



Texas Needs to Prioritize Rural and Urban School Districts through a Community Approach for Internet Connectivity

IDRA Testimony on House Bill 3591, submitted by Thomas Marshall to the House Public Education Committee on March 30, 2021

Dear Chairman Dutton and Honorable Members of the House Public Education Committee:

My name is Thomas Marshall, and I am an Education Policy Fellow at IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association). IDRA is an independent, non-partisan, education non-profit committed to achieving equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. This testimony is on HB 3591, and we ask that the committee consider students from our most marginalized communities and use a community approach when it comes to this bill.

HB 3591 creates a grant program for the commissioner of education to distribute to qualifying school districts for technology and Internet connectivity needs. We are curious as to how the grant-matching program will be funded. We realize that with the creation of a statewide broadband plan Texas will become privy to federal dollars used for the various grant programs that can help school districts' Internet connectivity needs.

Given the influx of billions of dollars in federal funds, Texas policymakers should invest in a statewide approach to Internet connectivity to serve all districts and avoid a singular approach to supporting individual districts' connectivity efforts.

Instituting an Equitable Approach to the Digital Divide

IDRA has held multiple stakeholder meetings with educators, superintendents, students and families about the huge challenge that Internet access is for school districts. The way to solve this pervasive digital divide is by establishing a statewide broadband office and providing additional supports to entities like school districts to receive funding for devices and Internet connectivity.

HB 3591 does not clarify how the grant-matching program coincides with a state broadband plan. To accomplish the larger state broadband goals, the federal relief dollars should be used through a statewide approach to resolve Internet connectivity issues. This would open the door to additional funding, as the Federal Communications Commission makes various grants available for school districts once the state has a broadband plan in place.

We want to ensure that all students have the best access to Internet capabilities within their schools. Any grant-matching program for districts to build their digital tools should only be part of the larger plan to resolve the digital divide statewide. Federal funds should be used now through targeted, systemic investments toward this aim.

We believe this grant program, if passed through HB 3591 as written, has the potential to become inequitable by directing grants toward more affluent school districts and rural districts, without accounting for school districts in urban areas that represent Texas' biggest cities.

Recommendations

- Clarify in HB 3591 how the grant-match program will be funded through state funds and direct federal funds to help aid the matching program to ensure all students receive connectivity;
- Ensure district eligibility for the grant-match program in both rural and urban communities;
- Incorporate a definition for "high speed Internet access." The current federal standard is defined by the Federal Communications Commission as an individual's ability to connect to broadband Internet through physical infrastructure (e.g., cables, towers) at 25 megabits per second (Mbps) download speed and 3 Mbps upload speed (25/3 Mbps) (2020);
- Add additional language that would require the grant program to allow for higher upload speeds for connectivity if the Federal Communications Commission, or the presumptive statewide broadband office, expands on that threshold that would be more equitable families with more than one student in the home; and
- Work with local municipalities to create matching incentives for private companies to establish Internet access to students' residences to ensure that companies provide low-cost, high-quality Internet to the students that need it most.

School districts should have adequate access to a reliable Internet connection. Thank you for considering our recommendations to systemically address the digital divide across classrooms in Texas schools.

IDRA is available for any questions or further resources that we can provide. Thank you for your consideration. For more information, please contact Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes, IDRA Deputy Director of Policy, at chloe.sikes@idra.org.

Resource

Federal Communications Commission (February 2021). Broadband Speed Guide. Federal Communications Commission. <https://www.fcc.gov/consumers/guides/broadband-speed-guide>

IDRA is an independent, non-profit organization led by Celina Moreno, J.D. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.