

September 30, 2020

Chairman Dan Huberty
House Committee on Public Education
Texas House of Representatives
Room E2.408
P.O. Box 2910
Austin, TX 78768

Dear Chairman Huberty:

UnidosUS is writing to submit comments to the House Committee on Public Education regarding the barriers that exist in providing a digital learning environment for all children, and the marketplace for blended learning products and services (Interim Charge 2).

UnidosUS, previously known as National Council of La Raza, is the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization and has built a stronger country by creating opportunities for Latinos for more than 50 years. Through its unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico, UnidosUS simultaneously challenges the social, economic, and political barriers at the national and local levels.

The UnidosUS Texas-based Affiliates include 28 community-based organizations that invest more than \$775 million and employ more than 6,200 staff to provide direct services to approximately 240,000 Texans annually. UnidosUS is headquartered in Washington, DC, and has staff in Austin and San Antonio. Through partnerships, community investments, and state research and advocacy on housing, health, and education, UnidosUS advances opportunities for the more than 11 million Latinos who call Texas home.

The COVID-19 pandemic has upended the lives of all students and families, but it has disproportionately impacted low-income students and students of color, making data collection on the impact of the pandemic on students' learning experiences and their access to remote learning more critical than ever.

Based on an analysis of data from the 2018 American Community Survey conducted by UnidosUS, and the National Indian Education Association, millions of households with children under the age of 18 years lack two essential elements for online learning: (1) high-speed home internet service and (2) a computer.¹ In Texas, 29% of households lack home internet services. And when you explore the data by race and ethnicity, the largest gaps exist for Latino households—38% of Latino households lack home internet access, compared to 28% of White households. Similar trends exist when you look at the data by income—39% of households with income between \$25,000 and \$50,000 do not have access to home internet compared to 10% of households with an annual income more than \$150,000.

We see similar trends for households in Texas without a computer (14% overall)—22% of Latino households do not have access to a computer compared to 13% of White households. Again, we

¹ Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap (Washington, DC: Alliance for Excellent Education, 2020) <https://futureready.org/homework-gap/> (accessed September 28, 2020).

see worse outcomes by income—21% of households with income between \$25,000 and \$50,000 don't have access to home internet compared to 1.4% of households with an annual income more than \$150,000. And families that do have a computer at home often report that they do not have enough computers laptops, or tablets for everyone in the home to work or learn remotely.

Given these inequities in access to internet and computers, Latino students and families are struggling in a variety of ways to ensure that their children continue to learn while schools are closed. This is especially problematic for children who are English learners (ELs) and children who need access to special education services but may not be receiving those services at home.

As the new school year has begun, students, educators, and parents have continued to grapple with lack of support at the federal and state level, while parents make an impossible choice—struggle with distance learning at home or risk the health and safety of their kids and families by going back to school. Texas policymakers must ensure that all students have an equal opportunity to succeed and must find a way to provide internet and devices to the 2.1 million students that do not have access to internet and the one million households that do not have access to a computer.

State and local policymakers must work together to identify these gaps in access to essential technology and high-speed internet so that the state can deploy state resources, and leverage federal resources, to schools and districts that need them most. Policymakers could also provide incentives and facilitate partnerships between technology companies and school districts to broaden access to broadband and devices. For example, Comcast's Internet Essentials program is available to bring affordable high-speed internet to eligible households.² The challenge is making sure eligible families are aware of these types of programs and are able to navigate the application process successfully. Partnerships with trusted community-based organizations and school districts would help to expand awareness, cross language barrier, and bridge cultural divide to increase take-up and ensure more households have connectivity to support distance learning.

If children continue to be disconnected from their school and the learning process, we will see opportunity and achievement gaps widen for the most vulnerable student populations. While COVID-19 did not create the digital divide, it has created more urgency than ever to close it.

Thank you for allowing us the opportunity to provide comments on this urgent matter. UnidosUS welcomes the opportunity to work with the Committee on Public Education and provide resources as needed. Should you have any questions regarding these comments, please contact me at mgrajeda@unidosus.org.

Sincerely,

Manuel Grajeda
Texas Strategist
UnidosUS

² Internet Essentials from Comcast, <https://www.internetessentials.com/> (accessed September 30, 2020).