

COMMITTEE: House Public Health Committee
TIME/LOCATION: 10:00 a.m., Tuesday March 10 in Room E2.028
CHAIR/VICE-CHAIR: Rep. Senfronia Thompson/Rep. John Wray
TOPIC: The State's Preparedness on COVID-19
CB WITNESS: Deputy Commissioner Ray Martinez

Thank you, **Chair Thompson, Vice Chair Wray** and Members of the Committee. My name is Ray Martinez and I serve as Deputy Commissioner for Academic Affairs and Workforce Education at the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board. I appreciate the invitation this morning to testify on how the Coordinating Board is working with institutions of higher education, the Department of State Health Services, and other state partners in responding to, and encouraging maximum preparedness, for dealing with COVID-19.

Texas has over 1.6 million students enrolled in higher education across our state – this includes public and private two and four-year institutions of higher education, our state technical colleges and universities, as well as our health-related institutions. The **highest responsibility** of the Coordinating Board, of our various system governing boards, and indeed, of **all leaders** in Texas higher education is to ensure the safety and well-being of these students, as well as that of the faculty and staff serving them.

Public and private institutions of higher education across the state are, as you know, incredibly diverse in size, demographics and other important categories. As such, specific institutional needs will differ when it comes to responding to a public health situation, such as COVID-19. Campus leaders are on the front lines of evaluating circumstances and making decisions regarding the safety and welfare of their students, faculty, and staff. Therefore, it is **imperative** that the Coordinating Board remain in close communication with our institutions of higher education and that we provide **frequent, accurate, and timely** information, especially as this situation continues to evolve so rapidly.

In short, important decisions regarding COVID-19 must be made by **informed institutional leaders** based on the circumstances of their campuses and in full **consultation** with state and local health authorities.

All higher education institutions across the state are taking this responsibility **very seriously**. Among other preparations, our campuses are focused on having incident management planning in place; reviewing, updating, and implementing emergency operations plans; communicating with local, regional and state health authorities; adopting policies to minimize risk, particularly around international travel; and providing accurate and timely information on COVID-19 to students, faculty and staff.

Likewise, the focus at the Coordinating Board has been to provide officials at institutions with the information they need to make informed and effective decisions for their campuses. And we have been doing so **on a regular basis** since late January. Commissioner Harrison Keller has designated me as the agency's point of contact for COVID-19-related issues. The agency staff and I are communicating regularly with representatives from higher education institutions to provide information and to understand their specific needs as this situation develops.

Last week, we **distributed guidance** to all Texas institutions of higher education – public, private and proprietary – from the US Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) regarding how institutions can **plan, prepare and respond** to COVID-19. This guidance notes the importance of working in collaboration with local health departments and other relevant partners. The CDC also recommends that institutions consider postponing or canceling student foreign exchange programs. This guidance notes that **those** overseeing such programs, *"should be aware that students may face unpredictable circumstances, travel restrictions, challenges in returning home or accessing health care while abroad."*

The Coordinating Board is also working closely with state leadership, **including the Governor's office**, the Texas Department of State Health Services (DSHS), and other state agencies. The Department of State Health Services has, for several weeks now, provided a weekly conference call to update all interested stakeholders – Coordinating Board staff participate in this call as do representatives from many of our institutions of higher education. This call has been a very useful way to get up-to-date information as well as to ask questions and update partners on preparedness efforts. As of yesterday, this call is now being held on a **daily basis**.

The Coordinating Board is also a **full participant** in the twice-weekly meetings of the Texas Emergency Management Council, which includes well over 30 state agencies. We will continue working with officials at DSHS, the Texas Division of Emergency Management (TDEM) (*Chief Nim Kidd*) and other state agencies to ensure that we receive and disseminate the latest information on COVID-19 to Texas institutions of higher education.

Finally, the U.S. Department of Education announced last week that it will provide as much flexibility as possible in accommodating students and campuses disrupted by COVID-19. We have **distributed this information** to all institutions of higher education, and we will continue to provide updates from the U.S. Department of Education as they become available.

As we move forward in the coming days and weeks, the focus of our agency will be to continue to **collaborate closely** with institutions of higher education across the state – to answer questions, disseminate timely and accurate information and most importantly, to ensure that students, faculty and staff are **safe and healthy**.

I appreciate the opportunity to testify today, and I'm happy to answer any questions.