



## Focus: Bridging the Digital Divide

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# Texas Needs an Equitable State Broadband Plan to Serve Students and Families

by Thomas Marshall

The digital divide in the United States impacts millions of people. And although the problem is significant in rural communities, it exists across the country. Three-fourths of the 20 million U.S. households that still lack home broadband or mobile data connections live in urban areas, not remote rural regions, and are very likely low-income (NDIA, 2019).

For students, the digital divide affects their online academic engagement and learning opportunities. In Texas, more than 2 million households do not have access to high-speed Internet.

The COVID-19 pandemic exacerbates the problem. Texas Education Agency reports that more than 600,000 Texas public school students – one in 10 students – did not complete assignments or respond to teacher outreach in spring 2020 as the pandemic began. Schools lost touch with Black students and Latino students at over twice the rate of white students. (TEA, 2020)

The state’s experience with remote schooling due to COVID-19 demonstrates clearly that much needs to be done. Without broadband Internet access, students and families cannot connect online with their schools. Students cannot access teacher materials, complete their homework, or connect to instruction and class discussions virtually. The lack of broadband access disproportionately affects students of color and students in families with low-incomes (Bauerly, et al., 2019).

The digital divide has four components: broadband connectivity, access to a consistent Internet-capable device, digital literacy about how to use Internet resources responsibly, and family engagement in online education.

### Broadband Infrastructure Needed

Broadband refers to always-on, high-speed Internet access, whether obtained through cable, fiber, wireless, satellite or a digital subscriber line. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) specifies broadband as 25 megabits per second (mbps) download speed and 3 mbps upload speed (25/3 mbps) (Connected Nation Texas, 2020).

**Texas is one of only six states that does not have a state broadband plan** (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2019). In 2019, the Texas Legislature gave the issue some attention by passing three measures related to broadband.

- The Legislature approved Senate Bill 14 in 2019 to ensure broadband infrastructure expands deeper into rural Texas through the help of Texas electric cooperatives.
- The Legislature approved House Bill 2422 relating to the coordination of certain broadband projects by the Texas Department of Transportation. It encourages state transportation and Internet providers to install, upgrade and maintain broadband alongside ongoing state highway construction.

(cont. on Page 2)



## IDRA Education Policy Priorities for Texas

- ★ Fair Funding for Strong Public School Education
- ★ End Harmful Discipline to Create Safer Schools
- ★ Grow & Sustain School District Health
- ★ Excellent Education for Emergent Bilingual Students
- ★ College Preparation & Access that Expands Opportunities
- ★ A Comprehensive Equity Approach to Addressing COVID-19's Impact on Schools
- ★ Keep the Public in Public Education

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(Texas Needs an Equitable State Broadband Plan to Serve Students and Families, continued from Page 1)

- The Legislature created the Governor's Broadband Development Council to study and identify ways to provide Internet access to underserved areas of Texas. The council submitted in November 2020 a report with recommendations for the 2021 legislative session to: create a state broadband plan; establish a state broadband office; and develop a state broadband funding program to incentivize deployment in unserved areas.

The state should move forward substantially to solve this problem by creating a permanent broadband infrastructure that includes connecting high-speed Internet to urban and rural communities. The plan should incorporate perspectives of key stakeholders at the local level to oversee implementation.

## Student and Family Engagement Must be Robust

Within a new plan for broadband, lawmakers should create a robust, positive student and family engagement strategy. The plan needs clear steps on how to engage with families, especially those who have been adversely affected by the digital divide and disruptions to student learning.

Inequities in student engagement can be addressed by expanding broadband connectivity and ensuring all students have access to appropriate devices. Students need opportunities to learn how to navigate and use the Internet responsibly through digital literacy and digital citizenship school courses on using the Internet regularly and effectively.

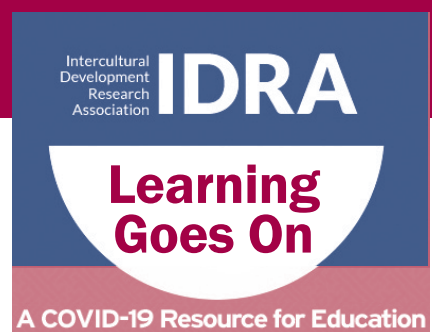
Family engagement is integral in this process, which at its best incorporates authentic collaboration with families and community members. For example, IDRA's Education CAFE program is based on IDRA's family leadership model that engages families and community members in

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their school's policies and practices (learn more at: <https://www.idra.org/families-and-communities/education-cafe/>).

## Community Reinvestment is Required for Sustainability

Texas needs lawmakers to create a system to empower communities to develop their approaches to identify who needs broadband access. A community reinvestment initiative would put the power of establishing access networks into community stakeholders' hands. The initiative would be a robust economic development tool to increase jobs and empower local entities like school districts to better handle their students' connectivity issues.

Currently, FCC regulations use census block data to count households with broadband. That data can be inaccurate or old, so local community groups need to be at the center of creating their own data to gain an accurate account of who has broadband and who does not.

*Texas is one of only six states that does not have a state broadband plan.*

Through such programs, local officials can access state broadband funds and, with communities, collect equity-focused data, establish connectivity maps and identify where connectivity is needed most.

## Recommendations

As the Texas Legislature convenes through the end of May, IDRA offers recommendations for developing a sustainable, equitable and community-driven plan for state broadband expansion plan to ensure equitable access.

- Create a statewide broadband plan targeted for rural and urban communities. The infra-

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# Teachers Share Best Practices for Virtual Instruction in the Age of COVID-19

by Aurelio M. Montemayor, M.Ed.

History will show that today's teachers are doing monumental work. After suddenly shifting from in-person to all-remote instruction, many now are balancing the two. They constantly adjust assignments, tests and special needs accommodations while exploring different ways to keep students engaged.

Who better can attest to their ingenuity than students themselves? I asked some students for recommendations and interviewed four remarkable teachers. I spoke with them to see how they combine instruction of challenging content with creative use of applications to engage the students.

## Annabel Saenz Cruz, La Joya ISD

Annabel Saenz Cruz teaches freshman biology at Palm View High School in La Joya ISD in South Texas.

She said: "It is a huge struggle for the student to sit in front of the computer for an extended period of time for all subjects. We have to be very precise in the delivery of the material."

In speaking about science specifically, Ms. Cruz said: "Biology has challenges with vocabulary and concepts." She supplements the textbook because the vocabulary is difficult for English learners.

"When I combine the textbook with Amoeba Sisters and then add slides or an interactive journal, the kids are able to see it in different ways," she described. "Giving it to them in a way where they are able to be visual and grasp the concept is crucial."

In speaking with students, Ms. Cruz said: "I remind students about the perks and benefits of the technology they have grown up with. In college and in life, technology is everywhere. Before, we didn't have much technology in our schools. Now it's: 'Here's your own Chromebook. Let's type out the report. Let's go ahead and share the document. You're going to be working on it with so-and-so on the project together.' I've always wanted to use technology in the classroom."

She said: "I plan to integrate some of these apps in face-to-face teaching. We can communicate even after school when some students miss. They can log in later on get the lesson."

## Jennifer Schulze-Aguirre, Northside ISD

When schools first closed last March, teachers had no time to prepare for the shift to distance learning. During the summer, as they got ready for the new school year, they applied what they learned during the previous spring.

Jennifer Schulze-Aguirre, who teaches Algebra 1 through AP Calculus BC at Brandeis High School in San Antonio, described: "First, I took multiple deep breaths myself because so much a part of who I am is interacting in person with my students. I had to figure out a way to make it still happen. How am I going to make them feel comfortable taking calculus, especially in a virtual environment? What kinds of things can I bring across in a Zoom meeting that would be somewhat the same as what I would do in person? I wanted to make sure I knew everything to make it more efficient for the students and make sure that it is easier for them to do the work."

Math is the subject that is proving to be most difficult for students to progress through distance learning. Ms. Schulze-Aguirre described how she adapted to support students who are online: "I normally do a lot of matching activities in calculus and had to figure out how to do that virtually; I learned how to do Google drawing very well. "In my in-person classroom, I could walk around, hear students talking in their groups and fix misconceptions on the spot. But now I don't have that ability. I have them do daily practices, and I spot check them. And I do individual tutoring appointments for students who need it."

(cont. on Page 4)



*Jennifer Schulze-Aguirre prefers to teach standing up. Teaching students online did not change that. She uses an extendable desk and a second monitor to be able to see her students while teaching. She also uses a tablet so that students can see her walk through calculus demonstrations. She said, "I have more energy and that gets translated to my students!"*



(Teachers Share Best Practices for Virtual Instruction in the Age of COVID-19, continued from Page 3)

Ms. Schultz-Aguirre encourages parents: “Ask questions about how to help your son or daughter engage in learning. Have patience with their teachers, because just like the students, they are having a hard time struggling with what is happening.”

And for her teacher peers, she encourages: “Remember the impact that you have. It doesn’t matter if you’re virtual or you’re in person. What you say, how you act, how you interact with your kids, it says something to them. And you may not know the impact you have on them for a couple of years. That impact is probably even more important now that kids are isolated socially. Just remember, your words and actions mean so much to your kids.”

### Bertha Amaro, La Joya ISD

Bertha Amaro is a precalculus and precalculus pre-AP teacher and math department chair at Palm View High School in La Joya ISD in South Texas.

“A big challenge is having everything hands on,” she said. “In the regular classroom, everyone had their calculators out. I could see what they were doing in person. With online calculators, it is difficult to see what they are doing.” Constant feed-

*“I always try to tie the lesson to what’s going on in our lives so they can fully understand.”*

— Annabel Saenz Cruz, biology teacher


back is crucial to learn if your student is better at visual or audio learning or another type of learning and to adapt your style.

She advises other teachers: “Don’t try to do everything you learned over the summer or in a couple of trainings, to do everything at the same time. Take your time. Do one application. Learn it well and keep going. Have patience because some of the students are not logging in. And it is not because they don’t like the teacher. It often is because maybe their situation at home doesn’t allow it.”

As Ms. Cruz mentioned, distance learning is particularly challenging for emergent bilingual students. High school teachers must create ways

### IDRA Classnotes Podcast #208

#### Teaching High-Level Math through Distance Learning



**“**

**To my teacher colleagues...**

**‘Remember the impact that you have. It doesn’t matter if you’re virtual or you’re in person. What you say, how you act, how you interact with your kids, it says something to them. And you may not know the impact you have on them for a couple of years. That impact is probably even more important now that kids are isolated socially. Just remember, your words and actions mean so much to your kids.’**

— Jennifer Schulze-Aguirre, M.A., Northside ISD

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to support students in learning new complicated academic vocabulary.

Ms. Amara said: “I have to do my lesson in English, of course. But during the one-on-one 20-minute period, I work with my students who are English learners. Precalculus is a totally different language, because you use such big and high words.” Her students ask for the technical terms in Spanish. “The calculus terms go beyond even the algebra vocabulary they already know in Spanish.”

### Thomas Ray García, South Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley

Thomas Ray García supports students in several high schools in the South Texas Lower Rio Grande Valley with steps to prepare for college and the application process.

He described the various ways he connects with students online: “I am currently jumping into Google Meets classrooms and Google Classroom. I invite students to share each other’s screen, review essays and apply to colleges. The fact that we are both staring at a screen and looking at the same tab actually helps.”

“You can cut down on direct instruction using a hybrid of maybe 15 to 20 minutes of synchronous activity and then an asynchronous activity,” Mr. García advises. “The student works in the Google Classroom conducting a poll or doing a piece of writing for 10 to 15 minutes and then jumps back into the Google Classroom to continue talking about it. It breaks the rhythm.”

High school juniors and seniors do not have time to miss content or to catch up later. “It’s hard keeping students on



Thomas Ray García discusses college preparation with high school students.

track with deadlines that are outside of our control,” Mr. García said. “College applications are pretty on the nose. One of the challenges is making sure all the work we assign students is scaffolded where one task completed leads to another.”

Technology will be a good partner for teachers’ personal connections with students. Mr. García said: “I love working with the students one-on-one over Zoom. I get to see their screen in real time, and we talk about specific sentences word by word. The students light up when they discover something and write a sentence that they’re truly proud of.”

Mr. García advises parents, “Keep in contact with the teacher once or twice a month at least. I hope that continues after the pandemic when

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(Teachers Share Best Practices for Virtual Instruction in the Age of COVID-19, continued from Page 4)

students literally do go away from home, back to school and the parents cannot see the lesson going on anymore.”

One common thread among the four teachers was the use of two-way communication with students. They listened to each student and modified their teaching to reach each one. Without simplifying the subject, they adapted the content so that it would be understood in the new learning environment. All were supportive of direct, personal contact with the students and their families and were available for help, consultation and conversation. The students valued teachers’ encouragement the most.

### Students: Jaasai and Leslie

As mentioned earlier, these four teachers came to us through student recommendations. One student started with, “My calculus teacher does everything right!” High school seniors, Jaasai Flores in La Joya, Texas, and Leslie Goodman in San Antonio identified several strategies their teachers have in common.

Jaasai said of Ms. Amaro: “In this overwhelming time period, my teacher has been very patient and understanding with my classmates and me. She makes sure everyone is understanding and answers all of our questions the best she can.”

Leslie said of Ms. Schulze-Aguirre: “When someone answers a question wrong, she explains why it’s wrong. And once a week, she posts a “check of understanding” worksheet so we can

*“When someone contributes, she acknowledges us and praises us by name, even if our camera is off.”*

– Leslie, student

see for ourselves how we’re doing before a test.”

Both, Jaasai and Leslie said their teachers post their slides and instruction videos online for students to review later. “And she really, really wants us to do one-on-one tutoring with her when we need it, Leslie added. “She keeps telling us she wants her timeslots to be full.”

Jaasai said: “She leaves a private chat open 24/7. She is always double checking if we need any help or have any questions even after we have said no. But some students are shy about asking a question, so she stays after class for students who are having trouble with the lesson that day.”

Similarly, Leslie said: “She stays on Zoom the whole class period to be available for questions. During class, she is very engaging. She asks questions, and we have to respond. She checks to make sure we’re understanding something and watches her screen to make sure everyone nods or something. Students who don’t have their cameras on have to do the thumbs up emoji. She asks for feedback, and if we don’t understand, she’ll explain it differently until we do. And she covers every step.”

When Lourdes Flores asked her teens about their

teacher, they described her constant encouragement, including encouragement to keep their cameras on. From her own vantage point, Ms. Flores appreciates their teachers reaching out to parents seeking their support from home. And she is grateful for the patience of the teachers to attend to all the difficulties of technology and connection issues.

Some of the students’ feedback sounds simple at first, like teachers answering student emails quickly. Leslie added, “When someone contributes, she acknowledges us and praises us by name, even if our camera is off.”

Teaching via distance learning has been a challenge and an opportunity. Effective teachers have new ways of teaching and explore the benefits of digital access to enhance one-on-one communication. They connect student interests and experiences with learning of concepts. In the virtual classrooms of these four teachers, students are engaged and learning high-level math and science during the pandemic.

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(Texas Needs an Equitable State Broadband Plan to Serve Students and Families, continued from Page 2)

structure should address education needs of the most vulnerable student populations – students with disabilities, emergent bilinguals (English learner students), students in families with low-income, Black students, and Latino students – across preK-12 schools and higher education.

- Encourage development of community reinvestment systems to increase access to existing broadband networks, promote digital equity and enable schools to access high-speed Internet. Municipalities could apply for grant program funding to establish equitable mapping for communities to identify the lack of broadband access in their area. This would help curb the inaccuracy of dated census block data used in the current broadband mapping.
- Create a robust student and family engagement plan that prioritizes distance and remote

learning options to create accessible pathways for engagement that promote digital literacy. The plan would include connectivity, access to devices and a communication system between schools and families.

Both Governor Greg Abbott and Lieutenant Governor Dan Patrick included broadband access in their policy priorities for the current legislative session. The digital divide must be taken head-on by Texas lawmakers this session to help close academic gaps for marginalized communities and families.

### Resources

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## Equitable Practices for Online Learning

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*Dr. Stephanie Garcia, IDRA; Michelle Vega, IDRA*

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#### Equitable Practices for Teaching Online

*Dr. Paula Johnson, IDRA EAC-South, and Dr. Stephanie Garcia, IDRA*

This webinar helps teachers rethink their lesson plans for an online platform, including resources like teacher-created YouTube channels and explainer videos, tools for sharing resources with your peers, and ways of working with your district to ensure students have access. Presenters also give an intro to using Zoom and provide a sample math lesson using the Zoom whiteboard.

#### Tools and Tips to Alleviate the Homework Gap - Interactive Teaching with Limited Internet Access

*Dr. Stephanie Garcia, IDRA; Michelle Vega, IDRA*

The homework gap is not a new problem. But with the move to system-wide distance learning, it's not just a homework gap any longer. This webinar presents ways to support students who do not have Internet access or computer.

#### Digital Divide: Connectivity, Infrastructure and Devices

*Jordana Barton, Federal Reserve Bank; Rene Gonzales, Lit Communities; Terrence Wilson, J.D., IDRA*

Get practical solutions to addressing the digital divide for your students. This webinar explores immediate and sustainable long-term strategies that preserve the integrity of district fiscal policies.

#### Nurturing Students' Hearts and Minds

*Dr. Cherise Rohr-Allegrini, Epidemiologist; Hon. Aicha Davis, State Board of Education; Hon. Marisa Pérez-Díaz, State Board of Education; Lisa Marie Gomez, San Antonio Chamber of Commerce and My Brother's Keeper - San Antonio; Gylon Jackson, Black Lives Matter - San Antonio; Dr. Chloe Latham Sikes, IDRA*

Our panel of advocates and practitioners discuss the needs of students on issues such as COVID-19, school safety, immigration, and the Black Lives Matter and #MeToo movements that schools will need to prepare for as they reopen.

#### Teacher, Parent and Student Perspectives on Using Google Classroom Effectively

*Dr. Paula Johnson, IDRA EAC-South; Dr. Stephanie Garcia, IDRA; Michelle Vega, IDRA*

Most people know that Google Classroom is a free online classroom management system, developed by Google for schools. But being a powerful and popular tool, doesn't necessarily keep teachers from experiencing bumps along the way in. In this webinar, get tips on how to use Google Classroom more effectively from the perspectives of a teacher, parent and student.

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# Words Matter – The Case for Shifting to “Emergent Bilingual”

by Araceli García

Throughout IDRA’s almost five decades, we have paid close attention to how we speak about people in terms of race or ethnicity, gender, etc. Words matter.

Almost 5 million students in U.S. public schools are learning English as a second language. That’s over 10% of the student population. The number almost doubled over the last 15 years. IDRA recently took another look at the terminology used to identify these students and the implications of using certain labels.

Most state policies refer to students with a first language other than English as *English learners* or *English language learners*, while 10, including Texas, use some form of *limited English proficient students (LEP)*.<sup>\*</sup> The Texas Education Agency also uses *English learners* in documents. At first glance, these labels may seem neutral and plainly descriptive; however a closer inspection reveals that these terms are deficit-based, that is, they define students by the knowledge they lack, rather than the strengths and abilities they already bring into the classroom.

Such terms can affect how we understand students and their potential. They can cause us to give English more legitimacy and power than a student’s first language. Additionally, because of the language used to define students, many may see them as a needy, expensive to educate, monolithic group, rather than a diverse group of students who represent a necessary resource and asset.

In Texas, for example, almost one in five students are designated *English learners*. Labeling almost 20% of Texas students as *limited English proficient students* or *English learners* can negatively affect how policymakers and educators measure those students’ potential. It starts with a deficit understanding of their abilities, labels them in terms of a cost that schools struggle to afford, funnels them into particular pathways according to perceptions, and often limits their access to criti-

cal learning opportunities, such as college-level coursework (Martinez, 2018). Because emergent bilingual students are seldom viewed as college material, only one in 10 are deemed college ready at graduation (TEA, 2018).

IDRA believes in the value of bilingualism and biculturalism. Schools must protect the civil rights of all students by preserving and celebrating the cultures and experiences tied to the diverse languages students bring into the classroom. For these reasons, IDRA prefers using the term *emergent bilingual* students.

Coined and popularized by Dr. Ofelia García in 2008, *emergent bilingual* focuses on the unique potential for bilingualism possessed by students who are learning English in school. This terminology demands that we take an asset-based view of the capabilities of emergent bilingual students, who are simultaneously acquiring a new set of linguistic capabilities in school and building on the valuable knowledge of their first language.

By adopting the *emergent bilingual* distinction, we hope that education stakeholders at all levels begin to imagine classrooms where linguistic diversity is praised rather than shunned, and where students are intentionally invited to leverage their full linguistic and social repertoire in all learning environments (Ascenzi-Moreno, 2017). To

propel this change, IDRA also is working with state lawmakers and education agencies, school districts and community members to encourage the use of the term *emergent bilingual* in state law, administrative codes and at the school level.

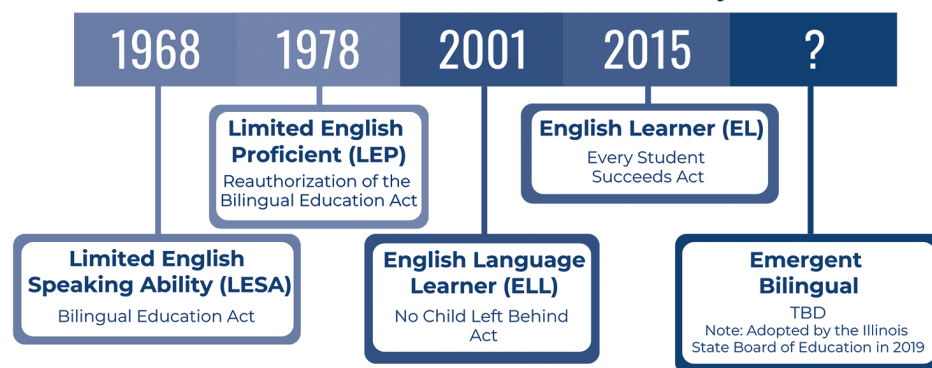
<sup>\*</sup> In some regions of the country, the term “dual language” learner is used, which can be confused with the instructional program that is also called “dual language.”

## Resources

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## Terms Used in Federal Policy



*Focus: Bridging the Digital Divide*

## Youth STEM Ambassadors to Peek Inside the World of Aviation & Aerospace

### Dee Howard Foundation Provides Virtual Tours and Curriculum for IDRA Texas Chief Science Officer Students

Students will expand their exploration of STEM careers by tapping San Antonio's rich aviation and aerospace industry through resources provided by the Dee Howard Foundation in partnership with the IDRA Texas Chief Science Officer program. The international CSO program empowers middle and school high school students to deepen their schools' STEM culture and career awareness through youth-led on-campus projects and interaction with STEM professionals. The Dee Howard Foundation provides virtual tours focused on aviation and aerospace career pathways for CSO students, who also will interact virtually with STEM professionals. In addition, the foundation provides its popular aerospace-focused curriculum to CSO teachers and advisors to use in their classrooms. See press release: <https://idra.news/CSOwDeeHoward>.

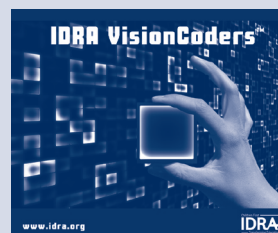


**Learn more about the IDRA Texas Chief Science Officer program and how to bring the program to your school**  
<https://idra.news/HostCSO>

## Middle School Students to Become Software Designers

### IDRA & Texas A&M University–San Antonio Launch 'VisionCoders™' with \$3.89M Federal Grant

San Antonio middle school students who are in at-risk situations will become the next generation of software coders through an innovative project called VisionCoders™, launched by IDRA and Texas A&M University-San Antonio. The project was kick-started by a \$3.89 million, five-year Education, Innovation and Research grant from the U.S. Department of Education.



IDRA and A&M–San Antonio will partner on the design and implementation of an eighth-grade computer science course in which the VisionCoders will create educational games for PreK to 1st grade students. The project will impact over 1,400 students in 12 schools in the seven Bexar County school districts that comprise the ASPIRE network. A&M-San Antonio founded that network in 2019 to accelerate locally-driven innovation and improve academic achievement for high-need students. Key to the course are well-prepared and knowledgeable teachers, which is why VisionCoders integrates focused teacher training with a master's level course through A&M-San Antonio's College of Education and Human Development. See press release: <https://idra.news/VisionCodersNews>.