



Hallsville ISD

P.O. Box 810
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Superintendent's Office

September 30, 2020

To: Texas House Committee on Public Education, Chairman Huberty and Vice Chairman Bernal via e-mail

CC: Representative Allen, Representative Allison, Representative Ashby, Representative Bell, Representative Dutton, Representative González, Representative King, Representative Meyer, Representative Sanford, Representative Talarico, Representative VanDeaver

Re: Request for Information, Interim Charge 2, Digital Learning
Chairman Huberty, Vice Chairman Bernal, and members,

Thank you for the opportunity to submit a response to Interim Charge 2, related to digital learning in Texas:

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 of all programs and initiatives funded by set asides from the TIMA.

As the leader of Hallsville ISD, I have the privilege of leading one of the state's few full-time online public schools through our Texas Virtual Academy @ Hallsville (TXVA). The program educates 11,000+ students statewide through a Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) program. As a member of the Commissioner's COVID-19 Instructional Continuity Taskforce, I have been exposed to the varied policy discussions regarding remote learning, and I wish to share my unique perspective from Hallsville ISD and a request to enhance the state's support for full-time digital learning in Texas.

The Hallsville ISD Board of Trustees and my administrative team feel privileged to be one of the few districts allowed to offer a full-time online public school option to Texas families. The school attracts families who prefer a home-based, accountable public school option for numerous reasons focused on the

specific and unique learning needs of students. Because the school is to a great extent self-paced, students who struggle with attention deficit, need more time, or can move more quickly through content are often attracted to and succeed in our model. This virtual academy attracts students from all sorts of backgrounds, demographic representations, and socioeconomic status. We attract and serve students with disabilities, those who are bullied, have anxiety, and those who are medically fragile. We serve many students who live in unsafe neighborhoods. As we are adding CTE programs to our offering, we are attracting students who want to graduate with real-world skills and wish to pursue industry-recognized certificates which have tangible economic value.

During the 2019-2020 academic year, over 36% of our online students were economically disadvantaged, nearly 12% were receiving SPED services, and 52.8% were African American or Hispanic. Student academic performance also increased during the 2019-2020 academic year. Internal NWEA MAP assessments demonstrated a 6% improvement and growth, including growth for important student sub populations. As a result, we predicted that our program would have achieved a rating of a B or high C in the state accountability system this academic year.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and the closure of traditional school buildings, we are attracting thousands of students and families who believe that our ability to offer a personalized online instructional model is superior to the crisis remote learning they experienced this past Spring. Many families were not satisfied with the quality of online learning they received from their district during the Spring (see an interesting article on the difference between crisis remote learning vs. robust online learning [Remote v. Online](#)), and many were not comfortable allowing their students to return to the classroom this Fall. In response, our board of trustees have committed to be a part of the solution and help meet the education demands of Texas families. Accordingly, we increased our enrollment capacity by an additional 5,000 students for the 2020-2021 academic year. We also recruited 100 more Texas-certified teachers and effectively trained them in the virtual instruction delivery model. (We offered our virtual teacher training expertise to TEA and TxVSN staff to support other Texas school districts, but were not granted the opportunity to assist the state in this manner.)

However, several barriers exist that prevent TxVSN programs from fully serving Texas students, for which we respectfully request the House Committee on Public Education consider permanent policy changes:

- 1) Open TxVSN programs to all grade levels, including grades K-2. Students of all ages are impacted by COVID-19, yet our youngest students are barred from this program. Our academic model is able to provide an age-appropriate education to K-2 students, including phonics kits, math manipulatives, young readers and science kits. The technology component is also age-appropriate and offers deep guidance to the learning coaches in the home to support the K-2 students. The lesson time, les-

son formats, online vs offline work balance is all developmentally-appropriate. Many of our current students have siblings in younger grades that would benefit from our program. In addition, adding K-2 would afford students a seamless learning experience rather than a need to adapt to a virtual program the same year state tests are taken. Texas is the only state in the country that prohibits K-2 for virtual students, and the efficacy of K-2 virtual learning has been documented for 20 years. Therefore, we ask you to repeal through statute the K-2 enrollment barrier outlined in *19 Tex. Admin. Code § 70.1001(10)*, *Tex. Educ. Code § 30A.104(a)(2)*.

- 2) Similarly, we ask you to open TxVSN programs to students who do not have the designation of “prior-year public” as noted in *Tex. Educ. Code § 30A.002(b)(1)*. Reports across the state and the nation have highlighted the closure of private schools that are not able to sustain the impact of COVID-19. These students are returning to the public school system in some form, and we wish to be one option to serve these families. Furthermore, recent enrollment attempts have highlighted that students who have sought enrollment in Texas online public schools who are protected under the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act - the federal act that authorizes the federal [Education for Homeless Children and Youth \(EHCY\) Program](#) and is the primary piece of federal legislation related to the education of children and youth experiencing homelessness - have been denied enrollment due to the prior-year public requirement. Even our most vulnerable students have been turned away due to this enrollment barrier.
- 3) To improve the process by which courses are approved for the TxVSN. As a district, we could hold the responsibility for course approval, or rely on third-party accreditors. Recent TEA guidance (*Texas Virtual School Network Guidance, May 14, 2020*) streamlined the course approval process for the 2019-2020 academic year, and we would greatly benefit from expanded and permanent flexibility, per *Tex. Educ. Code §§ 30A.103, 30A.104, 30A.105*.
- 4) Finally, ensure that the Texas accountability framework accounts for student mobility by making adjustments to the indicators in four areas outlined in the attached document, namely: 1) STAAR Performance, 2) Graduation Rate, 3) Relative Performance for School Progress and 4) Closing the Gaps in Graduation Rates. Also see a data analysis attached that highlights the impact of student mobility.

Our state is facing an education crisis, and our district has been uniquely positioned to serve students in a digital learning environment. We ask you to embrace the opportunity to improve the law in Texas so more students can be served through an effective online public school. We stand ready to serve and support in anyway that we can. Thank you sincerely for considering these requests.

Sincerely,

Jeff Collum
Superintendent
Hallsville ISD