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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: Interim Charge Two

Dear Chairman Huberty:

I write on behalf of TechNet to help inform the House Committee on Public Education on Interim Charge Two, which asks the Committee to examine barriers to providing a digital learning environment for all children. TechNet is the national, bipartisan network of technology CEOs and senior executives that promotes the growth of the innovation economy by advocating a targeted policy agenda at the federal and 50-state level. TechNet's diverse membership includes dynamic American businesses ranging from startups to the most iconic companies on the planet and represents more than three million employees in the fields of information technology, e-commerce, clean energy, gig and sharing economy, venture capital, and finance.

The COVID-19 pandemic immediately disrupted the Texas education system, and there is no consensus on when schools will return to a sense of normalcy that the state experienced prior to March 2020. Teachers, administrator, parents, students, and entire communities were forced immediately and dramatically to rethink their approach to education and lean heavily on technology as the central means of ensuring Texas students can continue learning. This shift to virtual learning has resulted in divergent student, family, and teacher experiences across the state and highlighted existing disparities in access to technology, connectivity, student support, and teacher professional development. If left unresolved, these disparities will have long-term effects on students' abilities to acquire the skills necessary to participate, compete, and innovate in the 21st century economy.

Although the pandemic has accelerated digital learning and shone a spotlight on the need to improve our digital connectivity, the digital divide will continue to expand unless efforts are undertaken to address it now. Fortunately, the benefits of a focused effort to address the digital divide will extend beyond the education system to include job training and creation, health care, and civic engagement, and access to government services for all Texans. In order for all learners to have access to quality learning experiences, policymakers must ensure that resources are

adequate to invest in devices, connectivity, and professional development through dedicated, long-term funding mechanisms.

There must be a reliable funding mechanism to ensure that districts have adequate resources to ensure that they can purchase and refresh devices on a regular basis. The bulk device purchase by Operation Connectivity will quickly benefit students who are struggling with either a lack of devices or older, less functional devices, and TechNet greatly appreciates the time and effort stakeholders have expended since Operation Connectivity was created. But it is important to point out that this bulk purchase is not a long-term panacea for devices, as the need will rearise after the average life span of the devices passes and technologies change. Therefore, the state must encourage districts to plan long-term about how they will meet their students and faculty's growing technological needs. Additionally, there are still many districts that are unable to provide the necessary technology to students and teachers, so the need remains.

The Texas Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA) is an instructional materials allotment created in 2011 for the purchase of instructional materials, technological equipment, and technology-related services. According to figures maintained by the Texas Computer Education Association (TCEA), over the course of TIMA's existence, more than 89 percent of funding – $3.6 billion – has been spent on instructional materials, whereas only 11 percent – $447 million – has gone toward technology. This includes many districts that have never considered the TIMA as a funding source for technology, instead spending it solely on instructional materials. Although many of the instructional materials are available in digital formats, they often still cost the same amount as hardcopy textbooks. This can leave little for districts to spend out of TIMA on digital devices. In order to help close the digital divide, Texas school districts must utilize the available technology funding that they already receive to better prepare for a digital learning future that in many respects fully arrived in March 2020. Similarly, the state must ensure that there are adequate resources for districts to purchase both devices and content.

The state must also make efforts to ensure that students across the state are able to connect to the internet, both in the classroom and at home. In particular, the connectivity divide is a challenge for rural areas of the state and for low-income families. In the classroom, TechNet supports measures that focus finances, partnerships, and strategies to ensure that all schools have sufficient infrastructure and secure network connectivity with the necessary speed, capacity, flexibility of choice, and reliability to support "smart" classrooms and provide sustained IT support to maintain and upgrade systems. At home, TechNet supports policies that expand access to the internet and technology, provide a safe and secure consumer experience, and promote strong private sector competition – while opposing provisions that would create unnecessary regulations or legal requirements.

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Finally, Texas must embrace the importance of investing in technology and pedagogical professional development for teachers. Funding should enable teachers to be proficient in technology and hybrid learning best practices so they can facilitate connected and collaborative learning for all students. In particular, Texas should consider providing pre-service and in-service educators and administrators with professional, technology-based learning experiences to increase their digital literacy and enable them to create compelling learning activities. Last session, TechNet supported HB 3069, which would have provided dedicated funding for a statewide professional development network that focused on K-8 teacher professional development in technology applications, computer science, coding, programming, and computational thinking. This legislation would have helped to lay the foundations for more advanced study in high school and incentivize high school teacher computer science certification.

The ongoing pandemic has ushered in a dramatic change to learning in an extremely short period of time. To truly solve the challenges of the digital divide, we need to knit together partnerships with different government levels, school districts, and businesses. The more systematic districts are in approaching the issue of digital learning, the more likely these partnerships will be well established and best positioned to meet the students' and educators' needs on both a short- and long-term basis.

TechNet appreciates the Committee's interest in digital learning and looks forward to working with the Committee and its members this upcoming session and beyond.

Sincerely,

David Edmonson
Executive Director, Texas & Southeast