



Texas Needs a Statewide Approach to Internet Connectivity Across Texas School Districts

IDRA Testimony on House Bill 3261, Presented by Thomas Marshall before the Texas House Public Education Committee on April 6, 2021

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

My name is Thomas Marshall, and I serve as an Education Policy Fellow at IDRA (Intercultural Development Research Association). We are 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. Thank you for considering my testimony today. We respectfully ask that the committee consider the need to develop, implement and use federal relief funds to support a statewide broadband plan.

HB 3261 facilitates a transition to digital tools for state assessments and institutes a grant-matching 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. 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 a Statewide 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 a for school districts. We suggest establishing a statewide broadband office and including additional supports to entities like school districts to receive funding for devices and Internet connectivity.

HB 3261 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.

Recommendations

- Clarify in HB 3261 how the grant-match program will be funded through state funds over the proposed four-year term, and direct federal funds to develop a statewide broadband plan in the immediate term;

- Ensure district eligibility for the grant-match program in both rural and urban communities; and
- Incorporate a definition for broadband Internet access, which 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) (FCC, 2021).

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, 2020). 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.