



Association of Texas  
Professional Educators  
305 E. Huntland Dr., Suite 300  
Austin, TX 78752-3792

Phone: (512) 467-0071  
Fax: (512) 467-2203  
Email: [info@atpe.org](mailto:info@atpe.org)  
Online: [atpe.org](http://atpe.org)

## For Immediate Release

March 2, 2021

### ATPE: “Ending the Statewide Mask Mandate is the Wrong Move at the Wrong Time.”

*State’s largest educator association believes removing the mask mandate will increase health risk in schools and increase anxiety among educators, students.*

AUSTIN, Texas— The [Association of Texas Professional Educators](#) (ATPE)—the largest educator association in Texas—believes that ending the statewide mask mandate is the wrong move at the wrong time. Ending mask requirements now will serve only to needlessly endanger Texas citizens at a critical moment in our collective battle against the COVID-19 pandemic.

Earlier today, **Gov. Greg Abbott** announced at a press conference in Lubbock, TX, that he would lift the statewide mask mandate that has been in place since last summer effective Wednesday, March 10. The Texas Education Agency (TEA) has not yet shared updated guidance for how Texas public schools should handle this change.

However, under current TEA guidance, schools are required to comply with the governor’s executive orders regarding the wearing of masks. As it stands, it is, frankly, irresponsible of the governor not to explain the impact of today’s announcement on Texas public school students and staff.

Other states are rushing to vaccinate their educators so they can finally safely reopen their schools to in-classroom instruction. In comparison, Texas officials, including Gov. Abbott, not only chose to put educators and students in harm’s way by opening schools earlier than recommended by health officials, but also they have chosen not to include school employees in early priority groups for COVID-19 vaccine access.

Masks and physical distancing requirements are some of the only mitigation strategies that have been offered to ease the fears of school workers and the families of students who attend schools in person.

“Lifting the mask mandate at a time when most educators still don’t have access to a COVID-19 vaccine and are anxious about being in close proximity to large numbers of students and fellow staff only adds stress to the already crushing pressure placed on our school employees during the pandemic,” said **Shannon Holmes**, ATPE Executive Director. “This ill-advised move is likely only to prompt educators to resign or retire.”

Per the [Centers for Disease Control and Prevention](#) (CDC), masks are an important step to helping “... prevent people from getting *and* [emphasis added] spreading COVID-19. They provide a barrier that keeps respiratory droplets from spreading.” Removing that barrier when most Texans have yet to be vaccinated will only create more COVID-19 cases, both in schools and out.

All of this doesn’t even account for the fact that Texas does not yet have COVID-19 cases under control, even as more people are getting vaccinated. On March 1, the state reported

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8,140 new coronavirus cases alone. [The CDC itself has cautioned against relaxing restrictions.](#) Texas is simply not there yet.

At a time when several Texas educators have already lost their lives to COVID-19 , eliminating these minimal safety measures sends yet another signal to Texas educators that state leaders do not care enough about keeping them safe.

“Gov. Abbott’s declaration that Texas has moved beyond the need for statewide mask requirements doesn’t match the facts on the ground,” Holmes said. “Mask requirements are helping mitigate the spread of COVID-19, and they should not be eliminated in Texas schools while most educators are waiting for access to the vaccine.”

**ATPE calls on TEA to immediately update its guidance for schools on how they can keep their students and staff safe in light of the governor’s announcement.**

[Visit ATPE’s comprehensive Coronavirus FAQ and Resource webpage for Texas public educators.](#)

[Download a copy of ATPE’s priorities for the 87<sup>th</sup> Texas Legislature.](#)

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#### **About the Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE)**

Founded in 1980, ATPE is the leading educators’ association in Texas with approximately 100,000 members statewide. With its strong collaborative philosophy, ATPE speaks for classroom teachers, administrators, and future, retired, and para-educators and works to create better opportunities for Texas’ five million public school students. | [atpe.org](http://atpe.org)