

HISD plans online-only option next year

Outgoing superintendent says each teacher will lead either in-person or virtual, not both

By **Jacob Carpenter**
STAFF WRITER

Houston ISD leaders plan to offer online-only classes to families that want them to start the 2021-22 school year – as long as state officials continue to provide funding for children enrolled in virtual instruction.

HISD Interim Superintendent Grenita Lathan, speaking Wednesday after her annual State of the Schools speech, said district leaders hope to bring as many students as possible back to classrooms by August while also remaining committed to an online-only option. About 56 percent of HISD's

197,000 students attended virtual classes as of February, largely due to health and safety concerns amid the novel coronavirus pandemic.

While Lathan pushed for choice Wednesday, she also warned that HISD families should expect one big change in 2021-22: educators no longer will be required to teach students in face-to-face and virtual classes at the same time. As a result, families should not expect to retain the same teacher if they

switch between formats during the school year.

“Our teachers teaching simultaneously has been extremely difficult this year, and we cannot continue to go on in that manner for the next school year,” Lathan said. “That’s what will look different. The option will be there, but we need to have teachers teaching in one mode.”

Lathan’s plans still remain subject to change, for two reasons. The first is that HISD will have a

new superintendent in the coming months, who could shift the district’s direction. Lathan announced earlier this month that she will depart in June to become superintendent of Springfield Public Schools in Missouri after an abnormally long three-year stint as HISD’s interim leader. Her decision followed the HISD school board’s vote last November to launch a nationwide superintendent search, which trustees hope

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Meeting students’ needs



Photos by Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

ABOVE: Eliud Sierra, left, and Maria Flores place food boxes in the back of a truck during a food distribution event Wednesday at Barnett Stadium. HISD Nutrition Services distributed student meals, family food boxes and masks for people in the community. Houston ISD had enough food for 4,500 students.

RIGHT: Cars line up for Wednesday’s food distribution event at Barnett Stadium. Houston ISD Nutrition Services offers campus curbside pickup Mondays and Thursdays, neighborhood supersites on Wednesdays and Saturdays, and apartment complex curbside pickup at rotating locations. See <https://www.houstonisd.org/StudentMeals> for more information.



Bill targets transparency for mental hospitals

By **Alex Stuckey**
STAFF WRITER

Patients have a right to know if a hospital is safe when choosing where to receive care, Rep. Stephanie Klick said Wednesday – and that means the inspection process needs to be more transparent.

Klick, R-Fort Worth, presented her bill, H.B. 2052, Wednesday to the House Committee on Public Health. It would require the Texas Health and Human Services Commission to post more information related to investigations and violations at both general hospitals and private psychiatric hospitals across the state.

Currently, the state only publicly posts enforcement actions from the previous year against these hospitals. The information posted includes the date of the action, the penalty and the state code the hospital allegedly violated.

But Klick’s bill would require the state to post the number of investigations health and human services has conducted at the facility and the notice of the hospital’s alleged violation – including the code in question and a statement about what happened. The outcome of each investigation, including the adoption of a corrective action plan, and the final decision, investigative report or

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Vaccine sites on tap for lots at Bush, Hobby

By **Dylan McGuinness**
STAFF WRITER

Parking lots at Bush and Hobby airports soon will be home to mass vaccination clinics for the Houston Health Department, as the supply of shots continues to ramp up.

City Council unanimously approved lease arrangements at the airports Wednesday.

The site at Bush’s The Parking Spot opened Tuesday under a short-term lease agreement, with some 6,665 people scheduled to get shots there this week. It is not

clear yet when the Hobby location of The Parking Spot will open for vaccinations, although the request for council action said it is necessary “for this operation to begin immediately.”

The news comes as the state announced Tuesday that all Texas adults will be eligible for the vaccine beginning Monday. The state Department of State Health Services said it expects supply to increase considerably next week, though it is not clear by how much.

District I Councilmember Robert Gallegos said he worried the move to open up the

pool of eligible adults would exacerbate wait times for those trying to get appointments.

“I know that when it was at (people) 50 and above, I heard people letting me know that they were having issues in regards to the wait time to get registered,” Gallegos said. “So, now that it’s open to everyone 18 and over, I can only imagine the wait time to register.”

Mayor Sylvester Turner said he hopes the number of doses coming to the city will “exponentially increase” since the state has

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HPD suspects hate crime in business attack

By **Anna Bauman**
STAFF WRITER



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

Sungjun Lee holds his mother, Jung Kim, who owns Uptown Beauty Supply on Kuykendahl. Two women have been charged in an attack on the family March 17.

Jung Kim went to pick up wigs that customers knocked to the ground at her family’s north Houston beauty supply shop. Her son, Sungjun Lee, said his mother told the women, “Don’t worry about it. I’ll fix it.”

But the women cursed at the Korean business owner, Lee said, saying that Asian people should not be selling wigs to Black people and accusing the business of stealing their money.

Kim asked the group to leave, but the encounter escalated when two women physically assaulted the owners of Uptown Beauty Salon. Houston police are now investigating the March 17 incident as a possible hate crime in light of a national surge in violence targeting the Asian American community.

Seconds after leaving, the women returned and knocked over more displays. One woman hit Kim several times, breaking

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ATTACK

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her nose. She scratched Lee in the face when he and his brother intervened to protect their mother. As the attackers fled, the driver attempted to plow into several members of the owner's family with her car before peeling out of the parking lot.

A week later, the family still feels traumatized and unsafe in their store following what they believe was a racially motivated attack, Lee said.

"I'm pretty sure they came to the store with a purpose," the 29-year-old said Wednesday.

The Harris County District Attorney's Office charged Keandra Young, 24, with aggravated assault with a deadly weapon in connection with the attempt to hit the store owners with her car, court records show. Young was released from jail on \$40,000 bail and is scheduled to appear in court in June.

A second woman, 22-year-old Daquiesha Rachel Williams, was charged with assault, accused of striking one of the family members with her hand, court records show. She also made bail and is no longer in custody.

"Our work continues, as prosecutors review all the evidence; Texas law provides for heftier sentencing for hate crimes, which unleash fear in an entire community," Harris County District Attorney Kim Ogg said in a statement.

On Wednesday afternoon, Houston police hate crime investigators decided to look into the reported assault because of the at-



Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

Signs on the door warn of the March 17 attack on the owners of Uptown Beauty Supply, 12412 Kuykendahl. Houston police are looking at the incident as a possible hate crime.

mosphere of concern surrounding a national rise in anti-Asian American violence, said Jodi Silva, the agency's public information officer.

At first, the case was not being investigated as a hate crime, she said. Patrol officers did not make note of any racial slurs used during the attack in their offense report, which Silva acknowledged "may have been an oversight."

Lee said he told the responding police officers about the attackers' racial language during an interview.

The family said they believe the assault was racially motivated because of the words and actions of the assailants, Lee said. They think the attackers targeted Kim because she is older, small in stature and Asian, Lee said.

"Whenever the one girl beat up my mom, she said 'You little Asian girl,'" Lee said. "They say a lot of racial words like, 'F---ing Asians, f---ing b--- Asians' to my mom and to us."

Hate incidents and crimes targeting the Asian American population have surged during the pan-

demic, but local authorities said last week that Harris County and Houston have recorded no uptick. The day before Lee's family was assaulted in their store, a gunman walked into three salons in the Atlanta area and opened fire, killing eight people – six of them Asian women.

The Korean family opened the store two years ago after more than a decade in the beauty supply business.

The attack was surprising because they have a good relationship with customers, Lee said. He



Photo courtesy Sungjun Lee

Jung Kim, who owns Uptown Beauty Supply, is shown after the attack. Two women have been charged.

was touched when regulars reached out and visited the store to check on the family following the assault. Most of their clientele and employees are black, he said.

"We never thought this (would) happen to us," Lee said.

The family members sought treatment at a hospital following the attack and a doctor said Kim will require surgery. Lee's face still hurts from the scratches, he said.

Kim was traumatized by the attack and did not return to the store until Tuesday, Lee said.

The other family members returned to work the day after the attack because they cannot afford to close the shop.

The attack was so frightening that they hired a security guard to protect the store during business hours.

"We're not in a dangerous field, but we don't feel safe anymore. It's really sad," Lee said.

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ONLINE

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to complete by late spring.

"We'll be monitoring these assurances when there's a new superintendent," said Jackie Anderson, president of the Houston Federation of Teachers, whose union supports the end to simultaneous in-person and virtual instruction. "We applaud our teachers for doing the very best under the circumstances, but we definitely don't want to see that continue in August."

Second, Texas Education Commissioner Mike Morath and state legislators have not yet committed to providing full funding to districts that enroll students in online-only classes in 2021-22. State leaders, who made that pledge for the end of the 2019-20 school year and the entirety of the current school year, have not announced a timeline for a decision on the issue.

In recent months, Morath has pushed for more students to return to classrooms, arguing the benefits of in-person instruction greatly outweigh the health risks for most children.

"On-campus instruction is where kids need to be, an overwhelming majority of the time," Morath told The Texas Tribune in February.

Still, Morath has given no indication to date that his convictions about in-person instruction will lead to cutting off funding for students in online classes in August.

Texas Education Agency officials did not respond to a request for comment Wednesday on plans for funding online learning.

In addition, Lt. Gov. Dan Patrick has made "expanding virtual



Brett Coomer / Staff photographer

Clara Morales works with students in the college prep class at North Houston Early College High School in February.

learning options" one of his 31 priorities for the state Senate during the current legislative session.

While they await funding guidance from state officials, many Texas districts are developing plans for continuing online instruction.

Some school leaders fear families may leave their district due to safety concerns – taking state funding along with them – if forced to end virtual classes. Other administrators add that a small percentage of children, mostly in high school, are performing better while learning from home.

In Clear Creek ISD, the Houston area's 10th-largest district, administrators said Tuesday that they intend to open the district's first full-time virtual school for students in all grades starting in 2021-22.

"We are looking beyond COVID-19 and identifying the successful attributes of an online education," Superintendent Eric Williams said in a statement. "Clear Connections Virtual School will be a destination for

families who love Clear Creek ISD but also enjoy the flexibility an online platform offers."

Lathan also announced Wednesday that HISD plans to form a committee that would guide the district toward its next bond program to help finance major construction projects.

HISD's last bond passed in 2012 and totaled about \$1.9 billion, much of which went toward renovating and rebuilding high schools. The state's largest school districts typically ask voters to approve new bond packages every four to six years, but leadership upheaval and a spate of negative headlines had hurt the district's chances of passing a proposal.

"This district is in desperate need for another bond," Lathan said.

While Lathan said she is eyeing November 2022 for a potential bond vote, she will have little say in the timing. The committee likely will not come together until after her departure, she said.

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HOSPITALS

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der issued by the commission to address the alleged violation would have to be posted as well.

"The intent of this bill is to increase transparency, making the final hospital investigation reports, outcomes and the number of times they've been investigated open to the public," Klick said Wednesday. "This transparency will help patients make informed decisions."

The information would have to remain on HHSC's website for two years. The measure would apply to all hospitals investigated by the state.

The Wednesday hearing comes weeks after the Houston Chronicle's investigation, "In Crisis," revealed that the state's mental health system has suffered for years from underfunding and insufficient oversight. The investigation found that the state doesn't have enough hospital beds to serve its growing population, with wait lists that stretch on for up to a year, and that it's failing to track whether patients are getting the help they need. Many find themselves in jail over and over again.

As wait lists continue to grow for state psychiatric hospital beds, the Chronicle found that more and more Texans are seeking help from private psychiatric hospitals. But determining if these hospitals are safe is difficult because of how little information is posted online. The Chronicle had to file more than half a dozen records requests over the course of 16 months to determine how many state violations Texas' private mental hospitals had faced in five years.

These records showed that hospitals failed to investigate patient-

on-patient assaults; that patients weren't appropriately monitored, ending in a patient killing himself while others watched; and that a staff member was allowed to continue working after his crisis training had expired, and a patient subsequently suffered a head injury.

Additionally, HHSC told the Chronicle last year that it does not "track or measure the number of times they perform inspections where no violation is found." Klick's bill would change that.

Christine Mann, commission spokeswoman, noted in a statement that it lists enforcement actions taken against hospitals on its website, but said the commission would "implement all legislation that is enacted into law."

Several individuals testified Wednesday that the public often has to rely on news reports to learn if a hospital has been found in violation of any laws. It shouldn't be that way, they added.

Ware Wendell, executive director of Texas Watch – a citizen advocacy group that focuses on holding insurance companies and other corporations accountable – said Wednesday that patients have a right to know this information.

"Sunlight is the best disinfectant," Wendell said. "Bad things happen in the dark."

State-run psychiatric hospitals are investigated by the Centers for Medicare and Medicaid Services and therefore information about alleged violations against these hospitals would not be included in this disclosure. Much of that information can be found on hospitalinspections.org.

No one testified against the measure. The committee did not vote on the measure Wednesday.

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VACCINE

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opened the eligibility requirements. If that happens, he said the city can open "many more locations" for people to get a vaccine, along with mobile sites that move around the city to reach people who have trouble leaving their homes.

"Please go and get the vaccination where you can, or sign up to receive it," Turner said. "The goal

is to increase the number of sites."

The request for council action on the airport leases said the Health Department anticipates receiving a large number of vaccines on a more routine basis.

The new sites would double the number of the city's main vaccination sites, according to the Health Department. It also operates clinics at Delmar Stadium and the Bayou City Event Center. Those four sites are designed to ramp up to 3,000 doses per day, six days per week, when the supply allows.

The clinics at Bush Airport, Delmar and Bayou City Event Center are giving out between 1,000 and 2,500 doses per day currently.

The city has also benefited from a federal vaccination site at NRG Stadium, capable of giving 6,000 shots per day. The Health Department said it will consider continuing that site when the Federal Emergency Management Agency demobilizes it, likely sometime in April.

The city also uses health centers, multi-service centers and

partnerships with clinics, pharmacies, churches and other groups to distribute the vaccine.

The city will pay \$2,000 per day to use each airport parking lot through June, at a total cost of \$392,000. The requests said the parking lot lease arrangements at the airports, which the city owns, are needed because they are "large enough to allow HHD to fluidly operate" vaccination sites. The city is using federal grants to cover the costs.

The Parking Spot lots were

closed to cars due to a drop in demand amid the pandemic, making them a viable option, spokesman Porfirio Villarreal said. The city-owned lots at the airports are still open to parking.

Appointments are needed for both sites, and they are not currently available.

To sign up for text and email alerts about new appointments, register for the HoustonRecovers option at AlertHouston.org.

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SCOOTERS

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council members said shifting the scooters to the streets comes with its own challenges. Pedestrians will not have to share space with the motorized two-wheelers but scooter users now must contend with vehicle traffic.

The scooter rules are identical to those for bicycles, which also are banned from sidewalks in business districts.

Despite the need to ensure safety, some observers lamented the council's actions limited mobility but did not improve the on-street

conditions that make some of those interactions calamitous.

"A truly pro-business city might see this as not just an opportunity, but a duty to build safe rights-of-way on our downtown streets so people can get around efficiently, and to create an environment that supports entrepreneurship," said Joe Cutrufo, executive director of the advocacy group BikeHouston.

District I Councilman Robert Gallegos said he will discuss additional safety needs in an upcoming Quality of Life Committee meeting, "so we can do what we can to keep (scooter users) safe, as well."

Advocates said those discus-

sions should include the addition of amenities, including dedicated bikes lanes similar to those along Lamar, Austin and Gray in downtown and Hardy and Elysian north of the central business district.

"They don't have to reinvent the wheel," Cutrufo said. "We already have examples of what we need on Austin and Lamar."

Critics of the scooters said they expect more regulations, especially if the popularity of the vehicles spreads.

"The best thing we can hope for is scooters don't catch on," Travis said.

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Steve Gonzales / Staff photographer

During the pandemic, scooter rentals have skyrocketed, but some complained about their use on crowded walkways.