



September 30, 2020

Texas House Public Education Committee
Interim Charge 2

Chairman Huberty and Members of the Committee:

Thank you for the opportunity to provide information to the committee regarding Interim Charge 2. Interim Charge 2 reads:

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.

Texas indeed faces barriers to the provision of a digital learning environment for all children. Fortunately, many of them reside in Texas's own statutes.

Though the competitive market for learning products blending digital materials and in-person instruction has existed for some time, and indeed been encouraged by state programs such as House Bill 3's Blended Learning Grants, the competitive market for the kind of exclusively virtual instruction that the state now requires has stagnated. Only 8 districts out of approximately [1,200](#) are allowed to provide virtual full-time instruction as part of the state system; 6 of them currently do so. Before school closures in the spring of this year, 9 of nearly [9,000](#) campuses were authorized to operate virtually. Most districts in Texas are offering digital instruction of some kind to students for the 2020-21 school year. Without legislative action, all but 8 of those programs must abruptly end after the close of this school year.

Moreover, the only district that was offering a full set of distance programming to Texas students in all grades was [TTU K-12](#), a special purpose district operated by Texas Tech University. If Texas is to create a vigorous system of distance education—one that can be used in future disruptions or as the modality of choice for students who prefer it—it must allow for a robust system of district-based, community-centric virtual education.

Florida requires each of its district to provide or arrange for some sort of virtual course offering for its students. When the pandemic arrived, Florida engaged a system already built, offering [training in virtual education and stipends to teachers](#), offering courses free of charge to districts, and scaling up its platform capacity from a couple hundred thousand students [to 2.7 million students](#) within weeks.

For more information on the opportunities and challenges facing Texas virtual education, as well as the recommendations below, please see the Foundation's forthcoming publication, *Virtual Education in Texas*.

The Foundation recommends the following changes to state policy regarding digital education:

1. *Lift the moratorium on districts' establishment of virtual education programs*
2. *Allow state funding to be applied to more than three courses in the state course catalog*



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3. *Limit the provision allowing districts to deny a student's course catalog enrollment if the district provides a "substantially similar" course*
4. *Open provision of virtual resources to all grade levels*
5. *Revise the process by which courses are approved for the TXVSN*
6. *Extend the timeline for required teacher professional development that could prohibit teachers from filling gaps in available online course teachers*
7. *Direct a portion of available federal emergency education grant funding to modernize the state virtual education system*
8. *Align virtual education admission and enrollment requirements with those of in-person campuses*
9. *Evaluate the course fee limit placed on TXVSN catalog courses and determine whether it is appropriately set for given subject areas*

Thank you for the opportunity to provide this information, and I look forward to future discussions.

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