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Public Education, Higher Education

Legislative committees want degree planning for Texas students enrolled in dual-credit courses

January 3 — As enrollment has increased in dual-credit programs in Texas, state lawmakers have raised concerns that some high school students may be taking college courses that will not count toward their degree programs. Proposals could emerge during the regular session of the 86th Legislature in 2019 to require more advising and degree planning for high school students who enroll in dual-credit coursework.

Dual-credit courses, typically offered under agreements between school districts and local community colleges, are college-level classes that allow high school students to earn both college and high school credit. Education Code, [sec. 28.009](#) requires all school districts to implement a program in which students may earn the equivalent of at least 12 hours of college credit while in high school. That credit may be earned through dual-credit courses, advanced placement (AP) courses, and certain other courses.

Legislators in 2015 removed limits on the number of dual-credit courses in which high school students could enroll, touting their potential to save time and money in earning college degrees. In the 2017 fall semester, 151,669 students were enrolled in dual-credit courses, an increase of 57 percent over a 10-year period, according to the Texas Higher Education Coordinating Board.

Committees on higher education in the House and Senate were charged this interim with evaluating the effectiveness of dual-credit courses in reducing time to earn a degree and making college more affordable for students and the state. The Senate Committee on Higher Education in its [interim report](#) recommended the 86th Legislature require high school students to file degree plans upon completion of 15 semester credit hours of academic or career and technical dual credit. The report also

recommended incentives be created to better advise students about how to best align dual-credit courses with their planned college majors. The House Committee on Higher Education's [interim report](#) recommended dual-credit students receive advising and support to prepare for college, including help with degree planning and financial aid. The report also recommended the committee continue exploring the rigor, content, and outcomes of dual-credit programs.

In addition to the committee interim charges, the Higher Education Coordinating Board was required by the 85th Legislature ([SB 802](#) by Seliger) to identify best practices in transferring course credit between institutions of higher education to ensure that courses, including dual-credit courses, apply toward a degree program.

The coordinating board's [study](#), published in October, focused on a cohort of 12,823 students who earned college credit between fall 2011 and summer 2013, graduated from high school, enrolled in a two-year or four-year public institution of higher education in fall 2013, and obtained a bachelor's degree by 2017. Of the cohort, 73 percent graduated without any excess credit hours and 27 percent graduated with excess credit hours. The study found that those who earned the most credit hours while in high school were likely to graduate with the most excess credit.

As a result of the study, the coordinating board recommends the Legislature require dual-credit students to file degree plans after earning 30 semester credit hours. This would be similar to a requirement enacted last session ([HB 655](#) by Clardy) for students enrolled in a community college degree program.

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The Texas Association of Community Colleges (TACC) also is promoting earlier planning for students earning dual credit. It recommends the 86th Legislature require dual-credit students to declare a meta-major or field of study upon completion of

12 semester credit hours in core academic subjects or declare a career path upon completion of 12 semester credit hours in career and technical education.

— Janet Elliott

General Government

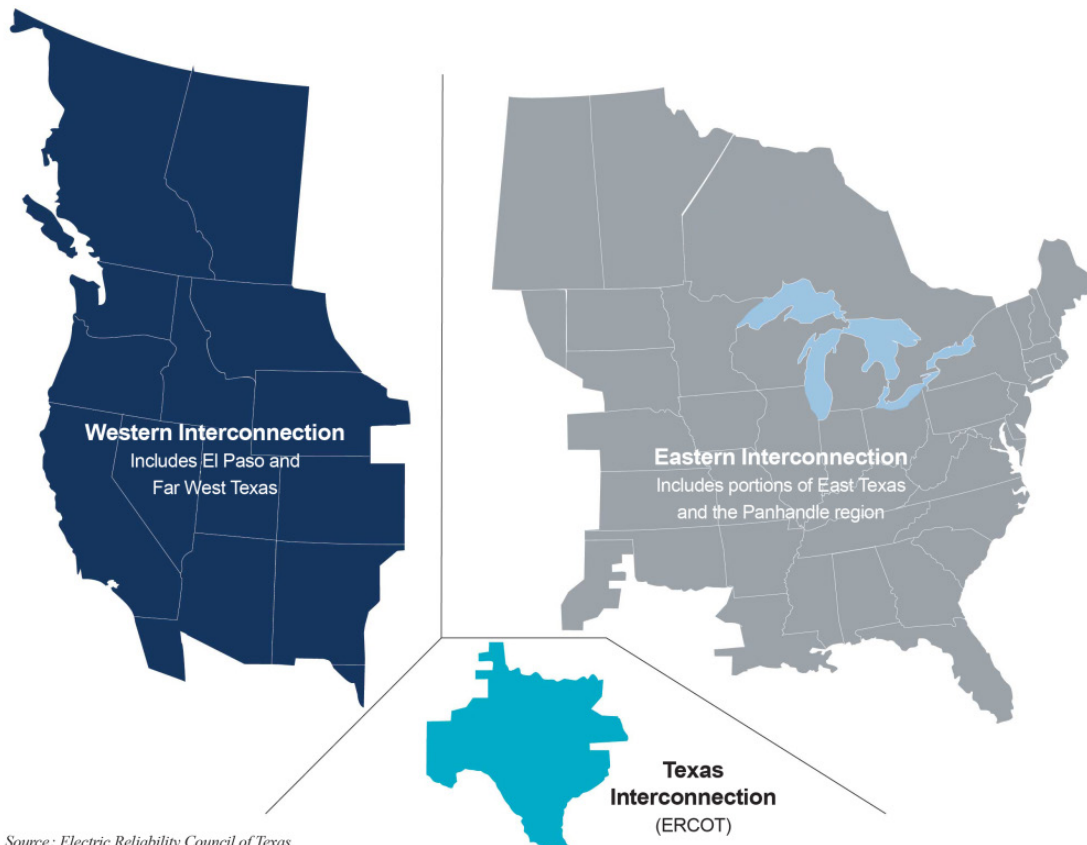
Lawmakers may consider electric grid security in Texas

January 11 — The electric grid in Texas, which produces and consumes more electricity than any other state, is one of three largely independent grid interconnections that make up the power system in the contiguous United States. The Texas Interconnection, also known as the ERCOT grid, covers about 75 percent of the state and supplies power to about 90 percent of the state’s electric customers. ERCOT stands for Electric Reliability Council of Texas, a nonprofit organization that regulates the state’s electric grid.

The Legislature is likely to consider proposals on grid security during the 86th regular session this year. Two measures filed this year, [HB 400](#) by Tinderholt and [SB 76](#) by Hall, would create a council to evaluate grid security, including strategies to

secure the ERCOT grid against certain threats. Other proposals that were considered but not enacted in previous sessions could also re-emerge.

Previous proposals. During previous legislative sessions, lawmakers proposed creating committees to study ERCOT grid security, along with associated computer systems and networks, to assess whether further efforts were needed to secure the state’s grid against a potential electromagnetic pulse and other physical and cybersecurity threats. Electromagnetic pulse is a naturally or artificially generated burst of high-intensity electromagnetic energy that could cause major power outages. Other proposals would have required a cost assessment of measures to protect the transmission and distribution system, urged Congress to



Source: Electric Reliability Council of Texas

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provide the Department of Homeland Security with funds for the protection of the state's electric grid, or provided an appropriation from general revenue to the Texas Public Utility Commission, which regulates ERCOT, to pay for certain expenses and investments for grid security, including a security audit.

Some have called for certain state agencies to develop response plans for incidents affecting critical grid infrastructure. A previous measure would have required the state's Homeland Security Council, in cooperation with the Department of Information Resources, to study cyber incidents affecting state-owned, operated, or controlled critical infrastructure and to develop a model response plan in the event of a cyber incident.

Earlier proposals also would have created a task force of certain Department of Public Safety employees to evaluate emergency planning and responses related to electromagnetic, physical, and cybersecurity threats. The task force would have been required to develop a comprehensive threat protection and recovery plan for critical energy infrastructure and vital utility facilities. Transmission and distribution utilities, owners of power generation facilities, and electric cooperatives, river authorities, and municipally owned utilities operating in the ERCOT power region would have had to assess and report the vulnerabilities of equipment, facilities, and systems to high-altitude electromagnetic pulse devices, geomagnetic storms, intentional electromagnetic interference, physical attacks, and cyber attacks.

Supporters of previously proposed legislation say states should be proactive about grid security, especially in Texas, where most of the state is on its own grid. They say the Legislature should enhance oversight of the state's electric industry and determine the best ways to harden the ERCOT grid against potential threats. The U.S. grid is increasingly interconnected, which may increase vulnerability to cyber attacks and other threats. With documented intrusions into the grid's control systems and concerns about reported threats to critical infrastructure, some experts warn that the U.S. power sector is underprepared. Supporters say current efforts to address grid security lack transparency and that further analysis would help both the electric industry and the Legislature make more informed decisions about long-term investment.

Although legislative action may have a cost for the state, supporters say, an underprepared electric industry may be a bigger cost. A major disruption to electric service could leave millions without power and harm the state economy. If security deficiencies in the ERCOT grid were found, the Legislature could determine whether upgrades would be funded with general revenue, through a ratepayer cost-recovery mechanism, or both. Supporters of legislative action say it would not be intended to prevent a utility from taking independent measures to secure the grid.

Critics of legislative action on grid security say securing the ERCOT grid is an industry-specific and technological issue, not a legislative one. They say technology moves so fast that prescriptive measures in legislation likely would be outdated quickly. The industry already has mandatory, enforceable security standards set by the North American Electric Reliability Corporation (NERC). Critics say electric companies in Texas are performing several security audits a year, participating in a biennial grid security exercise, and collaborating on studies to understand and mitigate the impacts of geomagnetic disturbances and other potential threats.

Critics also say some proposals could be costly to the state and that these costs could be passed down to customers through higher state government spending or personal electricity costs. Any proposals that could increase costs to consumers should ensure that the PUC and study committees justify costs to the Legislature, they say. Still others say such legislative action is unnecessary as the industry is already prepared for threats, and the likelihood of the most disruptive event, an electromagnetic pulse, is low.

— *Mackenzie Nunez*