

## Response to Superintendent's letter entitled "A message to AISD staff regarding accommodations"

On December 1, 2020, Dr. Elizalde sent a letter to AISD staff "to share [...] some additional information for context" about the accommodations process. The Superintendent's original letter is *italicized*, while our response appears **bolded and indented**.

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*Dear Austin ISD Team,*

*You may have heard a lot about accommodations in the last 24 hours. I wanted to share with you some additional information for context.*

*AISD developed a Benefits Review Committee to review all remote work accommodation requests for the Spring semester. The committee individually reviewed each request— minus identifying information to protect employee privacy—and determined if a remote work arrangement was feasible based on medical risk, if the position was deemed as essential to district function or directly impacts high-needs students or populations, and the needs of the campus or department.*

**It does not appear that the committee closely read these requests. After the decisions were made, we received a list of conditions which could qualify for an accommodation. This included, among a few other things, pregnancy, diabetes II, compromised immune systems, and cancer. We have seen at least 50 people who had one of those conditions and still received a denial. If the denials were based on something other than the medical condition, the individuals were not told. They just received a form denial with no rationale for the denial. We even know of one person who asked for an on-campus accommodation with extra protections. This person received the same form denial of a request to work remotely. Since this is not what the person requested, can we believe the request was closely reviewed?**

*Out of an abundance of caution in the fall, far more remote work accommodations were granted in Austin ISD than in other districts in Texas, and—even as other districts rescinded—we honored those remote-work accommodations as new information was provided by the CDC, and more evidence of the success of safety protocols in schools was confirmed.*

**Ok, it's great that people were accommodated earlier this year. However, now most of these accommodations have effectively been rescinded. People had to reapply, but they were told they could simply submit the same letter they originally submitted. What has changed? The medical conditions still exist. The vast majority of the students continue to choose to learn remotely. However, the number of positive COVID cases is increasing.**

*As we look toward the spring semester, we are preparing to welcome more students back to on-campus instruction. We know that it is paramount that our teachers and staff are able to provide the high-quality, on-campus teaching and support that each and every student deserves.*

**What? Where are these students coming from? They haven't showed up yet. Most students remain home. Do they matter? Not even going to get into the instructional model the district has chosen. Ok, maybe just a little. Why are teachers teaching remotely and in-person at the same time? Couldn't there be a better way to do this? Would it be possible to figure out how to have some teaching remotely and some in person?**

*The committee consulted with local health authorities regarding the CDC's list of health conditions that could put employees at higher risk and learned that the risk posed was reduced by the health and safety protocols in place at our campuses. It was determined that only those at the highest risk who could best fulfill their duties remotely would be eligible for remote work, in order to best support teaching and learning for students.*

*Teachers matter more to **student achievement** than any other aspect of schooling and **teachers** are estimated to have two to three times the effect of any other school factor, including services, facilities, and even leadership. At every juncture, we consider what is best for our teachers. How do we create an environment where they can excel? More importantly, how do we keep them safe?*

**Really? Most teachers and staff we hear from don't feel safe. Certainly, denying all but less than 50 accommodation requests via a form letter does not make teachers and staff feel safe and valued. That doesn't even include all the people who were previously denied, do jobs that cannot be done remotely, or have family members at risk.**

*AND, our students are the very core of our mission. What is best for them must motivate our actions and consume our time and energy. With very few exceptions, there is simply no question that in-person learning taught by teachers instead of remote via camera, is best for our students. Academic achievement is higher as is the level of positive personal connection between teacher and student.*

*Our students who are choosing on-campus instruction should be served by their teachers. Data, both local and nationally, continue to support that schools are NOT a high risk for virus transmission. These are very difficult times and granted, there are no perfect solutions. However, AISD has taken multiple steps to ensure that our school facilities are disinfected and hostile to the spread of the coronavirus. At each campus, trained professionals are in place to work with our returning teachers. We have provided extensive PPE such as masks, shields, hand sanitizer and even on-site testing for staff and students.*

**Again, it seems like only the minority of students choosing to physically attend school matter to the district. What about the other students?**

**Ok, the district plan includes safety protocols. However, this is not the reality at many campuses. We have heard of schools where social distancing is being reduced to three feet and schools where masks are not always worn. We have heard multiple examples of rooms not being disinfected after someone tests positive, so it is hard to be confident that all school facilities are being disinfected.**

*Finally, a word of praise for the teachers who have come to school - every day - despite their concerns. They have done a great job and deserve the support of every teacher, every school administrator, every child and every parent.*

**Wow! Yes, it is great that some teachers and staff are comfortable being back in school and are working hard. However, there are also teachers and staff who are there because they feel forced. They do not feel safe but are continuing work hard every day. Many of the teachers and staff who are working remotely would prefer to be in school, but it is not safe for them. Just because they are not in school does not mean they are not working. They, too, are working hard. There is no reason to divide people.**

**Everyone is working hard. Everyone has different circumstances. All teachers and all school staff are doing their job and should be respected. Things are tough enough right now. Let's work together.**