EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY INITIATIVES AT THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY

AN ISSUE BRIEF FROM LEGISLATIVE BUDGET BOARD STAFF

OBJECTIVE

The Texas Education Agency uses technology to achieve statewide educational initiatives in an effort to provide for a more efficient delivery system for content for educators and students. Examples include Project Share, statewide licenses for reading and mathematics instruction funded through the Student Success Initiative, and the Texas Virtual School Network.

KEY FACTS

♦ Through a mixture of statutory mandates and budget-saving measures, the Texas Education Agency has increasingly used educational technology in statewide initiatives in recent biennia.

BUDGETARY IMPACT

The Texas Education Agency has $76.5 million in General Revenue budgeted for statewide initiatives served by education technology, including $50.5 million for statewide licenses purchased through the Student Success Initiative, $18.0 million for Project Share, and $8.0 million for the Virtual School Network.

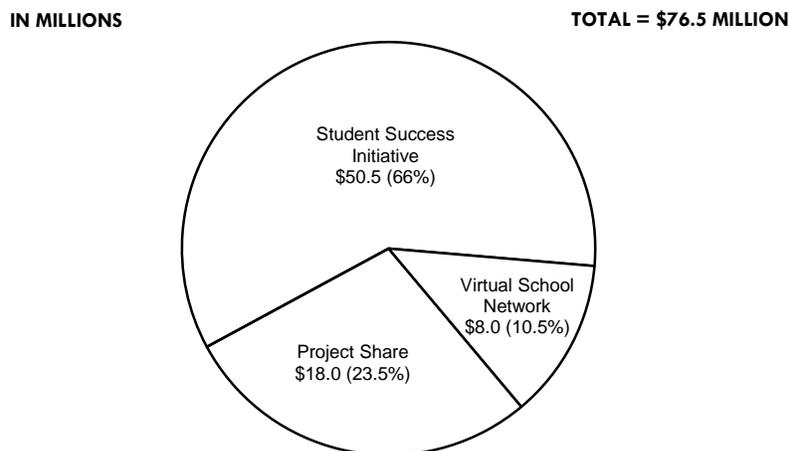### STATUTORY REFERENCES

Texas Education Code, Chapter 30A

Recently, the Texas Education Agency (TEA) has been using technology to achieve statewide educational initiatives more heavily than in the past in an effort to move to a more efficient delivery system for content for educators and students, as a response to budget constraints, and in response to statutory requirements. Examples include providing students and staff with supplemental instruction and support through Project Share, statewide licenses for instructional programs purchased as part of the Student Success Initiative (SSI), and courses offered online through the Virtual School Network. Some of the initiatives, including the statewide licenses purchased as part of SSI, have been in response to budget reductions as the agency looked to provide services to a large population of students with more limited resources, while other initiatives have been required by statute, such as the Virtual School Network. Fig. 1 shows the funding for educational technology utilized by TEA through these three programs.

PROJECT SHARE

Project Share is a web-based platform operated by TEA that includes resources for both students and educators. Project Share provides students access to supplemental instruction in English, math, science, and social studies for study beyond the traditional school day and a collection of professional development opportunities for educators in an interactive learning environment.

Project Share was created in fiscal year 2009 and began registering educators in fiscal year 2010 and students in fiscal year 2011. Since this time, Project Share has grown steadily, surpassing three million users as of December 2013, including 2.4 million students and 0.5 million educators.

FIG. 1: FUNDING FOR EDUCATIONAL TECHNOLOGY APPROPRIATED TO THE TEXAS EDUCATION AGENCY (TEA) FOR THE 2014–15 BIENNIUM

IN MILLIONS   TOTAL = $76.5 MILLION

Student Success Initiative
$50.5 (66%)

Virtual School Network
$8.0 (10.5%)

Project Share
$18.0 (23.5%)

SOURCE: Legislative Budget Board.

Rider 68 of TEA's bill pattern in the 2014–15 General Appropriations Act requires the Commissioner of Education to allocate $9 million of General Revenue in each fiscal year of the biennium to support Project Share. TEA indicated that $4 million of this total will be dedicated to Project Share-related information technology costs related to the program's infrastructure, while the remaining $5 million would be used for content development. Prior to the 2014–15 biennium, TEA funded Project Share with discretionary transfers from other programs with appropriations directed for similar purposes. In the 2012–13 biennium, Project Share was funded with $8 million in appropriations transferred from Rider 53, District Awards for Teacher Excellence from funds directed for an educator mentor program.

STUDENT SUCCESS INITIATIVE

The Student Success Initiative (SSI) was created by the Seventy-sixth Legislature as part of the state accountability system and is statutorily tied to the policy against social promotion. Statute requires districts to offer accelerated instruction to students who are at risk of not being promoted to the next grade, but does not specify the mode of instruction. In the 2012–13 biennium, the funding for SSI was decreased from $276.6 million to $36.5 million. In response to the budget reduction, TEA dedicated $17.5 million of the total to purchasing two statewide licenses in fiscal year 2013 to provide supplemental computer-based reading and math instruction to all students in grades 3 through 8. The licenses include Think Through Math and Istation, which provide online interactive programs to help students improve reading and math skills at their own pace. As of June 2014, 2,032,175 students had enrolled in Think Through Math, and 2,157,658 had enrolled in Istation.

In the 2014–15 biennium, funding for SSI was increased to $50.5 million with an additional $10 million appropriated for fiscal year 2013. TEA indicated the $10 million will be used for Write for Texas, a SSI-eligible professional development initiative focused on writing instruction across all content areas in grades 6 through 12. The agency also indicated that 2014–15 resources are being bid through a statewide competitive procurement process for new statewide licenses for supplemental computer-based reading and math instruction. Unlike in previous biennia, the agency has not planned to use any SSI funding for grants to districts.

VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK

The Virtual School Network is a state-supported online method of instruction available to students across the state through an internet-based system. The Virtual School Network is administered by TEA, while the Education Service Center Region 10 oversees the day-to-day operations of the network.

The Virtual School Network consists of a statewide course catalog and an online schools program. The statewide course catalog provides supplemental online courses for students in grades 8 through 12. Courses offered through the Virtual School Network are required to be part of the required curriculum, be aligned with the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS), and be equivalent in instructional rigor and scope to a course provided in a traditional classroom setting. Students not participating in a full-time online school program through the Virtual School Network are limited to three electronic courses in a school year. Course providers charge a fee to the student's home district equal to the lesser of $400 or the cost of providing the course. Course providers include Texas school districts, open-enrollment charter schools, education service centers, and public or private institutions of higher education.

A Virtual School Network Online School serves students in grades 3 through 12 in full-time virtual instruction. To be eligible to operate an online school, a school district or charter school is required to be accredited, be rated as acceptable, be financially secure, follow TEA reporting requirements, and be in good standing with other TEA programs. To be eligible to enroll in an online school, a student is required to have been enrolled in a public school in this state in the preceding year, have been placed in substitute care in this state, or be a dependent of a member of the United States military who was previously enrolled in high school in Texas and no longer resides in this state as a result of a military deployment or transfer. A Virtual School Network Online School receives Foundation School Program (FSP) funding in a similar manner to a school in a traditional setting, with students calculated in a school's average daily attendance (ADA) and generating funding for the school through the FSP. In grades 3 through 8, each student that is promoted to the next grade level will be included in the provider school's ADA. In grades 9 through 12, a student generates ADA based on individual course completion with a student needing to successfully complete a minimum of five courses to generate the same ADA as a full-time student in a traditional setting. In the 2014–15 biennium, TEA was appropriated $4.0 million in each fiscal year to administer the virtual school network. This amount does not include any funds transferred between a student's home district to providers, or the effect of students enrolled in a Virtual School Network Online School on a providers Foundation School Program entitlement.

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