



87th Legislative Session

Texas PTA Legislative Priority

DIGITAL CONNECTIVITY FOR ALL

Pursue legislation and funding to ensure all Texas public school students have access to reliable digital connectivity and devices.

Texas PTA is a founding steering committee member of Digital Texas, a coalition organized to ensure digital connectivity throughout the state. Digital Texas is focused on addressing connectivity through a broad lens. In addition to the connectivity needs of public education, the coalition is working to address other areas that impact youth, including digital access to workforce development, e-commerce, and healthcare.

POLICY GOALS

- Ensure access to reliable connectivity and devices so that all students may participate fully in a modernized PK-12 public education system, institutions of higher education, and technical training programs.
- To propel the state's twenty-first century workforce and economy forward, Texas must address the changing technological demands of employers and equip workers with the digital tools to compete in middle-and-high skill jobs, fostering economic growth and mobility.
- Ensure affordable access to connectivity, technology, and basic digital literacy in order to increase opportunities for employment in high demand industries; enhanced job-embedded learning and professional development that leads to career advancement; and industry certification and upskilling in high demand jobs and careers.
- Ensure access to necessary technology and infrastructure needed to maintain reliable telemedicine services, especially in locations where medical professionals are not physically available.
- Develop a statewide broadband plan that addresses the unique needs of communities across the state and identifies sources of dedicated funding.

BACKGROUND

Though digital connectivity is not a new issue, it has been exacerbated by COVID-19 and the closing of school campuses. Access to online education, during times of health crisis or otherwise, remains a major equity issue for students across the state.

- One in every six public school students in Texas does not have access to high-speed internet, and 30% of them don't have a "dedicated and adequate learning device" — a laptop or tablet computer — according to Texas educators who answered a voluntary state survey earlier this year.
- At least 1.8 million Texas students lack either devices or access to high-speed internet. Many of these students live in the vast rural areas of the state where basic digital infrastructure is not available, though there are a significant number of students living in urban centers who lack reliable internet connectivity or devices as well.

#TXDigitalDivide

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BACKGROUND

- The digital divide has implications for students entering higher education. “Because of school closures, students without home access to devices or broadband internet are no longer able to use computer labs and other resources available at their school to fill the gap.”
- Students without access to broadband internet, or to a desktop or laptop computer, face FAFSA completion barriers. For many students, the only available internet access is through a cell phone or other mobile device. Although steps have been taken to make the FAFSA available in a mobile-friendly format, it can be difficult for students to collect all of the information needed to complete the form—such as tax-return information—through a mobile interface.
- In 2014, colleges and universities received 94% of their applications online, up from 68% in 2007 and 49% in 2005, according to the National Association for College Admission Counseling (NACAC). “This digital divide is essentially one more barrier that low-income students face,” says David Hawkins, NACAC’s executive director for educational content and policy.
- What is ‘broadband?’ According to Connected Nation Texas, “commonly referred to as high-speed internet access, technically, broadband is any kind of connection other than dial-up. The connection is always on.”
- According to the Dallas Fed, “Those who find themselves on the wrong side of the digital divide—including low-income people, those with less formal education, rural populations, the elderly and minorities—suffer further economic, social and health disparities resulting from disconnection.”
- According to the Texas Organization of Rural & Community Hospitals, Texas leads the nation in rural hospital closures. Since the beginning of 2019, 26 Texas rural hospital closures have occurred in 22 communities. Access to tele-medicine helps to bridge the gap for communities that lack access to in-person medical care.
- According to the Greater Houston Partnership, 82% of middle-skill job postings require digital skills. Per the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, digitally-intensive middle skills jobs pay more than those that do not require digital skills.
- 44 states and Puerto Rico have a statewide broadband plan. Texas does not.
 - Without a long-range statewide broadband plan, Texas does not qualify for certain federal grants to increase access to broadband.

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