



Golsan: Time is now for virtual schools

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What if Texas could improve academic performance, promote innovation and competition between schools, and save money?

During a legislative session when Texas confronts a substantial budget shortfall, we must seek every opportunity to stretch our limited tax dollars. Virtual schools in several states have proven to be more successful and cost-effective than traditional brick-and-mortar public schools.

The Florida Virtual School, one of the country's first major digital learning initiatives, projects that it will save the state around \$1,500 per pupil compared to students in traditional public schools.

Pennsylvania, another leader in virtual education, saw its digital charters cost \$3,000 less per student during the 2005-2006 school year.

In his article for The Heritage Foundation, "How Online Learning is Revolutionizing K-12 Education," Dan Lips points to a 2009 U.S. Department of Education report with extremely positive findings on digital learning: "students who took all or part of their class online performed better, on average, than those who took the same course through traditional face-to-face instruction."

Other positives included increased access to high-quality teachers, improved flexibility for teachers and students, and greater classroom productivity and efficiency on a daily basis.

Compare this to the traditional brick-and-mortar approach here in Texas. From 1988 to 2008, Texas increased its K-12 education spending from \$11.8 billion to \$51.3 billion; that's a 66 percent per-student increase after inflation.

Despite the additional spending, test scores in vital areas remain sluggish. Data collected by the National Center for Education Statistics show that our students' ACT scores have not improved meaningfully since the 1980s.

The performance of our younger students on the National Assessment for Education Progress (NAEP) test, often referred to as the Nation's Report Card, is just as troubling. Between 1998 and 2009, Texas fourth-graders only increased their reading scores 0.92 percent, while eighth-grade reading scores dropped 0.76 percent.

Our math performance isn't much better; the NAEP finds that 38 percent of fourth-graders are proficient in math, while 15 percent are below basic. Only 27 percent of eighth-graders register as proficient and 27 percent score below basic.

More money is not translating into stronger academic performance, and what we might consider traditional learning — a teacher delivering a lesson to a room full of quietly listening students — might not be the best option for many Texas students.

Texas has learned some lessons from this. The Texas Virtual Schools Network, established by the 80th Texas Legislature, "authorized the Texas Education Agency to establish and administer a state virtual school network to provide education to students through electronic means." For the first time, Texas high school students were

given access to virtual classrooms, expanding their options when it came to choosing courses and providing better opportunities to prepare for college or attain career-specific skills.

While it is early to gauge the full impact of virtual schools in Texas, early returns in other states with more established programs are promising. Texas legislators should consider a drastic expansion of digital learning to make it available to more of our high school students. Fortunately, Gov. Rick Perry sees this need as well. His Texas Virtual High School initiative, launched in January 2010, would drastically expand virtual education availability in Texas. Additionally, allowing Texas public school districts, junior colleges, and universities to offer courses without Texas Education Agency approval would increase availability and foster competition amongst provider entities, ensuring the best and most innovative virtual education system possible.

Texas has an excellent opportunity to expand digital learning this legislative session. It needs to be more accessible to teachers who want to participate and easier to access. Modest changes to promote digital learning will pay off handsomely both for students and taxpayers.

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