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IDRA Report Links Lack of Broadband Access to Student Disengagement

“Plugged in, Tuned Out” Shows Problem is Worst in Large Urban School Districts

San Antonio • May 19, 2021

Since the transition to remote learning during the pandemic, schools struggle to reconnect with hundreds of thousands of students. A new IDRA study found that the problem is bigger than any school strategy. IDRA’s report, [Plugged in, Tuned Out – A First Examination of Student Engagement Patterns in Texas Public Schools During COVID-19](#), makes clear that, in many parts of Texas, student disengagement during the



Plugged in, Tuned Out – Student Engagement Patterns in Texas Public Schools During COVID-19 Show Need for Statewide Broadband Access

by Christine Quisenberry-Harris, May 19, 2021
The digital divide is one of the most pervasive equity issues plaguing students in Texas. It impacts rural and urban school districts alike. Lower-income students are significantly less likely to have access to the basic internet. The same disparities are present for Black students or low-income students who report having less access to computers, fast internet, and broadband speeds (IDRA, 2021).

In many parts of the state, diminished student engagement was a direct result of limited internet access during the transition to remote learning. IDRA’s new analysis found that school districts with the highest rates of student engagement tend to be urban/suburban, while districts with the highest rates of “untuned-out” students tend to exhibit greater proportions of Latino students.

Schools Lost Touch with 10% of Students During the Pandemic
TEA reported that more than 600,000 Texas public school students – over one in 10 students – did not complete assignments or respond to teacher outreach in spring 2020. Schools had touch with Black students and Latino students at over twice the rate of white students. (TEA, 2020)

Students’ engagement with their schools during the pandemic has been difficult to track because classroom instruction is delivered in-person and online. To develop data collection, in May 2020, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) began to require that schools submit crisis code indicators on student engagement in spring education for the 2019-20 and 2020-21 school years.

The Public Education Information Management System (PEIMS) crisis codes of action on student engagement as completion of assignments, responsiveness to teacher and school outreach, and participation in virtual classrooms by agreement (TEA, June 2020). TEA’s definition of student engagement for this purpose examines and places the onus on students rather than measure a school’s role in engaging students in the classroom.

Institute for Data-Driven Research & Analysis

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pandemic was a direct result of limited broadband access.

“Remote learning during the pandemic exposed long-standing inequities that interfere with quality education,” said Celina Moreno, J.D., IDRA President & CEO. “Students can’t connect with their schools if they can’t connect to the Internet. Texas needs to solve this.”

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Lawmakers are considering proposals to establish a state broadband office, set up a federal grant program for broadband funds, and create a mapping system to identify where to focus resources. To keep pace with digital needs, the state of Texas must prioritize education and ensure all students, regardless of their zip code, have access to broadband. IDRA calls for key actions to address the digital divide:

- Adopt a state broadband plan that addresses equity concerns in schools;
- Collect data equitably to accurately assess the digital divide;
- Increase financial support and training resources for digital literacy programs;
- Institute student and family engagement plans across all school districts;
- Offer training and support to educators, students and families in digital literacy and digital citizenship; and
- Invest in robust community engagement programs, such as ongoing community-led digital equity studies and resources for school district capacity to support students and families.

Authored by Christina Muñoz, an [IDRA Education Policy Fellow](#), the report includes data on how student engagement patterns differed across school district sizes showing that broadband Internet access was a significant predictor of full student engagement for larger, more urban school districts.

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Issue Brief

Digital Destination – Texas Needs Broadband Connectivity for All Students & Families

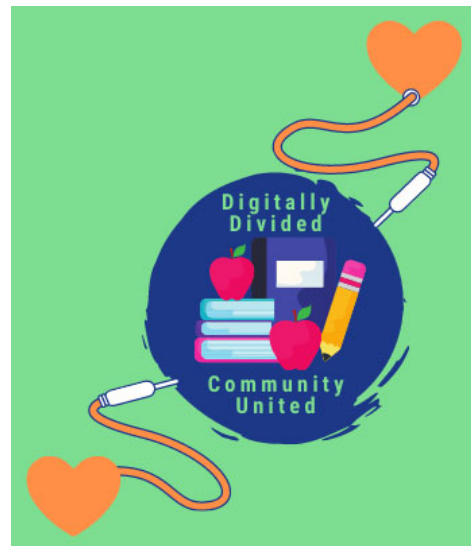
By Thomas Marshall & Christine Muñoz, April 20, 2021
Student success depends on the quality of students' educational resources to learn, engage and grow. The abrupt shift to virtual remote learning in response to the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted learning for millions of Texas students, especially for those without reliable internet access. The digital divide is not new. But in March 2020, it intensified and still presents an alarming barrier to student learning.

To keep up with digital needs for students and their families, the state of Texas must ensure all students, regardless of their zip code, have access to broadband.
This policy brief outlines recommendations for ensuring state policy decisions include plans to secure equitable access to broadband infrastructure and reliable connectivity for students in Texas' most vulnerable populations.
"For the past few months, I've had to drive to my aunt's house to take my online classes since no internet company could enter our neighborhood, making it difficult for me to even do assignments and homework every other day that I'm not able to drive to access the internet."
— Bill Harris, college student

- We urge four key actions to address the digital divide:
- 1 Invest in sustainable broadband infrastructure within Texas communities;
 - 2 Continue distribution of digital devices that are consistent, reliable and suitable for students' education needs;
 - 3 Offer training and support to educators, students, and families in digital literacy and citizenship; and
 - 4 Invest in robust community engagement programs, such as ongoing community-led digital equity studies and resources for school district capacity to support students and families.

This brief also includes student and parent testimonials from IDRA's Speak Out! Community Ground participatory research project, the Texas Student Advocacy Convening facilitated by IDRA, and various Texas community members about their experiences navigating school and work life during the pandemic and how the digital divide impacted both.

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Digital Destination – Texas Needs Broadband Connectivity for All Students & Families

See IDRA's report on the digital divide's effects on Texas students and families and what Texas should do to secure equitable access to broadband for Texas' most vulnerable student populations.

Digitally Divided – Community United

See our video campaign to promote digital equity and highlight community voices about how the digital divide has impacted learning and daily life for them. Students, educators and community members can record a 15-second video to shared with Texas policymakers.



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The Intercultural Development Research Association is an independent, non-profit organization. Our mission is to achieve equal educational opportunity for every child through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college. IDRA strengthens and transforms public education by providing dynamic training; useful research, evaluation, and frameworks for action; timely policy analyses; and innovative materials and programs.

IDRA works hand-in-hand with hundreds of thousands of educators and families each year in communities and classrooms around the country. All our work rests on an unwavering commitment to creating self-renewing schools that value and promote the success of students of all backgrounds.