COUNCIL FOR A
STRONG AMERICA
TEXAS

REPORT

Facing the Challenges Ahead in Texas

Developing long-term solutions to key challenges will strengthen our future public safety, workforce, and national security.



Acknowledgements

Council for a Strong America is a national, bipartisan nonprofit that unites five organizations comprised of law enforcement leaders, retired admirals and generals, business executives, faith leaders, and prominent coaches and athletes who promote solutions that ensure our next generation of Americans will be successful, productive members of society.

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>9 Million
Texans lack access to high-speed internet at home

The COVID-19 pandemic revealed, created, and exacerbated a number of obstacles to preparing the children of Texas for lifelong success. The necessity of social distancing upended classroom instruction. Consequences of unreliable internet access grew larger and fell unevenly on rural and lower-income communities. An already weak support system for child mental health faced new strains. Developing long-term solutions to these challenges will strengthen the future of our public safety, workforce, and national security.

Texas business leaders, law enforcement, and military leaders call on state policymakers to provide communities, students, and schools with the resources to fully recover from the pandemic and work toward a safer and more prosperous future. This includes resources to help students catch up on missed instruction, to help communities provide reliable high-speed internet access, and to help schools support child mental health.

Unfinished learning

With the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, Texas schools made the switch from in-person to remote learning virtually overnight. While Texas educators should be commended for their work to ensure that instruction continued under these suboptimal circumstances, we must also acknowledge that many students learned less remotely than they would have in a traditional classroom setting.

In Spring 2021, the Texas STAAR standardized test results revealed moderate declines in student performance in reading and substantial declines in student performance in math. For students in eighth grade, for example, the percentage of students failing to meet the state standards increased from 23 percent in 2019 to 28



percent in 2021. In math, the percentage of eighth graders failing to meet state standards more than doubled, from 19 percent to 40 percent.[1]

Learning declines on this scale may affect individuals in a way that impacts the national economy. One analysis found that, nationally, an additional 1.1 million students could drop out of high school in the coming years, which could drive an increase in criminality and threaten the stability of the workforce.[2] Reduced educational attainment would also impact earnings: students could lose an average of $49,000-$61,000 in lifetime income,[3] which amounts to roughly two years of earnings for the average Texan.[4] A third analysis, which drew similar conclusions about the potential loss of individual income, concluded that the impact of this lost income could lower the national GDP by 1.5 percent through the remainder of the century.[5]

For many students, the loss of learning time that has occurred since the start of the pandemic builds on years of weak school attendance. In 2019, over 12 percent of Texas students were absent for a tenth of the school year or more.[6] These chronically absent students were already at greater risk of falling behind academically and suffering long-term consequences, including dropping out of high school, poor career prospects, and involvement with the criminal justice system.[7]

The pandemic's impact on learning is not limited to K-12 settings. At the postsecondary level, COVID-19 led many students to delay or pause their education. In fall 2020, enrollment at four-year institutions in Texas was over three percent lower than in 2019; enrollment in two-year institutions fell by 14 percent.[8] These educational pauses make it less likely that a student will earn a postsecondary credential, and the delays to completion can decrease post-college earnings by as much as 15 percent.[9]

Digital Divide

For many students, poor access to the internet and digital devices was a primary barrier to learning during the pandemic. At the end of the 2019-2020 academic year, as schools transitioned to remote instruction, 97 school districts in Texas reported that less than 75 percent of their students were fully engaged with remote learning resources.[10]

Over nine million Texans lack access to high-speed internet at home.[11] Closing this digital divide can lead to major improvements with regard to work, health, and quality of life, including:

- Accessing virtual doctor visits, which could improve health care in areas with fewer medical professionals[12]
- Supporting small businesses to reach a larger customer base and increase their odds of survival[13]
- Enabling rural farms to take advantage of advances in food production technology[14]
- Developing a workforce with the foundational digital skills required for a growing number of occupations[15]

Reliable high-speed internet access can also meaningfully improve education opportunities. Students with high-speed internet at home are more likely to complete assignments, earn higher grades, and score higher on college admissions tests, even after accounting for other differences between students with and without home internet access.[16]

Solving the digital divide will require solutions tailored for both rural and urban communities. Conservatively, over half a million Texas households lack broadband access—meaning that they cannot acquire broadband internet even if they desire it and have the means to pay for it. Of these households, 86 percent are in rural areas.[17]

Many urban areas also lack the infrastructure or providers for broadband service, though ability to pay for broadband is often a more substantial barrier. Last year, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance placed four Texas cities—Pharr, Brownsville, Tyler, and Harlingen—near the top of their list of the nation's Worst Connected Cities, with up to two-thirds of households lacking a fixed (non-mobile) broadband subscription.[18]

> "The last few years have had a huge impact on our kids' social-emotional health. I commend the Texas Legislature for the steps it has taken to ensure that Texas children have most of the support they need during their schooling years."



Dawn Ferrell, Ph.D.
Major General, USAF, retired

Mental health and well-being

Mental and emotional health have always been a critical component of student success. In the words of experts at the Learning Policy Institute, "learning is social, emotional, and academic."[19] Each student's ability to learn depends on both the quality of instruction available to them and also their ability to navigate the school environment, form positive relationships



with adults and peers, and manage the stressors that may exist in their homes.[20]

Unfortunately, poor mental health affects an overwhelming number of children and youth in Texas. The most recently available data from the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration shows that, annually, over 13 percent of Texas youths experience a major depressive episode, but only a third of those affected receive treatment for depression.[21] Child and youth mental health may have declined even more since the onset of the pandemic, with the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention reporting a national increase in the number of children ages 5-17 visiting hospital emergency rooms for mental health-related reasons.[22]

In addition to promoting learning, good mental health also influences behavior and, ultimately, public safety. Experts estimate that between 50 and 75 percent of juveniles involved in the criminal justice system have a mental health disorder.[23]

Learning from Missed Opportunities

In the last legislative session, the Texas state legislature made some progress toward addressing some of the challenges outlined in this report:

- House Bill 5 will establish a broadband development office, which will work toward a comprehensive solution for closing the digital divide.[24]
- Senate Bill 179 ensures school counselors spend most of their workday supporting and counseling students and protects them from getting overburdened with administrative and other non-counseling-related tasks.[25]
- Senate Bill 481 will allow parents to transfer their children to another school district if their home district solely offers virtual instruction for more than one grading period, empowering families to make choices that best fit their needs.[26]
- House Bill 1247 will advance work-based learning opportunities, such as youth apprenticeships, internships, and virtual workspaces, ensuring opportunities for growth toward a future career.[27]
- House Bill 3643 establishes the Texas Commission on Virtual Education, whose purpose is to make recommendations regarding the implementation of virtual education in public schools.[28]



These bills represent major accomplishments with the promise of supporting student learning and development. In other instances, however, the legislature missed opportunities to take meaningful action to improve academic performance and student well-being. For example, the following bills did not succeed during the last legislative session:

- Senate Bill 462 would have provided funding for transporting meals and instructional materials to students during a declared disaster, reducing threats to health and barriers to education during times of crisis.[29]
- House Bill 823 would have flagged chronically absent students as at-risk for dropping out of high school, making them eligible for the additional support necessary to get on track for graduation.[30]
- House Bill 2975 would have prevented school security officers from using pepper spray on children 10 years old or younger, safeguarding the school environment.[31]

We hope that similar legislation will succeed in the future. Like teachers and students have done since the outset of the pandemic, state leaders must adapt to changing circumstances and make choices within the context of our new reality. More work remains to provide students with the academic and personal support to graduate from high school prepared to be a productive member of society.

Conclusion

Advancing student learning, improving internet access, and supporting child mental health can help ensure a safe and prosperous Texas.

Business leaders know that these efforts can increase the number of workers with a high school diploma and postsecondary education and training—workers needed to fill increasingly demanding jobs.[32] Law enforcement leaders prize the potential for a positive impact on high school graduation rates, particularly given that six in 10 incarcerated individuals nationwide do not have a high school diploma. Military leaders, likewise, recognize that the strength of the military depends on our ability to recruit healthy high school graduates into the armed forces. In Texas, however, 73 percent of youth between the ages of 17 and 24 cannot serve in the military due to issues such as lack of education, a record of crime, substance use disorder, or lack of physical fitness.[33]

These are solvable barriers that we can address through programs that support student learning and well-being. In the end, these efforts can make for a safer society, and also result in more young people graduating from high school ready to embrace the next stage of their life, whether that path includes higher education, a skilled trade, or a military career.

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