focus
REPORT

Online learning: Trends in K-12 education in Texas

As technological advancements increasingly affect public education, including how and where students receive instruction from kindergarten through high school, questions linger about the most effective ways for schools to employ technology and integrate online learning. While most Texas students still attend traditional public schools in person, online learning is becoming the choice for a certain number. This includes those seeking more flexible, fully online, teacher-directed learning off campus and those wishing to take individual online courses in combination with traditional classroom learning. According to the Texas Education Agency (TEA), roughly 10,000 students were enrolled in full-time virtual schools as of October 2013, and students took roughly 2,300 supplemental high school level online courses during spring 2014.

This report examines the history of online education in Texas, related legislation considered by the 83rd Legislature in 2013, and issues that may affect future decisions on expanding online education, including school accountability, methods of funding, and availability of technology resources.

Historically, policies adopted in Texas have limited the number and types of online courses students could choose, required state-level review of supplemental online courses offered by local districts and charter schools, and placed restrictions on funding and payments to providers of virtual education.

This report examines the history of online education in Texas, legislation considered by the 83rd Legislature, and issues that may affect future decisions on expanding online education.

At the same time, other states, such as Florida, have adopted policies that make certain virtual learning opportunities available to home-schooled and private school students, require all high school students to take at least one online course before graduation, and require many districts to offer multiple options for virtual instruction (see *Florida Virtual School program*,).

Texas state lawmakers may consider proposals similar to Florida's for expanding virtual learning opportunities in the state. They also may consider whether current funding mechanisms and rates of reimbursement are adequate and whether public schools have sufficient technological capacity to provide online learning. Some say any expansion of online learning should be accompanied by funding and resources to improve district Internet access and technology support. Among those who stand to gain the most from virtual learning, they say, are rural and certain at-risk students who often lack sufficient Internet access.

Most recently, after a decline in online course enrollment through the state-approved network, the 83rd Legislature in 2013 enacted HB 1926 by K. King, allowing nonprofit organizations, private companies, and other entities to offer online courses through the state's network and requiring school districts to inform parents annually about online learning options. HB 5 by Aycock, also enacted by the 83rd Legislature, allows students to pursue career-focused high school graduation plans, which some say could prompt them to search for applicable online courses not offered at their local campuses.

Supporters of proposals to expand virtual learning say Texas should do more to offer all students a chance to take online courses that can be tailored to college and career plans and help them gain technology skills. They say the state should encourage a vibrant marketplace of online education providers and give students and parents enough information to make choices. Texas should encourage enrollment growth in full-time virtual schools and online courses through the state network by adopting an appropriate funding system, allowing more local control, and opening full-time virtual schools to more students, including children in kindergarten through second grade and those currently outside the public school system. Supporters say expanded online learning could provide a more cost-effective way to educate students, especially those who live in certain small districts in sparsely populated areas where the state provides additional funding through the school finance formulas.

Online learning has been a feature of the state's educational system since 2001, when the Texas Legislature first authorized the establishment of an electronic course pilot program.

Critics of proposals to expand virtual learning say that while online courses may be appropriate for certain groups of students, most still learn better in a traditional classroom setting. Even in those circumstances where online learning is the choice for certain students, critics say, lawmakers should take a cautious approach to expansion in order to safeguard the integrity of online courses. Expanding online programs to private and home-schooled students could create an expensive "virtual voucher" program, they say, which could drain funds from public schools even as questions persist about whether sufficient information is available to judge the efficacy of online learning. Critics say that current regulation of online course providers keeps the focus squarely on providing quality instruction.

Establishment of online programs

Online or "virtual" learning has been a feature of the state's education system since 2001, when the Texas Legislature first authorized the establishment of an electronic course pilot program in selected school districts. In the years since, an increasing number of districts and open-enrollment charter schools have offered some form of virtual instruction, ranging from individual online courses to full-fledged virtual schools.

A series of laws enacted since 2001 has resulted in two programs for online education in Texas: full-time online schools operated by school districts or charter schools and a state online course catalog designed to supplement classes taken in the traditional school setting.

In both programs, teachers must be Texas-certified in the content area and grade level in which they teach and trained in best practices in delivering online instruction. Courses must meet state curriculum requirements, as well as quality standards established by the International Association for K-12 Online Learning (iNACOL).

History. The evolution of virtual learning in Texas began with the enactment in 2001 of SB 975 by Shapleigh, which authorized the commissioner of education to establish an electronic course pilot program in a limited number of districts beginning in the 2001-02 school year. The bill directed the pilot program to focus on districts with higher-than-average populations of students at risk of dropping out or students underserved by local gifted-and-talented programs.

In 2003, the 78th Legislature expanded the scope of online learning through the enactment of SB 1108 by Shapiro, which authorized full-time pilot programs. Students in grades 3-9 began attending these virtual classes in spring 2006.

Establishment of the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) – which today includes a statewide online course catalog and an online schools program – began with the enactment of SB 1788 by Shapiro in 2007. SB 1788 required TEA to administer the network and contract with a regional education service center to operate the program. Today, TEA administers the TxVSN in collaboration with Region 10 Education Service Center and the Harris County Department of Education.

Under the requirements of SB 1788, now codified under Education Code, ch. 30A, a student who wishes to enroll full time in the network must have been enrolled in a public school the previous year or meet certain conditions as a military dependent. Home-schooled students may take up to two online classes per semester but must pay a fee and gain access to the courses through the district or charter school attendance zone in which the student resides. SB 1788 also established $400 as the maximum fee that may be charged for an online course, whether paid by the student or the school district.

Recent legislation. The 83rd Legislature in 2013 revised the TxVSN with the enactment of HB 1926 by K. King. The bill expands those who may be course providers to include nonprofit organizations, private entities, and corporations that can demonstrate financial solvency and provide evidence of prior success in offering online courses to middle- or high-school students. It also authorizes the TxVSN to enter into an agreement with another state to facilitate expedited course approval.

Under HB 1926, districts have discretion in selecting course providers for their students. A district may deny student enrollment in an online course if it is inconsistent with requirements for college admission or industry certification or if the district or school offers a substantially similar course. Under the new law, districts may decline to pay for more than three year-long electronic courses per student, although students may pay to take additional courses. Districts and charters must send written information to parents about online courses at least once a year.

Funding

Funding for full-time online schools and supplemental online courses comes through state school funding formulas, subject to certain restrictions.

Full-time virtual schools. School districts and charter schools that operate full-time online schools receive funding based on student attendance using the regular Foundation School Program (FSP) formulas. Payments to virtual schools are contingent on a student's promotion to the next grade or successful completion of a high-school course.

Supplemental online courses. For students enrolled in supplemental online courses through the TxVSN, districts pay up to $400 per course each semester. Fees are paid to the Region 10 Education Service Center, which then pays course providers. Providers earn 70 percent of the fee upon the student's continued enrollment after the official drop deadline for the course and the final 30 percent if the student successfully completes it. Districts receive formula funding for up to three courses per student each school year, provided the courses do not exceed a student's normal seven-course load.

Previous funding mechanisms. For a brief period before the 2011-12 school year, supplemental online courses were funded through a state virtual school allotment. The allotment was created in HB 3646 by Hochberg, a school finance bill enacted in 2009 by the 81st Legislature. The state paid allotments of $400 per student to the online course provider and $80 per student as reimbursement for administrative costs to the district or charter school in which the student was enrolled.

The virtual school allotment was repealed when state funding to public schools was reduced through the enactment in 2011 of SB 1 by Duncan during the first called session of the 82nd Legislature. SB 1 also repealed the authority of the commissioner of education to pay for courses exceeding a normal course load.
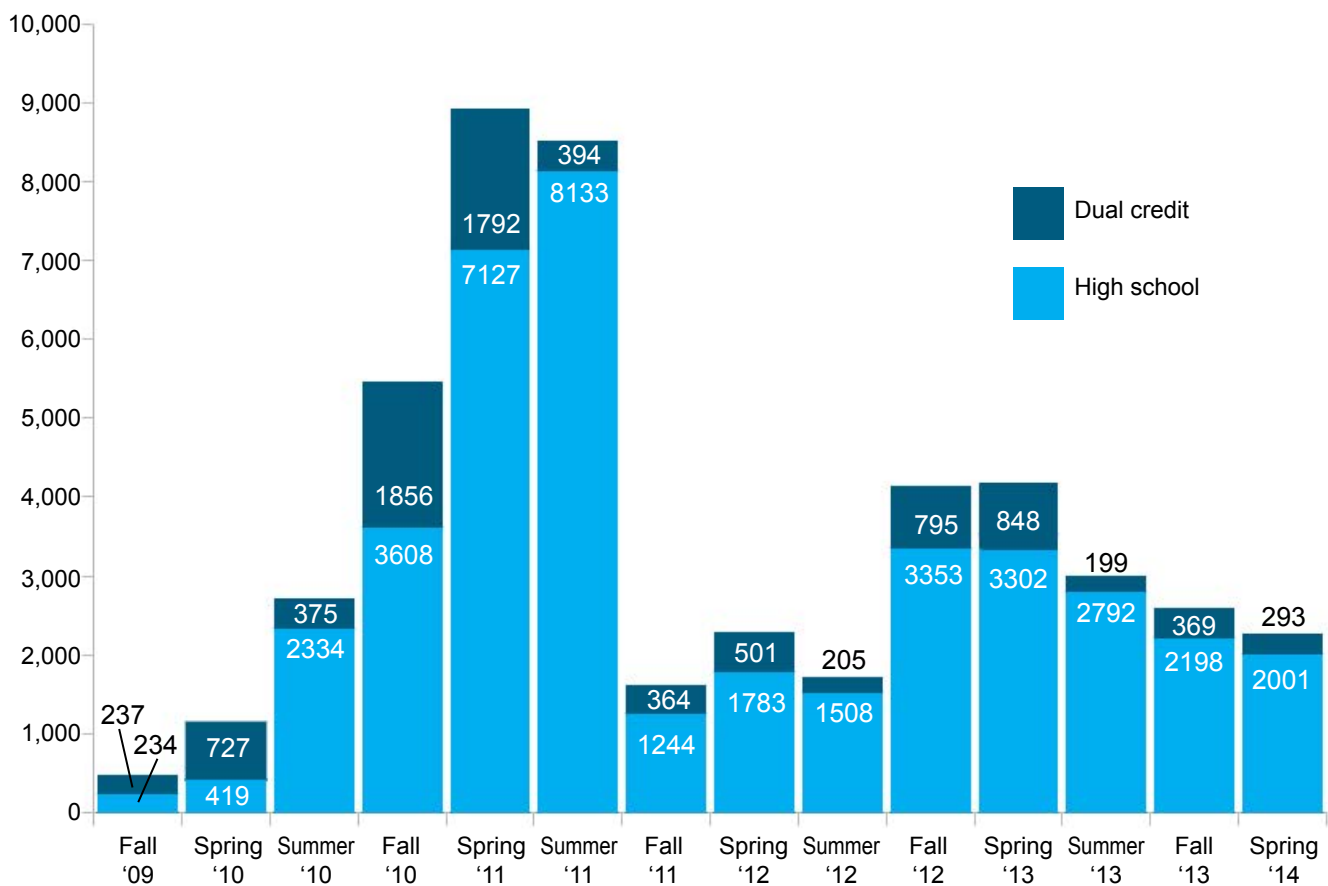
In 2011, TEA began using funds remaining from those appropriated for the virtual school network to establish virtual learning scholarships. These scholarships were available to districts and charter schools to pay course costs for students enrolled in supplemental online courses. When a student successfully completed the course, the home district also received $100 to help offset the cost of mentoring the students while they were enrolled. The scholarships were available to districts and charter schools from the fall 2011 semester until funds ran out in summer 2013.

Enrollment trends for online courses

The TxVSN catalog of supplemental online courses opened in January 2009, and enrollment grew steadily over the next two years, reaching a peak in the 2010-11 school year when nearly 23,000 courses were taken through the TxVSN.

TxVSN supplemental course enrollments by semester

Stacked bar chart showing TxVSN supplemental course enrollments by semester, with Dual credit (dark blue) and High school (light blue) categories:

Semester	Dual credit	High school
Fall '09	237	234
Spring '10	727	419
Summer '10	375	2334
Fall '10	1856	3608
Spring '11	1792	7127
Summer '11	394	8133
Fall '11	364	1244
Spring '12	501	1783
Summer '12	205	1508
Fall '12	795	3353
Spring '13	848	3302
Summer '13	199	2792
Fall '13	369	2198
Spring '14	293	2001

Virtual allotment discontinued fall 2011

Source: Texas Education Agency

Enrollment in supplemental online courses declined after repeal of the virtual school allotment — from 22,910 in the 2010-11 school year to 5,605 in 2011-12 (*See chart, page 4)*. According to TEA, demand for the agency's virtual learning scholarships that replaced the allotment led to 11,289 course enrollments from fall 2012 through summer 2013. Since the scholarships ended, per-semester enrollments have dropped by about 41 percent.

The drop in enrollment has been accompanied by a change in demographics of those enrolled, according to the *Evaluation of the Texas Virtual School Network* report for 2011-12 published by ICF International. The percentage of African-American students enrolled in high school courses fell by 9 percent from 2010-11 to 2011-12, while students classified as "at risk" decreased by 6 percent. During the same period, according to the report, the percentage of white students increased by 13 percent.

In the 2011-12 school year, white students comprised 51.9 percent of TxVSN students, while Hispanic/Latino students accounted for 30.7 percent and African-American students 11.3 percent. Students identified as Asian comprised 5.1 percent, while those identified as American Indian or Alaska native made up 0.8 percent. Female students were enrolled in online courses at a higher rate than their male counterparts, according to the report.

Course enrollments by students in urban districts also dropped after repeal of the virtual allotment. During the 2013 spring semester, 75 percent of course enrollments were by students from districts of 5,000 or fewer students. The remaining quarter of enrollments was split almost equally between students from medium and large districts.

Internet access

Growing use of online learning has led many to examine the adequacy of the technology and infrastructure needed to support high-speed online educational content around the state, with recent legislation calling for a study of the network capabilities of school districts in Texas.

According to Connected Texas, a public-private initiative working to ensure that the entire state has broadband access, broadband service is less available to school districts and communities in parts of East Texas, Central Texas, West Texas, the Panhandle, and the Rio Grande Valley than to those in other parts of the state, making use of online programs more difficult for certain smaller districts. A Texas residential technology assessment in 2013 by Connected Texas also found that even where service was available, home broadband adoption varied across socioeconomic and racial lines. Compared to 77 percent of households statewide, 55 percent of low-income households, 60 percent of African Americans, 64 percent of Hispanics, and 70 percent of rural households subscribed to home broadband service. While broadband use is trending upward, the report said that nearly 953,000 school-age children in Texas do not have broadband access at home.

A report to the 83rd Legislature from the Senate Committee on Education in 2013 recommended that online providers be required to supply students with content, videos, and simulations for installation on an array of devices that students could use even without access to the Internet. In addition, the recently enacted HB 1926 directs the commissioner of education to study by December 1, 2015, the network capabilities of each school district and determine if a district and its campuses meet the following targets:

- an external Internet connection to a campus's Internet service provider featuring a bandwidth capable of a broadband speed of at least 100 megabits per second for every 1,000 students and staff members; and

- an internal wide-area network connection between the district and each campus featuring a bandwidth capable of a broadband speed of at least one gigabit per second for every 1,000 students and staff members.

Proposals to expand online learning

Lawmakers and advocates have considered a number of proposals to address the growing interest in

online learning. The debate on proposals to expand these opportunities has centered on the relative financial costs to districts and the state, whether online instruction is suitable for every student, and the degree of discretion available to students and local school districts.

Easing restrictions on course enrollments. Education Code, sec. 26.0031(c)(3) allows districts and charter schools to deny a public school student's request to enroll in an online course if the district or school offers a substantially similar course. Districts also may decline to pay for more than three year-long electronic courses per student.

Full-time virtual schools

The online schools program of the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) provides full-time instruction through school districts and charter schools to students in grades 3-12. Six full-time schools together served about 10,270 students during the 2013-14 school year, according to the Texas Education Agency (TEA). Most host districts and charters contract with private online education companies to provide the teachers and curriculum.

The recently enacted HB 1926 limits funding for virtual schools to those that were operating on January 1, 2013, but the commissioner of education granted waivers allowing three districts to begin operating new schools in fall 2013. The waivers will expire in two years, according to TEA.

The following full-time virtual schools now operate in Texas:

- Texas Connections Academy at Houston enrolled 3,887 students in grades 3-12 in the 2013-14 school year. It is operated by Houston ISD and managed by Pearson's Connections Education.

- Texas Virtual Academy enrolled 5,999 students in grades 3-12 in the 2013-14 school year. It is operated by Lewisville-based charter school network Responsive Education Solutions and managed by K12 Inc.

- Texarkana ISD Virtual Academy enrolled 135 students in grades 3-8 during the 2013-14 school year, its second year in operation. It is operated by Texarkana ISD and managed by Calvert Education.

- iUniversity Prep enrolled 108 students in grades 6-11 during the 2013-14 school year, its first year of operation. The school is operated and managed by Grapevine-Colleyville ISD.

- iScholars Magnet Academy enrolled 19 students in grades 3-8 in the 2013-14 school year, its first year of operation. It is operated by Red Oak ISD and managed by Pearson's Connections Education.

- Texas Online Preparatory School enrolled 125 students in grades 3-12 during the 2013-14 school year, its first year of operation. It is operated by Huntsville ISD in partnership with Sam Houston State University and managed by K12 Inc.

Students enrolled full time in online schools access instruction at home or from another location outside of a regular school building. They are required to take any state-mandated tests associated with the courses in which they are enrolled, including State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) end-of-course exams. Each full-time, virtual school is considered a campus of a district or charter school, and their academic ratings are publicly available on the TEA website.

For 2013-14, Texas Connections Academy at Houston, Texarkana ISD Virtual Academy, iUniversity Prep, and Texas Online Preparatory elementary and high schools met state academic standards. In addition, iUniversity Prep earned a distinction designation for reading/English language arts and Texas Online Preparatory high school earned distinction designations in closing performance gaps and postsecondary readiness. Texas Virtual Academy, iScholars Magnet Academy, and Texas Online Preparatory middle school were rated as improvement required.

Some have suggested eliminating or modifying these laws to give students more opportunity to enroll in any online courses that are consistent with their graduation plans and with requirements for college admission or an industry certification.

Supporters of easing restrictions on course enrollments say public school students would benefit from the scheduling flexibility and the chance to choose online courses that might better fit their learning style or provide better instruction than at the local campus. Online courses are held to the same standards as traditional classroom courses, supporters say, and the scheduling and learning benefits they provide for some students might not be available through a substantially similar course in the traditional setting.

Supporters say eliminating barriers to enrollment could increase student demand for the courses, lead to a more robust network of course offerings, and result in cost savings for taxpayers. In addition, they say, combining eased restrictions with targeted funding could provide more flexibility and opportunity for those at low-performing schools who most need and could benefit from it.

Opponents of easing restrictions on course enrollments say these restrictions help ensure that students work with school counselors or other staff to determine whether an online course is the best choice for that student. Some students may think an online course is easier, only to find that it is more difficult and decide to drop the course. Much of the research indicates that only certain highly motivated students excel in online learning.

Eliminating districts' discretion to limit enrollment could harm districts financially, opponents say. Under the current funding structure, districts lose a portion of their state funding when students enroll in online courses. Districts need to be able to manage online enrollments so they can plan financially to provide classroom instruction for the vast majority of students who receive instruction in the traditional classroom.

Requiring online courses for graduation. While state law does not require students to take a course online before graduation, some observers believe Texas should follow the lead of other states in adopting such a policy, which they say would better prepare

students for success in higher education and beyond. Others contend that online learning is not the best fit for every student and that such a requirement would be costly to the state.

Supporters of requiring students to take an online course say digital learning is the way of the future and Texas should treat online courses as an integral part of student learning, particularly at the secondary level. Instead of having online options limited, supporters say, all students should be required to take an online course before they graduate. The selection

Supplemental online courses

The statewide course catalog of the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN) offers students in higher grades access to supplemental online courses provided by eligible entities for high school credit, Advanced Placement, and dual-credit courses, which are college-level courses that also count for high school credit. Credits are awarded by the student's home district or charter school, which remains accountable for the student's academic progress.

In 2013, 18 providers — including districts, open-enrollment charter schools, education service centers, and institutions of higher education — offered online courses to students statewide through the catalog. Students from 304 districts enrolled in those courses. According to TEA, 76 percent of the course enrollments in the 2012-13 school year were completed successfully.

Students may not enroll directly in supplemental online courses but must work with a school counselor or educator to select courses. The TxVSN website (www.txvsn.org) offers resources to help students, parents, and counselors with the process and provides information on the success rate of online course providers during a specific semester based on the percentage of students who successfully completed a course, did not pass, or dropped out. The site offers an orientation to online learning to help students understand the skills and support systems they will need to be successful in a virtual course. Site visitors also can view the results of student and parent surveys for specific course providers.

of the online course should be up to the student, and a district should pay for the online class even if it offers a substantially similar course on campus. Supporters say this should not result in a substantial increase in cost to the Foundation School Program, particularly if students take courses that are part of their required graduation plans.

Florida, Virginia, and several other states require all students to take an online class before graduation. Under Florida law, school districts may not limit access to courses offered by the Florida Virtual School or another district. These requirements have helped increase the number of courses and made it easier for students to find courses that meet their needs and interests. Virtual learning is becoming more common in higher education, supporters say, and students would benefit from learning the skills needed to succeed in an online course.

Opponents of requiring students to take an online course say Texas cannot afford the expense of adopting such a policy, which would apply to an estimated 2.5 million students in grades 6-12.

Florida Virtual School program

The Florida Legislature historically has adopted policies designed to increase the online delivery of public education. In 2012, Florida became the first state to offer full- and part-time online courses to all students in grades K-12, including options for private and home-schooled students.

An estimated 240,000 students in Florida took at least one online class in the 2012-13 school year, the largest number of any state. Districts in the state must offer at least one avenue for full-time and part-time virtual instruction for students in grades K-12, with larger districts required to offer three.

Districts can meet their requirements in a variety of ways: by contracting with the state-operated Florida Virtual School (FLVS) or an approved private provider, by entering into an agreement with another school district or virtual charter school, or by operating their own programs. District programs do not have to be approved by the Florida Department of Education.

Similar to requirements in Texas, online courses in Florida are taught by certified teachers. The curriculum must meet state standards, and full-time schools are evaluated and rated through Florida's accountability system.

Some courses are available year-round with flexible starting times, while others follow a school-year calender. Districts must provide equipment needed to participate in the full-time virtual program to students who qualify for free or reduced-price lunches and who do not have a computer or Internet access at home. Unlike in Texas, districts in Florida may not limit their students' access to courses offered by the FLVS or another district. All students entering grade 9 must complete an online course before graduation. Beginning in the 2015-16 school year, Florida students will be able to enroll for credit in certain approved online courses outside the FLVS or district courses — these are sometimes referred to as massive open online courses, or MOOCs.

Florida recently experienced a shift in enrollment from the long-dominant FLVS to smaller, district-operated programs after lawmakers changed the funding structure. Under the new law, funding is split proportionately between districts and online course providers, which may be FLVS or a district. Supporters of the change said it would prevent the state from paying for the same student more than once. The policy has led to a drop in FLVS enrollment and layoffs of teachers employed by FLVS. Amid concern that districts were directing students away from FLVS, the chancellor of public schools reminded districts in a 2013 memo that they may not restrict students from taking FLVS courses.

Online courses should be treated as an option for students whose campuses do not offer certain courses or who need flexibility, opponents say. Taking a course online is not for every student, and TEA reports that roughly a quarter of students who enroll do not successfully finish their online courses. A requirement for all students to take an online course during their school years could unnecessarily set some back in completing their graduation requirements.

A better approach to helping students gain experience with online learning, opponents say, would be to incorporate technology and online lessons into one of the required traditional high school classes.

Other opponents of requiring students to take an online course say this could lead to technological inequities because many rural school districts in Texas do not have high-quality, high-speed Internet access. Students from low-income families would be particularly disadvantaged, they say, because such students are less likely to have computers and Internet access at home.

Targeted funding for low-performing schools. As enrollment in online education has fluctuated with changes in the state's funding mechanisms, more recent policy proposals have focused on providing grant funding or state funding targeted to struggling schools. Proposals have included those to allow students attending low-performing schools to take additional online courses at state expense and to provide grants to improve these schools' access to technology.

Supporters of targeted funding for low-performing schools say Texas should direct additional state resources to increasing online learning opportunities for students attending struggling neighborhood schools that are not meeting their educational needs. These students could benefit from being taught by an experienced teacher in an online setting in place of an ineffective classroom teacher. Research has indicated that some students at risk of not graduating benefit from online learning's ability to deliver personalized learning at a time and place that works better for the student.

Supporters say a technology grant program for struggling schools would help students with less access to technology in their homes, who would benefit from exposure to technology they are likely to encounter in college or in the workplace. While the state might not be able to afford to upgrade technology and Internet access for every school, it is appropriate to channel available funds to students most in need.

Critics of targeted funding for low-performing schools say online classes may not be the best way to help students struggling in traditional classrooms. Evidence suggests that highly motivated students who are used to working independently and who have strong parental or school support are most likely to excel in virtual learning settings. A TEA-commissioned study of TxVSN concluded that online courses have been used primarily by white, non-Hispanic females, and research is needed on what would best serve a more diverse student population.

Critics of technology grants say that most schools have unmet technology needs and a grant program would benefit only a few schools. Some critics say it might be better to direct additional education funding to all schools through the school finance formulas than to create new grant programs that reach only some districts.

Increasing the course fee. Under Education Code, sec. 30A.105(b), course fees may not exceed $400 per student per course. A school district may charge the cost to certain students, including those who enroll in a summer course or who exceed a normal course load. Students residing in Texas but not enrolled in a public school must pay a fee. Some observers say increasing the per-semester course fee paid to providers of online courses would improve the quality of offerings while reimbursing instruction delivered online at a rate commensurate with education in a traditional setting. Others say paying online providers less per course is appropriate because virtual education should be more cost effective than instruction delivered in a classroom and that increased spending on online programs would divert money from the traditional schools that educate most students.

Supporters of increasing the $400 course fee say a higher fee would result in higher-quality courses and more choices for students. The fee paid to online course providers has not changed since 2007, and supporters say it is time for the Legislature to bring this fee up to date. If course-fee payments were based on the average levels to which a school district is entitled for the

delivery of instruction in a traditional classroom setting, payments to providers would be $625 per student, per course, according to the Legislative Budget Board (LBB).

Opponents of increasing the $400 course fee say there is no evidence that the current fee is insufficient to cover the expenses related to providing online courses. Online learning is supposed to be more cost effective, and payments should reflect the actual costs of providing the courses rather than being indexed to the cost of educating a student in a physical school building.

Opponents say that increasing the course fee likely would come at the expense of brick-and-mortar schools that educate the vast majority of Texas students. Directing taxpayer money raised to support public schools into the coffers of private entities providing online education for profit would amount to a "virtual voucher" system, they say.

Eliminating state review of TxVSN courses. TEA evaluates electronic courses submitted to be offered through the TxVSN to ensure they are aligned to the state's curriculum standards, known as the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and that they meet national standards set by iNACOL and accessibility standards. HB 1926 directs TEA to publish a submission and approval process for course providers. It also requires providers to apply for renewed approval of courses on a schedule to coincide with revisions to the required curriculum or no later than the 10 years after the initial approval.

Districts or charter schools that want to provide supplemental online courses may apply to the education commissioner for a waiver of the course review requirement. As a condition of receiving a waiver, TEA requires that students enrolled in the online courses perform at a rate at least equal to that of the district or charter as a whole. If they do not, the school may be required to submit courses for review as a condition of continued participation in the TxVSN.

Some observers favor eliminating prior state review of courses offered through the TxVSN catalog, arguing that such a policy would improve the variety and quality of online offerings. Others contend that Texas should continue its gatekeeping role in helping to ensure that courses available online are consistent with the state curriculum and meet other quality standards.

Supporters of eliminating state review say districts should be allowed to develop online courses for the TxVSN without being subject to the state review process. Districts are dedicated to helping students succeed and should be trusted to develop rigorous online content.

The course reviews and student success rate data available on the TxVSN website make the pre-approval process unnecessary. Course providers have an incentive to provide highly rated courses so that more students choose to enroll.

Opponents of eliminating state review say Texas should continue to grow its online course network slowly and maintain state-level quality control over content and funding. Developing online content is different from developing classroom lessons, and review helps ensure that online courses are as rigorous as their classroom counterparts.

Without state oversight, opponents say, students could be exposed to online courses that are of lower quality than, or not aligned to, the Texas curriculum standards. Preserving this requirement, they say, is important because it compels private entities, which may offer courses in other states as well as on the TxVSN, to make the necessary changes to align those materials with Texas standards.

Eliminating enrollment barriers to students outside the public school system. Education Code, sec. 30A.002 limits eligibility to enroll full time in online courses to students who were enrolled in a public school in Texas in the preceding school year. Exceptions exist for students who have been placed in substitute care in the state or meet certain conditions as a military dependent. Private and home-schooled students may

enroll in up to two supplemental courses per semester, which they must access through their local school district or charter school and for which they must pay a fee of up to $400 per course. During the regular session of the 83rd Legislature in 2013, the Senate Education Committee favorably reported SB 1298 by Hegar, which would have eliminated the requirement of prior public school enrollment for full-time virtual schools, but the bill was not considered by the full Senate. Some say that the prior-year enrollment requirement for full-time virtual schools should be eliminated and that barriers to enrollment in supplemental courses also should be eased. Others contend that such policies would be prohibitively expensive and divert dollars from the brick-and-mortar schools that most students attend.

Supporters of eliminating enrollment barriers to students outside the public school system say this change in policy could open full-time online schools and free supplemental online courses to home-schooled students, private school students, students who have recently moved to Texas, and certain students who have dropped out of school. Many of these students, supporters say, would benefit from instruction in a nontraditional school setting — including those with special education or health needs, students in need of remedial attention, and gifted students who could learn at an accelerated pace but lack the resources locally to do so.

According to supporters, virtual schools provide a good alternative for self-motivated students who want to pursue a time-consuming activity or sport, as well as for students who have experienced bullying in a traditional school setting. Students in these situations might benefit from being able to access resources available through the public school system online.

Supporters say there is demonstrable demand from parents of home-schooled students to enroll in full-time online schools. In the early years of the pilot Electronic Course Program, home-schooled students were allowed to enroll. Since the change in law to require prior public school enrollment, supporters say, some parents of home-schooled students have had to enroll their children for a day or two in public school to qualify for virtual school enrollment the following school year. This is a waste of time and resources for everyone involved and places an unwelcome administrative burden on already overworked public school staff. In addition, eliminating

the prior-year enrollment requirement would allow students moving to Texas from other states and certain students who dropped out of school to directly enroll in full-time virtual schools.

Other supporters favor statutory changes that would allow students being educated at home or in a private school to enroll in up to three TxVSN supplemental online courses at no cost or at reduced cost. These are Texas students whose parents are taxpayers, supporters say, and they should have the same opportunity to supplement their education as their counterparts in public schools.

Critics of eliminating enrollment barriers to students outside the public school system say Texas cannot afford to expand online educational opportunities offered in public schools to home-schooled students and private-school students.

The LBB has estimated that it would cost the Foundation School Program tens of millions of dollars per fiscal year if even a relatively small percentage of private and home-schooled students enrolled in full-time virtual schools and courses through the statewide course catalog.

In addition, it would be inappropriate, critics say, to divert tax dollars raised to support children in the public school system to be used for private-school students and home-schooled students to enroll in supplemental online courses.

Expanding full-time online schools to grades K-2. Since the inception of fully online schools, Texas has limited participation to grades 3-12. Some observers say Texas parents should have the choice to enroll their K-2 students in full-time virtual schools just as they do their older students. Others say the youngest students need the guidance of a classroom teacher to get them off on the right foot in their public education.

Supporters of expanding full-time online schools to grades K-2 say most states that offer full-time online schools offer enrollment to all students in grades K-12. Young students could have the same need for a home-based online learning setting as students who are in grades 3 and higher, supporters say. Experience in some states has shown that an early start can help students gain virtual learning proficiency by the time they reach
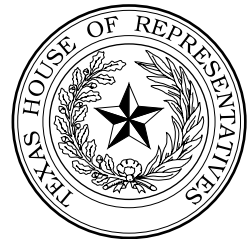
grade 3 and are required to take standardized reading and math tests. Supporters say the virtual curriculum for K-2 students also includes activities that are not computer based. While young students would need extra help from a responsible adult at home to log in to the computer and follow directions, these are not insurmountable obstacles that should bar them from full-time online learning.

Opponents of expanding full-time online schools to grades K-2 say it is particularly critical for the youngest students to be in a classroom with a trusted teacher who can guide them as they start their formal education.

Students in these early grades are not subjected to state standardized testing, which would leave the state without data to determine if students enrolled in a full-time online school were meeting state grade-level expectations, opponents say. Full-time virtual schools have a mixed record of success in Texas and until more is learned about what makes some schools more effective than others, it is best to limit their enrollment to students in grade 3 or higher.

— by Janet Elliott