



TEXAS ASSOCIATION OF RURAL SCHOOLS

"The Voice for Texas Rural Schools"

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September 28, 2020

The Honorable Dan Huberty
House of Representatives
Chairman, Public Education Committee
1100 Congress Avenue
Austin, Texas 78701

Dear Chairman Huberty and Committee Members:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide input to the House Committee on Public Education. The Texas Association of Rural Schools (TARS) conducted a survey of school districts from rural, small and mid-sized school districts. A summary of the responses is provided as well as individual district responses to questions posed by the committee. As always, we stand poised to assist with any other need from the Committee. Thank you for your continued work to support the school districts and school children of Texas.

Sincerely,

Michael Lee

Leigh Ann Glaze

DIGITAL LEARNING

INTERIM CHARGE 2:

Determine if any barriers exist in providing a digital learning environment for all children, including an evaluation of the competitive marketplace for blended learning products and services.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the Technology and Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA) in providing districts the resources necessary to equip students with instructional materials and technology, including in the review all programs and initiatives funded by set asides from the TIMA.

QUESTION 1 FROM INTERIM CHARGE 2: Can a map, detailed list, or other resources be provided that shows where there are gaps in available internet coverage? If so, please provide. What needs to be done to close this gap?

Please see highlighted responses from superintendents below:

- Only 48% of our students have internet in their homes. In most cases its due to a lack of availability versus an ability to pay.
- Internet is a problem in our area. Speed is the limiting factor along with families choosing to use data on phones as their internet provider.
- We are a very rural community and have limited coverage in many areas.
- Many of our areas only have access to satellite internet which expensive and of low quality and speed.
- There is a state, nationwide problem with connectivity within the rural communities across the nation
- Currently we have increased our technology expenditure by over 50%.
- This needs immediate attention and improved rural connectivity.
- At our school facilities we are fortunate to have very good services. However, in areas outside of our town there is very little coverage via fiber and service via other means is extremely spotting. We have several families that cannot access cell or internet at all at their residence.
- We are ok in town, but have outlying areas within our school district that are very spotty.
- There are a few gaps in coverage but for the most part we have pretty good connectivity, although it does vary from one provider to the next.
- We have some areas that don't have coverage
- Our district has 65-75% of the student population with no internet accessibility due to lack of infrastructure of towers in rural area.
- Fair to good.
- Big gap in Kaufman County.
- We have very limited broadband coverage in rural areas. It is not sufficient to support remote learning without significant investment on the part of the district and tax payers.
- Internet service is poor in our rural area and we have several student households who do not have internet. Fortunately, we are a technology-rich district who had already invested in ensuring we had the capability to handle remote learning.
- Available internet in our community is at approximately 75%. This pandemic has exposed the digital divide. We definitely need help in this area.
- Spotty in rural areas.
- no internet options for a large part of our district.
- We live in the National Park. At times we do not have phone and/or internet service. Internet service is spotty due to our remote location.
- We luckily have no gap.
- We are rural, so internet access is good in some locations and nonexistent in most.

INCREASED INTERNET COVERAGE

INTERIM CHARGE 2:

Determine if any barriers exist in providing a digital learning environment for all children, including an evaluation of the competitive marketplace for blended learning products and services.

Evaluate the effectiveness of the Technology and Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA) in providing districts the resources necessary to equip students with instructional materials and technology, including in the review all programs and initiatives funded by set asides from the TIMA

QUESTION 2 FROM INTERIM CHARGE 2: What plans do internet service providers have to roll-out increased coverage in the state to close the technological gap only highlighted by the current pandemic?

Survey question: How has your local provider or ESC increased internet service to close the technology gap during the pandemic? Please see highlighted responses below.

- They have provided support at every turn and guided us through the connectivity project through Region 4.
- Our local provider donated hotspots for our students to use. While the gesture was appreciated, this was still limited service.
- We have purchased an increase in service as well as purchased hotspots to hopefully assist in internet coverage for students.
- Our ESC has been very supportive. However, all but one of our students has access to Wi-Fi, so we did not have huge gaps to address.
- No, neither has provided any tangible service.
- It stayed constant we had already increased it.
- Very limited at this time; focus has been elsewhere.
- I am not aware of either doing much to improve service in our area.
- They have worked closely with us to ensure that we get everything that we need.
- None that I am affected by.
- yes
- Not any temporary fix for infrastructure issues. Providers say it takes approximately a year to clear requirements to put in a tower and cost is approximately \$1 million per tower.
- no
- Our ESC serves our district very well, however we do not use their internet service.
- Our local provider has limited ability to close the technology gap. However, I feel they have done everything in their power absent further state assistance.
- Our ESC has increased their services at no additional cost to districts. However, they have not guaranteed those additional services beyond December 31, 2020.
- In regards to internet, our ESC has not been able to support us. We do have local providers that have offered discounted deals to our community and us, as a school district.
- Local provider has made low cost plans available.
- No increase
- No. Big Bend Telephone is the only provider allowed in the park and service is subpar. Due to the fact we live in the National Park, fiber is not allowed, and we have to work with the resources available.
- The region center has allowed us coverage and WCW has helped with hot spots at a lowered rate.
- To our district, yes.

Survey Question: What barriers exist in providing a digital learning environment for all children?

Please see highlighted responses below:

- Availability of technology infrastructure in our area.
- Internet and parents available at home.
- The biggest barrier for digital learning is the need for assistance and monitoring at home. For most families, both parents work and the children do not have support at home or are left with older siblings/family. If there are issues, they typically cannot be resolved until parents return home after school hours. This puts a large handicap on creating an ideal learning environment. We find most students prefer and do better with in-person schooling if given the choice.
- Our biggest barrier has been the lack of knowledge from the parents. They are not familiar with technology or do not hold education to a high priority and therefore, have struggled to adequately support their children.
- Connectivity and reliability in the internet service.
- The price of connectivity to rural area.
- Lack of funding and lack of commitment.
- Primarily adequate internet service. To a lesser degree, lack of devices. However, under project connectivity our district has made significant strides toward meeting the need.
- What we don't have is the seamlessness and continuity for importance of digital learning to exist and be emphasized.
- Children do not have assistance at home many times in order to do their work. (remote learners) We are still having to purchase devices for our students.
- Training, Internet and devices
- The mentioned internet connectivity already discussed. Also because of the difficulty of service parents and students do not attempt to be involved in the digital learning. We have been F2F only since August 12.
- Availability of devices and connectivity in remote locations
- Connectivity
- Internet connectivity/broadband access
- In our district, the main barrier is home internet access!
- Quick access to hotspots. Educating our public so that they prioritize having internet in homes. It's tough on single parents who don't have it and have relied on their children to use it at schools.
- Connectivity.
- Connectivity and teacher workload
- Stable internet services.
- Reliable computers and communication from TEA and the bulk suppliers
- Access to broadband/high speed service. Video streaming in some areas but not in most.

TEA SPECIAL EDUCATION FEDERAL REQUIREMENTS

Interim Charge 3:

Monitor the progress of the TEA's compliance with the Corrective Action Response required by the United States Department of Education, the implementation of the state's Special Education Strategic Plan, and the state's compliance with other federal requirements regarding special education, including maintenance of state financial support for special education. Recommend solutions to barriers the agency, school districts, students with disabilities, and parents face in accessing a free and appropriate public education and in meeting the milestones of the plan and any measures needed at the state level to ensure that students with disabilities are being located, fully evaluated, and appropriately identified for special education instruction and services.

Survey Question: Please comment on what experience you have had as a result of TEA's compliance with the Corrective Action Response to the USDE for special education services? Changes in programing, funding, regulations, guidance?

Highlighted Responses below:

- We are scheduled to be audited this spring. We'll know more then. The Feds have never funded SpEd as they originally promised.
- N/A
- We have seen some impractical solutions to providing services to our special education students.
- N/A
- The experience was the MOE letters was sent out during our closure and the timeline to contest passed during the closure so we wrote a check back to TEA of over \$38k
- it requires time for staff to handle changes while limiting time with children and the learning process
- We have experiences a rash of testing and that has resulted in some increase in students served. However, I think this is mainly from people moving into the area. The schools in our area had been in general compliance with federal requirements.
- We feel like they have moved from near unreasonable to workable with the policy.
- We review procedures for child find, evaluations and FAPE. We found no issues of compliance.
- We have had to provide for additional staffing to best suit the services needed for corrective action.
- N/A
- We are making adjustments as needed to ensure compliance.
- I have no experience with this issue.
- None as of yet.
- None, yet.
- More kids being identified – positive. Less funding for resources for students and staff needed to service said students.
- I have none
- They have been helpful with guidance and programming but not so much with funding.