

**McAllen ISD School Community Safety Alliance on School Reopening
Open Letter to McAllen ISD Superintendent and Board of Trustees**

Public School Employees want nothing more than to begin the new year with the safest way to educate our students and continue to put them on the path to educational excellence. In the current COVID-19 environment, it has become increasingly evident that changes must be made to ensure that teachers and school staff remain as safe as possible and that their students can continue to benefit from their instruction, whether the teacher is in school or teaching virtually from home.

With increasing number of COVID-19 infections in Hidalgo County and the expected post-holiday surge, the McAllen School Community Safety Alliance -- public school employees, along with community members, local organizations, and elected officials-- is calling on the McAllen Independent School District to revise its school reopening plan, with the guidance of local health experts, to allow school employees to teach and work remotely.

As of December 15th, 2020, 71 positive COVID-19 cases have been reported to the district's [Covid-19 Dashboard](#) with 192 students and employees currently quarantined. On December 14th, the Hidalgo County Health and Human Services Department reported 2,866 active cases with numbers that have steadily increased as schools have reopened, businesses operate at larger capacities, and families gather for holidays.

We must prioritize keeping our students and school staff safe while helping to curb community spread. We recognize, and implore McAllen ISD to recognize, the significance of both the physical and psychological impact decisions regarding COVID-19 response have on the ability of school faculty and students to function in a manner representative of the standards of performance set at the state and local levels. Studies have shown teacher anxiety to notably impair the quality of education provided to the students. Teachers are unable to provide a safe environment in which learning can occur if they do not first feel safe. During elementary school ages, children are developing a sense of autonomy, agency, and trust. A teacher's attunement to these needs is clinically impaired through anxiety and depressive symptomatology. In order to provide ethical and effective education to our students, our teachers' physical and psychological safety must be made a priority. Our collective of public school employees, parents, community members, non profit organizations, elected officials, and public health experts is urging the McAllen ISD school board and superintendent to do the following to keep students and school employees as safe as possible:

- **Enforce the 20 day waiver period from TEA should the local hospitalization rate rise to 15% and once the waiver period expires, revise the school reopening plan to provide school employees the option to *volunteer* to return to in-person instruction for a monthly stipend while allowing for non-volunteers to work remotely. If TEA does not approve the waiver, the district should move immediately to allowing volunteers to take on in-person instruction as described above.** Currently, McAllen ISD is the only public school district in Hidalgo County still operating with 100% of its staff onsite. Employees are not provided with the flexibility to work remotely. Many have been turned away from receiving ADA accommodations, forcing high-risk individuals to report to campus and risk

infection, and/or in many cases, return home to family members with underlying health conditions. Additionally, the district continues to use all 3,418 staff members to service just 16% of the student population. Allowing for employees to opt-in to work onsite would prioritize the safety of employees and their families while also addressing the disproportion in numbers between staff and students on campus.

- **Transparently report district cases of COVID-19 to the McAllen ISD community, district employees, and students *and* enforce immediate and appropriate quarantine protocols for school employees and students exposed to or suspected of being exposed to COVID-19.** We know there is still much to learn about the [long-term effects](#) of COVID on adults and children and that the disease affects victims differently. To protect the health and safety of the school community and their families, it is critical that the district maintain transparency surrounding the amount of cases on campuses and at worksites while also allowing for employees and students to properly adhere to the [CDC's Public Health Guidance on Community Related Exposure](#), which recommends that affected parties quarantine for 14 days after exposure. Campuses should not wait until the end of the day to report to students, staff and the community when a case has come up, as is done currently. Sanitizing the affected areas and quarantining the entirety of the students and employee(s) exposed to the infected person to mitigate the spread of Covid-19.
- **Offer free and accessible testing for district employees and students suspected of being exposed to COVID-19 on campus or at district worksites.** To access free testing, MISD students and staff must currently be symptomatic. However, we know that individuals exposed to COVID-19 do not always show symptoms after developing the virus. Implementing testing in the district would help ease school community members who fear they were exposed to COVID-19 onsite while also help schools mitigate the spread of the virus.
- **Join the fight to curb community spread.** Our schools do not exist in isolation; they are part of the larger community. [Guidance](#) from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention notes that schools are a *“potential source of COVID-19 outbreaks, due to the number of individuals intermingling in close proximity for extended periods of time.”* Data from The [COVID Monitor](#), a research initiative that maintains a comprehensive national database of COVID-19 cases in schools, shows that schools are not immune from COVID spread and are contributing to the spread in the greater community. This information is not surprising and mirrors what Hidalgo County Local Health Authority Dr. Melendez stated [back in September](#) when county officials urged the delay of school reopenings in Hidalgo County.
- **Maintain CDC public health guidelines by following recommended safety protocols and ensuring district employees have access to enough PPE.** On November 5th, 617 district employees responded to the McAllen AFT survey on returning to in-person instruction; among those who participated were school teachers, office staff, transportation workers, paraprofessionals, and custodial staff. Only 9% of respondents reported that they feel safe coming to work. With this sentiment in mind, the district

must work with all campus staff and teacher organizations to ensure that [recommended safety protocols](#) are in place and enforced at all campuses.

- **Continue to ensure equitable access to technology for district students, staff, and employees.** To provide the best instructional experience possible, the district must continue to ensure that the school community has working technology and [access to internet services](#). This is especially important for students and families living in low socioeconomic and rural areas of the Rio Grande Valley where connection is limited and in households where multiple students must share an internet connection.
- **Ensure equitable access to trauma informed mental health services for the school community.** Teachers bring their work home with them. They complete lesson plans after dinner, research classroom activities over the weekend, and stay up late into the night entering grades into the gradebook. Psychological unrest will come home, as well. Anxiety surrounding the possibility of contracting the virus as a result of exposure to larger groups is high. Many teachers are classified as higher risk of infection and adverse response to COVID due to age, illness, etc. and anxiety related to falling ill or succumbing to the virus is high among teachers. This anxiety is experienced by the students in the classroom and by family at home. A teacher's inability to be heard when expressing concern elevates anxiety to trauma. Trauma experienced in the workplace is powerful. Some teachers have already resigned as a result of COVID response by the district, while others conduct internet searches for online teaching opportunities or open positions within other districts--in pursuit of safety.

A prioritization of teacher and student mental health would look like adherence to the strictest guidelines at all times. Another leg to that stool would be a focus on addressing the mental health needs of faculty and staff throughout the district. Anxiety and trauma, left unattended, have the potential to lead an individual to maladaptive coping mechanisms. Increased access, and sincere encouragement, to use mental health services is a step toward demonstrating the district's commitment to the psychological wellbeing of its employees.

- **Immediately install ventilation and purification systems specifically designed to destroy the Coronavirus.** On October 15th, the McAllen AFT was awarded a total of \$25,000 in [grant funding](#) to aid the school district in providing filtering for air purification systems on behalf of Texas and national AFT through the AFT Innovation Fund. The purchasing and installation of these systems will provide campus employees, students and parents with much needed peace of mind when returning to campus school buildings. While surrounding school districts are already installing systems, this delay of action appears as a lack of prioritizing the safety of district employees and their families.
- **Demand that the [COVID-19 Expert Vaccine Allocation Panel](#) prioritize school employees in their plans to distribute COVID-19 vaccines.** Texas is seeing an [unsustainable increase in hospitalizations](#) because of COVID-19 — without additional statewide mitigation efforts. The number of Texans hospitalized with COVID-19 and the seven-day average of new cases have nearly tripled since the [beginning of October](#). Teachers are still in their classrooms and bus drivers, cafeteria workers, nurses, and

counselors are all still on the job. As vital members of our larger community, the state must recognize school employees as frontline workers.

We remain deeply concerned about the health and safety of our teachers, staff, students, and their families. We welcome the opportunity to collaborate on advocacy and our coalition will continue to call upon our local leaders to prioritize the safety and health of our **community** as COVID-19 transmission in schools not only affects students and teachers. The school district must do its part to reopen schools in a way that provides the utmost care and reduces risk as we seek to control this pandemic; we hope you will work alongside us.

Sincerely,

Organizations and Elected Officials

McAllen American Federation of Teachers	Montserrat Garibay Secretary Treasurer Texas AFL-CIO	Shane McCarty, PhD Developmental Psychologist Promote Care & Prevent Harm
Zeph Capo President Texas AFT	Cristina Gomez Founder and Co-Director New Leaders Council South Texas Frontera	Rebecca Obregon Community Member Moms Demand Action
Ruben Cortez State Board of Education	David Gomez & Victor Cavazos Laredo Carnalismo Brown Berets	Jesse Rodriguez Club Board of Directors McAllen Palm City Lions Club
Krystal Carranza Community Member, LPC Counselors for Social Justice	Congressman Vicente Gonzalez Member of U.S. Congress	
Cesar DeLeon Community Member Poets Against Walls	Elizabeth Marquez Adult Educator Coordinator La Union Del Pueblo Entero (LUPE)	

McAllen ISD Educators and District Employees

Martiza Acevedo MISD Educator	Fatima Garcia MISD Educator	Ludivina Perez MISD Educator
Melissa Andrade MISD Educator	Daniel Garcia MISD Educator	Claudia Pinon MISD Educator

Chris Ardis MISD Educator	Rogelio Garcia MISD Educator	Marisa Pompa MISD Educator
Sylvia Arguelles MISD Educator	Lyamar Garcia MISD Paraprofessional	Evangeline Quinones MISD Educator
Stephen Arispe MISD Paraprofessional	Gracie Garza MISD Educator	Yovany Rangel MISD Educator
Jane Banda MISD Educator	Elide Gomez MISD Educator	Corinna Reyna MISD Educator
Glenda Barrera MISD Educator	Veronica Gonzalez MISD Educator	Clarissa Riojas MISD Educator & Vice President of McAllen AFT
Aurelia Benavidez MISD Educator	Cristina Guerra MISD Educator	Janie Rivera MISD Educator
Sarae Bernal MISD Educator	Courtney Harris MISD Educator	Andrea Rocha MISD Educator
Florentina Buentello MISD Educator	Hannah Hernandez MISD Educator	Eva Rodriguez MISD Educator
Mari Campos MISD Paraprofessional	Christina Hernandez MISD Educator	David Ruiz MISD Educator
Debanhi Cantú MISD Educator	Juan Hernandez MISD Educator	Nancy Salinas MISD Educator
Christina Calvillo MISD Educator	Adriana Iglesias MISD Educator	Patricia Serviere MISD Educator
Katherine Cappon MISD Educator	Maritza Jasso MISD Educator	Oralia Soza MISD Educator
Andrea Casas MISD Educator	Stephanie Keebaugh MISD Educator	Cynthia Sparks MISD Educator
Cristina Castillo MISD Educator	Amanda Kopecky MISD Educator	Leslie Stephens MISD Educator

Dr. Jose Castro MISD Educator	Corona Lopez MISD Educator	Sylvia Tanguma MISD Educator & President of McAllen AFT
Michelle Cavazos MISD Educator	Marisela Luna MISD Educator	Christina Trevino MISD Educator
Lucia Chapa MISD Educator	Letty Macias MISD Educator	Elva Trevino MISD Educator
Maribel Contreras MISD Educator	Laura Macias MISD Campus Testing Coordinator	Yvonne Uribe MISD Educator
Josie Cornejo MISD Educator	Linda Martinez MISD Educator	J. Hortecia Valdez MISD Educator
David Cortinas MISD Educator	Socorro Martinez MISD Educator	Laura Villalobos MISD Educator
Thelma Davila MISD Educator	Vanessa Martinez MISD Educator	Jorge Villalobos MISD Educator
Claudia Demo MISD Educator	Daniela Méndez MISD Educator	Elsa Villarreal MISD Educator
Edith Escobedo MISD Educator	Naomi Moreno MISD Educator	Marybel Waldo MISD Educator
Veronica Fonseca MISD Educator	Jessika Moreno MISD Educator	Joel West MISD Educator
Oscar Fuentes MISD Educator	Blanca Navarrete MISD Educator	Martina Zamora MISD Educator
Betzabeth Garcia MISD Educator	Maria Navarro MISD Educator	Irma Zamora MISD Educator
Brittnie Garcia MISD Educator	Adriana Ochoa MISD Educator	Celina Zumwalt MISD Educator
Irma Garcia MISD Educator	Juanita Olivarez MISD Educator	Sophia Peña Garza Retired MISD Educator, MISD Parent, and Taxpayer

Gina Garcia MISD Educator	Hiram Orozco MISD Educator	Raquel Garcia Former MISD Educator
Shelsea Garza MISD Educator	Rosalinda Pena MISD Educator	Carla P. Lopez Former MISD Paraprofessional
Mario Garcia MISD Educator	Raquel Pérez MISD Educator	

McAllen ISD Parent and Educators

Adriana Arce MISD Parent and Educator	Luis Garza MISD Parent and Educator	Evelyn Rector MISD Parent and Educator
Deborah Arney MISD Parent and Educator	Ada Gonzalez MISD Parent and Educator	Marie Rinker MISD Parent and Educator
Lyndsay Cano MISD Parent and Educator	Veronica Guerrero MISD Parent and Educator	Cindy Tijerina MISD Parent and Educator
Norma Echazarreta MISD Parent and Educator	Charlotte Hollinger MISD Parent and Educator	Vivian Velazquez MISD Parent and Educator
Norma Echazarreta MISD Parent and Educator	Jessica Mendez MISD Parent and Educator	
Samantha Gaona MISD Parent and Educator	Joy Morales MISD Parent and Educator	
Norma Garcia MISD Parent and Educator	Maria Ortiz MISD Parent and Educator	
Marisa Hammond Garza MISD Parent and Educator	Delia Pacjexo MISD Parent and Educator	

McAllen ISD Parents and Caregivers

Nadeem Abu-Hala MISD Parent, Doctors Hospital at Renaissance	Ana Lisa Flores MISD Parent	Veronica Peña MISD Parent
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Hector Andrade MISD Parent	Norma Fuentes MISD Parent	Armando Pompa MISD Parent
Rocio Ausucura MISD Parent	N. Garcia MISD Parent	Magaly Ramirez MISD Parent
Felipe Alvarez MISD Parent	Daniel García MISD Parent	Robby Rangel MISD Parent
Melissa Andrade MISD Parent	Carlos Gandara MISD Parent	Anissa Reyna MISD Parent
Sofia Alba MISD Parent	Patricia Montemayor Garcia MISD Parent	Elisa Rivera MISD Parent
Yvette Solis Benavidez MISD Parent	Miranda Garza MISD Parent	William Rivera MISD Parent
Melinda Botello MISD Parent	Manuel Garza MISD Parent	Irma Rodriguez MISD Parent
Yvette Castellanos MISD Parent	Margarita Garza MISD Parent	Triana Rodriguez MISD Parent
Melissa Cortez MISD Parent	Rebecca Guerra MISD Parent	Jessica Rivas MISD Parent
Angel Cavazos MISD Parent	Derrick Gonzalez MISD Parent	Mariela Salinas MISD Parent
Jennifer Champion MISD Parent	Heather Hunsberger MISD Parent and Registered Nurse	Mirna Salazar MISD Parent
Juan Castellanos MISD Parent	Ramiro Jasso MISD Parent	Jorge Valdez MISD Parent
Heather Chavez MISD Parent	Maritza Jasso MISD Parent	Marisol Villalon MISD Parent
Raul Chavez MISD Parent	Sara Jones MISD Parent	Esmeralda Villalobos MISD Parent
Melissa De Leon MISD Parent	Liliana Lopez MISD Parent	Kristina Y. Garcia Concerned Family Member of MISD Educators and Students

Perla De La Cruz MISD Parent	Nohemi Marroquin MISD Parent	Camilo Martinez MISD Grandparent
Silvia De La Rosa MISD Parent and Family Nurse Practitioner	Cris Martinez MISD Parent	Jaime Riojas Parent of MISD Educator and Taxpayer
Cesar Elizondo MISD Parent	Viola Menchaca MISD Parent	Ana Reyna MISD Grandparent
Belinda Escobedo MISD Parent	Sissy Navarrete MISD Parent	
Priscilla Elizondo MISD Parent	Brenda Ochoa MISD Parent	
Alonzo Flores MISD Parent	Analissa Passement MISD Parent	

Community Members:

Veronica Ayala McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Juan Livas Community Member and Leader	Joe Pompa Former MISD student
Nicholas Balderas Educator, Community Member, and Taxpayer	Fred Longoria McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	San Juana Rangel McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer
Elida Cantu McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Khrystyane Lopez Higher Education Recruitment Specialist	Paola Rodriguez MISD Student
Joshua Chapa Instructor, & McAllen Taxpayer South Texas College	Danielle Martinez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Lorena Saenz-Gonzalez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer
Adriana Coronado McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Jaqueline Mata McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Arlinda Shephard McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer

Sofia Davila MISD Student	Allison McGurk McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Lynne Shropshire McAllen Community Member
Norma Garza McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Leticia Medina McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Alexia Anne Solis Community Member Texas AFT
Armando Gonzalez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Clinton Mohammed McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Lucia Thompson Attorney and Community Member
Olga Gonzalez McAllen Community Member, Taxpayer, and Case Manager	Sabrina Ochoa McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer, RN	Michelle Todd Community Member Sign Language Interpreter
Sylvia Guerrero McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Samantha Ortegon McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Daniela Tovar McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer
Eric Hernandez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Virginia Palacios Community Member and Taxpayer	Rosalinda Trevino McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer and Healthcare Essential Worker
Mark Hernandez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Amber Palomo McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Jesus A. Valenzuela McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer
Mary Herndandez Community Member and Taxpayer	Emmy Pérez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Mick West McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer
Tim Hollinger, MA Clinical Health Counseling	Mary Perez McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	
Jose Luis Jasso McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	Roger Perales McAllen Community Member and Taxpayer	