

Texas Public Policy Foundation

Keeping Texas Competitive

A Legislator's Guide to the Issues 2013-2014



Virtual Education

The Issue

Virtual and blended virtual learning are education's newest frontier. They are mediums that encompass a broad variety of education tools, from distance education for high school students to putting iPads in second grade classrooms. At the K-12 level, the potential of virtual education is enormous. Through the use of technology, students in rural districts would have access to the same educational resources as students in more populated areas. Familiarization with technology could prepare students for the workforce more quickly. Further, states facing budget difficulties now have a resource that allows them to educate their students with greater efficiency.

While Texas is attempting to grow digital learning gradually through the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN), the state's general policies in this area remain too restrictive. If virtual education and blended learning are to flourish in Texas, the state must remove policies that add needless red tape and expense to virtual learning and technological expansion in Texas classrooms.

There are many benefits to digital and blended learning, perhaps the foremost of which is greater access to quality instruction. Virtual education provides more opportunities for students to learn from a quality teacher. While there is no guarantee that every purveyor of online education will be top quality, at the very least, virtual education gives students an alternative to the teachers present in their own school, should they be faced with an educator who is less than ideally qualified.

Course availability is another obvious and central benefit of expanding virtual education. Often, smaller or poorer school districts are unable to offer the same variety of courses that their larger, better funded counterparts can. For instance, many students use the TxVSN's online course catalog to augment the education available at their school; according to the TxVSN, the bulk of its public school students attend on a part-time basis, generally taking one to two courses a term on top of their traditional course work.

Additionally, Texas has a substantial dropout problem that virtual learning could help address; between the 2008-09 and 2009-10 school years, Texas saw around 75,000 students drop out of its public schools. While there is no "silver bullet" to fix this or any other problem in education, virtual education gives students who have dropped out a chance to begin recovering their middle and high school credits, particularly if the student that dropped out is facing the prospect of getting their course credits around a work schedule. Online learning provides an option beyond attending traditional brick-and-mortar schools for degree completion.

It can also not be understated that virtual and blended learning could be a significant cost saver to the state, particularly over a longer period of time. Full-time digital students can potentially be educated at \$1,500-\$3,000 less than traditional, brick-and-mortar students, and it is highly conceivable that the use of more technology in blended learning classrooms could make schools much more efficient.

The Facts

- The inception of the TxVSN has demonstrated the popularity of online learning in Texas; since it went operational in 2009, enrollment has expanded from just over 250 to comfortably over 8,000 students.

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- Texas still trails behind true leaders in this arena, like Florida, which as of 2007, had 130,000 students enrolled in their virtual school program.
- Texas is facing a budget problem in public education. Online students can be funded for up to \$3,000 dollars less than brick-and-mortar students.
- Approval for a student to take courses in the TxVSN requires multiple approvals from both their own district and the provider district.
- There are very few full-time students in the TxVSN, and those that are must have been in Texas public schools the year previous.
- Virtual education in Texas is funded through an allotment in the budget, rather than being a part of the mainstream funding formula.

Recommendations

- Change the funding structure in Texas virtual education so that monies flow directly through the finance formula, rather than from a set aside allotment. This would allow students to pursue virtual education in Texas more freely.
- Remove cumbersome restrictions on school districts' budgets that tell them how to spend their money, breaking down barriers to expansion of blended learning and technology in the classroom.
- Encourage the use of blended learning as a teaching tool in Texas classrooms.
- Allow public school districts to run their own virtual education shops, rather than running through the red tape of the virtual school network process.
- Allow greater freedom for private providers of virtual education than is currently available in the state's virtual learning law.
- Allow more flexibility for private and home-schooled students to take place in publicly provided virtual education in Texas.

Resources

Virtual Education and the Future of Texas Education by James Golsan, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2012).

Virtual Schools: The Future is Now by James Golsan, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Mar. 2011).

Virtual Learning Across the Nation by James Golsan, Texas Public Policy Foundation (Aug. 2011).

