

HB 3280: A New Approach to Virtual Learning

by James Golsan, Policy Analyst, Center for Education Policy

Background

During the 80th Texas Legislature, the Texas Virtual Schools Network, or TxVSN was created, making Texas a leader on the frontier of digital education. It has been a popular program, although thus far a somewhat limited one, as it has both funding restrictions and a somewhat complex system of participation. At present, digital education in Texas is run almost completely at the state level.

Status

HB 3280 allows for school districts to provide their own digital education, rather than going through the Texas Virtual Schools Network.

Analysis

There are several options for expansion of digital education in Texas on the table this session, including expansion of the existing TxVSN via HB 2843, and the creation of the Texas Virtual High School, via SB 1483, an initiative announced by the Governor's office in early 2010.

This distinction between such initiatives and HB 3280 is two-fold. The first is the mechanism by which they are run. Both the TxVSN and the Texas Virtual High School are state-run entities. While centralized education organizations might appear to be a more comfortable option on education's "digital frontier," there are some disadvantages to this model. The approval process that virtual courses are required to go through slows the time it takes for a course to be made available to the public. Along those lines, the process through which a school becomes a certified "provider" district might be off-putting for some schools, when simply maintaining the status quo of providing standard, brick and mortar education requires less red tape. These restrictions hinder innovation, reduce efficiency, and increase the cost of providing digital instruction.

HB 3280, in contrast, puts the operation of digital classes in the hands of school districts. It aims to bring standards for

digital education in line with standards for traditional education, allowing virtual courses to be provided at the district's discretion, with no upfront approval process or mandatory participation with the larger state network.

The second central difference between HB 3280 and HB 2843/SB 1483 is in the cost structure. While the latter two bills do expand virtual education in Texas, they do it at potentially substantial cost to the state. The filed version of HB 2843 had a fiscal note that stated its financial impact could not be determined at the time of the filing. SB 1483 has a fiscal note in excess of \$140 million over the course of the next biennium. While expanding digital education should be a priority in Texas, that kind of expenditure warrants careful consideration given the state's current fiscal climate.

While the filed version of HB 3280 did have a fiscal note of around \$14 million, the committee substitute should come at no or minimal cost to the state. The central idea of the bill is to put virtual education in the hands of school districts, and that includes financial responsibility of providing digital education. Under this bill, a school could use its Foundation School Program funding to run its virtual courses. This would allow for virtual education to expand without Texas directly having to increase state money appropriated for digital learning.

Conclusion

HB 3280 is a strong means by which Texas can expand digital education at minimal cost to the state. Though it goes outside the bounds of precedent for digital education in Texas, it only does so in that it allows digital courses to be treated more like traditional courses. Additionally, it increases flexibility to school districts seeking to expand upon their own digital education programs, or simply save costs. District flexibility and reduced costs are the central tenets of HB 3280. 