

October 6, 2020

The Honorable Dan Huberty  
Chairman, House Committee on Public Education  
1100 Congress  
Austin, Tx 78701

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

Mr. Chairman-

Regarding the request for information related to interim charge #2, I am writing on behalf of Tomball ISD.

As you know, schools all across the state during this pandemic will for the foreseeable future deliver synchronous and asynchronous instruction. Distance learning by itself is not new, but the scope and breadth of this endeavor commands more effort and resources at the local level. For the purposes of your work, below are a couple of recommendations that would go a long way towards our current distance learning effort, especially since the Comptroller predicts a deficit when you begin the 87<sup>th</sup> legislative session.

**Recommendation #1:** Amend TEC 31.0211 to make clear that schools may use their IMA money to buy hotspots, purchase monthly Wi-Fi plans and build cell towers.

**Rationale:**

- History serves as a guide. After the Civil War, our state, not even 50 years old, had the vision and created the Permanent School Fund (PSF) to ensure every student had a textbook.
- Now more than a century later, the state needs to update its goal and ensure every student has at least a hotspot and Wi-Fi service.
- If TEA demands that every student take STAAR this year, then it's imperative to enact this recommendation into law to ensure students have access to instructional materials.
- The PSF's net worth hovers around \$38 billion, probably the richest endowment next to Harvard's.

**Recommendation #2:** Re-establish the telecom discount found in Ch. 58 and 59 of the Tex. Utilities Code for a minimum of three years.

**Rationale:**

- From 1997 to 2015, recall telecom providers were required to reduce the cost of telecom services service to schools, colleges, hospitals and libraries.
- This recommendation does not demand this discount last in perpetuity or that schools should receive this service for free. The increased patronage of service plans should make up for any discount provided.
- The Comptroller says every service sector experienced a serious decline in revenues during this pandemic, except one industry: the telecom industry.
- Early in the pandemic, the state's four major cable companies provided free internet service to households with K-12 or college students and not cutting off service for nonpayment.
- Discount plans vary greatly across the state and this recommendation could provide a uniform approach.
- This recommendation will not generate a fiscal note.

At a time when the state can ill afford to raise new taxes or divert the use of current state resources, these two recommendations combined will give schools much needed flexibility and free up local dollars.

Thank you for your leadership and consideration of these recommendations.

Sincerely,



Dr. Martha Salazar-Zamora, Superintendent  
Tomball ISD