

SUBJECT: Electronic courses in public schools

COMMITTEE: Public Education — favorable, with amendment

VOTE: 7 ayes — Sadler, Dunnam, Grusendorf, Hochberg, Oliveira, Olivo, Smith
0 nays
2 absent — Dutton, Hardcastle

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, April 4 — 29-0

WITNESSES: For — Rene Lara, Texas Federation of Teachers
Against — None

DIGEST: SB 975, as amended, would require the education commissioner to implement a program by May 1, 2002, under which a school district could offer electronic courses to its students or to students in another district under agreements between the districts. A district could not require a student to enroll in an electronic course. The bill would define an electronic course as one available primarily through the Internet or other electronic media and in which a student enrolled in the course would not have to be physically present in the classroom.

The commissioner would have to select school districts to participate in the program from applications submitted by districts. The commissioner could not require a district to participate in the program but would have to allow the participation of rural and urban districts with higher than average numbers of at-risk students, dropout rates, or populations of underserved gifted and talented students.

A school district seeking to participate in the program would have to submit an application no later than January 1 preceding the school year in which the district wished to participate, or by an earlier date set by the commissioner.

The application would have to include:

- ! a proposed program budget;
- ! a method to verify student attendance;
- ! an accountability plan;
- ! a description of the electronic courses the district would offer;
- ! a description of the students expected to be enrolled in the courses;
- ! any requested waiver of a requirement, restriction, or prohibition imposed by the Education Code or by a rule of the State Board of Education or the commissioner; and
- ! the period for which the requested waiver would be in effect.

The commissioner could waive any requirement, restriction, or prohibition relating to the computation of daily attendance computation as necessary to implement the program. The commissioner could cooperate with the comptroller, the Department of Information Resources, or any other state agency or commission in adopting technical standards for auditing or verifying student attendance in an electronic course.

Not later than December 1, 2002, the commissioner would have to submit a report on the electronic courses to the lieutenant governor and House speaker, reporting:

- ! proposed methods for funding, including the fiscal costs or benefits of each method;
- ! methods of verifying student attendance, including biometric attendance methods;
- ! any security or privacy issues involved;
- ! educational benefits of the courses;
- ! a list of any waivers requested; and
- ! a list of provisions waived by the commissioner in implementing the electronic course program.

The bill would take immediate effect if finally passed by a two-thirds record vote of the membership of each house. Otherwise, it would take effect September 1, 2001.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 975 would allow school districts with higher than average numbers of at-risk students, dropout rates, and underserved gifted and talented students to take part in a program that would stimulate these students to pursue their educations. Electronic technology allows students to take courses on-line from home at times that are convenient for the students. This feature could be especially beneficial for dropouts, students with children, and working students. Electronic courses would allow students to work at their own pace, easing pressure to complete their work at the pace of other students.

SB 975 would enable more school districts to take advantage of advances in educational technology. At least two districts, Houston and Ysleta, already are experimenting with electronic courses. Many colleges and universities offer on-line classes.

The bill also would help address the looming teacher shortages. On-line courses would provide attractive and more efficient instruction methods that would not require more teachers. On-line courses also could be specialized courses, expanding the type of classes students could take.

Electronic course programs should be allowed flexible funding. Currently, school districts are paying all costs of offering these courses. State funding for schools is based on their average daily attendance. SB 975 would require districts to propose methods on how they would verify student attendance in electronic courses, participation by a specific student, and whether the student completed all required work. These safeguards would help establish average daily attendance so that districts could be eligible to receive state funding for the electronic courses.

SB 975 would provide necessary information for the state to study the issues and potential problems of offering electronic courses, so that all districts might be able to offer these courses eventually.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

Although it shows promise, distance learning technology still is in its early stages of application. The state should not overcommit resources to this technology in the hope that it can substitute for the presence of a qualified, caring teacher.

NOTES: The committee amendment to the Senate engrossed version would add a district's population of underserved gifted and talented students to the criteria for priority selection for the program.