September 1, 2020

Dear Chair Turner and House Higher Education Committee Members,

We write to you as members of the **Texas Postsecondary Advocates Coalition (PAC)**. Texas PAC consists of organizations from across Texas focused on improving equity in college access, affordability, completion and supports.

**In Response to Interim Charge 4, Questions 1, 4, 6:** We write to address the challenges related to technology, quality, accessibility or other considerations for students in Texas and to provide perspectives on how the Legislature can address gaps in equity in accessing reliable, affordable Internet access.

**Current Landscape**

The current landscape characterized by inconsistent access to reliable and affordable internet indicates significant challenges which are highlighted and exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to reliable internet across the state has not been equitably available for many years past.

- In 2019, more than **2 million Texas households lacked internet access.**[1]
- **42% of Dallas households lack fixed internet access.** Census data shows that one-in-four households with children in Dallas County are not subscribed to broadband internet. Nearly half of these households are in just ten zip codes, reflecting **childhood poverty rates twice the County average,** with this subset also representing the concurrent crises of economic immobility, over-incarceration, and poor health outcomes.[2]
- According to the Census Bureau, the city of **San Antonio ranks in the bottom third** in internet access among cities with at least 100,000 inhabitants.[3]
- The city of **Houston ranks as the third worst major U.S. city in terms of internet connection rate.** 38% of the city lacks access to fixed internet service.[4]
- In both Laredo and Brownsville, **nearly one-third of residents lack any internet access.**[5]

**Student Perspective**

Amidst the COVID-19 pandemic, postsecondary students are highly impacted by challenges in accessing technology. Our coalition gathered insight and perspectives from students on this issue to shed light on key themes.

Breakthrough Central Texas, a direct-service educational non-profit organization that supports first-generation college aspirants in the Austin metro area to achieve they and their families' shared definition of postsecondary success, conducted a survey last month with their class of 2020 cohort to better understand ongoing needs related to technology and connectivity. Access to fundamental technological tools in their hybrid, remote, and in-person learning environments will be critical to a successful start of their 2020-21

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[1] Source: Texas Comptroller
[2] Source: Commit Partnership
[3] Source: University of Texas at Austin
[4] Source: University of Texas at Austin
[5] Source: Texas State Teachers Association, Source: Texas Tribune

academic year in a variety of public, private, HBCU, online, and community college institutions of higher education across Texas.

Of the young people surveyed from this diverse group, **45% did not have access to their own laptop or computer** for the upcoming semester, and **11% still did not have access to internet** in their home, despite having just completed their final high school semester of online learning. 91% of these same students would not be provided a laptop or other device by the postsecondary institution they are attending this fall.

Using qualitative responses gathered from the Breakthrough Central Texas Survey, Young Invincibles student network, and the Commit! Partnership student survey, we compiled a snapshot of student responses in Texas below.

**Access to a high functioning laptop or computer is critical and urgent**
- "I do have a laptop, it's just slow and works weird."
- "I have an old computer that doesn't always work and is slow."
- "I wish my college gave us technology, especially since everything is going to be online for fall semester."
- "At the beginning of quarantine, my laptop gave out on me in the middle of a busy work week. I had to put my entire life on hold because I lost my connection to the outside world... It kept me from being able to fully engage with my classes and made my work assignments next to impossible to complete. My whole life should not hang on the thread of my access to technology."

**Internet connectivity continues to be a struggle for students**
- "Finding low cost internet outside of Austin is difficult."
- "Although I do have internet at my home, the internet is very slow."
- "I have friends that use coffee shop Wi-Fi, risking exposure to COVID, because they do not have access at home."
- "A student contacted me who had to put money together that she did not have in order to purchase an online textbook. She completely forgot in the heat of everything that she needed that money to pay for her internet bill. Realistically, having an online textbook is completely useless if you can't afford internet."

**Lack of access to technology has a direct impact on academic trajectory**
- "Students lacking in technology who are solely dependent on financial aid are at risk of being charged for failed courses. This is a long term problem that will result in the decrease of graduation rates and the increase of student debt."
- One student shared that they are "scared of taking online classes and is contemplating decision of not going to college"
- "I am afraid my first semester of college will be online which I will have much more difficulty with."
- "The COVID-19 pandemic having a negative impact on my learning (online)" in response to the question, "What are you most worried about for after high school?"
- Another student shared they "need the most help with signing up for classes because it's online" and they struggle with the process.

**Recommendations to Drive Change**

As one University of Texas student summarized, "Broadband internet access is more than a luxury, it is fundamental to being a student and oftentimes an employee in this day and age." We encourage lawmakers, wherever possible, to use state higher education, rural strategy, and federal GEERS dollars to invest in internet and technological access for postsecondary students, close internet connectivity and device access gaps, and improve overall broadband access and infrastructure. We recommend the Legislature and leadership take the following actions:

1. Direct additional $10 million from the GEERS fund (via CARES Act) specifically for postsecondary institutions' instructional materials, including internet infrastructure and device procurement for enrolled students.
2. Utilize state influence to advocate for more Congressional stimulus funds directed toward educational purposes, including technological uses.
3. Avoid education cuts to postsecondary institutions in order to stay on track toward state goals, such as TX60x30.

The Texas PAC is eager to work with lawmakers from across the state on addressing these critical issues. To discuss these recommendations in greater detail or collaborate on other steps for students, please contact the leaders of the Postsecondary Advocates Coalition.

Sincerely,

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Breakthrough Central Texas
Commit!
Deeds Not Words
Educate Texas
Every Texan (Formerly the Center for Public Policy Priorities)
IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association)
NAMI Texas
The Education Trust - Texas
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