

Improvement and Uncertainty in Texas Online Learning
Education Technologies on the Rise

By Arlene Wohlgemuth

During the 83rd Texas Legislature, our lawmakers passed what is arguably our state's most significant piece of digital learning legislation since the inception of the Texas Virtual School Network in 2007. The bill, House Bill 1926, allows private and non-profit providers of digital courses and content to participate in the Texas Virtual School Network without having to partner with a school district to make their courses available to Texas students. The new law should create much greater flexibility for providers and provide our students with more access to high quality online content.

Online and blended learning remains a bit of a wild frontier in the education world. The potential upsides—expanded access to high quality teachers, the removal of geography and even socioeconomic standing as barriers to any class a student might wish to take, among others—are numerous. Used properly, learning technologies are powerful tools to help all sorts of students, from high school students looking to gain college credit early to dropouts returning to complete their high school degrees.

As with anything new, however, there is still some uncertainty. Until very recently, the approval process of digital curriculums in Texas was much looser than it was for traditionally delivered curriculums.

Hopefully, the passage of HB 1926, which contains high accountability standards for online courses, as well as the continued vigilance of Texas parents and teachers, will generate an impeccable standard of excellence in Texas online learning. This will be vital as learning technologies continue to proliferate in Texas classrooms.

Though HB 1926 represents significant progress, Texas still has a great deal of work to do. According to Digital Learning Now, which produces a comprehensive annual report on how well every state is implementing digital learning, Texas was the 12th best state for digital and online learning in the country. Certainly not a poor showing, but the separation between ourselves and true leaders in this field such as Utah and Florida remains vast.

One area where Texas must improve is in the realm of student eligibility. Currently, for a student to enroll full time in the Texas Virtual School Network, it is necessary that the student has been a full time student in the Texas public school system the previous year. To truly proliferate digital and online learning in Texas, we must find a cost effective means to allow broader student participation. Keep in mind, studies in Florida have shown that full time digital learners can receive a high quality education at lower cost than traditional brick-and-mortar classroom students.

Even as we work to grow learning technologies in Texas, we must assure that our students are receiving a high quality education. There is no better way to ensure as much than to give the State Board of Education—an elected body whose sole responsibility is the assessment and approval of curriculum standards for the state of Texas—full sway to approve digital curriculum standards. Steps were taken in that direction during the 83rd Texas Legislature, and it is encouraging that our lawmakers recognize the need for high quality review standards of these curriculums. Let us hope we continue down that path.

Education is only going to continue to modernize, and that's good for Texas. We have 80,000 new students arriving in this state every year; the more tools we have at our disposal to meet the needs of those students, the better, and a robust Virtual Network is necessary component. We must be certain those students are receiving a top quality education as learning technologies continue to expand.

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