
Senate Education Committee

Testimony on Digital Learning



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Introduction to Frisco ISD

Frisco ISD is the third largest school district in North Texas serving over 63,000 students. The district has also been one of the fastest growing school districts in the United States over the past 20 years, adding more than 55,000 students in that time period. Even while facing the significant challenges associated with enormous growth, the district has remained one of the highest performing districts in the state and is currently the highest performing large district in the state. Frisco ISD employs almost 8,000 people, including more than 4,300 teachers.

Currently, due to COVID-19, Frisco ISD is serving just under 30,000 of our students virtually.

Texas Virtual School Network

What TxVSN Does

The Texas Virtual School Network, as it is currently designed, primarily serves as a catalog of courses available to students throughout the state of Texas. However, this catalog remains limited in breadth to high school courses. Additionally, school districts only receive funding for those courses upon successful completion. TxVSN also provides limited oversight of the small number of approved full-time virtual schools in the state.

What TxVSN Doesn't Do

However, TxVSN was not designed to accommodate school districts utilizing virtual and blended learning options within their own districts. TxVSN classes and schools are open to students regardless of their home district and TxVSN was designed with this more widespread constituency in mind. TxVSN is not an appropriate mechanism for widespread use of virtual learning by school districts for their own students.

Improving Digital Learning Options

Local Programs

The TEA has made significant allowances related to online learning in response to COVID-19. These allowances have provided temporary flexibility, so this testimony addresses the situation as it stands in current law without the allowances made by TEA which can only be made permanent through legislative action. Frisco ISD has a number of students with medical conditions requiring long-term treatment, students in outpatient treatment facilities, and elite athletes, all of whom are impacted by the limitations on online learning in current law. Frisco ISD's mission is to know every student by name and need.

One student is receiving 6 weeks of chemotherapy at a facility outside of the district. Because the student is out of school for 6 weeks, current law would require the student to either enroll in the district in which the treatment facility is located, or in an online school and as Frisco ISD cannot currently operate an online school, the district has been unable to serve this student. As a result, the student is receiving instruction from a different school on a different scope and sequence than the classroom to which the student hopes to return.

A second student spent six weeks in an outpatient treatment facility. While in the treatment facility, Frisco ISD was unable to provide services because the student did not qualify for homebound services. The student then returned to the classroom part time, but had missed so much content and was quickly overwhelmed while attempting to catch up. Later, when the student required additional treatment, the student withdrew from Frisco ISD.

A third Frisco ISD student is an elite athlete who participates in competitions throughout the country. The student chose not to take AP courses because the student's schedule meant the student often missed class and was concerned with having to continually catch up.

Frisco ISD has hundreds more students who may not be able to receive the quality education they deserve because current law prevents school districts from tailoring educational programs that take into account the student's particular needs.

However, the Legislature can make a number of changes that will allow school districts across the state to serve their own students.

The first is to allow districts to count as present for the purposes of Average Daily Attendance, students participating in digital learning programs. This is vitally important to ensuring students receive quality online instruction. Teaching via a digital platform is as resource-intensive as face to face teaching. Recruiting and retaining high-quality teachers will be a primary challenge for online learning, just as it is for face to face. Additionally, the technology infrastructure required to ensure

students have access to high-quality educational resources is expensive. Without full ADA funding for online students, districts will not be able to ensure quality digital learning.

Second, the legislature should allow districts to determine when and whether to offer online courses to students, including students who may wish to select online courses temporarily, rather than full-time.

Third, the legislature should allow districts to establish online campuses in the same manner other campuses are created. This would allow districts to operate full-time programs that can be tracked for accountability purposes.

Finally, the legislature should remove any growth restrictions related to these local programs.

If the legislature made these changes, the student receiving chemotherapy out of district and the student in the outpatient treatment facility would be able to maintain the scope and sequence of their courses making the transition back to the classroom more seamless. The elite athlete would be able to continue pursuing the student's dreams while also receiving a more advanced and rigorous education.

Changes to the Texas Virtual School Network

In addition to providing the opportunity for school districts to serve their own student's better, the legislature can also make changes to TxVSN to help districts all across the state better serve the needs of their students.

First, the legislature should provide ADA funding for TxVSN courses beyond the current three-course limit. This will allow school districts who rely on the TxVSN catalog to provide greater opportunities for their students.

Second, the legislature should codify the current waiver granted by the TEA to allow any district to submit online courses to the TxVSN course catalog to be used by other districts. This increase in the type and quantity of classes offered through TxVSN will be available to all districts, whether that district has a virtual academy or not, and increase access to students across the state without creating competition for small or rural districts.

Conclusion

One of the most common concerns expressed related to online learning is that the quality of online learning programs are insufficient. That has been used to justify maintaining current law. However, current law does not prevent students from receiving online instruction, it merely prevents students from receiving online instruction from their home district. Districts should be permitted to serve their own students in the way that best addresses their individual needs.