HOUSE   SB 396
RESEARCH   Shapleigh, et al. (Grusendorf)
ORGANIZATION bill analysis   5/26/2003   (CSSB 396 by Grusendorf)

SUBJECT:	Authorizing a technology pilot project in public schools
COMMITTEE:	Public Education — committee substitute recommended
VOTE:	7 ayes — Grusendorf, Oliveira, Branch, Dawson, Dutton, Eissler, Griggs
	0 nays
	2 absent — Hochberg, Madden
SENATE VOTE:	On final passage, April 24 — 31-0
WITNESSES:	For — Tom Burnett, Apple Computer; Diane Jackson, Spring Branch ISD; Julian Shaddix, Texas Association of Secondary School Principals; Marjorie Wall, Texas State Teachers Association; JoHannah Whitsett, Association of Texas Professional Educators
	Against — None
DIGEST:	CSSB 396 would authorize the Texas Education Agency (TEA) to establish a three-year technology immersion pilot project in which each student in a participating school would receive a laptop computer or other wireless mobile computing device, software, online courses, and other learning technologies that had been shown to improve:

- academic achievement as measured by performance on assessment instruments (exams);
- academic progress relative to students not participating in the pilot;
- cost savings and improved efficiency relating to school personnel and facility maintenance;
- dropout and attendance rates;
- enrollment in higher education;
- teacher performance and retention;
- communication among students, teachers, parents, and administrators;
- parental involvement in children's education;
- community involvement and support for the district or school; and
- proficiency in technologies that prepare students for the workforce.

If TEA established the pilot project, it would have to establish procedures and criteria for administering the program. If possible, TEA would have to select at least five schools to participate in the pilot project, at least one of which would include students in grades 6 through 12. TEA could select at least one entire school district and at least one entire school. It could not allocate more than $1 million for a participating school. TEA also would have to define conditions for distribution and use of technologies, buy and distribute the technologies, monitor implementation, and conduct a final evaluation of the pilot project at the end of three years. TEA's final evaluation could be included in its comprehensive review of public education for the 2006-07 school year.

TEA could not use state general revenue to implement the pilot project but could solicit and use gifts, grants, and donations from any source. The pilot project could not be implemented if TEA did not receive enough funds for it. Students in participating schools or districts could keep the laptops they received under the pilot for as long as they were enrolled in a participating school and after the expiration of the pilot project.

A school district could apply to TEA for the entire district, a single school, or a group of schools to be chosen for the pilot program. TEA would have to select participants based on their needs and whether those needs could be mitigated by educational technologies. TEA would have to consider an applicant's:

- access to educational resources;
- teacher shortage;
- access to advanced placement courses;
- rates of satisfactory performance on standardized exams;
- dropout rates;
- readiness to incorporate technology into its classrooms;
- possibility of obtaining technology support staff and high-speed Internet service; and
- proposed measurement methodology.

The board of trustees of each participating school district would have to appoint members to a community education pipeline progress team that would

help develop and implement the technology pilot project. The team would have to develop a plan for implementing the pilot project locally. It would have to recommend to the board how to use the funds and could make annual recommendations about necessary changes. TEA would have to approve the academic improvement plan before disbursing pilot project funds to the school board. The board also would have to report its progress to TEA by August 1 of each year in which it participated in the pilot. The report would have to detail the pilot project's effect on the performance criteria and could be used in TEA's final review of the pilot project.

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, 2003. Its provisions would expire August 31, 2007.

SUPPORTERS
SAY:

Policymakers in Texas have developed a clear vision for integrating learning and administration in public schools with computer technologies that break down barriers to education. CSSB 396 would represent the state's first steps in making that vision a reality. Other states, including Maine and Virginia, have had tremendous success in making technology an integral part of public education, and Texas should not forgo this opportunity to benefit its students and families.

For schools and districts participating in the pilot program, each student would receive a wireless laptop computer, software, and access to online courses or other learning technologies. In addition to allowing students to work on laptops in the classroom, participating schools could link teachers, parents, and administrators. In at least one jurisdiction with a similar program, doing so reduced teachers' administrative time by 40 percent.

This is a very good time to implement a technology pilot program. The tools are in place to do so, laptop computer costs have dropped significantly, online courses already have been developed in some places, and some districts have moved forward with technology on their own. The great majority of public schools across the state already have T-1 lines for high-speed Internet access through grants from the Telecommunications Infrastructure Fund (TIF).

The technology pilot project would require no state general revenue but would be financed entirely through gifts, grants, and donations. This funding method

not only would preserve taxpayers' resources but would help build important community linkages in support of education.

The bill would require that participating schools be ready to incorporate the technology available under this pilot program so that computers do not sit idle in schools that lack the basic infrastructure to make good use of them. While not all schools in the state have T-1 Internet access yet, work is proceeding on that front. However, there is no reason why this pilot program could not move forward simultaneously with achieving universal T-1 access in Texas schools. The longer lawmakers wait to make technology available to school children, the more distance those students will have to cover to catch up with their peers in technology-rich areas.

One of the primary reasons why students drop out of school is a lack of reading material in their homes. Laptop computers can be transported easily between school and home and could expand students' access to literature. Some areas that have made laptop computers available for children to take home have seen an increase in students' excitement about coming to school. Students whose families have no computer at home can teach family members how to use the computer, which also makes learning more enjoyable. Sending laptop computers home with children can change the whole culture in the home to be more conducive toward learning. Students with disciplinary problems who were suspended from school could remain connected to online coursework via a laptop computer.

Existing programs similar to the one that CSSB 396 would establish have not experienced problems with loss, theft, or misuse of laptop computers. On the contrary, participants take pride in their access to laptop computers and take good care of the investment.

OPPONENTS SAY:
Some schools in Texas have not yet been equipped with T-1 lines for Internet access with TIF funding. These schools tend to be in either rural or inner-city areas and generally are low-performing schools. CSSB 396 would widen the "digital divide" between students in these schools and their suburban counterparts by excluding them from participation in the pilot project because they could not meet the requirement of demonstrating readiness to incorporate technology into the classroom and an ability to obtain technology support staff and high-speed Internet service. These students already are lagging

behind their counterparts and would be held back further by being excluded from the pilot program.

Sending laptop computers home with children is risky, and the bill would create no accountability mechanisms to protect the technology investment. Laptops could be lost, sold, or damaged by children and their families. The school then would have the burden of either replacing the technology or having to develop non-computer-based work for the few children in this situation.

NOTES: The committee substitute modified the requirements in the Senate engrossed version for the hardware, software, online courses, and other learning technologies that the technology pilot project could provide.