



March 13, 2020

Dear PAISD Family,

This last week, the Port Arthur Independent School District was scheduled to have a relaxing and reinvigorating Spring Break. Instead, it was a week of anxiety and uncertainty as the World Health Organization declared the outbreak of COVID-19 as a pandemic.

Panic is seizing the stock market and causing a spiraling downfall of public confidence in our ability to rally against the disease. This unease has reached Jefferson County as our lives are starting to resemble the days of Hurricane Harvey and other abnormal Southeast Texas weather conditions. Events have been cancelled and each of us has to determine what our collective response will be. We know what the anxiety of uncertainty is. We have lived it over and over these past few years. Our children have lived it over and over again.

We must be hypervigilant and protect students, staff and the community. However, we as leaders have a duty to not panic in the face of possibilities. We must handle them and make the best decisions we can. As Superintendent of Schools, I must manage the anxiety around the coronavirus and make decisions that are in the best interest of students, staff and the community.

Unlike the districts that are in the Houston area, (at the time I am writing this article) there are no confirmed cases of the coronavirus in Jefferson County. I understand that that is likely to change. However, the education of our students depends on the continuation of our school system. The decision to close schools affects so much. Parents have to provide care for students which may cause a hardship. Texas school superintendents are having daily phone conferences with the Commissioner of Education in order that any closure will be in line with the expectations for our students with TEA. As our community is painfully aware, school closure does not come without costs. Our students were required to make up over seven days within the last two school years for missed days due to weather conditions. At this point in the school year, a closure would possibly mean an extended school year for students and delayed graduation for seniors. This should be a last option for our students. As we have learned, an extended release from school has a negative effect on academic achievement. Our students are making gains as a group and we should take seriously any disruption of academic instruction. The concerns have to be weighted against the concern for the health and welfare of students and staff. **IT IS NOT AN EASY DECISION.**

In response to confirmed cases of the virus in our neighbor Houston and the surrounding area, some districts have announced closures. However, these closures are temporary and short term: a week or two which includes Spring Break. At this time, that serves no purpose for PAISD.

Our district will remain open with assessment from day to day with consultation with the local health organizations as well as the Texas Education Agency. Students and staff are asked to seek medical attention if feeling ill, to be proactive with washing hands and using sanitizer when soap and water are not available. Additional restrictions will be placed on non-essential visitors at our school campuses and parents and the community will be updated on any possible school closures.

We ask that our parents and staff complete the Spring Break survey to provide us with information to assist us in our decision-making process going forward. All information will be kept confidential: <https://forms.gle/fXbu2Dvvovqd8JSY9> If you traveled internationally during the break, it is possible that you may need to be quarantined up to 14 days upon arriving home. All decisions will be made by the CDC and the Port Arthur Health Department. If any employee has questions concerning this process, please contact the Human Resources Department on Monday morning.

We also understand that some parents may want to keep their children home. If that is your decision, please contact your campus principal on Monday and they will provide you with resources to keep your child current on their lesson until they return.

A day of learning is a positive day, no matter what day it is. It will be a day of learning that will help each student to move closer to achieving his or her dreams in life. The district is doing everything it can to ensure that our students receive the very best education and remain healthy while in our care.

For continuous information please refer to [www.paisd.org](http://www.paisd.org).

Sincerely,

Dr. Mark Porterie

PAISD Superintendent of Schools