

Texas Legislature Locks Down the Virtual Learning Revolution

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When the Democrats walked out of the Capitol on the last day of this past legislative session they may have killed any chance to build on the momentum the virtual learning revolution had created across the state in response to the COVID-19 school disruptions. Although younger learners predictably struggled with remote on-line, and a-synchronized instruction, many middle and high school students thrived in this new learning environment. When in person school starts back in August these same students, supported by their parents, do not want to go back to the typical seven hours per day on-site school schedule. They learn well in a supportive blended-learning model combining both remote and in person learning, and want to continue doing so while enrolled in the same school so they can participate in the school's extracurricular programs, and remain with their graduation class. While there are some purely virtual public schools licensed in Texas that these students could enroll in, the virtual only school experience is not what they want.

When Texas followed some other states and passed the charter school law in 1995, it stated as one of its objectives to "encourage different and innovative learning methods". Clearly many (but not all) charter school innovations have worked as evidenced by the large waitlist of students wanting to attend a charter school. As an added bonus, many traditional ISD schools also made significant improvements in learning that this new competition encouraged. The recent pandemic lock-downs sped up these innovations as a new round of freedoms were granted to all public schools out of necessity. Suddenly the latent usefulness of technology went from simply being offered in school based computer labs to virtual zoom classrooms taking place in homes and outdoor cafes across the state.

Unfortunately, this new learning option is going to be pulled from under them when school starts back up in August. Those traditional and charter schools who adjusted, took advantage of the opportunity, and got better at this hybrid instructional delivery model should be able to continue with funding support from the state. But for that to happen, the legislature needed to pass HB 1468 that would have authorized local traditional and public charter schools to count students in remote learning settings as present in school for funding purposes. In Texas, a healthy student must be in a seat at the school building for that public school to receive public funding. This requirement was waived during the pandemic but has now expired. Without this new law, schools continuing to offer the virtual option will be doing so without public funding. So basically, those schools who adjusted best, won't get paid for a cool innovative product they created that a growing number of tax paying consumers want. What is the government afraid of?

All innovation requires a proper architectural structure to encourage and support it. In this case that structure can only be provided by the Texas Legislature and the Texas Education Agency ("TEA"). They should encourage the further development of these hybrid learning models with

continued funding, and by giving TEA and these innovative schools more time to accumulate evaluation data. If the science backs it up, and I believe it will, these hybrid models may also turn out to be a more efficient way to prepare our Texas students to compete in a global economy with smart machines doing more and more of the work.