



TSTA NEWS

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Digital divide in Texas is wide but can be corrected, TSTA study confirms

Overall digital access for Texas students is worse than in the country as a whole, but the biggest victims are low-income, rural and minority students, a study commissioned by the Texas State Teachers Association found.

Inequities in virtual learning capabilities were known before the coronavirus pandemic struck Texas this spring, but they are more critical now that remote learning has assumed a much greater role in public education as educators and parents work to protect students, school employees and their communities.

“The Texas State Teachers Association supports virtual learning as a safe way to provide learning opportunities to Texas children while protecting them, their teachers and their families from the dangerous coronavirus. But our state and federal governments must significantly increase funding for this effort so that all students, regardless of family income, race, ethnicity or home address, have access to the tools they need,” said TSTA President Ovidia Molina.

“These are uncertain times, and we don’t know how long they will last. Teachers will continue to do their part to educate our students, but the state and federal governments must do a much better job of providing the support and resources that this emergency requires.”

Drawing on data from the Census Bureau’s American Community Survey, Public Policy Associates Inc. (PPA), which conducted the study for TSTA, determined that Texas ranked 46th among the states in overall internet and computer access, 45th in broadband access and 45th in access to both broadband and computers.

Seventy percent of households with school-aged children in Texas metropolitan areas have access to broadband and computers, but only 50 percent of similar households in non-metro areas do, a 20-point gap.

“In many rural areas, Texans are not able to get high-speed internet access even if they are willing and able to pay for it,” PPA noted in its summary.

The study also found:

- Students whose families are below the poverty line are much less likely (43 percent) than their middle- and upper-income peers (74 percent) to have both computers and broadband access at home.
- White students (78 percent) have greater access to both broadband and computers than Blacks (63 percent) or Hispanics (59 percent). The gap between Hispanic and white students in Texas is larger than in the country as a whole.
- Only 70 percent of all school-aged children in Texas have access at home to what can be considered high-speed internet access.

- Thirty-three percent lack either a computer or broadband access.

PPA suggested the digital deficit for some groups may be even worse than these numbers indicate because the American Community Survey, on which the study was based, collects data on household access to computers, not how many or what kind.

“It would be helpful for the ACS to ask respondents how many devices they have in the household. It would also be helpful to understand whether or not households with school-aged children are relying only on a handheld device, such as a cell phone, for internet access as opposed to a computer, tablet, or other device with a keyboard,” the report said.

“Closing the gap will require additional dollars for low-income neighborhoods, rural and hard-to-reach communities, and in communities of color,” the report said, as well as for additional training for teachers and support staff.

Molina added: “This is another reason Gov. Abbott must act now to call off STAAR testing this year. That will reduce student and educator stress and provide additional resources for computers and internet access for students in need. How can the state expect students to properly prepare for STAAR when many don’t even have the appropriate remote learning tools that will be necessary for much of this school year?”