, and she is one of the students I'm most proud of. If there are any school board members out there who are looking for a *Latina* to lead your district, Dora has been an assistant supe for six years and is ready to make that move—though I'd really like to see her as superintendent of Fayette County Public Schools here in Lexington!

Honorable Anne Sung of the Houston ISD Board of Trustees will also be joining us in a moment.

It has been eleven months since public schools in Texas and across the nation were turned upside-down by this once-in-a-century pandemic. Let's start on a positive note: What positive things have you seen during this past year that has made you especially proud of our public schools?

Sauceda: Brownsville is a border town at the southernmost tip of Texas, so when this pandemic began, our public school district suffered from a lack of connectivity. The city had very weak Wi-Fi internet services, and many of our students live in Mexico, so it was difficult for us to ensure that all students had uninterrupted instruction. It was quite difficult, to say the least. As we drove around our schools, we saw our kids parked in front of our schools, trying to access our Wi-Fi in order for them to continue the education. Many of our parents can't afford Wi-Fi. One of the positive things I saw was our district quickly buying devices and hotspots, as well as sharing paper packets. We quickly shifted to online and remote learning. We were more prepared this year. It has been difficult to ensure that all our students have fair and equal access to education.

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Vásquez: Before the pandemic, having high speed internet and devices for each child in your home was a luxury that not everyone could afford, and we know that the Valley was hit harder than many other places by this pandemic.

Pérez: We had a similar experience. We're surrounded by mountains and have no broadband. My district stretches 900 miles along the Texas/Mexico border, from El Paso to Laredo, and every town is a border town. So, we have students who are U.S. citizens, students whose parents are Mexican citizens, and students who live in Mexico. Due to

a lack of investment in broadband infrastructure, many of our students are still doing schoolwork with paper-and-pencil pack or kits, which means there has been no new learning for about eleven months. We need to review what we've learned during this past school year, particularly for our demographic. In five to ten years, when these young people become the tax base and the workforce of our community, it could be quite catastrophic from an economic perspective. Once again, the burden falls on the shoulders of Brown people, of disenfranchised people and of low-wealth communities. Along the border, we're quite concerned about this pandemic's effect on our young people, the extra work that is now required of teachers, and what all this will mean for us a decade from now.

Once again, the burden falls on the shoulders of Brown people, of disenfranchised people and of low-wealth communities.

Vásquez: We absolutely have to be thinking about the cumulative effect of this pandemic. We've seen an exacerbation of inequality that already existed.

Burris: I see this pandemic from a national perspective, as well as from a personal perspective. I'll start with the personal. For 25 years, I was a teacher and a high school principal, so what I'm observing nationally breaks my heart. A good society puts children first—and children have not been put first during this pandemic. We need to get kids back to school, and that means that we need the resources to get them and their teachers back to school safely. In New York City where I am, for example, we see huge disparities between more affluent children who were able to return, and children who live in households of poverty and whose parents are just too worried to have them return because of the terrible price that people of color have paid during this pandemic in terms of health. We see similar patterns in cities where kids are lost track of: I was just reading yesterday that 100,000 kids in Chicago fail to log in for school every day. We're losing connection with lots of kids, and we're not giving them the supports they need and that they get in-person. I worry about the older kids, who, frankly, we may never

A good society puts children first—and children have not been put first during this pandemic.

I worry about the older kids, who, frankly, we may never get back. Who's going to return to school after falling so far behind?

get back. Who's going to return to school after falling so far behind? I'm worried about draconian policies for retaining the kids who will become future dropouts. Poverty has taken an extraordinary toll on these children, and, even with the necessary technology, if students are left to their own devices while their parents are working, a lot of them aren't going to log on. Even students from wealthy homes need adults standing over them and saying, "You need to log on for school!" Imagine what it's like for kids who are high schoolers, whose parents are working, and who need to take care of little brothers and sisters. I so agree with Georgina: We are going to pay the price for this for years and years. It's a national tragedy, next to the people who have lost their lives to this pandemic. This is certainly the worst consequence of COVID-19.

Vásquez: It's very sobering. Here in Fayette County, the University of Kentucky has partnered with the local school district, and all educators have received their first vaccination. That's what leadership and community partnership look like, and frontline workers throughout Kentucky are now starting to be vaccinated. Let's turn to you, Anne. I worked in Houston ISD, in the Accountability and Research Department back during the Rod Paige era. Back then, we knew that the ninth grade was a tough year for kids, and we lost a lot of ninth graders, particularly African-American and Latino kids as a result of high-stakes testing. Twenty years later, HISD is doing much better, but the district continues to be criticized by state legislators.

Sung: We're working really hard to support families, not just for the education, but for basic needs right now. We know that without getting fed and without healthcare, it's impossible for kids to learn. I love the name of this panel: "Exacerbated inequities" is spot on in our district. Anytime we have a natural disaster, like the hurricanes that frequently come through Houston, we see how existing inequities are exacerbated. We are a *Latino*-majority district with over 75% of students receiving free or reduced lunch. It's no surprise, then, that we've seen existing inequities

exacerbated by this pandemic. Food insecurity has worsened. In low-income neighborhoods, families are very food-insecure and lack the devices for remote learning. Over the years, we've put in place supports and wraparound services for families. After Hurricane Harvey, we really built up our wraparound services, and our specialists continue to help families. During this pandemic, we've distributed seven million meals to students and families. We've shared masks and blankets. Our schools are safe places and trusted institutions in our communities, so families will come to us for food, masks and technology. We've distributed 144,000 iPads and laptops and 40,000 mobile hotspots. As we begin to vaccinate Texas, teachers have not generally been prioritized, but we've partnered with local pharmacies to make sure that teachers over the age of 65 can get vaccinated.

Vásquez: I want to thank Houston ISD for addressing those basic needs with blankets and food. Thank you for making the children in your community a priority. What are other actions that you've seen to address inequities?

Burris: New York may be one of the few places where educators were prioritized for the vaccine, after healthcare workers. New York City has done a remarkable job. Our mayor insisted that schools open, and the union pushed back and made sure it was done safely—so many of our schools are open. New York was hit hard by the pandemic last spring, but they made sure that schools were open to provide food and to get hotspots and devices to kids. There have been really good attempts to balance a hybrid program of a fully remote program with open schools. Special education schools were immediately opened, and kids with special needs were brought back by late September. We had a surge of cases again in the winter, and New York closed for a few days, but then we brought the elementary kids back—which was a smart decision because our little ones, in kindergarten through fifth grade, need supervision during the day and are least able to learn

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Pérez: One of the problems that we have here in Texas is that we know how very important our educators are. In many communities, schools are the backbone of the economy. Parents have to work, so their children have to be somewhere safe—but we haven't prioritized our teachers in Texas. Our schools are being forced to open and bring in all kids, regardless of how dangerous the situation is, and the State has said that it will not compensate or assist employees who become ill. At the same time that we say that our local and statewide economies depend on teachers, our State is telling teachers, "You're still not a priority for vaccinations or health. Good luck—and thank you for sacrificing yourselves for the good of the economy!" We need to make some real changes at the state and national levels to support our teachers and school staff. We can't keep pushing and pushing and demanding so much from them, while they increasingly feel burnout from their self-sacrifice. They're human beings, and they deserve to be treated far better than how our state and nation treats them.

We haven't prioritized our teachers in Texas. Our schools are being forced to open & bring in all kids, regardless of how dangerous the situation is…. Our State is telling teachers, "You're still not a priority for vaccinations or health. Good luck—and thank you for sacrificing yourselves for the good of the economy!"

Sauceda: A senator recently asked me what we can do to help teachers. I responded, "Vaccinate our teachers." 24 states have made teachers a priority. Texas has not. We are one of four states that insists on keeping our schools open, which we want to do, but we can't put our teachers at risk, and we want them to feel safe in classrooms with our children. Brownsville is a hotspot in this pandemic because we have multiple generations living together in the same home: Little ones and teenager live with parents and grandparents. I'm proud of New York; now Texas needs to start prioritizing our teachers.

Vásquez: How might school board members and others speak with stakeholders about the importance of responding to the inequities that are being exacerbated by this pandemic?

Sung: In Houston, we've brought together diverse stakeholders for conversations. We also have regular conversations with our health authority, our legislators and our union. There is consensus that it's important for us to open our schools and serve our kids, especially our students with disabilities, but we also need to ensure the safety of our teachers and school-based employees, including our bus drivers and custodians. We are making it a priority to say, "Texas, vaccinate our school-based staff!"—and I think our message is getting through. Legislators are now petitioning Governor Abbott to do that. There are many concerns and hesitations. In some of our elementary schools, only 20-30% of students are back, because our parents don't yet feel confident to send their kids back. We're finding that in our neighborhoods with more minority students, more immigrants, more African-American students, families are choosing to keep kids at home because of the rate of COVID transmission. In more affluent neighborhoods, where families are generally able to work from home and have access to healthcare, families are making different choices.

In our neighborhoods with more minority students, more immigrants, more African-American students, families are choosing to keep kids at home because of the rate of COVID transmission.

Vásquez: That's fascinating. The Houston ISD, of course, is such a large district, with so many different types of schools. We know that the pandemic, in its current form, will not last forever, but we also know that H1N1 or the "swine flu" was the cause of the 1918 flu and has been with us for 100 years. Scientists say that COVID-19 will probably be with us for quite some time, if not forever, but in the form of different variants. At the College of Education at the University of Kentucky, we're beginning to think about life post-pandemic. Strategically, what will we need to do after COVID, especially with respect to addressing inequities?

Pérez: Now that Texas is waiving accountability based on high-stakes standardized testing or two years, it's time for us to discuss returning to a more diagnostic testing model. Let's talk about making up for lost time in the classroom and addressing learning loss, rather than the draconian consequences attached to high-stakes, standardized tests, which will not help us catch up. Besides, it's a bit asinine to test children at the end of the year, when teachers don't have a whole bunch of time left to help students catch up and learn what they haven't mastered. Let's look at and learn from other states. The amount of money that we invest in our high-stakes, standardized testing is beyond ridiculous, and there are better ways to invest this money—to protect our teachers and help our students recover from the learning loss they've experienced.

Let's talk about making up for lost time in the classroom and addressing learning loss, rather than the draconian consequences attached to high-stakes, standardized tests, which will not help us catch up. Besides, it's a bit asinine to test children at the end of the year, when teachers don't have a whole bunch of time left to help students catch up and learn what they haven't mastered.

Vásquez: When I was in Texas, in 2012, we created a community-based accountability system, which is now being implemented in some places in Texas but has been in place in California for quite some time. As a result, the Learning Policy Institute found lower suspension rates, improved student success and increased graduation rates where this was implemented. So, there are alternative ways of doing accountability than the way that Texas has been doing it since the mid-1990s, which is a very top-down, structured approach with high-stakes testing.

Burris: I agree that there's no reason to do high-stakes testing at this time. It just absolutely makes no sense. We have neither the time nor the treasure to do it. Our tax dollars need to be directed towards students now, and we'll just have to accept where they are when they come back and move them ahead from there. It's a fool's gambit to test them and set unreasonable goals now while this pandemic is still raging. Universities will have to be more tolerant

and provide more supports for kids. We'll have to provide more supports for kids outside of the school day. Let's not go back to policies that punish them. If you want to close the achievement gap, focus on closing the opportunity gap. That's where our focus should be. More resources should certainly go toward districts with higher levels of high-needs students. It doesn't take a crystal ball or a high-stakes test to know that the achievement gap has widened. We know where the problems are going to be. We know where the need is going to be. Let's just put our money there, and let's address some of the wider problems that cause these disparities to begin with. If we're going to close opportunity and achievement gaps, we need to increase the minimum wage, create job opportunities, and offer better childcare.

If you want to close the achievement gap, focus on closing the opportunity gap. That's where our focus should be…. It doesn't take a crystal ball or a high-stakes test to know that the achievement gap has widened.

Vásquez: After the 2008 recession, Texas nearly seven billion dollars from public education, and it took a decade to put that money back. School finance has been litigated some five times. What will districts need to address the inequities caused by COVID?

Sauceda: We'll need much higher per-pupil funding. It takes money to provide services. With the "COVID slide," the achievement gap is getting bigger and bigger. We'll need more afterschool programs. We'll need to be very creative with our schedules. We'll need more intersession and summer support program, especially in literacy. We need to redirect funding to social emotional learning and supplementary services. I wrote my dissertation on school finance during our state shortfall, when supplementary services, like counseling and nursing, were cut. I fear that this will happen again, unless our representatives prioritize education and redirect money from testing to supplementary services.

Pérez: The money is there. It's just being spent for the wrong reasons and in the wrong places. Look at how much

Look at how much additional cost the state assumes through privately-managed charter schools. Think about all the money that would provide for dropout recovery, wraparound services & meals!

additional cost the state assumes through privately-managed charter schools. Think about all the money that would provide for dropout recovery, wraparound services and meals! It's not that we don't have the money. We need the right people sitting at the table who can get the money to where it needs to be.

Vásquez: I've done a lot of research on school choice. Texas essentially funds two separate systems of education, which is more expensive than funding one. That's the bottom line. That's where "the rubber meets the road," especially with respect to inefficiencies. Let's conclude with your calls to action to remedy inequities relative to COVID.

Burris: My call to action is: Put children first, and prioritize teachers for vaccinations. Let's make sure that federal funding supplements and doesn't supplant state funding. That'll be a challenge in New York, where Governor Cuomo likes nothing better than to take the money he gets from Washington and use it to fill his budget hole. We need to make sure that those monies fund schools throughout the nation, rather than plug holes.

Sauceda: My call to action is: Prioritize our students, and make education the number one priority for our state. Vaccinate our teachers and staff. It's the only way that we'll get back to normal and get assistance and supplementary services to our students.

Sung: Our people have done a good job, and we don't know where the money for education will come from this Session. If we really believe our kids are important for the future of the state of Texas, we need to put more money into education, not less. Last Session, House Bill 3 moved Texas from the bottom quintile, to the fourth quintile of states in terms of investment in education. That's not good enough, given how much education our kids have lost this year. Let's set high expectations for our legislators and ensure that they supplement and not supplant what we've done.

Pérez: We need to vaccinate our entire staffs. If anyone says there's no money to help students, they're lying to you. We spend almost the same amount of our budget shortfall to fund charters! If you're looking to find money, you don't have to look far: We spend a billion dollars on border security—when the federal government is already funding that. Let's make sure that our *Latino* population does not bear the brunt of the "COVID slide." We need to start investing our children and our students, and the lack of broadband needs to end now. We have the money for it, and many community needs, like telehealth, depend on it. If anyone tells you there's no money, or that they can't find the money, don't believe the hype. They're lying to you. We have the money; we're just not allocating it correctly.

If anyone says there's no money to help students, they're lying to you. We spend almost the same amount of our budget shortfall to fund charters!

Pandemic Public School Policy

State Representative Rafael Anchía
Mexican American Legislative Caucus

State Representative Dr. Gary VanDeaver
House Public Education Committee

Dr. Jayme Mathias, Moderator
MASBA Executive Director

March 1, 2021

Mathias: It's my great pleasure to welcome State Representatives Rafael Anchía and Gary VanDeaver. Let's invite them to introduce themselves and to share their own public education story. I'm a product of 13 years of public education, so I credit much of my present success to the solid foundation that I received from our public schools. Representatives, tell us who you are, and tell us about your connection to our Texas public schools!

VanDeaver: I am absolutely a proud product of public education. I was privileged to have a 33-year career in public education, as a teacher, principal and superintendent. So, I am a huge fan of public education, and I truly believe in the importance of public education. I believe that public education truly is the key to the future of Texas—and for many of our students.

Anchía: This is my ninth term now in the State Legislature, and I had the extreme good fortune of serving as Representative VanDeaver's desk mate for part of that legislative service, where I witnessed firsthand his commitment to public education. I'm the son of immigrants to this country. My parents immigrated in the mid-1950s from Mexico and the Basque Country in northern Spain, to seek a better life. I accessed the "infrastructure" of opportunity in our public schools, from Pre-K all the way to graduating from high school. I enjoyed high-quality public schools, but it's much

deeper than that: We lived in a new immigrant community, where we had people from all over Latin America, and my high school was over 85% *Latino*. We were from Mexico, Cuba, Nicaragua, Venezuela, Colombia and the Dominican Republic. I contribute any success that I've had in my life to that public education experience. I also watched my mom go to community college. She immigrated from Mexico City, attended night school at a community college, studied at a four-year university, then became a public school teacher for 30 years. She taught first-grade bilingual students in our neighborhood. I went to the same high school as José Canseco and Pitbull, to give you an idea of our neighborhood. Then, when I was a "baby lawyer" in Dallas in 1994-1995, I served as "Principal for a Day" at Sunset High School, my neighborhood high school. I asked the principal about the programs that made a difference in my life as a student: debate, moot court, mock trial and a court observer program. He said, "We don't have a debate or mock trial team," so I said, "Sign me up!" I got our law firm to adopt the school and set up a mock trial team, until they brought in a debate coach. That experience caused me to want to be a school board member, so I ran for the school board in 2000 and was elected in 2001. I served on the Dallas School Board for three years, along with Superintendent Mike Moses, when we passed a then-historic $1.4 billion bond package. That's my public education story, and I admire the amazing work that Superintendent Hinojosa is doing in the Dallas ISD today.

Mathias: Here at MASBA, we like to talk in terms of "glows and grows," so let's start on a positive note. It was one year ago today, on February 29, 2020, that our nation suffered its first death due to COVID. Two weeks later, COVID shuttered our Texas public schools, and we had to reinvent public education. My first question for the two of you is: What are some of the "glows"? What are some of the things that have made you proud of our Texas public schools during these past 50 weeks?

Anchía: I have two Dallas ISD high school students—a junior and a freshman—who have gone through this pandemic, and they've been incredibly resilient, and it has allowed me to see how teachers have stepped up. The public education "infrastructure" literally "fixed the plane while flying it." My two children haven't missed a beat, and I get shushed about ten times a day for talking too loud while they're trying to concentrate and study at home. It has allowed me to take a more active role in parenting and helping them with school. The teachers and administrators have been amazing. Despite the hiccups, I really want to honor our school personnel, because they've been out in the community with no rest or respite, with no ability to work from home, and they've done amazingly well to keep us on track. I hope that this is not a "new normal." I still believe that the best, safest and most productive place for kids is in our public schools. Having kids in school also helps families and allows women to reenter the workforce, This experience has provided us with some great learning. Virtual school has allowed us some efficiencies, and students are able to take courses—like AP subjects—that weren't offered on their campuses, allowing them to have a more global education.

The public education "infrastructure" literally "fixed the plane while flying it." …Teachers & administrators have been amazing. Despite the hiccups, I really want to honor our school personnel.

VanDeaver: This pandemic has afforded us great opportunity. Those of us who are connected with public education have forever known the dedication of our teachers. Our teachers love what they do. They love their students. During this pandemic, we saw them rise to a new level. Our bus drivers jumped on buses and took meals and hotspots out to students. So many people rose to hero status during this pandemic, making sure that students' needs were taken care of. It has been amazing to watch these professionals step up. They constructed a high-functioning, online school in a matter of days. It was tremendous! I just

So many people rose to hero status during this pandemic, making sure that students' needs were taken care of.

can't say enough for the adaptability and resilience of our public education community in stepping up. They have a heart for their students, they want to see their students succeed, and they are ready to meet student needs, even if it means taking a meal to them! I have more reason now to be infuriated when I hear people suggest that our teachers are professionals or that they're in this for the money. This pandemic debunked all of that.

Mathias: Thank you for those "glows"! What about some of the "grows"? We say that hindsight is 20/20. What were the challenges that you wish our public schools might have better handled?

VanDeaver: I don't know that there was anything that our schools should have better handled. We certainly had an opportunity to see the gaps we have in broadband in many of our school districts and communities. We know it's a rural issue, but we have broadband "deserts" in urban areas as well. That's going to be a real priority for us in the Legislature. The importance of teachers in classrooms became very clear as well. Hats off to all who made virtual instruction work, but there is really no replacement for in-person teacher-student interaction. So, it's not a knock on teachers or anything that our schools have done; I simply wish that we had had the infrastructure in place to allow them to really do what they need to do.

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Anchía: We certainly saw a material digital divide. Much of that was ameliorated when kids received access to Wi-Fi. Schools issued computers and hotspots. Kids drove to schools for open-access Wi-Fi. Lack of infrastructure and high degrees of poverty were certainly problematic. In my house, we spend a couple hundred dollars a month on our connectivity package, and we get dropped—especially when my girls are using the internet for their studies—so I can imagine the challenges of very large families without a desktop,

laptop, reliable hotspot or Wi-Fi access. I can imagine the challenge of three or four kids in a house, trying to do school work at the same time and on the same device. It's not a criticism of our public schools; it's really more of an opportunity to reflect in the Legislature on how we can offer more connectivity to people in urban and rural areas—which will only make us more competitive as a state. We're the ninth-largest economy in the world. Our economy is bigger than Russia's or Australia's or South Korea's. If we build out the infrastructure, not only will it benefit our students; it'll help us grow our human capital and make us more globally competitive.

Mathias: For those superintendents and school board members who may be a bit more new to their positions, we find ourselves in the middle of a very different Legislative Session here in Texas—and we have about 90 days left in this Session. Give us a perspective on this 87th Legislative Session: What has happened so far, and what might we expect to occur during the last 90 days of this Session?

Anchía: I'm always struck by how quiet the Capitol is these days. Usually, we're blessed with the presence of school children and parents, and Representative VanDeaver and I are giving Capitol tours and engaging with people in our offices. None of that is happening now. It's a byproduct of three things.

We really shut things down after the U.S. Capitol riots on January 6. Representative VanDeaver and I receive security briefings from the Texas Department of Public Safety of the credible threats that have been made against all 50 Capitols, and law enforcement takes those threats very, very seriously. Even today, you'll see an enhanced law enforcement presence at the Capitol.

The second factor is the pandemic. Obviously, we have new protocols in place for testing before coming into the Capitol. The testing is cumbersome, and people have to wait outside for 15 minutes before they get their rapid tests. You can no longer bring a class of 50 high school students into the Capitol with the same ease.

Finally, we lost power in the state for a solid week, and that really impacted our ability to meet. Now we have a virtual Legislature, which works to some extent like our virtual schools, but it really is suboptimal and slows things down for us in the Legislature. While the Speaker of the House is doing a great job of assembling committees and putting talented people in the right places, we really haven't been able to meet yet—apart from the 30 hours of emergency investigative meetings that we held last week to get to the bottom of how 14 million Texans could be left without water and power. That's going to occupy a lot of our legislative "oxygen" this Session, in addition to a competent distribution of the vaccine and the balancing of our budget so that we can keep the promises we made to public education in HB 3. This will be a Session with fewer bills and less "budget dust" for pet initiatives that cost money. After two years of learning, there will be finetuning around HB 3. We're off to a slow start and keeping the main thing the main thing.

This will be a Session with fewer bills & less "budget dust" for pet initiatives that cost money…. We're off to a slow start & keeping the main thing the main thing.

VanDeaver: Coming in, we anticipated a slow start, and certainly the winter storm the week before last didn't help. I agree: It's a priority for us to keep our promises to HB 3. I'm confident we will do that, that there's widespread support for this, and that the money is there. I anticipate an HB 3 cleanup bill, and I hear that we have a 60-page bill—which is huge—being filed. HB 3 was a really large bill, so we should expect the cleanup to be sizable as well. I expect the cleanup to maintain all of the major programs and initiatives of HB 3. We've been very pleased with what we've seen so far. Some HB 3 initiatives are not fully implemented, partially due to COVID and partially due to the amount of time it takes to roll out some initiatives. Our teacher incentive allotment, for instance, is only partially rolled out at this point and will continue to be rolled out in other districts. The HB 3 cleanup will take a lot of air in education. The power failure and our COVID response will take a lot of

air. We'll likely close the digital divide through broadband access. In many ways, this is a fun session, because we're not dealing with some of the silly things that sometimes work their way into the legislative process.

Mathias: Many of our superintendents and school board members have the same question: How can we best advocate for our students and Texas public schools during this very unusual pandemic Legislative Session?

Anchía: Representative VanDeaver and I have a close relationship with TASB, which effectively funnels to us your legislative priorities. I participated in Leadership TASB when I was a school board member, so I think very highly of that organizations. My mom was a 30-year veteran AFT member, so I hear from teacher groups on a regular basis. We want you to do your job: If you communicate your needs, policymakers will often be happy to step up and get you what you need. As a former member of the MASBA Board of Directors, I know that you are a terrific advocacy institution, and, as Chair of our Mexican American Legislative Caucus, I think almost all MASBA members have my cell number, so hit me up by text. With over 1,000 school districts, school board members are one of the largest constituencies in Texas. Thankfully, we are electing more and more school board members to the State Legislature, which helps to tamp down certain narratives and cultivate an appreciation for our public schools.

Thankfully, we are electing more & more school board members to the State Legislature, which helps to tamp down certain narratives & cultivate an appreciation for our public schools.

VanDeaver: I really miss having students come and visit the Capitol. That was always a bright spot for us here. Get to know your legislators—those who represent you. If you don't have the cell phone number of your legislator, then you probably need to work on that relationship. That's the type of relationship we need to have: where we have one another's cell numbers. I enjoy working with TASB and all of the teacher and educator groups. They are a

If you don't have the cell phone number of your legislator, then you probably need to work on that relationship. That's the type of relationship we need to have: where we have one another's cell numbers.

great source of information for us, but nothing can replace the personal relationship that you have with your representative and your senator. Develop those relationships to the point that, if something is coming up in committee or on the floor, you can text your representative and say, "Hey, this is good for us" or "This is bad for us." We can't always respond to everyone in the education community who communicates with us, but I can assure you: We respond to our constituents and those who vote for us. Our constituents have our ear. I discourage groups from sending group emails, where everyone is putting their name on the same email. We get thousands of those, and we can't open them all. The more personal your touch can be, the better your message will be received.

Anchía: A lot of folks have us on speed dial and text us when legislation is moving.

Mathias: We can't understate the importance of relationships. In fact, this webinar is happening because my next-door neighbor is State Representative Eddie Rodríguez. We often speak across the fence, and he said, "You need to get Rafael and Gary as part of your webinar series!" We have a question from Trustee Tracy Fisher of Coppell ISD.

Fisher: I love this platform that MASBA is providing for us to learn during this pandemic! It's so refreshing to see state legislators who really understand education and who care about kids. What is the sentiment in the House and the Senate toward community censorship, toward the idea of taxpayer-funded lobbying?

VanDeaver: When my constituents hear about taxpayer-funded lobbying, they think of multi-million dollar contracts with taxpayer money. Most bills against taxpayer-funded lobbying are really an effort to silence a large sector of my constituency, and I can't support that. I represent a rural area in northeast Texas, so such bills

put rural counties, cities and school districts at a disadvantage. They can't travel to Austin and testify. They need the representation of groups like TASA and TASB and city and county organizations. We need to "keep our eye on the ball" and on any bills on this issue.

Anchía: It's part of a theme of eroding local control. As someone who's been a local elected official, I'm willing to countenance local government getting it wrong, but local government is always closest and most responsive to people. When I was a school board member, I was stopped in the grocery store all the time. If people stop me now, they confuse me with their federal legislators. That's a testament to the fact that people know who their mayor, city council members and school board members are. I can't support such bills. In fact, it's the ultimate hypocrisy to support such bills when we have the Office of State and Federal Relations, which does the same exact thing for the state of Texas in Washington, D.C.! That's right: Even though we have 38 members in Congress, we still have an Office of State and Federal Relations in Washington, D.C., that is run out of our Governor's office and lobbies Washington on behalf of Texas. You can't have it both ways: You can't say that what Texas is doing in D.C. is O.K., but that the City of Dallas can't have someone down here at the Capitol advocating for their interests.

It's the ultimate hypocrisy to support such bills when we have the Office of State & Federal Relations, which does the same exact thing for the state of Texas in Washington, D.C.!

Mathias: We now go to Johno Oberly of Leadership ISD.

Oberly: Thank you so much for hanging out with us today. I work with a group of students who are really interested in student voice at the local level and at the Capitol. Representative Talarico is filing a bill that seeks to be more intentional about involving students in the decisions that directly impact them. As we come out of COVID, there is sometimes a pretty big dissonance between what is actually happening in classrooms and what we, as adults, believe is happening in classrooms. My question is: Would you be in favor of more directly

involving student feedback and voice in the process of decision-making?

Anchía: I have voted for that in the past, and early in my legislative career, we put a student member on the UT Board of Regents. When I was on the school board, we had a teen representative on our board. Those things make a ton of sense. Some of the best ideas I've gotten for bills have come from students. And they are some of our most ferocious advocates! Elementary students once called me in, to talk to me about the STAAR test, how much time it took away from instruction, and how much time it took for the test. We have fifth-graders sit in a room for eight hours, until the last student is finished with the damned test. That type of advocacy hits close to home—and those students didn't want to hear excuses from me. They wanted me to take action. Candidly, student voice is a very effective form of advocacy.

Some of the best ideas I've gotten for bills have come from students. And they are some of our most ferocious advocates!

VanDeaver: I totally agree. Some of the best ideas come from those who experience the effects of the policy we create. We do a disservice by not allowing their voices to be heard. Some student feedback is great, and some is not usable—but we have that at the State House, too. I certainly support student voice being heard to a higher degree.

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Mathias: As we start to conclude, I'll pull together two questions from two of our MASBA Directors. Trustee Sylvester Vásquez of Southwest ISD in San Antonio says, "*Gracias* to Rafael and Gary. Any possibility of getting funds to be able to increase staff pay? They have come through for us during these hard times and are literally doing double the work in many creative ways. We need to thank them through compensation." And Trustee Raymond Meza of San Felipe-Del Río CISD says, "Our students are stressed to a great extent by looking at their computer screens for long periods of time. What

assistance can be provided for mental health programs to help with social emotional issues?" Is there anything you might say to address either or both questions?

Anchía: This pandemic has impacted my mental health. I'll be very plain about it: This pandemic has caused a lot of stress for a lot of people. Many people lost their jobs or had difficulties with childcare. Many navigated school with suboptimal hardware and Wi-Fi. My hat is off to the people who have struggled, and there's no shame in talking about mental health. This has been a stressful time. It has been a stressful time for school districts, with new costs added to budgets, and school districts have spent money to expand mental health. I think the State should partner with you and help share those costs.

My hat is off to the people who have struggled, and there's no shame in talking about mental health. This has been a stressful time.

VanDeaver: We know our school districts have incurred additional expenses, and it's only fair that we help cover those expenses. Our educators have stepped up and gone above and beyond, and we need to compensate them for that. I have the honor of serving on the House Public Education Committee and on the Appropriations Committee, and we have been discussing the $5.5 billion dollars coming from the federal CARES Act. We need to see to it that these monies go to school districts and aren't captured by the TEA and used for other things than expenses incurred by school districts as a result of this pandemic. We had to deal with mental health issues before the pandemic. We know that this pandemic only makes this money more important. Let's keep our eye on those $5.5 billion, to make sure they go to districts and incentivize their teachers and employees.

Mathias: Representative Anchía, you serve on the Redistricting Committee. Now that the 2020 U.S. Census is complete, many large school districts will be redistricting as well. Is there anything that we should know about redistricting at the state level, or is there any way that we should be involved?

Anchía: We won't do redistricting until later this year, when we have the racial and ethnic demographic data. We need block-level data for redistricting—and that likely won't be available until September. We'll be called back into Session the minute that block-level data is loaded into our redistricting software, and we'll quickly knock out maps—for Congress, then the State Senate and House, then the State Board of Education. According to our Texas Constitution, redistricting for the State House and State Senate has to be done during regular sessions of the Legislature, so it's entirely possible that we'll just have provisional maps going into the 2022 election cycle for State House and State Senate. I've been a longtime advocate of citizen-led redistricting commissions. When I chaired the City of Dallas Charter Review Commission, we created a citizen-led redistricting commission. I ask that MASBA and TASB members advocate that we don't let politicians pick their voters; let the voters pick their politicians! To have truly democratic redistricting, we need to put citizens in charge of the process. Let them draw fair districts, so that communities can elect the candidates of their choice.

I ask that MASBA & TASB members advocate that we don't let politicians pick their voters; let the voters pick their politicians!

Mathias: What concluding words and/or call to action might you share with the school board members and superintendents who are with us today?

VanDeaver: I've enjoyed this time and great discussion with you and with my colleague, Representative Anchía. As a freshman, I chose him as my desk mate because I knew that he brought a wealth of knowledge and experience. That was a great decision, I learned a lot, and he really helped "show me the ropes" of the Legislature. MASBA is already involved and committed to public education and to our students. I encourage you to stay involved. Reach out to your representative. Feel free to reach out to me. If you don't have my cell phone number, I'm happy to share it with you. Don't let your guard down. Stay active. Stay involved. Stay with it. Public education has a bright future, and we will come out of this

pandemic better than we went into it. I'm convinced of that because I know the people who are involved. I look forward to that future, and I look forward to working with you in the future!

Anchía: I appreciated Gary's kind words. People often ask Gary and me, "How is it working across the aisle?" I reply, "There is no aisle. We sit together, as Republicans and Democrats, all over the House floor, and we proved to Texas last Session that we can set aside any differences we might have—and those differences always make the news. Gary and I vote together 75% of the time—but that never makes the paper. We try to take off our Republican and Democrat "jerseys" and put on our Texas "jerseys." We did that with HB 3, and we have another opportunity to exert bipartisan leadership during this pandemic as we distribute the vaccine, balance the budget, and ensure a reliable power source for Texas. Let's wave the victory flag on those issues, then go home and let local school board members and superintendents soldier on without our interference—which, I know, is what you want us to do. We need to "do no harm." We need to be part of the team, part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

We need to be part of the team, part of the solution, and not part of the problem.

Public Education Issues of the 87th Legislative Session

Amy Beneski
Texas Association of School Administrators

Dr. Jesús Chávez
South Texas Association of Schools

Dax González
Texas Association of School Boards

Naomi Miller
Northside ISD Governmental Relations

Kevin O'Hanlon
O'Hanlon Demerath & Castillo

Charles Stafford, Moderator
Denton ISD Trustee
MASBA Treasurer

March 8, 2021

Stafford: We have a panel today with a lot of expertise. I'd like to invite our panelists to introduce themselves and to begin by sharing with us their public education stories. My public education story began in 1988, when I was a brand-new board member with four adopted kids and "stars in my eyes." A few years later, and with few non-gray hairs left, I'm still doing my best. As our Governor insists on opening our state, I regret that the only things that aren't open in Texas are…our science books!

Chávez: I'm Jesús Chávez. I'm a longtime educator and have served in public education for 35 years—as a teacher, central office administrator, and for 17 years as a superintendent. Most recently, I retired from Round Rock ISD, but I still wanted to have my "toe" in education, so I have now served as Executive Director for the South Texas Association of Schools for five years—or three

Legislative Sessions. Some of you may remember Martín Peña, the former Executive Director with the South Texas Association of Schools. He took me "under his wing" and handed the organization over to me. My passion, of course, is for children and for the learning that's necessary for them to be successful—not only while they're with us in school, but also for them to be successful in life. I'm happy to be part of education and part of advocating for all Texas children.

González: My name is Dax González. I'm the Division Director for TASB Government Relations. I've been there for about 14 years now. I'm really proud to have this job and to contribute to public education, because I come from a family of educators: My parents are both teachers, and I don't have that disposition, so I give to education in this way!

Beneski: I'm Amy Beneski with TASA. I'm a product of public education, but then, when I worked in the criminal justice world for a while, I noticed a theme of uneducated folks in our prison systems. I wanted to do something different, so, in 2002, I came on board with TASA and have been here ever since. I am in awe at all the things that trustees and people do for our kids in our schools!

Miller: I'm Naomi Miller. I'm the Director of Government Relations for Northside ISD in San Antonio. I'm a product of public schools, but I am still fairly new to public education advocacy, and I am starting my third year with Northside. Prior to that, I worked for the State Legislature, in the Speaker's Office, so, in my work of advocacy for all students in Texas, I like to think that I see both sides. Our students, teachers and families need a voice at the Legislature.

Stafford: We'll catch up with Kevin O'Hanlon when he joins us. Just over 80 days are left in this very different Legislative Session. What have been some of the highlights and lowlights so far, and what can we expect during the last 80 days?

Beneski: Being in a global pandemic for a little over a year now, this has been a Session like no other—and this comes on

the heels of the historic legislation of House Bill 3 last go-around. Access to the Capitol is a more limited than we've seen in the past. With a focus on major issues, there seems to be a theme that fewer bills will go through this go-around. The Legislature is constitutionally required to pass a budget, and we'll likely see some cleanup language in House Bill 3. Every Session has its own "groove." This one started slow and is just beginning to pick up. Folks in the education community are used to "pivoting"; that's also what's happening in the Legislature.

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González: This Session keeps getting more and more unprecedented, especially now after the winter storms we just got through. Before the storm, legislators seemed content with passing the budget and getting out of town. Since the storm, there has been a slew of issues that have risen to prominence. Broadband will be addressed: Kids with devices need a way to connect with their schools. Committee are beginning to take up bills, and it's almost as if they're putting out "feeler bills," to see if they can get into a groove.

Miller: This is my tenth Session in some capacity, and it seems to be the slowest one I've seen, with the least amount of activity on the floor. The House and Senate didn't begin referring bills till two or three weeks later than they did during the last Session, then the winter storm hit. I'm hopeful that the Legislature will address assessment and accountability, considering how the "COVID slide" will continue to affect students for years to come. Because of the delay in census data, we know we'll have a special session in the fall. That's a sticking point for us, GR folks, but it's also an opportunity for the Governor to add those issues that aren't taken up before *sine die*, the last day of Session.

Chávez: Accessibility to our representatives and senators continues to be very challenging in light of COVID-19. We're communicating with legislators largely by telephone and email. We should also make an extra effort

to be at the Capitol at appropriate times. As important bills come before committees, we need to be there. The surprising, good news is that we're no longer projected to wind up with a $5 billion deficit, as we initially thought. The latest revenue estimate has us coming in less than a billion dollars short. I keep pressing districts to identify the needs of children and to hold legislators' "feet to the fire." School districts need additional funds for the acceleration of instruction and other COVID-related items. I hope we wind up the Session in a better situation than we thought a few months back.

O'Hanlon: Now that President Biden is about to sign the new COVID relief bill, we should expect a bunch of money for school districts, unless the Legislature takes it out again. We're going to be challenged by the "doomsday machine" of the compression of tax rates in HB 3, which will subsidize local compression with the new money from rising property values and result in lower total revenues for districts. I'm concerned about what HB 3 and its obsession with lowering tax rates will do long term to public education funding.

Stafford: Following the thread of that thought, what are some of the best ways that we can advocate for our students and for our schools during this Legislative Session?

Beneski: We have $5.5 billion of federal aid that we've received and that is still sitting there. We're going to have to make our case for this additional funding—and we certainly can do that with all the learning loss we've seen, which won't disappear when we're vaccinated and have achieved herd immunity. We're going to have to work to close gaps over the next couple of years, so it's incumbent upon trustees and superintendents to talk to their legislators now and say, "Here's why we need this money: We need it for summer school. We need it for additional tutoring. We need it to pay our teacher more. Our kids need this money! Our school districts need this money!" Fund balances have become

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an issue this Session and we need to tell our lawmakers how we're using our fund balances during this pandemic and during the recent ice storm.

González: During the last House Public Education Committee hearing, Representative Dan Huberty made sure that all committee members heard that there are $7 billion of fund balances in excess of what is recommended for school districts. School leaders really need to talk to their legislators about what they're currently using those fund balances for. A lot of districts have remediation programs for kids. Legislators need to know that y'all are already using that money. Even before COVID, many districts approved deficit budgets that would tap into their fund balances in order to keep their districts afloat. We also need to give very specific examples of the things that we'll spend federal stimulus money on, to help get kids back up-to-speed. It has been somewhat offensive to hear legislators suggest that districts aren't doing enough to find the kids who are missing and aren't in school, because I know that schools are doing a lot of things to find those kids. We need to tell our legislators how we're doing these things, and how we need federal dollars to supplement and not supplant state funding.

Chávez: We can't overemphasize the need for school board members and superintendents to communicate with their legislators. Pick up the phone. Send an email. Visit the Capitol. All these actions are very important. As individuals, we each need to make a commitment to these actions. We need to acknowledge that the "COVID slide" is not going to be a one-summer fix or a one-year fix. Let's see it long-term, as something over three to five years through a lot of effort: programming, curriculum, materials, and everything it will take to advance our students and catch them up. There are federal dollars available, and we have to use them for COVID, for "COVID slide," and other COVID-related expenditures. Many school districts have invested in computers, devices, towers and other

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solutions to resolve the issue of connectivity. Those have been expensive, and we need to communicate with legislators not only about our needs, but also about the expenses we've incurred.

Miller: This is the first time that I can think of where we've had a crisis or disaster that has affected every single school district in Texas. It's not like a hurricane, which only affects some school districts and their fund balance. The fund balance conversation needs to include all the unanticipated expenses that districts have endured during this past year. The Capitol halls are more empty, but calling and writing letters is just as effective, and our legislators and their staffs are accustomed to virtual meetings. Advocate aggressively. Request online meetings. Keep the conversation open about the federal dollars that came in the December package, and that are expected to be approved in the federal package tomorrow. Those dollars can help mitigate the expenses that every school district in Texas has had to endure. This isn't an East Texas problem. This isn't a South Texas problem. This pandemic has affected every single student in Texas, so no member of the Legislature can say, "I'm not going to vote for this; it doesn't affect my district!" This pandemic has affected the constituents of every legislator. Those federal dollars need to come to our school districts, as they were intended to.

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O'Hanlon: In the words of the Clinton Administration, we need to be careful not to waste a crisis. The traditional notion of a nine-month school year, with three months off in the summer, is now exploded. What a regular classroom looks like has been exploded. We now have technology in the hands of every students, even if we haven't totally mastered the art of how to use it. This

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is our chance to transform public education. The rhetoric needs to stop. We need to figure out how we're going to educate, catch up and create a "new normal." We need to capture people's imagination and re-engineer because the old paradigm is on the rocks. We need to rebuild it in a way that makes sense with the short-term money we receive. We need to be thinking about how we transform the business of education. We can't go back to where we were ten years ago. This is a bridge to something new, something we must begin to imagine now. We need to lead the change, rather than have it dictated to us by someone on the Senate Education Committee or on the House Public Education Committee. We need to imagine what this could be like, we need to build it, and then we need to grab the phone. We should not let this opportunity pass to advocate for significant restructuring.

Stafford: We have an opportunity for visionary leadership to step up!

González: Talking about leadership, we were disappointed to see school districts thrown under the bus when our Governor announced the lifting of our statewide mask mandate. He left it to local school districts to fend off the hoards, you might say. I've seen the emails, and I'm sure you have, too, of parents threatening to send their maskless kids to school, no matter what, and telling us that they'll be visiting their kids every day for the rest of the school year without their masks. School districts were provided no cover and little support, and it puts many school districts in a really tough spot.

Stafford: If you polled our parents in Denton, you'd likely find a 50/50 split. We're taking our lead from county public health officials, and we're following CDC guidelines. It's the Governor's job to safeguard the economy, but it's our job to safeguard our children and our teachers. He can do what he needs to do, and we will do what

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O'Hanlon: School districts still have the authority to "run their own business." The Governor left you on an island, but there's no doubt that school board trustees have the ability to make those determinations. It's a tougher call with the Governor leading the cheerleaders, but let there be no doubt: You have the authority to require masks and institute any remedial measures.

Chávez: I return to Kevin's comments about taking the opportunity to change education. We're hearing concerns about students who haven't attended pre-kindergarten or kindergarten—and now they're expected to go into the first grade next year. One proposal is for them to repeat kindergarten. The research shows that every time you retain a student, the chances of graduation are lessened for that student. I'm concerned by proposals to retain students. Instead, I ask: How can we accelerate those students? How can we put in place the necessary policies and practices to jump them forward when they learn and master the content? We shouldn't make them go into kindergarten when they're supposed to be in the first grade. We need to get away from this "one year, one grade" model of education and create opportunities for students to advance and move forward. We've been talking about this for decades. This is something we should talk about and promote. The other piece is in-person instruction versus online learning versus hybrid models. Almost all the bills we've seen relate to in-person instruction. We need to expand our legislation on online learning, because the rules and laws aren't in place to facilitate that. We need to allow for the flexibility of online and hybrid instruction. As Kevin suggests, we need to move forward and change how we do education.

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Miller: I keep talking about the long term. I have a niece and nephew who go to school virtually, from home. My sister-

in-law is a teacher and stay-at-home mom, so they'll succeed, of course. There is no adolescent vaccine yet. It's completely missing, and it's not on the table at all. Even if we vaccinate all kids this summer, my niece could decide to do her high school studies from home, with the fear of being exposed to COVID. Some of our kids are looking at the positive side of virtual learning. Some have had a taste of it and believe they could be more successful, if they had a virtual option. School districts should think through how to provide online learning options that aren't burdensome to students or teachers. We really need to look at something new moving forward. We have the State Virtual School Network, but it's set up in a way that's not easily accessible for our school districts. We need a robust curriculum for kids who want to learn at home. The fact that we don't yet have an adolescent vaccine is detrimental to our planning process.

Beneski: The pandemic has provided an opportunity for districts to use technology and deliver instruction in a different way. Having a child in front of a teacher is usually the best idea-but it's not the only way. It's time to really think "outside the box." Superintendents across the state tell me that parents are asking how districts will continue virtual learning. Everyone is trying to figure out how to deliver it and what the parameters will be. This doesn't necessarily mean that we'll be adding to what teachers are already doing. Our TEA Commissioner refers to these two groups of students—engaged in virtual and in-person learning—as Zoomies and Roomies. We need robust programs for both. Traditional school settings will be important for mitigating additional learning loss, and now it's exciting to see public education pivoting in a direction that we could not have imagined at the beginning of last school year. We have to be really careful with the bill language, to make sure that we get it right.

Our TEA Commissioner refers to these two groups of students – engaged in virtual and in-person learning – as Zoomies and Roomies. We need robust programs for both.

González: We'll have to be really careful about the language, since the expansion of virtual instruction will include private

providers and charter schools. We need to ensure that the language allows districts to provide virtual instruction for their kids as best as they can while providing districts the flexibility, resources and support to do that.

Stafford: It's important to acknowledge that we have teachers who now have multiple preps and who aren't doing virtual teaching by choice: They stepped up because somebody had to do it. We spent millions out of our fund balance to purchase devices and settle connectivity issues. We now have a brand new platform and area a lot better off than we were in the past. We also know that there are "wolves" in the fold, in the form of virtual charters that make incredible promises, and we don't know whether they'll deliver or not. In my district, we know that if we don't offer a high-quality product, somebody else will come in and sell one.

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O'Hanlon: Now that we've begun virtual learning, we need to ask how we'll incorporate a feedback loop. We need to think through ADA and academic rigor, rather than simply counting noses. If we can figure out how to reintroduce rigor, they may give us some flexibility here. We need to convince people that we can do this. There's another option, which is tail-end funding, where entities receive funding when students pass examinations.

Beneski: I'm concerned that we have some very large omnibus bills, and amendments can be tacked on them in the last hours of the Session. We can't be strangers to our lawmakers. Talk with them about fund balances. Make sure your lawmakers know what their school districts are thinking. Don't wait for legislative alerts with specific bill numbers. Talk generically about big issues.

Stafford: That sounds like a call to action! What other calls to action might we share?

González: We need trustees to be out there, contacting their legislators and letting them know our issues—and we need to do this quickly.

Chávez: We also need to pay attention to the bills that we don't support.

Miller: My advice is that we taper our expectations in light of state priorities, and focus on federal money. Let's make sure we get those extra dollars and are fully funded, so that we can be successful until the Legislature meets again in 2023.

O'Hanlon: Bad ideas accumulate over time, and lawmakers need to be educated. This is going to be a late-arriving session, with a lot being done through what we used to call the "Christmas tree bill," where everyone tries to hang their "ornaments" at the last minute in conference. We need to do our groundwork well before then.

Student Experiences of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Christian
El Paso ISD Student

Evelyn
Houston ISD Student

Fernando
Southwest ISD Student

Jon Paul
Hays CISD Student

Michael
Mathis ISD Student

Susana
Plainview ISD Student

Jacinto Ramos, Jr., Co-moderator
Fort Worth ISD Trustee
MASBA President

Johno Oberly, Co-moderator
Leadership ISD

March 15, 2021

Ramos: A mentor of mine used to say, "Young people make up 10% of the population, but 100% of the future." I'm pleased today to introduce my colleague at Leadership ISD, Johno Oberly, who has a gift of communicating with young people and translating their words for adults. Last year, we hosted a panel on students' perspectives of this pandemic. A year later, we're taking advantage of this spring break week to invite students to be with us and to speak of their experiences—and we look forward to hearing them speak their truth!

Oberly: I'm really excited to be here. Over the course of the last year of this pandemic, I've been talking with students from all across the state about their school experiences, and I've been helping adults in school districts to have really authentic conversations with students. In our conversations, students share their experiences, identify challenges and share potential solutions. Students, we'll invite you to share with us your name, your school district, and your favorite extracurricular activity prior to this pandemic.

Evelyn: I'm Evelyn. I'm from the Houston ISD. I'm a senior this year, which has not been as great as I thought it was going to be. My favorite extracurricular activity was biking. I love to ride my bike around the neighborhood.

Jon Paul: I'm Jon Paul. I'm a junior in Hays CISD. Before this pandemic, I liked to travel and play games.

Christian: I'm Christian. I'm from El Paso ISD. My favorite extracurricular outside of the pandemic was Student Council.

Fernando: I'm Fernando, and I'm from Southwest ISD. I'm in the 12th grade, and my favorite extracurricular activity is athletic training.

Susana: My name is Susana. I'm from Plainview ISD. I'm a junior this year, and my favorite extracurricular activity outside of the pandemic was theater.

Oberly: It was a year ago this week that most Texas public schools temporarily shut down because of COVID-19 and tried to figure out how to take education entirely online. Tell us what those first few weeks were like. What moments stand out to you during those days when you realized, "Holy cow, things are bananas!"

Fernando: I was attending a baseball game for athletic training when we received a communication from the school district, saying that we wouldn't return to school for a couple of weeks. They said they would let us know. It was weird. We were all together, so we looked at one another and asked, "What is this supposed to mean?" There was no more baseball the rest of the year. As a junior, I hoped my senior year would be better. Obviously, it's not.

Evelyn: That week, we went to our Business Professionals of America state competitions in Dallas, when everyone was starting to get COVID. When we came back, everything shut down. Our teacher said, "Aren't you glad we went to Dallas before everything shut down?" I was like, "I guess"—but we couldn't go to nationals! Everything just went "bye bye."

Jon Paul: At first, I was happy that we got a week off of school. Then we got another week off, then another week, and, after a while, it got pretty boring just being in the house.

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Christian: The week we started the shutdown, we were hosting our district's Special Olympics. It's weird looking at my phone now and seeing that we didn't wear masks then. Those photos look so wrong! Here in El Paso, we got hit pretty hard with COVID cases. We had spring break, then we got another week for spring break, and then another week of spring break, and then Zoom classes. We had no idea what was coming.

Susana: I'm not very good with not knowing what's coming, so it was kind of scary as more weeks were added to our spring break. Everything shut down so quickly, and we couldn't ask people questions—because they had never been through a pandemic before.

Oberly: You all had to approach a situation that no one had ever experienced before. That had to have been challenging. That leads to my next question. After the shutdown, students, teachers and parents had to make a significant transition to online learning. How was that transition?

Evelyn: This may sound harsh, but I was like March was the end of the year. We had a whole month of spring break, and then students were wondering, "Why go to school through Zoom? We're in a pandemic, and they still want us to go to school? That's not how it works!" A lot of

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students just lost the motivation to go to school. Many students put other priorities ahead of school and said, "What's the point of going to school now?" School just wasn't important for a lot of kids. I had perfect attendance in elementary and middle school, then all of a sudden we went virtual. A lot of students were asleep or in bed during class. We're still not fully used to it.

Jon Paul: I agree about not having the motivation to do schoolwork anymore. It was hard. At school, we do our work and fall in line. It wasn't a good transition. We started receiving mountains of work. I just didn't enjoy it very much anymore, and I lost a lot of motivation to do work.

Oberly: Does it feel like you're receiving more work through virtual learning, than when you were in person? I see Susana and Jon Paul nodding. Fernando says, "100%." Are you 100% sure you're receiving more work now than you would be in-person?

Christian: When you're in-person, you get an assignment and have a week to do it, maybe even as a group project. Online, it seems like teachers have to give a certain amount of assignments for the grading period. We used to work on bigger assignments over longer periods of time, but now we get assignments each day. It gets mundane, because it feels like the same assignments over and over again. In English, they say, "Find these literary elements in this essay." Then, the next week, we're looking for the same literary elements in another story or essay. It just gets kind of boring.

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Susana: I actually attend in-person now. I did online for a while, at the beginning of COVID, and I just didn't like it. It was really hard to communicate with teachers online. There was a delay: Teachers answered your questions the next day. I sympathize with y'all who are still online.

Fernando: At the beginning, we had 20 to 30 kids logging in through Zoom for a class. Now we three to five kids show up for class, because we have until midnight to finish assignments, so kids say, "Why should I show up at class?" At the beginning, we thought we had to show up for attendance, but the district wasn't able to control that. We get a lot of work, and, like Christian said, it's the same thing over and over. There's no group work, like we used to do. There are no more fun conversations in class, where the teacher can join in. Now it's just, "Here's your assignment. Turn it in when you're done—and when you're done, I'll give you three more assignments. It just never stops.

There are no more fun conversations in class, where the teacher can join in. Now it's just, "Here's your assignment. Turn it in when you're done—and when you're done, I'll give you three more assignments. It just never stops.

Oberly: I can imagine how that sort of repetition would get really old really fast. Are there ways in which your teachers have tried to recreate that feeling of being in a classroom in virtual learning?

Evelyn: My literature teacher is very big on communication, so she's trying to figure out new ways of communicating more efficiently. She uses a platform that's like a PowerPoint. The first slide will say, "How are you feeling today?" I always like that. It's good for your mental health. She asks us questions, and we type our answers and she reads our responses while we're going. It's kind of like a virtual conversation, where the teacher is writing, "Yes, I love that" or "Yes, I agree." It's almost like a face-to-face conversation

Susana: I'm going in-person now because virtual learning is not for me. It's a different experience because of COVID, and I like to talk to my teachers about how they have to change their lessons because of the pandemic.

Fernando: I'm in an education and training class, because my pathway is education right now, and my teacher uses Nearpod for all virtual and in-person students. We answer questions and play educational games. She calls on us to read slides, and we've gotten so comfortable with each other that, even when we're virtual, we all turn our cameras on and are never muted. It feels like we're not virtual, but that we're really in-person. It's kind of cool being virtual: Kids are at home, and you get to see their whole face on the screen, which you don't see in the classroom. The first few weeks were weird because some kids are at school, and others are at home. Now it's like, "This is our 'new normal.' We have to adapt—and we did!"

It's kind of cool being virtual: Kids are at home, and you get to see their whole face on the screen, which you don't see in the classroom.

Oberly: How do you think your teachers have been impacted by this pandemic?

Jon Paul: Teaching is different for them now. Now they use a lot of different websites, like my physics teacher has us using Khan Academy. Other teachers give us work on three different sites.

Susana: My teachers have been really stressed. Almost all students go in-person, but we also have an online option, so teachers are having to do double the lessons: for the in-person kids, but then making those lessons available to everyone who's online. They've had to learn lots of new technology. Like Jon Paul said, they work with a lot of platforms, so that we can get them the work that they need. They're getting used to it, but they're still a little more overwhelmed than they were in years past.

Christian: Many of my teachers are still virtual, but they have found ways to keep students engaged. It seems that's been their biggest struggle. Last year, attendance was counted by if you turned in the assignments. This year, to be counted, we need to show up for our Zoom classes. We have to log in to be counted presence. It seems teachers are struggling to keep students engaged.

Fernando: It seems this is very stressful for teachers, because they've never done it. They're getting instructions from the superintendent and all the higher-ups who've never tried teaching virtual and who don't know what works and what doesn't work. Teachers get all these instructions from all the higher-ups, who don't know what's working and what isn't, so that really stresses teachers out. They're trying to do what they're told, but they're also trying to do what's best for students, because that's their main priority right now.

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Evelyn: I feel like my teachers have been able to handle the whole virtual thing. It has been very stressful for most of them. The higher-ups give them a platform they have to use, but they don't even know how to use them. They know what will work best for our learning. You really can't give orders to people if you haven't been in their position and can't see what they're going through, Your literature, physics and pre-cal teachers might all choose different platforms. Getting different perspectives always helps.

Michael: Student engagement is really important. When this school year started, it was all virtual, and everyone was bored. We're all sleepy, in our rooms, and I was the guy who really tried to crack jokes and talk to people. I was just trying to act normal, as if nothing's wrong, and that really made a difference.

Oberly: It's like you're saying: This is how things are, and we can respond by being weird and turning off our cameras and ignoring each other, or we can interact like real human beings. We often hear the phrase, "Do your work," as if the most important thing at school is to do the work that is assigned. There are two things: There's the work that's assigned, and there's the point of school, which is to make you a better human, able to create the life that you want for yourself and more likely to be successful as you enter

the real world. Can you talk about the difference or the similarities between those two things? Is there work that you get that you can tell is important, and you say, "I'm going to do this because it matters to me"? And is there work that you do just because someone else says it's necessary.

Evelyn: That's a controversial topic. If you have a conversation with two students, one will say, "I'm just do the work to pass the class." Our teachers say, "When I was your age, I had to do this and that," and it's like nothing is different. It's the same. It's like our educational system is failing us in a way. We're missing so many things that we need to learn before going into the world, and we'll probably end up saying, "I never learned this in school" or "I should have learned this in school"—because apparently it was more important to learn algebra than to learn how to get a bank account. Especially during this pandemic, I hear so many people's say they just give up. We have an Instagram chat, and most kids are just like, "At this point, I'm just trying to get my work in and graduate." This pandemic has not helped us feel like school is important. We're not saying, "I enjoy waking up every morning and going to school!" We've lost a connection with our teachers. We've lost the motivation to go to school. And I want to, like, you know, grow those connections. We want to go to school because we enjoy going to school and because there are good things that school offers us, not because we want to do the work and graduate and move on to the next step of our lives. That's why it's such a controversial topic.

We're not saying, "I enjoy waking up every morning and going to school!" We've lost a connection with our teachers. We've lost the motivation to go to school.

Jon Paul: I have half-given up. The only thing that keeps me doing my work is my mom. She lets me know when I have work to do. I've pretty much given up at this point.

Fernando: I agree. Those of us who are seniors have "senioritis." We're virtual, and we ask ourselves, "Do I really want to do that? Do I really need to do that? Is it really going to help me?" Actually, I think about that a lot when I look at

assignments, and I think, "I don't really need this"—but I do it because I have to, or my GPA will go down, and that will affect me when I look into colleges. I'm not doing it because I want to or because it's going to help me improve.

Christian: With "senioritis," it's hard to differentiate whether it's just because we're seniors and we're ready to go, or whether it's because of COVID and the fact that we're virtual. Now it's like, "Here's your assignment. Get it done." The fun part about in-person school is being with your friends. That made it fun to do the assignments. We were able to talk and find meaning through people. Now we just get assignments. I'm kind of like Jon Paul as well: I've kind of lost motivation for school. Not completely. I keep going, but I'm at 75% of the motivation that I had last year. It has definitely dwindled down.

Susana: The virtual concept is a big factor in the loss of motivation in school. I'm a "people person," and I honestly don't think that I could have done this whole school year virtually, without being face-to face-with teachers and others. I'm a junior, and I'm taking some very hard classes—AP classes and a few college classes—so I can't imagine doing those virtually, without being able to talk to my teacher. I do sometimes lose motivation, but I also know that we really have to get a broad education. The thought that keeps me going is college: I know I just have to get through this, and then I can go and do whatever I want—something that I'll enjoy.

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Oberly: Christian, you talked about constructing meaning together, and that's not something that I had thought about: how to make a meaningless worksheet actually become meaningful, for instance, if you're tackling it with others. Thank you for that. And I understand Susana's commentary on high school as this thing you have to do in order to do the things you want to do. As an adult who cares deeply about the experience of high schoolers, my hope is that we can move to a place where both those

things can be true: that you have a broad experience that can be meaningful, and that you can do more specific things that are meaningful as well. I want to shift a little bit. MASBA, the Mexican American School Boards Association, is especially interested in closing gaps between student groups. Not everyone experiences school in the same way. School works really well for some, and school hasn't done exactly what it's supposed to for other students. What groups of students have you noticed are impacted the most by this pandemic?

Evelyn: Elementary kids and freshmen are affected the most. I have two little brothers. One loves his video games, and he doesn't go to class because he's playing video games. I look at him and say, "You're failing your classes, and you're in fourth grade! How is that even possible?" This pandemic has affected our younger generations a lot. They're at a point where they don't see the meaning of education. We need to put more attention on elementary students. I'm going for an education major, in teaching, so I look at my little brother and say, "You do realize you need this for fifth grade and sixth grade and high school, right? You're playing video games, and you're losing the things you'll actually need to do—like reading and writing. You need to learn!" And freshmen are going through a transition, from middle school to high school, and now they're doing it virtually. Their teachers can't give them the attention they need to grow as people—and freshmen need more attention. I have a teacher who says, "I don't know these kids. They're like little people on my computer—and sometimes I don't even think they're people. They're just on my computer!" That's the way I'd put it, and freshmen will be impacted by this this most.

I have a teacher who says, "I don't know these kids. They're like little people on my computer—and sometimes I don't even think they're people. They're just on my computer!"

Michael: I have a lot of friends whose families rely on them for chores and taking care of brothers and sisters, so this pandemic affects them a lot more. They don't have an eight-hour school day to pull them away from home. They're at home, and their parents look at them and

expect them to help. Even though we're in class, our parents sometimes come into our rooms and require our attention. Some parents don't understand that it's a school day—and if they need your help, they need your help!

Susana: I've never really experienced that, but I have friends who have. Since our district gives us the choice to be online, a lot of my peers have chosen to go to work—so they provide for their families and do their assignments later. Some families are immunocompromised, and that takes away from their focus on education, too. Low-income families can't afford to be put on quarantine or to miss two weeks of work, so a lot of my friends have to take extra precautions to not fully engage in their education because they worry about their family.

Fernando: I agree with Evelyn about the impact on freshmen. They didn't get to experience what everyone else did: like the fun pep rallies and how high school really is fun. They're just logging into Zoom and doing their schoolwork. There's much more to high school than that. My freshman and sophomore years were the best times I've ever had in school. We always had activities. It never stopped. There was something almost every week. We would go to elementary schools and read to kids each month. We would get involved at the pep rallies at our middle schools and join their classes and tell them what to expect in high school. They don't have that now. They just log into Zoom and go to class. There's no more fun.

Oberly: During the course of this pandemic, I've been teaching adults in positions of decision-making how to have conversations like this with students. I find that many times adults don't ask students the right questions. We have a whole bunch of superintendents and school board members on our call today. If they really want to know how to better support you, what questions should they be asking, and who should they be asking them to?

Ask questions like, "How can we help make this easier for you?" Or, "How can we make this a lot more fun & engaging?"

Jon Paul: They should ask questions like, "How can we help make this

easier for you?" Or, "How can we make this a lot more fun and engaging?"

Fernando: I agree, but we don't have a relationship with our teachers like we used to. We don't see them every day. We don't really have a relationship with them. So we're not going to feel open to actually tell them. We'll tell them what they want to hear.

Oberly: That's a really great point: It's not just about the question; it's about who's asking it. If I haven't built a relationship or trust with you, I may not give you "the whole scoop."

Evelyn: Like Christian, my favorite extracurricular activity outside the pandemic was Student Council. Many times, our teachers said, "You have to go talk to the principal," and we said, "We don't want to do that!" We hadn't built a relationship with the principal. Our principals aren't like our teachers, asking every day, "How are you feeling? How is your day? How is your family getting through this pandemic? Is your family safe?" We don't open up to our principals in the same way.

Our principals aren't like our teachers, asking every day, "How are you feeling? How is your day? How is your family getting through this pandemic? Is your family safe?" We don't open up to our principals in the same way.

Susana: I think it's very important to ask many different groups of students, because if you just base it on one group of students, they might all have the same opinion. You won't get the diverse answers you're looking for, that fit all the students in your district.

Christian: Adults should ask, "What do you need? What can we offer you that can help, that will make your day a little better and a little less boring?" Questions like that will get you a lot of answers.

Michael: I'm really open and not afraid to be honest. If adults want to talk about issues that our schools have or problems in the district, we understand that adults are trying to do their best. They're trying to solve a problem.

Advocating for Students during a Pandemic Legislative Session

Araceli García
Intercultural Research Development Association

Thomas Marshall
Intercultural Research Development Association

Christina Muñoz
Intercultural Research Development Association

Ana Ramón
Intercultural Research Development Association

Luis Figueroa
Every Texan

Vincent Tovar
MASBA Associate Executive Director
Moderator

March 22, 2021

Tovar: Today we have an all-star cast, with a handful of leaders and champions for public education and our public schools. We'll let them introduce themselves.

Ramón: My name is Ana Ramón. I'm the Deputy Director of Advocacy at IDRA. I don't have a traditional background in education policy, like most of my colleagues at IDRA, but this is my fifth Legislative Session. I worked for former school board member and State Representative Joe Farias out of Bexar County and San Antonio before he retired. Then I worked at the House Democratic Campaign Committee as the Executive Director there. After that, I worked for Chairman Garnet Coleman out of Houston, as the Executive Director of the Legislative Study Group. Most recently, before joining IDRA's team, I was the Executive Director of the Texas Senate Democratic Caucus,

where I got to work with twelve wonderful senators, including the now-retired Senator José Rodríguez.

Tovar: For those who might not be familiar with IDRA, tell us a bit about your organization.

Ramón: Absolutely. IDRA was started in 1973 by Dr. José Cárdenas, who was tackling school finance. Our mission greatly grew, and much of our policy work is centered around the school-to-prison pipeline, keeping the public in public education, and school finance equity. This Legislative Session, we've done a lot on the digital divide, student engagement, and family engagement. We have a policy team, a research team, and an education practice team.

García: My name is Araceli García. I'm a recent graduate from Stanford University, and I'm glad to be back in my hometown of San Antonio, working on education policy issues that support equity in our state. I am a product of public education in San Antonio, so these are issues that are very important to me. This year, I'm working with IDRA as an Education Policy Fellow, working on issues related to immigrant students and English Learners—or, as we prefer to call them, Emergent Bilingual students—to really touch on the assets that these students bring into the classroom with their potential for bilingualism.

Muñoz: I am Christina Muñoz. I'm also an Education Policy Fellow with IDRA during this Legislative Session. I am a graduate student at The University of Texas at Austin. I'm studying quantitative methods within educational psychology. Most of my work and research has centered around student engagement issues and digital divide issues that intersect with Thomas' work.

Marshall: My name is Thomas Marshall. I am a University of Houston graduate student. I'm getting my master's in education, studying higher ed specifically. At IDRA, I have the privilege of working on digital inclusion issues and the digital divide, as well as student engagement.

Figueroa: I'm Luis Figueroa. I'm the Legislative and Policy Director at Every Texan. You may recognize us by our old name: the Center for Public Policy Priorities. Every Texan strives

to ensure that all Texans are financially-secure, educated and healthy. We do this by advocating for social justice-oriented policies. We believe that social justice begins with policy, so we advocate at the local, state and federal levels on policies related to health, education and financial security. I had the privilege of working with Ana over the years at the Capitol, and I've also worked for Senator Rodríguez. For many years, I was the Legislative Staff Attorney for the Mexican American Legal Defense and Educational Fund, from 2004 to 2009.

Ramón: Let's begin by discussing the ever-changing process of participating in the Legislature this session.

Figueroa: For people who aren't familiar with what's going on at the Capitol and how this process is working, I'll say: I have not been in the Capitol. Our agency has a policy that, until we're vaccinated, we won't enter the Capitol because of COVID protocols. We understand it's very crowded in there, and that some people are wearing masks and others are not. If you want to enter a Committee hearing room or schedule an individual meeting with an office, you're supposed to go to the tent on the north side of the Capitol to get a bracelet that indicates that you have tested negative for COVID. If you want, though, you can enter the Capitol without being tested. Because of that, we've been very concerned about sending our staff into the Capitol. We are very appreciative of alternatives to in-person meetings and in-person testimony. As always, you can email and call your legislative members and their staffers. The gold standard on the House side is being invited to give testimony, virtually or at a public hearing. If you're in Austin, you can register your position for or against any bill by using the Capitol Wi-Fi. You can also submit written testimony if someone is willing to hand-deliver it for you in the Texas Capitol. If you are an affected individual or have expertise on a particular bill or issue, we encourage you to find a way to be invited for testimony.

Ramón: You'll want to know where to find all bills online. There is a general portal for this. If you want to send comments,

you'll need to find the portal link on the committee hearing notice. This information is not always easy to track down, which is why we have organizations like MASBA, IDRA and Every Texan.

Tovar: When we send or submit public comment, who receives it?

Ramón: When you send public comments, they are received by all Committee members. There is also a place where all comments are posted online—but it's pretty hard to find. Written testimony must be limited to 3,000 characters, and there's no way to attach additional information or materials. Your comments and concerns are so crucial. Always state your name, your organization, and your position on the bill. Be very clear about your position on the bill, and share examples of how proposed legislation will affect your school district and students. Highlight the good, the bad and the ugly of the bill—and how it will affect you and your community.

Figueroa: Processes have been very inconsistent this Session—with the portal, testimony and online registration through Capitol Wi-Fi. We're trying to document these inconsistencies, in the even that they're needed in litigation.

Ramón: We're really trying to cut through a lot of misinformation. Even for the professionals who are at the Capitol every day, there's still a lot of confusion, and the rules are bending in both Chambers. Some House Committees, for instance, are closing down the process of virtual testimony. I'll now invite Thomas to speak on the issues of the digital divide and digital inclusion.

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Marshall: Digital inclusion is one of the most pressing issues of the Legislature this year. Various bills have been filed, and I place them in three "buckets": building out the necessary infrastructure so that our students and families can have internet access. Texas is one of six states without a broadband plan, so we are not able to get federal funds for broadband internet access, so it's super-important that we

build out our infrastructure. The second piece is connectivity: making sure that everyone is able to be connected to good, reliable internet. Many districts have used hotspots to get us through this pandemic—but they are only a temporary fix for a really pressing issue. Hotspots only have so much bandwidth. If you have three kids at home on the same hotspot, they're not able to use all their platforms at the same time, which is why connectivity is a huge piece of digital inclusion. The third piece is digital equity and literacy: making sure that everyone can equitably participate in the digital space and do such things as apply for a job or for food assistance, or make vaccine appointments. It can be difficult to navigate online resources, which is why digital literacy is so important.

Many districts have used hotspots to get us through this pandemic—but they are only a temporary fix for a really pressing issue.

Muñoz: A lot of my research and advocacy focuses on ensuring an equitable response to COVID-19 from an educational perspective. Much of our bill tracking on digital inclusion lands on HB 5, authored by Ashby, relating to the expansion of broadband services to certain areas. Our key stakeholders suggest that there's still a need for greater consideration for schools and education as a whole in that bill. Another component of my research is focused on student mental health and wellness. Three bills that we're closely watching are SB 178 and SB 179, authored by Lucio, and HB 2287, authored by Senfronia Thompson. SB 178 and SB 179 were considered by the Senate Education Committee last week. SB 178 relates to the employment of certified school counselors by school districts and would incrementally reduce the student-to-counselor ratios in Texas public schools, narrowing it to one school counselor for every 300 students by the academic year 2029-2030. SB 179 and its companion bill, HB 589, is very closely aligned and would ensure that our counselors are allowed to dedicate up to 80% of their work time to direct counseling service for students. These bills will address the student mental health and wellness issues that have continued to grow as students have transitioned to online learning,

where their social interactions with peers and teachers have been limited. HB 2287 will be heard this week. It relates to data collection on public school mental services and would disaggregate data by campus and race. This will also disaggregate data for English Learner or Emergent Bilinguals.

García: Our Emergent Bilingual students are often overlooked by the Legislature, so we are urging our legislators to prioritize these students. I know I'm "preaching to the choir." With issues of equity and the digital divide, Emergent Bilingual students often sit at the intersection of various marginalized populations. One in every five Texas public school students is an English Learner—and that percentage is higher in early education. SB 560 and its companion bill, HB 2258, will develop a strategic plan to comprehensively address the needs of Emergent Bilingual students. SB 1101 and HB 2256 will create a bilingual special education certificate in Texas, which would meet the needs of students who sit at the intersection of those Emergent Bilingual and Special Education identities. Lastly, SB 2065 and SB 2066 would change the term Limited English Proficient, to Emergent Bilingual in state law. This is really important and will treat our students as assets, as intelligent, college-bound beings, which isn't implied by "Limited English Proficient" or "English Learner."

This is really important and will treat our students as assets, as intelligent, college-bound beings, which isn't implied by "Limited English Proficient" or "English Learner."

Ramón: We're also looking at the House Bill 3 cleanup from last session. That may be taken up as soon as the first week of April. We are constantly providing updates on our IDRA website. I invite you to check that website for updates and to see our "Learning Goes On" COVID resources there!

The Impact of Proposed Charter School Legislation on Texas Public Schools

Patti Everitt

Thomas Ratliff

Emily Sawyer

Vincent Tovar

Dr. Jayme Mathias, Moderator
MASBA Executive Director

March 29, 2021

Mathias: We are excited to be hosting this webinar on the impact of proposed charter school legislation on our publicly-run public schools and on children of color here in Texas. In the interest of transparency, I am not the biggest fan of charter schools. In fact, in 2012, I ran for the school board here in Austin on a platform of reversing the privatization of Austin's public schools, which we did later that year. The feat is featured in the documentary, "Killing Ed," which tells how Texas taxpayer funds were funneled through one charter school system to fund a military coup in Turkey! I invite you to check out "Killing Ed." Today, we have some powerful panelists. Let's invite them to introduce themselves, to tell us what they love about our Texas public schools, and why they absolutely had to be here today to speak about this very important topic.

Everitt: I'm Patti Everitt, and I work out of Austin. My son attended the Austin ISD for a long time, and I loved most of my son's teachers. In terms of public education, I do consulting work, and I work on charter school issues. I work with education organizations, districts, and parent groups to really focus on increasing the transparency and accountability of charter schools. Our public schools serve our children without discriminating against children based on discipline history or needed special education services, and the democratic

control of elected school board members is essential for the preservation of our public schools.

Ratliff: I'm Thomas Ratliff, and I'm a recovering State Board of Education member. In full disclosure, my father wrote the law that created charter schools in 1995, under Governor Bush, and I've spent the better part of the last decade and a half trying to unwind it. I am a product of public schools. My wife and both of my children are as well. My wife taught for six years as a high school Spanish teacher, instilling in children a love of their language and culture and of the Mexican-American heritage. Candidly, I've just always been a big public education advocate, and, when I heard you wanted to talk about charters and what's going on this Legislative Session, I thought I would jump in with both feet!

Sawyer: I am Emily Sawyer. I am a parent of five boys who attend Austin ISD schools. What I love most about our Texas public schools are the teachers. The teachers and staff really make our schools, so I do everything I can to support them. I'm here because of the crossroads between discipline practices and charter schools, which are coming together in the Legislature this year.

Mathias: I can't brag enough on Vincent Tovar, our Associate Executive Director here at MASBA. In 2012, Vincent led the reversal of the privatization of public education here in Austin.

Tovar: In 2012, a charter operator was planning to take over schools in the Austin ISD, and we were fortunate enough to organize and keep them out. I love public schools because they serve our most marginalized students, rather than try to filter out families. They serve our students with highest needs. Our public schools are like the Statue of Liberty at Ellis Island, saying, "Come over! We love you! We want to help you!"

I love public schools because they serve our most marginalized students, rather than try to filter out families. They serve our students with highest needs. Our public schools are like the Statue of Liberty at Ellis Island, saying, "Come over! We love you! We want to help you!"

Mathias: MASBA is laser-focused on the issues of racism and equity, so, before we get too deeply into the impact of proposed charter school legislation on our Texas public schools, I'd like to invite each of you to share with us an overview of your perspective on charter schools, particularly with respect to issues of race and equity. That is, the NAACP shared a strong statement in 2017 on the impact of charter schools on communities of color. In your estimation, in what ways are charter schools helping or hindering issues of race and equity in public education?

Ratliff: Candidly, it's deceiving to think that charters appeal to minority populations. They don't. They appeal to kids who have parents who have the ability to stay engaged, despite language or economic barriers or other factor that truly having a choice. Charters play a game, showing that they're more inclusive than they are. The demographics of charters are very monolithic. They don't have a lot of diversity, which is not good for any child. Diversity helps us all become a stronger state. Charters don't have a good story to tell. They're cherry pickers and copycats by and large.

It's deceiving to think that charters appeal to minority populations. They don't…. They're cherry pickers & copycats.

Everitt: I talk to charter teachers and parents, so I know many dedicated charter school teachers, but it's really important to emphasize that the charter system works against intentionally serving *all* students. They cherry-pick students from our public schools. In places where they serve a high percentage of kids of color, it's due to a certain geographic determinism, and they don't serve the most challenged children. It's important to compare charter demographics to nearby neighborhood schools. We find, for example, that charters serve only a third of the students with special needs that public schools serve. The comparisons are very stunning. There is no equity in charter schools. They work against our public schools through discipline exclusion, by not providing transportation, and by canceling out children with special needs.

Sawyer: Many people talk about creating a system of competition and so-called "choice," when public schools are really about striving to serve all students. So-called "choice" sets up a system of winners and losers, whereas public education seeks to be a system where everyone wins.

Mathias: Let's pause and take a comment from our audience. Stephanie notes that some charters serve dropouts, ages 16 to 24, and the trauma-exposed. She suggests that we can't lump together all charter schools

Ratliff: Publicly and privately, I will say that some charter schools do save kids' lives. There's no doubt about that. Some non-traditional charters offer those programs, including dropout recovery for young mothers who can't participate in a traditional school day. There has been some innovation brought about by charters. I wish we saw more of it, because there are more kids that would benefit from a more non-traditional model. If nothing else, COVID has taught public schools and charters that there are different ways to do education. So, I don't doubt that some charters really do a fantastic job reaching non-traditional kids in a non-traditional way, but the lion's share of charters are simply locating across the street from our public schools and trying to skim the cream off the top of our schools, taking the kids who are easier to educate. The numbers just don't lie.

The lion's share of charters are simply locating across the street from our public schools and trying to skim the cream off the top of our schools, taking the kids who are easier to educate. The numbers just don't lie.

Tovar: In the documentary "Killing Ed," Diane Ravitch notes that charter schools were created to pilot models that public schools could possibly replicate. Instead we've seen charters become franchising chains at the detriment of public schools. We don't need charters to get kids GEDs. To create a whole other system of schools is a capitalist thought that sees to exploit the money involved. We see it in healthcare. We see it in military contracts, where

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contractors make money off defense contracts. We see it in testing businesses. Charter schools make money off the public infrastructure of public education. I don't say this to disrespect the great work that people are doing to try to help kids and families. It's simply an observation of how the charter school system hurts our true public schools.

Everitt: In my research, I look at how charter schools work "below the fold." I look at what they spend on instruction versus central administration, for example. Premier High Schools serves a targeted audience of older students who fall under alternative accountability, so they spend incredibly less per student on instruction. They don't have the social workers and counselors to support students. And what they don't spend on instruction, they spend on central administration.

Mathias: Trustee Leigh Crenshaw of West ISD notes that there is always something that we can learn from every situation. She says we need to fill gaps, so that charters are no longer needed. Let's turn to the impact of proposed legislation on our publicly-run public schools in Texas. Panelists, as you survey proposed legislation concerning charter schools, what strikes you?

Ratliff: To quote the book of Ecclesiastes, "To everything there is a season." The last Legislative Session was a very pro-public education session with House Bill 3 and school finance. House Bill 5 by Jimmy Don Aycock was another watershed moment in the history of public education. We are in a different season now, which was apparent when Harold Dutton was appointed Chair of the House Public Education Committee. He is very pro-charter, which is an observation, not a criticism. That's how he's wired. The biggest burr under my saddle blanket is the bills that want to restrict what ISDs can do, while freeing up what charters can do. There's a threshold question for members of the legislature: If regulation is bad for kids, then free us up, too, and level the playing field. There is not a single school

The biggest burr under my saddle blanket is the bills that want to restrict what ISDs can do, while freeing up what charters can do. There's a threshold question for members of the legislature: If regulation is bad for kids, then free us up, too, and level the playing field.

district in Texas that do things the same way tomorrow if they were given freedom from regulations today. If the lack of red tape is good for charters, allowing them to be innovative and creative, then let's do the same for our public schools and trust our locally-elected officials with the same freedom from red tape. There's an exceedingly high amount of hypocrisy on legislative policy in the Legislature. I don't care which direction our legislators go, so long as they treat us all similarly. To call the charter movement a "laboratory" or an "experiment" at this point is a joke. My dad wrote the law in 1995. We're beyond the experimental phase. The beta test has become a full-blown program. The education regulations that apply to public education should apply to charter schools, too. Then, let's compete and see who does best for kids and parents.

To call the charter movement a "laboratory" or an "experiment" at this point is a joke…. The education regulations that apply to public education should apply to charter schools, too. Then, let's compete & see who does best for kids and parents.

Everitt: One challenge is the lack of transparency on how charter schools spend their funds. Proposed legislation this year would require basic information to be posted on charter school websites. Other bills will create equity in funding. One bill on discipline is extremely important because we'll never have equity until charters accept all students. We don't know if we will even get hearings on these bills. Charter schools have bills that are moving forward, too. One bill will give charters freedom from local zoning authorities. Another will make it easier for charters to expand.

Sawyer: I'm watching HB 97 and HB 108, which will help to level the playing field between charter schools and true public schools. One will include discipline history as a category that charters would no longer be allowed to discriminate against with respect to prospective students. Charters are currently able to choose their students in a way that true public schools cannot. You can't have equity or a level playing field when two different teams are playing by different rules. If

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we believe in competition and markets, we really need to level these playing fields and ask charters to play by the same rules that true public schools play by. The second bill will level the playing field, so that charters have to abide by the same pieces of the Texas Education Code regarding suspensions and codes of conduct as public schools. The disciplinary practices in Chapter 37 of the Texas Education Code often have really horribly disparate impacts on students of color, particularly for Black students and *Latinx* students, as well as on students who receive special education services. Charter schools exacerbate disparities by simply not serving those students at all. Due to the pro-charter attitude of the Legislature, neither bill has been scheduled for a hearing.

Tovar: Every Legislative Session, charter schools try to find a different way to get their hands in our pockets and in our wallets and to increase their specific freedoms through loopholes in zoning, admissions policies, or now through SB 1882, which gives more money per pupil to school districts that partner with charter schools. When they can't come through the front door, they try to come in the side window.

Everitt: I'll give you my favorite example of things that are included in charter school student codes of conduct. In 2015, Representative Alma Allen pointed out how one charter school could expel students for a parent's failure to follow its parent code of conduct. Another charter school had a policy that allowed it to expel a student who didn't show up every day ready to learn. We all understand how subjective that is! The charter system of exclusion is evident in admission and retention policies, and there's all kinds of research about the disproportionate percentage of children of color and special needs students with disciplinary issues.

The charter system of exclusion is evident in admission & retention policies, and there's all kinds of research about the disproportionate percentage of children of color and special needs students with disciplinary issues.

Tovar: All this is grounded in "school choice." Charters have manipulated that phrase while, in the shadows, choosing

which kids they'll accept and teach. Charter chains in particular have a very different view of "school choice."

Mathias: Superintendent Michael Cardona of San Marcos CISD is asking a question: Why do you believe some public school districts are embracing charters? Let's add to that another question: What do you believe are the real reasons that legislators push a pro-charter agenda as well?

Sawyer: Follow the money. There's a lot of money flowing to charter schools and away from public schools. What strikes me is that we are absolutely starving our public schools of funds, leading them to believe that they must partner with charters to bring in more funds. We don't need to look for help outside of true public education; we need to choose to fund our true public education system in an effective and appropriate manner.

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Everitt: There has been pushback to SB 1882, which allows districts to partner with open-enrollment charters and other organizations. It's an attempt to normalize charter schools, of course. On average, charter schools get $1,150 more per student than public schools. Charter schools receive $2,200 more per student than the Socorro ISD. They receive $1,182 more per student than the Austin ISD. SB 1882 is definitely a big "carrot" to get public schools partnering with charter schools.

Mathias: Why would legislators be so pro-charter?

Ratliff: If you truly believe in local control, as I do, then you have to allow for the possibility that some superintendents will view a partnership with a charter as what's best for their kids. Spring Branch ISD in west Houston was one of the first districts to partner with charters. The superintendent may have thought that the best way to

Many people make decisions regarding charter schools based on inaccurate information. I believe this is the case with many charter school parents. It's also the case with the 181 members of our Legislature.

reach those kids is in a less regulated model with a charter partnership. They can do things that the state won't allow public schools to do. I find that many people make decisions regarding charter schools based on inaccurate information. I believe this is the case with many charter school parents. It's also the case with the 181 members of our Legislature. They are citizen-legislators who sometimes make decisions based on inaccurate information about school districts, either globally or locally. It's a challenge that will never go away.

Tovar: There's always a temptation to say, "If we can't beat them, let's join them." There's a masked or disguised narrative that contrasts with how charters are really operating. Some say that 100% of their kids go to college after graduation. So, parents take their kids out of our public schools and place them in charter schools, only to find their kids often kicked back to our public schools. We need to ask how many students enter a charter school as ninth-graders, versus how many graduate as seniors. They go from 300 freshmen, to 75 graduates who were accepted to college. That's 225 students who were "counseled out." Some charter schools threaten to retain students in the same grade, with the hope that they'll transfer back to our public schools. When we hear of the "success" of charter schools, we wonder what we can learn from them. You can certainly learn something from them: You can learn how to lie and be unethical and immoral.

Everitt: Superintendent Cardona did a great job in the last round of approvals of charter applications. San Marcos CISD was very proactive in informing people of the consequences of charter expansion. Their efforts made a huge difference, and the charter application was rejected.

Mathias: We have two questions from attendees on SB 1882 partnerships. In the Austin ISD, we forged an SB 1882 partnership with United Way to serve Pre-K kids. Brett Miller asks: "Can you distinguish SB 1882 charter partners for innovation from the charter schools discussed so far today? What is your opinion on SB 1882 charters for innovation, and do you expect the additional funding to

continue long term for partnering districts?" Trustee Tracy Fisher of Coppell ISD asks, "Don't SB 1882 collaborations result in more authority by the TEA Commissioner, versus the State Board of Education?"

Everitt: Austin's SB 1882 partnership with United Way definitely expanded the district's ability to serve more kids, so there is some rationale for the legislation. The TEA certainly has more ability to determine what SB 1882 partnerships look like. Charter schools are paid for entirely through state funds, with no local funds, so not only do we have questions of equity, with students in one school receiving more funding than students in a neighboring school, SB 1882 students cost the state more money.

Mathias: Trustee Armando Velázquez of the Lake Worth ISD asks whether there have been any legal challenges against the State for any of the inequities that have been created as a result of pro-charter legislation.

Everitt: Tarrant County districts, like Lake Worth ISD, are really getting hit by charter school expansion. We are exploring how charter school discipline policies violate state statutes. There's also a matter of federal law: Charters serve 28% fewer students with special needs, compared to neighboring schools. That's a concern, and I know that TEA is concerned about this, too.

Mathias: What concluding words and/or call to action might each of you share today?

Ratliff: One of the biggest threats with respect to the oversight of charter schools this Session is the Senate's attempt to pull the State Board of Education out of the approval process for new charters. Charters don't like the fact that the State Board of Education exercises its authority over the approval of new charter campuses. It's an attempt to take this decision away from elected officials, and give it to a single appointee of the Governor. That's not good policy.

One of the biggest threats… is the Senate's attempt to pull the State Board of Education out of the approval process for new charters.

Elected officials represent their districts better than a single person appointed by the Governor.

Contact your senator and representative, and let them know that elected officials represent their districts better than a single person appointed by the Governor.

Everitt: It's important to remember that legislators do not know where you stand on issues unless they hear from you. I've seen firsthand how legislators receive calls from ten parents and board members and come to understand that their constituents care about these issues. The power of board members should not be underestimated. Legislators need to hear from you on things like this, and the SBOE veto is incredibly important.

Sawyer: I encourage everyone to engage and involve the parents in your schools. Parents are a huge force. We are on the front lines, with our kids in your schools. Listen to your teachers. Listen to your staff. Students, parents and teachers are real experts for superintendents and school board members.

Vincent: We need to engage our families—and let's engage charter school parents, too. When we engage with people outside our comfort zone, we hear of their problems, too. They'll tell us how we can improve. They'll tell us about the customer service in our schools. They'll tell us if there's a lack of connection between kids and teachers. Let's take that information and figure out what we can do in our public schools.

The Top Five Legislative Issues affecting Latinx Students & Emerging Bilinguals

Ana Ramón
Intercultural Development Research Association

April 5, 2021

We're now more than halfway through this 87th Legislative Session here in Texas, and we're excited by the collaboration of IDRA, MALDEF and MASBA through TLEEC—the Texas Legislative Education Equity Coalition. MASBA was a founding member of our educational social justice coalition, which is focused on racial justice and K-12 public education through higher education. We have a diverse coalition of 25-plus organizations. We've been focused this session on economic and educational justice, Emergent Bilingual students, fair funding for our schools, the impact of charter school legislation, and keeping the public in public education.

Let's talk about important dates in this Legislative Session. March 12 was the deadline to file bills for this Session. The next major date is *sine die*, when the Legislative Session will end on May 31. June 20 will be the deadline for the Governor to sign or veto legislation. At this point in the legislative process, we're beginning to wrap up Committee hearings, and we're having longer floor debates, which often center on controversial bills or bills that have to pass. This is the roughest part of session, a real sprint to get bills passed and the budget passed.

As you know, a bill has to go through both chambers before it can be sent to the Governor's desk. If a bill is not heard in Committee this week or next week, the likelihood of that bill passing unfortunately plummets. Once a bill is voted out of Committee on the House side, it's sent to the Calendar Committee. On the Senate side, it's sent to the Lieutenant Governor's office, and each senator provides input on the bills that the Lieutenant Governor should take up. The House Committee is made up of 12 members, who vote as a body, whereas the power in the Senate is centered on Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick. Once a bill hits the floor of the House or Senate, it's up for

debate. Right now, both Chambers are focused on moving bills forward.

Few bills are currently moving on the House side, so representatives are looking for opportunities to place amendments on bills. TLEEC is concerned with making sure that good legislation gets tacked on and that bad legislation doesn't. These amendments are worked out in Conference Committee by conferees, with the authors of the Senate and House Bills serving as mediators.

Lieutenant Governor Patrick, the Speaker of the House and the Governor have started to put together a proposed budget for the next biennium. This is the only bill that is constitutionally required. The budget is about four months behind, and I've never seen a budget pass out of both Chambers so late in the Session.

We've also had challenges as a result of changes in leadership. We have a new Speaker of the House, a new Chairman of Public Education, a new chairman of Higher Education, a new Chairman of Appropriations.

The Senate is seeing more "business as usual." Lieutenant Governor Patrick is still the President of the Senate, and most of the Chairs have remained the same. The Senate has 31 members, as opposed to 150 in the House, so it's easier to get work done on the Senate side.

One critical issues for us this Session is English Language Learners—or Emergent Bilinguals, as we refer to them. MASBA, TLEEC and IDRA have been on the forefront of this issue. Emergent Bilinguals are one of the fastest-growing populations in the state. In House Bill 3 last Session, we saw an increase in the formula for funding Emergent Bilinguals and a desire to ensure that resources are being appropriately given to this population. It's a priority for us. During this pandemic, Emergent Bilinguals have suffered not only as students of color, but also as English Language Learners. We're tracking a bill on bilingual special education teacher certification, which is scheduled for a hearing tomorrow. It's so critical that we continue to work on behalf of our Emergent Bilinguals.

During this pandemic, Emergent Bilinguals have suffered, not only as students of color, but also as English Language Learners.

We're tracking broadband access. 45% of Texas students are still virtual. One bill will create a state broadband plan, since Texas is one of only six states in the nation that does not have such a plan. This bill would also create a department that would draw down billions of federal dollars. This is an issue that affects rural and urban districts. As part of a survey, 108,000 households in the San Antonio ISD were recently found to be without internet, which is about 21% of the district. This is an issue that has the greatest impact on Black and Brown students, including Emerging Bilinguals.

We're also following COVID response bills. Last week, the House Public Education Committee held a hearing on a bill to expand virtual schools. We know that virtual schools are not the most effective way to educate students, but we also know that virtual and hybrid models of learning are likely here to stay, at least for the time being. We were really excited to see the hold harmless implemented by Commissioner Morath earlier this Session, to ensure that this pandemic doesn't adversely impact our school districts. Such bills, which aren't yet gaining traction, would change the landscape of traditional public schools. We've seen an increase in district accountability bills, and we know that school takeovers don't work. We need to elevate and not stifle community voices. We oppose school board takeovers, and takeovers in general, since this strips community voice and participation from the process. We know that MASBA submitted testimony last week in opposition to the takeover of Houston ISD.

The last big issue that we're following is the state budget, which is $251 billion. It's a monster of a bill. The base budget of both the House and the Senate are very similar. It is still unknown how federal dollars are proposed to be spent. This biennial budget will be for 2022 and 2023. There are concerns that the events of this past year, with the pandemic and our winter storm, may lead to budget cuts in the 2024-2025 biennium. Our priority is making sure that federal aid goes to students most in need, especially to students of color, Emergent Bilinguals, and such vulnerable students as homeless students and those in foster care.

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One Year Later: Opportunities for Improvement

Dr. Robert Durón
TASB Associate Director of Governance Services

Orin Moore
TASB Board Development Services

Jasmine Wightman
TASB Senior Attorney

Dr. Phil Gore, Moderator
TASB Board Development Services Division Director

April 12, 2021

Gore: We're honored to be here today. A year ago, school districts and boards were very swiftly and admirably responding to the COVID-19 pandemic. It was amazing how all of you—and so many others—stepped up to provide services and education for Texas's 5.4 million public school students. Almost immediately, this pandemic began to shine light on looming disparities in education and student opportunities. The events of last summer highlighted the ongoing racial injustices that plague our society. A year later, we're back to talk about some of these issues, with the hope that public school trustees might take from this some ideas for the improved success of all students.

Joining me today is Dr. Robert Durón, my direct boss at TASB, who is not a stranger to many of you. He has spoken at several MASBA conferences through the years. Robert is the former Superintendent of San Antonio ISD and Socorro ISD, as well as a former Deputy Commissioner of the Texas Education Agency. Anything to add, Robert?

Durón: Nothing, except that I'm looking forward to our conversation.

Gore: Also joining us is Jasmine Wightman. Jasmine is a senior attorney with TASB Legal Services and a specialist in school law. Jasmine, would you like to add anything before we jump in?

Wightman: MASBA's mission is dear to my heart: not just as a Mexican American, but also as a teacher for five years in low-income communities where over 80% of our students were Mexican-American. I'm really grateful to be here today.

Gore: Orin Moore is a senior board consultant with TASB. He has done a great job and is in his sixth year of doing this work. Orin is also a proud, new father. Anything you'd like to add?

Moore: Thank you, Phil, and a warm thank you to MASBA for this opportunity to engage in tough, courageous conversations. I'm glad to be here today

Gore: Let's start with Jasmine. MASBA's mission is to inspire leaders of public education to empower *Latinx* students and address issues of race and equity in Texas public schools. Jasmine, what are some of the greatest challenges that this pandemic has brought to school systems, and how have these challenges disproportionately affected students?

Wightman: Education was inequitable, even before the pandemic. Access to resources was already a problem. We had opportunity gaps in Texas and in our country. This pandemic has really magnified the disparities. School disruptions, health risks and income loss have all had disparate effects on some of our communities. We've seen learning loss at levels we've never seen before. Initial data suggest that White students will fall behind an average of five to nine months, while Black and *Latinx* students will fall behind approximately 12 to 16 months. Gaps have widened since the beginning of the shutdown, when everything was remote. During virtual learning, we saw a gap in the participation rates of White students

This pandemic has really magnified the disparities…. White students will fall behind an average of 5 to 9 months, while Black & Latinx *students will fall behind approximately 12 to 16 months.*

and other student populations. Part of that was due to disparities in access to technology. Part of it was due to parental supervision. All this compounded the pre-existing opportunity gap. For our Emergent Bilinguals, who are learning English, remote learning was incredibly difficult, if not impossible, for our youngest kids. Asynchronous learning, with no interaction or back-and-forth, is not the best way to learn a language. 66% of the students who lack internet access are Black, *Latino* or Native American. Student enrollment is down, particularly for Emergent Bilinguals and for Pre-kindergarten students. We saw a backslide in *Latinx* student college enrollment this year: 5.4% less *Latinx* students enrolled in college this year. We work in K-12 education, but this pandemic will affect long-term outcomes. COVID-19 disproportionately affected our minority communities. We saw that *Latinx* and Black families were three times more likely to be infected by COVID-19 as their White neighbors, and twice as likely to die. Some issues included less access to health care, multigenerational families catching the virus, and families who worked on the frontlines of the pandemic as the disease was spreading. We also saw issues related to lower socioeconomic levels. Food insecurity has been an issue over the past year, and it's incredibly hard for our students to focus on learning when there's instability in their families, including food or economic insecurity. Now we're seeing inequitable access to vaccines: that the population getting vaccinated right now does not reflect the population of Texas. The opportunity gaps for Black and *Latinx* families is only widening.

66% of the students who lack internet access are Black, Latino or Native American…. 5.4% less Latinx students enrolled in college this year.

Gore: I think we're all ready to be done with COVID! How have these negative aspects of the pandemic increased the burden and trauma felt by minority communities? Are there any rays of hope?

Wightman: We can really focus on student and family strengths that we've seen during this past year. We've seen the

increased independence of our students. I'm a parent of a fourth-grader, so to see him be able to sit down for a couple hours of work was a strength to build upon. Our students had to learn how to navigate technology in ways they hadn't before. We can build upon that to fill gaps. We also saw a focus on social and emotional learning by our schools. Our families were hit hard by this crisis, and our schools took the opportunity to focus on the impact on students and families.

Gore: We certainly saw our students gain new skills through this struggle, including adaptability and resilience.

Moore: We were exposed to and grew in our awareness of these issues, which led to empathy. We came to better understand how to support and help our families. I've talked to teachers and principals, to get a firsthand account of all that Jasmine mentioned. It was amazing to hear principals share how their teachers pitched in. We saw an evolution in thinking on compassion and empathy. We also became more aware of the inequities, and, most importantly, we recognized that we could do something about it. Perhaps that's one of the "silver linings" in this pandemic.

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Durón: Our educators know that our most vulnerable students and their parents were affected most by this pandemic. In my experience of working with those families, they're accustomed to persevering. They experience more crises than we might imagine. During this past year, our teachers have been like healthcare workers in hospitals, really getting to see the needs of their "customers," taking seriously their mission to serve, and stepping up. I've dedicated my profession to being an educator, so I wasn't surprised by what I saw during this past year, but it did make me proud. It was heartwarming. With that said, I worry about our students' ability to persevere. I'm

hopeful that we're seeing some "light at the end of the tunnel," which is encouraging.

Gore: On top of the pandemic, at the end of the school year, on May 25, we all witnessed George Floyd's life being snuffed out of him. And that was only one incident. We saw the deaths of Breonna Taylor and Ahmaud Arbery, and these deaths represented multiple racial injustices that have occurred and continue to occur. MASBA was moved by those incidents to create the book *Seats at the Table: School Board Members' Perspectives on Race and Racism*, which was a really positive outgrowth of tragedy, where school board members spoke up and let their voices be heard. Orin, you had a direct connection to George Floyd. Why was his death in Minnesota so significant to us in Texas, and what are some specific implications of his death for Texas school districts?

Moore: I want to choose my words thoughtfully when speaking about an issue that literally set the nation ablaze. This issue hit struck me on more familiar territory: George Floyd was a Texan. He spent his formative years in Houston's Third Ward, where I spent 13 years working and supporting families and students. Quite bluntly, Floyd's story was exactly the mission that we hoped to fulfill: helping a hardworking, single parent who struggled against all odds. After his death, I saw a picture in *Christianity Today* of George Floyd with one of my friends from college and grad school who supported youth in the Third Ward. As educators, we write our vision and mission statements, saying that we want to create productive members of society. We talk about preparing students to respond to a changing world. I suggest that our mission should instead be to prepare young people to change the world. If George Floyd hadn't perished the way he did, and if he had his day in court, research suggests that there's a good chance that it wouldn't have resulted in an equitable outcome. This highlights the disparities and the

If George Floyd hadn't perished the way he did, & if he had his day in court, research suggests that there's a good chance that it wouldn't have resulted in an equitable outcome. This highlights the disparities and the lack of parity in our justice system.

lack of parity in our justice system. When we think about what that means for Texas, we have to continually have this conversation on equity and how will we equitably invest in the people who will change the world tomorrow. I'm an optimist, and I believe that things can change, but when you see what happens when people push against the system, it can be frustrating and disheartening. Let's not prepare kids for a changing world; let's prepare kids to change the world! It's a good, old-fashioned value, which goes to the heart of our nation, "All men are created equal," but we haven't seen that outcome in many of our systems. We need to instill character, empathy and wisdom in our kids, so that they will handle issues a lot better than what we saw happen in that heart-wrenching video. This is our opportunity to create young people who will think differently and work to change systems and make them more equitable. We have that power with the young people who sit in our chairs five days a week!

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Gore: That's some good thinking, Orin. We need to think not only about the changes we can implement, but also about the changes we can help students navigate, implement, improve, and carry forward. Any other thoughts on the significance of these deaths and the implications for school districts in Texas?

Wightman: There's been a huge wave of awareness as a result, and people have tuned in who didn't tune in before. The racism was so undeniable. It was so "in your face." Much of the racism in our country is less "in your face," so there's a bit of a plausible deniability. These deaths were events we couldn't deny. This is the time to seize the momentum. Our schools are incredibly important: For many Black and *Latino* students, it's their first interaction with the government. How do they feel about our schools, and how does this shape their feelings on government? How are we teaching them to navigate and change systems and inequities?

Gore: As the old, White guy in the room, I wonder if we might use these deaths to help our students better understand bullying and its effects. It's one thing to see excessive use of force by a police officer; it's another to speak with five-, six- and seven-year-olds about a different sense of right and wrong that they will carry into future positions of power and authority. How do we help them to grow in self-awareness, self-control and restraint, and how do we help them deescalate situations on the playground from an early age? My next question is for Robert, who wrote his doctoral dissertation on teamwork. We know that MASBA likes to emphasize the importance of teamwork among boards and superintendents. How might school boards and superintendents work together to address inequities in school districts?

Durón: Before I comment on what school board members should be reminded of, I want to comment on the last topic of racism and what our kids are learning. Racism is certainly a problem. I'm reminded of when I was an elementary principal in Waco. We had a curriculum of five life skills that we used in our school of 900 students, predominantly low socioeconomic students of color. One of those life skills was, "No put-downs." We really focused on that. We insisted that teachers not put themselves down, and that students not put others down, and when a student put down or said something negative about another student, we jumped on it. Over time, it had a remarkable effect, and discipline problems between students went down exponentially—simply by focusing on that one variable of not judging other people. It's very important to teach students the value of non-judgement.

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As Phil suggested, one of the things I really "nerd out" on is teamwork. It was my dissertation topic, so I read a lot about it. Together with leadership and education, teamwork is one of my three passions. For me, one book on teamwork sums it up: *The Wisdom of Teams*, by Jon Katzenbach and Douglas Smith. They point out six things that really define a team. One of those six elements is that every team must have a true meaning of purpose, of why they're all together. They must totally agree: "We're all in this!" Picture a group of teachers, a whole campus, or even a whole district: As individuals, we come together and finetune why we're all here, why we get out of bed every morning, and what's driving us. Outside of COVID, many school boards have struggled to identify their role and connect that role with student performance, as our XG research has clearly done. The upside of COVID is that it has brought boards together as teams. I've seen dysfunctional, factious boards lay aside their egos and differences, to come together during superintendent searches. There's an urgency about their work, and we see positive results. That's what COVID has done: It has widened gaps, and, to borrow from Marin Luther King, Jr., leaders always see and step into the gaps! During this pandemic, we've seen school board members "step in the gap" and try to figure this out. They looked for guidance from their superintendents and community members. Jasmine has pointed out the gaps that have exponentially grown during this pandemic. School board members now have the opportunity to "step into the gap" and say, "Our number one purpose, our number one sense of urgency is to close the gap—to at least bring it to where it was prior to COVID." If the parents who have suffered the most from this pandemic had a collective voice, they would no doubt ask us to stand in that gap. When events bring our school boards together—superintendent searches, bond elections, natural disasters—our communities see our school board

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members and say, "This is why we elected you—to help us out of these situations!" I urge boards members more than ever to be proactive: Go out into the community with situational awareness, and see what is really needed. There's nothing like going out and having community meetings, really listening to people, informing the superintendent about the needs of the community, and formulating a plan to meet those needs.

Wightman: I love the idea of "stepping into the gap." At TASB, we often hear from school boards, and we know that many issues can be distractions. What really matters are the students. They're the reason you joined the school board. Focus on them, and don't allow yourself to be distracted from that need to "step into the gap"!

What really matters are the students. They're the reason you joined the school board.

Moore: Caring for kids and families is at the heart of what we do. I love that reminder that effective leaders "step into the gaps" and meet immediate needs. Until those need are met, nothing else matters.

Gore: At TASB, we've been reading another book where the authors use the term "moral purpose" or "moral imperative." We encourage trustees and boards to come together and grapple with their moral purpose. Why are we here? What is it that we're trying to accomplish? If we can identify the core business that we're trying to accomplish, we can evaluate whether other ideas help us fulfill our mission. A primary mission of every school district should be to raise achievement for all students and close gaps. Here in Texas, we've done some research that suggests that boards that improve their governing systems also improve in student achievement. We're not saying they *caused* that achievement; they just happened to be on the board while the scores are going up. We found that when the scores are going up and the gaps are closing, those boards report that they're doing something different when it comes to community engagement. I'm wondering how governance may need to change in

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order to promote more equitable outcomes. Any ideas on that? How might governance change to help promote reducing inequities?

Moore: One thing that we've been talking about lately is focus. I keep coming back to the need to choose a focus. When we make equity our goal and focus, we put more energy behind those efforts, and we know which trails not to chase and which things we need to let go. What's important rarely changes throughout the year, but what's urgent does. In many places, I'm hearing urgency around focusing on and being more intentional about looking at data, understanding our systems, gathering data from the people about our systems, and then deciding collectively as a group of smart individuals what our focus ought to be. We need to adjust, evaluate that thing, revise as needed, and test it out again.

Durón: The situation of this pandemic has been somewhat analogous to the events of 9/11, when people literally came out of the ashes, lucky to be alive and hugging one another. I recall the story of one woman who noted how ego melted away in light of the urgency to act. It's an extreme example, but people looked at one another and shared a common purpose. In the same way, we need to pull together and make things happen in our school systems.

The situation of this pandemic has been somewhat analogous to the events of 9/11… People looked at one another & shared a common purpose. In the same way, we need to pull together and make things happen in our school systems.

Gore: The pandemic happened right after the State Board of Education and the State had begun the rollout of ethnic studies courses. A State Board of Education member in another state recently sent me a news article on the possibility of their State Board of Education requiring an ethnic studies credit for graduation, as a way to help inform students of people who are different than them. We know that there are lots of benefits to requiring an ethnic studies credit. What was interesting about this other State Board of Education was that the members were going to require that they take an ethnic studies

training first, before requiring it of administrators and teachers. Think about how we, as school board members, might lead in cultural diversity training, cultural sensitivity training, racial bias and so many other issues.

Durón: It starts at the top.

Moore: We've seen boards transform their perspective and become more effective in any area in which they choose to invest time and learning. They become more aware, more sensitive and better prepared to address equity in their own systems.

Gore: This webinar series by MASBA has addressed several inequities, but they haven't explored gender inequities to a great extent. Some MASBA districts have a "boy problem," where girls are outperforming boys on many academic and disciplinary indicators. Is there anything that boards should be looking at when it comes to disaggregating data by gender and ensuring all students are being well served?

Wightman: This is the time to really rethink education. With COVID learning loss, there are now gap for all of our students. If we don't think of new solutions, we're going to continue to see the same gaps, and one year's growth in one year isn't going to be enough. I have two boys and, while I don't want to stereotype boys, I know it can be a struggle for some boys—and for some girls—to sit in their seats for hours. Let's rethink education and flexibility and really focus on critical thinking and other skills. Let's look at all parts of our population and make sure nobody's left behind.

If we don't think of new solutions, we're going to continue to see the same gaps, and one year's growth in one year isn't going to be enough.

Gore: It certainly was a transformative question for my school board: We were talking about improved fourth-grade writing scores when one school board member asked how the boys were doing. It sent an assistant superintendent scrambling, and he discovered that boys were doing worse with the new curriculum! The improved scores overall overshadowed the disparity between boys and girls.

Wightman: When we dig deeper, we see that Black male students and *Latinx* male students often have worse academic outcomes than their female peers. Gaps exist. We need to ask how we address this and ensure that we're not reinforcing culturally-taught gender biases. We need to serve all kids and leave no one behind!

Black male students & Latinx *male students often have worse academic outcomes than their female peers. Gaps exist.*

Homestretch Issues of the 87th Legislative Session

Chloe Latham Sikes
IDRA Deputy Director of Policy

Ana Ramón
IDRA Deputy Director of Advocacy

April 19, 2021

Ramón: As we head into the final stretch of the 87th Legislative Session, let's take a look at where we are in the process. The Session began in January. By February, we were looking at potential bills and building relationships. In March, we saw the beginning of the hearing process. This Legislative Session has been unique: It has moved much more slowly because of COVID-19 and the winter storm that we suffered in mid-February. The creation of our state budget is four months behind. Imagine starting the school year four months behind and having to make up for lost time! Heading into this Session, we were hearing concerns that the budget might not pass on time. The budget has now been placed on the emergency calendar of the House, so that it's given priority and passes before the last day of the Session. Traditionally, the budget would have been taken up in the first week of April on the House side. It is now scheduled to be taken up on April 22, and members will be very keen to get it moving as fast as possible.

This Legislative Session has been unique: It has moved much more slowly because of COVID-19 and the winter storm…. The creation of our state budget is 4 months behind. Imagine starting the school year 4 months behind & having to make up for lost time!

Now, in April, we're seeing bills move between the Chambers. This Session, we've seen fewer bills filed and fewer bills receiving a hearing. House Bill 5, the broadband bill, is beginning to move.

Constitutional deadlines come into play in May, which leads to a mad dash to get things moving and to make sure that bills and amendments are protected. Much of what happens is "behind the scenes" and outside of the public view.

We're playing offense and defense on bills right now. In terms of offense, we're working on community engagement, which is crucial because elected officials are often looking for guidance. For this reason, we offer office hours on Monday to help people submit public comments and/or testify on the House side. In terms of defense, we're watching for bad bills and trying to protect the language of bills from harmful amendments. We're working on budget amendments for our priorities with the Mexican American Legislative Caucus. Because things are moving at an escalated pace, with marathon hearings to get through bills as fast as possible. TLEEC has been successful in slowing down some really bad resegregation bills, like SB 204. If it were not for TLEEC, that bill would have been voted out of the Senate much more quickly. It has made its way to the House, where we're now playing defense. SB 29, the anti-trans student athletes bill, was also voted out of the Senate, so TLEEC is trying to slow it down as well. We're in the downward slope of the Session, when more bills are stuck in Committee and die, and fewer bills "have legs"—which means that they're moving forward and have a chance of making it to the Governor's desk. If you're concerned that a bill is not moving, we recommend alternative vehicles at this point. Articles that are germane to a bill can be added as amendments. We call it "secondary legislation," which can be just as effective as having the bill come out of a hearing. For example, we have successfully amended House Bill 5, the Broadband Bill, to require that a member of an urban school district be appointed to the Governor's Broadband Council, to

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represent the hundreds of thousands of families in urban areas who are struggling with broadband internet access. We're closely following the conversation on federal aid for Texas, which could total $12.5 billion. Commissioner Morath reports that students are likely to perform below grade level by the end of the school year, so there's a lot of concern around reading attainment levels for children.

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We know that Texas lost contact with about 600,000 students since the beginning of the pandemic. We've found many of them, but this means a lot of learning loss. Commissioner Morath recently testified that he believes we are looking at an average of 5.2 months of learning loss for students so far. We are advocating for resources for students and school districts, to bring all students—especially students of color and Emergent Bilingual students up to grade level. We conducted a study and found that three out ocf every four students report struggling with mental wellness issues. These results were mirrored in a nationwide study that similarly found that about 75% of students are dealing with mental wellness issues. You know better than us that the need is there. We're trying to get these federal dollars released to districts and spent with equity. The American Rescue Plan of March 2021 includes $122 billion for elementary and secondary schools across the country. In the House and Senate, we're seeing conversations on how these monies could be utilized. We expect state and federal guidance during the next couple of weeks. Texas is one of only a handful of states that has not taken steps to distribute these dollars. Texas used the first round of federal aid dollars to replace or supplant state funds for schools, leaving many districts without additional monies. In March of 2020, Texas received $1.3 billion, which the state used to fill its own budget gaps. Round 2 came in December 2020, with $5.5 billion. Texas has not

distributed those funds to schools. Most recently, the March 2021 relief package is $12.4 billion for Texas, and the state has not distributed those funds to schools as well. We are actively pushing state leadership to get those dollars distributed. Other states are distributing funds to their schools. Arkansas has made direct allotments, with some schools receiving up to $40 million. Georgia and Louisiana have issued guidance to schools as well with respect to Round 2. That Round 2 monies in Texas haven't moved concerns us, and we remain hopeful that those monies can be equitably distributed to target our Black, Brown and Emergent Bilingual students. We believe that immediate access to the federal funds is necessary at this point. We've worked on two amendments for House Bill 5 and Senate Bill 5, to require that an equity study be done of dollars distributed, based on student and family need. These monies cannot simply be distributed based on census block data, because those data can be flawed, especially in Black, Brown and rural communities. If dollars are distributed, we want to make sure that students, families, parents, school board members and community leaders are a part of that dialogue. Our amendments have been well accepted.

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On Thursday, the House will debate the state budget, which is $119 billion in general revenue, in addition to federal dollars, so that's a budget package of $251 billion. This is the first budget cycle in which public education and higher education are now the largest section of the budget, even overtaking healthcare.

Sikes: I want to highlight a few of the bills that will be heard tomorrow in the House Public Education Committee and in the Senate Education Committee. We always have "the good, the bad and the ugly" on any given day. We have a couple of really good bills that promote bilingual education and strengthen bilingual education plans. House Bill 2258 creates a statewide strategic plan for high-quality bilingual education, that includes

expanding language programs and creating measurable goals that the state will track for bilingual, biliterate graduates. The Senate companion, SB 560, was heard last week and voted out of Committee by all members. We did not expect so much movement on bilingual education this Legislative Session, with the COVID-19 response and so many demands on the budget, but this is a some substantive legislation.

House Bill 1744 provides a bilingual education teacher preparation for high school students in their Career and Technical Education pathways. It will help students become bilingual, ESL and Spanish educators. We know that we have a 30-year shortage of bilingual education teachers in Texas, so this bill will address that.

House Bill 4042 is on the list of very bad bills. It's the House companion to SB 29, which discriminates against transgender students in school athletics.

Senate Bill 1716 promotes vouchers for special education students receiving supplemental services. It will create a private voucher system for students seeking services outside the public school system.

Senate Bill 215 creates an Office of Inspector General for the Texas Education Agency, to investigate alleged fraud, abuse or waste.

Senate Bill 1277 promotes advising for dual credit, and we're glad to see that.

Senate Bill 1955 is being called the Learning Pods Protection Act, which would exempt the learning pods that have popped up as a result of the pandemic from any municipal regulation, including school districts. These are enrolled students in public institutions, so you might want to follow that issue, too.

Ramón: Until now, the Legislative Session moved very slow, but now it's moving very fast. If you'd like to learn more, please join us for our weekly office hours every Monday. We are always happy to be a resource to MASBA, and we appreciate MASBA's leadership in ensuring equity in public education!