

Texas Classroom Teachers Association



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Response to House Public Education Committee Request for Information Regarding Interim Charge 2

Submission from:
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Question 1: Can a map, detailed list, or other resources be provided that shows where there are gaps in available internet coverage?

A map or list is unlikely to currently exist, at least not from any official agency. Questions regarding internet access and coverage are currently included in census data collection, but are not broken down to a level which would tell us where the pockets of lack of coverage exist. Instead that information is broken down by census block and any internet coverage within that area results in an entire census block (potentially incorrectly) indicating internet coverage. Connected Nation and Connected Texas have made efforts to map broadband access throughout the state.

However, data collection related to broadband coverage is just one issue related to the digital divide. The pandemic focused a spotlight on the digital divide, exposing a lack of access to the vast information resources of the internet as perhaps the greatest obstacle to providing for the equitable dissemination of knowledge required by the Texas Constitution. Families with resources were able to make the pivot to online learning, while vast numbers of students became lost to their districts and teachers. While school districts have done an admirable job trying to navigate this new environment and supply students with the necessary technology, most districts have relied upon temporary solutions. For example, hotspots for internet access are convenient and among the easiest solutions to provide, but ultimately, they are expensive and only work as a short-term solution. And it is not simply students and their families who are lacking access, but also teachers, particularly in rural areas where the infrastructure is lacking. Lockhart ISD is an example of a district that has successfully worked toward a long-term solution. LISD has partnered with a communications company to build cell towers and use the district's network to eventually provide access throughout the district. <https://www.npr.org/2020/04/24/843411430/even-in-crisis-times-there-is-a-push-to-wire-rural-america>

It is clear moving forward that the state needs to focus on a broader, statewide, long-term solution to address the digital divide. **A statewide broadband connectivity plan needs to be among the first steps, addressing the immediate needs of students and teachers while also focusing on more lasting goals. It has also become abundantly clear that internet service should be**

treated like a public utility to ensure more access and better affordability. While internet access used to be seen as a luxury or a convenience, over the last decade it has evolved into a necessity, fundamental to ensuring educational equity. **Cities should be allowed to provide internet service, as with any other utility.**

Digital literacy is also a concern because access to the internet is useless if there is not an understanding on how to use it as a resource. While most students learn some digital literacy in school, an undertaking to bolster those efforts and also to reach out to family members is necessary. Digital literacy within an entire household should be the goal to ensure long-term educational success.

The Texas Classroom Teachers Association is partnering with others to make sure this important topic is addressed by a diverse coalition of parties working to make this inequality a priority for next session. TCTA appreciates the work of Project Connectivity, which worked hard to ensure that major issues were addressed this summer and continues to work on these issues moving forward.