



## Response to the House Public Education Committee's Formal Request for Information on Interim Charge 2

September 30, 2020

**The Association of Texas Professional Educators (ATPE) offers the following comments to the House Public Education Committee in response to its formal request for information on Interim Charge 2.** This charge asks the committee to determine if any barriers exist in providing a digital-learning environment for all children, including an evaluation of the competitive marketplace for blended-learning products and services.

How to ensure equitable access to technology and appropriate use of technology has become an important consideration for districts and educators seeking to provide an exceptional public education experience to their students. This was true prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, which has only highlighted the benefits, drawbacks, and obstacles around the intersection of technology and education. **The pandemic has made it crystal-clear that children face many barriers to accessing the digital learning environment.** The ability to provide necessary devices and connectivity to students is just one of these barriers. Even if devices and connectivity are provided, many students face additional barriers inherent to or exacerbated by a remote-learning environment, such as hunger, inadequate access to medical care or stable housing, a lack of adequate adult assistance, and not having the time and space within the remote environment to devote to schoolwork.

Widespread use of technology in public schools has been the norm for several years. Long before COVID-19, the majority of students in Texas public schools were already experiencing substantial daily use of integrated technology in their campus educational environments. Therefore, the question for educators and lawmakers alike is not, "Should students have access to technology?" They already do. Instead, the question should be, "How do we optimally use technology to improve, instead of detract from, student learning, and how do we ensure technological resources, including broadband, devices, and the knowledge to effectively use both, are equitably distributed both in and out of the classroom?"

Use of the internet as a supplemental research and enrichment tool can provide an educational advantage for those with internet access. ATPE supports an equitable and adequate public education system that provides every student an equal opportunity to receive an exemplary public education. As internet access provides a benefit to those who have it, such access should be equitably distributed.

Ensuring equitable internet access includes the issues of both physical placement of broadband infrastructure and affordable access to broadband service. As made clear by the committee's request for information, an important step to addressing equitable broadband access is having accurate and reliable information on gaps in access, both in terms of physical infrastructure and utilization. **Question 1 asks, "Can a map, detailed list, or other resources be provided that shows where there are gaps in available internet coverage? If so, please provide. What needs to be done to close this gap?"**

Regarding tracking broadband access, ATPE understands there may be overreporting of broadband utilization and access because the reporting is currently tied to census-block reporting. As ATPE has heard it explained, even if only a small fraction of the people in a census block have a broadband connection, the entire census block is reported as having broadband access. For example, if a census block contained 100 households, and only one household reported having broadband, the entire block of 100 would be reported as having broadband at the census-block level—creating an overreporting of 99 households. As the Legislature seeks to create the “map, detailed list, or other resources” that are the subject of question one under this charge, **ATPE hopes policymakers will keep this in mind and attempt to resolve the issues inherent with using census-block reporting to track broadband access.**

ATPE believes that part of providing an adequate and equitable public education system is incorporating measures to ensure all educational settings are safe and secure environments where students, school employees, and volunteers can be productive. In the rare instances, such as the current pandemic, when health and safety considerations render the use of in-person educational settings either inadvisable or completely unavailable, access to the internet becomes particularly important.

**Although distance learning has proven to be a critical tool needed to protect the health of students, staff, and families during a public-health emergency, it is not an advisable substitute for traditional classroom instruction after such instruction can safely resume.** Research has concluded that compared with a standard, in-person learning environment not impacted by COVID-19, full-time virtual learning detracts from educational attainment. This is one of the main reasons ATPE opposes any program, initiative, tuition tax credit, or voucher system that would direct public funds to private, home, or for-profit virtual schools. Allowing the home setting to become the school setting creates less-than-optimal learning environments for most students, particularly those with limited access to logistical and physical resources, and this setting should only be considered in specific limited situations.

Considering the arguments above, identifying and removing barriers to broadband internet service, access to a device on which to use the internet, and the knowledge to be able to effectively use the internet would improve the overall educational environment for Texas students. On the other hand, **removing statutory barriers to full-time virtual education for all children on an ongoing basis would detract from the overall educational environment and should not be a goal of lawmakers.**

Blended-learning programs are a separate and distinct concept that also rely on a wide distribution of broadband internet service and student access to educational technology. These programs, when thoughtfully designed and well-implemented, may promote enhanced teaching and learning. When poorly designed or implemented, these programs can lead to excessive teacher workloads and eventual burnout, likely without any significant educational benefits for Texas students.

Some have argued that educational programs that involve the internet and connectivity, such as blended learning, should be encouraged through a “competitive marketplace.” Precisely due to the equity concerns already laid out in this testimony, this is not a reasonable policy goal. The marketplace concept often leads to situations in which entities rely on advertising, persuasive sales techniques, and artificially low price points to market their products, as opposed to

providing high-quality, research-based products that are designed to produce optimal educational attainment. Although a market-based system may be adequate for selling consumer goods, it is not an optimal system for selecting the programs used to educate Texas public school students.

Texas should encourage the thoughtful design of educational programs by educational experts, followed by rigorous research to demonstrate a program's effectiveness, before incentivizing its broad adoption and use. Such a policy would likely go a long way to deterring the currently common practice of campuses and districts purchasing the latest fad program from a persuasive or well-connected vendor only to replace that program in a year or two when the next vendor with the next fad program comes along. These constant shifts often waste taxpayer dollars and are burdensome for campus and district staff, while producing a chaotic educational environment for students. **Prior to developing any blanket incentives around blended learning, the Legislature should commission a study of the field to identify best and worst practices and determine the impact of those practices on educational attainment.**

**Interim Charge 2 also asks the committee to evaluate the effectiveness of the Technology and Instructional Materials Allotment (TIMA) in providing districts the resources necessary to equip students with instructional materials and technology, including in the review of all programs and initiatives funded by set-asides from the TIMA.** The current pandemic has highlighted opportunities for potential improvement in the design of the TIMA.

As part of Project Connectivity and in response to delays in the supply chain, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) instituted a project in which the agency coordinated with districts to purchase devices, such as Chromebooks and Wi-Fi hotspots. In addition to being able to overcome backorder status, districts, according to ATPE's understanding, were also able to acquire products at better bulk-rate prices due to combined purchasing power available at the state level. The state should ensure the current design of the TIMA affords districts access to this best available pricing on all common technology purchases. **If such bulk pricing is not otherwise available to districts under the normal structure, then the Legislature should consider redesigning the TIMA to make such pricing available going forward.**

ATPE appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback during this process and invites House Public Education Committee members and their staff to contact ATPE Governmental Relations at (800) 777-2873 or [government@atpe.org](mailto:government@atpe.org) for any additional information.