

To the Editor:

I am writing to you today as a concerned citizen of Laredo, a teacher of LISD, and more importantly a mother of two beautiful boys. I have never been one to voice my opinions or concerns, much less, reach out to a newspaper. My decision to communicate my issues to you comes after weeks of high levels of anxiety, constant discussions with my husband and those who share the same predicaments as I do; and the desperate need to be heard and have someone take educators like me into account.

I work at one of LISD's high schools, and have 7 years of experience. My passion has always been to help my students, not just teach them. I tend to develop such strong bonds with "my kids"—as I call them, that they become an extension of my own family. I am one who cheers them on, celebrates their victories, and sheds tears with them when they are defeated.

With that being said, our current COVID pandemic has turned all our lives upside down and has everyone living with a heightened sense of uncertainty. As educators, we tried our best to adapt and adjust—almost overnight, into distance learning. While many argue and point out its numerous flaws, we, the teachers, know we tried our best. Many of us were also tending to the needs of our own families and guiding our little ones through this new way of learning. While overwhelmed, we pushed through and sought out resources to enhance and engage our kids. We collaborated, at times, more than under normal circumstances. We made ourselves available to our kids at all hours of the day, because we understood the realities of some of our students' home-life.

As we wrapped up this unusual semester—to say the least, we reflected as usual, and were able to recognize our short-comings. As I conversed with a few colleagues, we each spoke on changes we would do, on resources we'd seek, and we each spoke with an eagerness to create engaging, innovative, and creative lessons to enhance the effectiveness of distance learning. As teachers, we are committed, life-long learners. We are always in search of research-based strategies and activities aimed at increasing rigor while meeting our kids' academic needs.

The 2020-2021 school year is one unlike any other. The pressure, the overwhelming uncertainty, the risk-factors, the guidelines, the liabilities—all create an insurmountable amount of stress on all those in the field of education, the students of our community, and parents. COVID, according to research, is unlike the flu. Whereas many of us choose to get the flu vaccine every year, COVID currently has no vaccine, and worse yet—no treatment nor cure. Although many whom have been infected either show no signs, or suffer mild symptoms, many others suffer greatly.

Researchers and experts have continuously cautioned those who fall under the “high-risk” category to stay home whenever possible. As a high-risk individual myself and as a parent of a high-risk child, my family and I have taken this quarantine seriously. We have remained put with only my husband going out to work. We have set precautionary procedures for when he arrives home from work. We go to extreme lengths to protect our family from a potential exposure. We have not visited with any family, nor friends, and our only outings are occasional drives around town, or to pickup curbside groceries. This isn’t ideal; we would much rather be out and about traveling with our boys. However, there is nothing worth risking my boys, myself, or my husband’s life.

As school districts meet and discuss their options and weigh out what’s at stake, more and more it becomes clear that individuals like myself are not being considered. Aside from my issues with the logistics given CDC guidelines, why am I not being offered an option to teach from home? How can I continue to protect myself and my kids, when I do not have the option to keep us safe? I am willing to meet any expectations required of me, participate in countless trainings on technology, seek out best distance learning practices, and collaborate with others with knowledge on virtual teaching. There are many students who are also high-risk. Why not pair up high-risk educators with high-risk students, and those who wish to attend face-to-face can do so at their own will.

A simple cold, or sinus infection has landed me in the ER numerous times. I understand that if any educator requires hospitalization, the district will manage by hiring a permanent sub or another teacher, but are we really that dispensable? What about our families? Allow us the opportunity to choose by providing us with an option to continue doing what we love without the risk of contracting this unforgiving virus. With less high-risk individuals on campus, the district avoids a lot of liability issues, will likely have more space to practice social distancing and abide by the CDC guidelines. I am more than willing to provide documentation from my specialist attesting to my condition.