



Date: September 30, 2020

To: House Committee on Public Education

From: Bexar County Education Coalition

Re: Request for Information, Interim Charge 2

The Texas legislature has invested significant time into pushing schools to be digitally connected and digitally capable. From early access to technology spending to pursuing online testing, Texas, in many ways, started preparing our districts for the stark realities of COVID-19 prior to the pandemic making headlines. However, while many of our districts have made large strides towards complete digital inclusion and access, most districts across the state still have a sizable percentage of families that remain disconnected from high-speed broadband internet for monetary or infrastructural reasons. Testament to this fact, House Bill 391, which was passed during the 86th Legislative Session, recognized, districts must still ensure printed materials are provided to all children who do not have access to the internet or an appropriate device to access educational materials. In fact, this interim charge was made prior to the pandemic and the intense need for digital access in schools and in homes.

Bexar County Education Coalition (BCEC) represents districts that are inside of or are adjacent to Bexar County, centered on the city of San Antonio. While an urban center may give the impression of being digitally connected, 50% of households in several zip codes less than two miles away from San Antonio's city center lack broadband internet access.¹ In fact, the three largest cities in Texas rated as some of the worst connected large cities in the country according to the US Census Bureau.² These statistics become even starker when evaluating the connections rates within the more rural areas of the region, where more than 30% of families lack access to any kind of internet infrastructure.

COVID-19 not only highlighted these existing inequities, but tested the capability of existing infrastructures in place. From speed to available bandwidth to quality of signals interrupted by weather conditions, Texas faces not just the question of "how connected

¹ Commit Partnerships, "Internet Access Across Texas" – Zip codes: 78202 and 78215: <https://commitpartnership.org/dashboard/visualizations/internet-access-across-texas>

² National Digital Inclusion Alliance "Worst Connected Cities" - Houston #24, Dallas #15, and San Antonio #25 for cities with more than 100,000 households: <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/worst-connected-cities-2019/>

are students across Texas” but also “*how well* connected are the students across Texas.” As COVID-19 will be present in our country for the foreseeable future, closing the digital divide for our state’s students is not just important, it is vital.

Question 1: 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?

When evaluating the connectedness of the Bexar County region, BCEC leaders utilized several sources to generate a sense of internet coverage: American Community Survey One Year Estimates (ACS), released by the U.S. Census and visualized by the National Digital Inclusion Alliance;³ Internet Access Across Texas Map from the U.S. Census Bureau’s five year estimate visualized by Commit Partnership;⁴ and a recently released report from University of Texas at San Antonio and the City of San Antonio titled, “Digital Inclusion Survey and Assessment: A Report on Digital Connectivity Capability and Outcomes in San Antonio and Bexar County.”⁵

BCEC remains encouraged by the City of San Antonio’s willingness to partner directly with districts to expand internet infrastructure and access to families that need it the most. Through a symbiotic connection of resources, the city of San Antonio is able to utilize local dollars to increase infrastructure to district networks to keep children safe on established school firewalls. Through this partnership approximately 20,000 more households will have access to high-speed broadband internet.

Partnerships like the one between the city of San Antonio and Bexar County area school districts should be encouraged and bolstered at the state level through sustainable funding dedicated to expanding low-cost or no-cost internet services to families that need it the most. While providers have dedicated hours of labor and donated countless services during this intensive time, the state should also encourage provider partnerships to be time-bound and not data-bound since large data plans that promise significant data coverage can be used up quickly by on-going, required video conference meetings and content downloads.⁶

³ National Digital Inclusion Alliance - <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/data-research/>

⁴ Commit Partnership - <https://commitpartnership.org/dashboard/visualizations/internet-access-across-texas>

⁵ University of Texas at San Antonio - https://hcap.utsa.edu/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Measuring-the-Digital-Divide-Report_Final_City.pdf

⁶ Sprint 1 Million Foundations “How much DATA you are using?” - <https://schools.saisd.net/upload/page/11211/docs/Data%20Usage.pdf>

Technology costs, including strengthening internet networks and fiber, internet capable devices, and on-going digital competency training, should be covered by the state as a necessary part of every child's education. Texas needs to ensure the ability to access education is available to all children, especially for school districts that serve low-income and rural areas.

BCEC knows that the House Committee on Public Education understands the necessity to close the wide digital divide present in Texas. BCEC member districts wish to thank the committee for the time, labor, and consideration on these issues and look forward to continued partnership during the coming session.



The members of the Bexar County Education Coalition (BCEC) are districts that collectively care and educate approximately 350,000 students, 60% of whom are economically disadvantaged, and are suburban, urban, fast-growth, recapture, military, and rural independent school districts ranging in enrollment sizes from 1,000 to 100,000 students. BCEC members also employ close to 200,000 citizens of this great state.