



September 30, 2020

The Honorable Dan Huberty
Chair, Committee on Public Education
Texas House of Representatives
Texas Capitol, Room E2.408
Austin, Texas 78701

RE: Charge #2 - Part 1 - Barriers to digital learning

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee,

TCEA has been monitoring the barriers for digital learning for many years. Although the COVID pandemic exacerbated the barriers, the problems have remained the same. Many districts have been working over the years to provide their students with digital resources that have enabled them to learn anytime and anywhere. The districts who had been moving in this direction through strategic planning, resource allocation, and preparing their personnel for the shift from print to digital were able to make the necessary adjustments during the pandemic. Those who had not have struggled. Part of their struggle was due to circumstances beyond their control.

We have addressed broadband as a separate barrier because the solutions that will address broadband require solutions that affect more than just education.

Broadband

Through the Governor's broadband initiative, Classroom Connectivity, 99% of Texas school districts have met the FCC's minimum broadband standards. However, many Texas students do not have adequate access at home. This was a barrier even before the pandemic, but the pandemic has highlighted the inequities that these families face. Broadband is not a luxury anymore. It is as much a necessity as basic telephone service. Without broadband, many students and some teachers have not been able to access the remote learning opportunities that many other Texas students have utilized to continue learning from home. It is important to note that these students who do not have access at home need this access even when they are able to go to school. Anytime, anywhere learning relies on access to resources regardless if the student is at home or at school. A student who is not able to access robust and fast Internet while at home is at a distinct disadvantage compared to their friends who have access 24/7. It is imperative that Texas provide the leadership that is necessary to solve the disparities in broadband access.

Recommendations

TCEA participated in the discussions of Operation Connectivity. From those discussions and research conducted on this issue over the years, we recommend the following:

- The state should establish an office to coordinate the efforts to provide broadband access to all Texans. This office is not designed to regulate telecommunications services, but rather provide assistance in the efforts of the different regions and local communities as they try to meet the needs of their citizens. Without this coordination, Texas public entities such as healthcare,

education, and public safety have duplicated their efforts and expense in providing broadband for their needs. The office would also coordinate efforts to secure federal funding for rural and urban broadband access.

- The state should improve the accuracy of the broadband mapping data by requiring a process to verify this data. It is impossible to solve this problem without accurate data.
- The state must decide how they will fund the installation of this vital infrastructure. More than likely, there will be federal funding to accomplish this, but it will also require an investment by our state. The legislature should decide if the Texas USF should be repurposed to help subsidize the installation of broadband, use general revenue, or create another funding mechanism similar to the telecommunications infrastructure fund which was created in the 1990's to accomplish this task for Texas communities.
- Permit cities of a specified size to provide broadband services to their citizens after they have done an exhaustive study to determine if that is the best solution for their citizens.

Technology Planning

Technology is ubiquitous in our society. Almost every aspect of our day is powered by technology. This is true for a school district as well. This has required many districts to quickly adapt as they strive to find personnel that have the level of technical expertise that is required in today's environment of cybersecurity attacks that threaten the personal information of both students and staff. The reliance on data to analyze student achievement also requires a level of expertise that was once only needed in the corporate world. The ability to use technology instructionally requires a teacher to not only know how to use a plethora of technology applications, but to also know which ones can best be leveraged to help their students to overcome a variety of learning challenges. All of this must be accomplished with limited funds. None of this is possible without careful planning. Currently, Texas school districts are not required to create, follow, or update a technology plan.

Teacher Readiness

In a recent report written by Common Sense Media, it was cited that 56% of teachers felt that lack of training is a "significant or extremely significant problem."¹ The quick pivot to remote learning was taxing on many teachers. They were unprepared to adapt to the demands of knowing how to use the conferencing platforms, but also how to integrate the technology tools within their pedagogy and their content. In 2011, when districts lost the Technology Allotment, many schools disbanded their instructional technology training teams. These districts had used their Technology Allotment to pay for personnel to train their teachers. When that resource was eliminated, so were those positions. We are still reaping some of the consequences of the loss of that dedicated technology funding.

Digital Literacy

There is a mistaken assumption that since most children and teenagers have a smartphone, they must be digitally literate. Knowing how to use a consumer product and how to utilize digital technology for work and learning are two separate skill sets. The digital literacy skills that students need today are complex and require not only access to a variety of technologies, but also instruction and guidance in how to

¹https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_final_7_1_3pm_web.pdf

leverage digital resources in order to research, create, analyze, curate, and collaborate as they are acquiring new knowledge and skills. At the same time, they need to be taught how to protect themselves and their data since much of their life will be lived online.

TCEA has partnered with Learning.com over the years to help districts assess their student's digital literacy. Sadly, the data indicates that Texas student's digital proficiency has actually decreased by ten percent between 2013-2018². Texas students are required to be taught the Technology Applications skills. The problem is that these skills were last updated in 2011 and are woefully inadequate.

Technical Support

School districts often have the largest and most sophisticated networks within a community. These networks and the digital devices that access the networks require technical staff that can keep up with the demands of a large-scale deployment of devices. They are often understaffed and underpaid, but they are committed to the core mission of the school district. These dedicated personnel are managing complicated networks and face many security challenges. Keeping them trained and staffed at a level that is manageable is a challenge. It requires funding for salaries and training to ensure they have the necessary skills to meet the demands of the district.

Recommendations:

Rather than address each one of the barriers, we have chosen to address them as a whole.

In the 85th Legislature, [SB 810](#) required the SBOE to update the Long-Range Plan for Technology at least every five years. The SBOE [updated the plan](#)³ and added it to the appendix of the [Long-Range Plan for Education](#) in 2018. The Texas Education Agency brought together a group of stakeholders together to reimagine what is possible if we utilize technology within our educational environment. TEA then took this group's ideas and built a plan that, *if enacted*, would address the barriers identified mentioned above. The plan addresses the following:

Barriers	Long-Range Plan for Technology Goals
Technology Planning	Goal 1 and 5 - Strategic Planning with LEA's and State Leadership
Teacher Readiness	Goal 1 - Redesigning learning to take advantage of digital resources.
Digital Literacy	Goal 3 and 4 - Digital citizenship, literacy, and cybersecurity
Technical Support	Goal 2 and 6 - Device acquisition; technical support, and connectivity

The plan has already been developed and approved. The *state now needs to implement the plan*. Below is a list of actions we believe the Texas Education Agency and the ESC's should do to assist districts in

² Learning.com Texas – TCEA 8th Grade TA-TEKS Assessment

³ https://drive.google.com/file/d/1fOnStR_m5Gh-EpJ6jG18-FFPBjJSh3Qu/view

implementing the Long-Range Plan for Technology (LRPT). These recommendations are in line with the TEA's blended learning projects.

- Create a task force made up of district and state stakeholders to establish benchmarks that districts can use to measure their progress in implementing the LRPT.
- Require districts to write and adopt a three-year technology plan that demonstrates how they will align their district's goals with the LRPT.
 - The ESC's and educational technology non-profits should offer workshops in which districts can send a team of district leaders that will assist them in developing their district's plan.
 - The agency should allow districts to resubmit their plans if the agency did not approve the first submission. The goal is to help them learn how to develop plans that are specific and will move their district toward accomplishing their goals.
- Establish a Digital Teaching and Learning grant that districts can use to implement their technology plans once they are approved by the state. These grants should be available for all districts that submit an approved plan. Thus, districts will receive funding to support the implementation of their plans, but not until the plan has been approved.
 - Each grant should focus on an area of need. Each district will focus on where they need to improve. Some districts may need to focus on infrastructure, while others need to focus on professional development. Their plan should drive where they focus their efforts.
- The Texas Legislature should provide funding so that TEA, ESC's, and educational technology nonprofits can provide districts with support as they implement their plans. This could be in the form of, but not limited to:
 - Technical support and advice
 - Professional development for both administrators and teachers
 - Workshops on best practices for implementing digital instructional materials
 - Technology planning advice
 - Identify exemplar districts who exhibit best practices that other districts could contact and visit.

We commend the state legislature, the SBOE, and TEA for ensuring that Texas has a visionary [Long-Range Plan for Technology](#) for school districts to follow. It is currently in the appendix of the Long-Range Plan for Education. We highly recommend that the LRPT be promoted and supported by TEA and the ESCs and that they provide leadership and support so that districts can align their goals and actions to make this plan a reality. We also recommend that the Texas legislature appropriate funding to accomplish the goals and strategies in the LRPT. We believe that all Texas students should be given the opportunity to learn in a district in which the strategies and goals of the LRPT have become a reality.

Respectfully,

Jennifer Bergland, Director
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Texas Computer Education Association