



The Honorable Dan Huberty
Chairman, Committee on Public Education
Texas House of Representatives
PO Box 2910
Austin, Texas 78768

Chairman Huberty and Committee Members,

The Texas Library Association (TLA) represents almost 5,000 librarians working in academic, public, school, and special libraries across the state. The following comments on Interim Charge #2, which directs the Public Education Committee to determine if barriers exist in providing a digital learning environment for all students, are submitted on behalf of the Texas Association of School Librarians (a TLA division).

Certified school librarians are essential educators, a fact made even more apparent during the current pandemic. They are instructional partners, teachers, leaders, information specialists and program administrators. School libraries have long been the hub of online learning on our school campuses, supporting digital literacy and citizenship, and librarians are experts when it comes to incorporating technology into curriculum.

Since the pandemic began, librarians have helped teachers connect with students digitally, doing everything from collecting and distributing devices to holding virtual information sessions for students on how to access digital resources, including TexQuest. They have also jumped in to help orient students and parents to online learning platforms, creating tutorials and responding to requests for assistance. Additionally, librarians continue to instruct students in information and digital literacy skills.

In Humble ISD for example, the librarians identified over 800 titles to be added to SORA (the online platform that allows students to check out eBooks from the school library) and worked with the Teaching & Learning department to make those eBooks and audiobooks available for remote learners.

Certified school librarians continue to support other educators in this new learning environment where they are often simultaneously teaching students in the classroom and online. They collaborate with teachers on classroom content, and identify, curate, and regularly update targeted online resources which offer additional resources beyond the textbook that support learning objectives.

Barriers to providing a digital learning environment for all students

According to the recent Operation Connectivity report released by TEA and Dallas ISD, 17% of Texas students lack access to high speed internet and 30% lack a dedicated and adequate learning device at home. School librarians have been on the front line of the digital divide since before the pandemic brought these disparities to the forefront. While many school districts worked quickly to provide devices and hotspots to students, this did not address the issue of accessibility. Many households are unable to

afford high speed internet services, and the effectiveness of hotspots can be limited by the availability of services offered by carriers in a particular area.

Academic outcomes for all students have been impacted, but nonwhite and lower-income students, and those living in rural areas have been affected to a greater degree. For example, in districts around Lubbock that were not able to offer devices for all students, families who did not own devices had to pick up and turn in paper packets on a weekly basis. This meant there was no interaction between students and teachers, and no real, consistent opportunity for instruction or feedback.

For those students who have devices and can access adequate internet service, there are still challenges to overcome. Online learning is new to many families and they need a great deal of support – not only in how to work the technology, but how to access the resources and information needed to succeed.

At the beginning of the pandemic, TEA noted that tens of thousands of students were defined as “non-contactable.” Districts across the state had to get creative and find ways to connect with these families to ensure that learning continued.

Carolyn Slavin, a bilingual certified school librarian at Reed Elementary in Leander ISD worked with a parent of one of her students to go door-to-door in a neighborhood where many of the district’s English language learner students live. They collected note cards to update contact information, tested hotspots, delivered books, and helped students use their devices.

This type of [outreach initiative](#) occurred across the state, however, not all districts were successful. A statewide initiative that provides support for outreach on an ongoing basis, not just when there is a crisis, would greatly enhance academic performance across the state.

In conclusion, the pandemic has brought many of the inequities and challenges faced by students in Texas into sharp focus. Texas needs a statewide plan and funding to address broadband access and availability, and to ensure that technology and educational resources are accessible for all students.

Sincerely,



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