



Senate Bill 1861

Written Testimony Submitted to the Senate Committee on Education in Favor of SB 1861

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Chairman Creighton and Members,

Before March 2020, virtual education was a niche offering in Texas public education, serving fewer than 1% of Texas students. Then school closures related to the COVID-19 pandemic plunged the nation and state into an extended experiment in emergency remote education. While Texas virtual education needed renovation even before the pandemic, the state's experiences exposed the existing framework as untenable for the 21st century. Now, Texas has a unique opportunity to update state policy on virtual and hybrid education, using the lessons we have learned.

The Texas Commission on Virtual Education, created by Rep. Ken King's HB 3643 and sponsored by Chairman Taylor (87th Legislature), convened many of the most experienced practitioners in the state and country to inform Texas' path toward a robust, future-ready education landscape that empowers students, teachers, and districts. Their findings and recommendations were released in a report at the end of 2022; those findings are in large part reflected in the provisions of Sen. Bettencourt's SB 1861.

The best of virtual and hybrid education offers students flexibility in pacing, scheduling, and career training. Programs of this kind could help districts offer more career options for Texas teachers and re-enroll students who have chosen other schooling methods such as private school or homeschool in their search for a better fit. They show strong promise for supporting cutting-edge career training opportunities that allow districts to partner with each other and with businesses, such as the Rural Schools Innovation Zone. Incorporating hybrid and virtual education into Texas public education can leverage the best of current technology to build a bright future for our students while preserving the best of our heritage and keeping Texas communities strong.

The Foundation supports SB 1861. Among other items, the bill accomplishes the following:

- SB 1861 supports flexible decision making for both districts and families.
 - Districts will be able to develop and establish virtual education programs, and families will be able to choose to attend those programs. Currently, only waivers and short-term legislative fixes have allowed more than a handful of districts to offer full-time virtual education to students.
- SB 1861 ensures that virtual programming will be voluntary for students and intentionally developed by districts.
 - Students cannot be forced to participate in virtual programming and districts must spend time developing programs that will meet basic standards of quality.

- SB 1861 largely eliminates statutory prohibitions preventing students from participating in virtual education based on their grade, prior enrollment status, or prior academic achievement.
 - Grade-based and academic restrictions will not prevent students from participating in virtual education. Restrictions on prior enrollment are reduced, though not eliminated. Individual programs may still set appropriate enrollment criteria.
- SB 1861 establishes a transparent format for reporting and evaluating program results.
 - Full-time virtual and hybrid campuses will be treated as individual campuses, ensuring that they are included in accountability evaluations.
- SB 1861 allows for the creation of innovative hybrid school models and competency-based educational programs.
 - These settings create an opportunity to develop approaches that focus education on student outcomes and support career and technical education. In the coming years, lessons from developing these competency-based approaches can also be applied more broadly to Texas public education.

We are pleased to see the results of the Commission on Virtual Education reflected in this legislation and look forward to continuing to support your efforts.

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