

SB 1483: Expanding Virtual Learning

by James Golsan, Policy Analyst, Center for Education Policy

Background

Senate Bill 1483 is an expansion of the Texas Virtual Schools Network (TxVSN). This bill has two central purposes: to make participation for students and school districts in the TxVSN easier, and to allow for the creation of virtual high schools in Texas, which would allow students to enroll full time and receive a degree from a virtual school. It also re-designs the funding stream for the TxVSN.

Analysis

SB 1483, and its companion bill, HB 3088, make wholesale changes to the existing virtual education system in Texas. One of its most significant provisions is to make it mandatory for school districts to create policy by which students have the option to take courses through the TxVSN. This would create opportunities for digital learning for every student in Texas public schools.

SB 1483 also allows for the creation of virtual high schools in Texas. These would allow Texas students to attend virtual schools for the duration of their high school careers, and receive a diploma from those institutions. Such programs would be entirely new to the state.

Additionally, SB 1483 redesigns the funding of the existing TxVSN. In its previous form, the TxVSN was funded through a special allotment. SB 1483 brings the funding into the Foundation School Program's funding stream, eliminating that allotment and allowing virtual education to be funded similarly to traditional brick and mortar courses.

The central drawback to SB 1483 is the cost. The initial draft of the bill received a fiscal note of around \$140 million dollars for the 2012-2013 biennium, citing increased numbers of students in Texas schools via dropout recovery and increased technology costs as the primary drivers for negative financial impact.

There are also concerns regarding the administration of these substantial Virtual High Schools. While the aim in creating them is an excellent one, it is necessary to ask whether now, when the state is pressed for funding, is the time to expand virtual education in a manner that is both costly and might create the need for new positions and new administering bodies within the state government.

Recommendation

The strengths of SB 1483 and HB 3088 are that they are a means for reaching out to students who might not perform as well in traditional learning environments, creating online learning options for a scope and spectrum of students never before seen in this state. However, the cost of expanding a state run program in such a budget tight period, should be taken into account when considering these bills.

To reduce costs imposed by SB 1483, legislators should instead consider HB 3280, which allows school districts to run their own virtual classrooms with their own Foundation School Program money, rather than create a substantial new revenue stream specifically to fund virtual learning. This would allow for the expansion of virtual instruction without expanding the cost of running and funding virtual education. ★