# IMPROVE ACCESS TO ACCOUNTABILITY AND TECHNICAL INFORMATION FOR THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK ONLINE SCHOOLS PROGRAM

Internet courses and online learning have been a part of the U.S. educational system since the 1990s, and all 50 states and the District of Columbia adopted some form of online learning by 2011. The Texas Virtual School Network consists of two components: a statewide catalog of supplemental online courses for credit toward high school graduation and an Online Schools program offering full-time virtual instruction for eligible public school students in grades three to 12.

Although virtual schools have maintained steady enrollment, accountability information that is available to students and parents for full-time online schools lacks consistency and accessibility. The Texas Education Agency provides annual accountability reports for each district, campus, and open-enrollment charter school. For each electronic course, informed-choice reports are required to provide information regarding enrollment, technical specifications, and course requirements. However, accountability information and informed-choice reports for virtual schools are difficult for parents and students to access, and lack consistency between the Online Course Catalog and Online Schools programs. Ensuring streamlined access to informed-choice reports and accountability reports will increase accessibility and consistency of information available to parents and students that are considering enrollment in the Online Schools program.

## FACTS AND FINDINGS

♦ Enrollment in the Texas Virtual School Network's seven online schools totaled 13,766 students for school year 2016–17, an increase of 12.8 percent from school year 2015–16.

♦ During school year 2016–17, two of the state's largest virtual schools received an Improvement Required rating. These two schools collectively represent 68.0 percent of total Texas Virtual School Network enrollment.

♦ The Online Schools program website provides an informational video for students and parents, directions to access accountability reports on another website, and contact information for the available online schools.

## CONCERNS

♦ Parents and students must navigate multiple website pages to access an online school's accountability information, which may hinder parents seeking to learn more about online school performance and make decisions regarding their children's learning needs.

♦ The Texas Education Code provides general reporting requirements for informed-choice reports attached to electronic courses, but the statute makes no reference to program-specific requirements. The Texas Administrative Code outlines informed-choice reporting requirements for all virtual school courses, but it is unclear how those reporting requirements apply to full-time online schools.
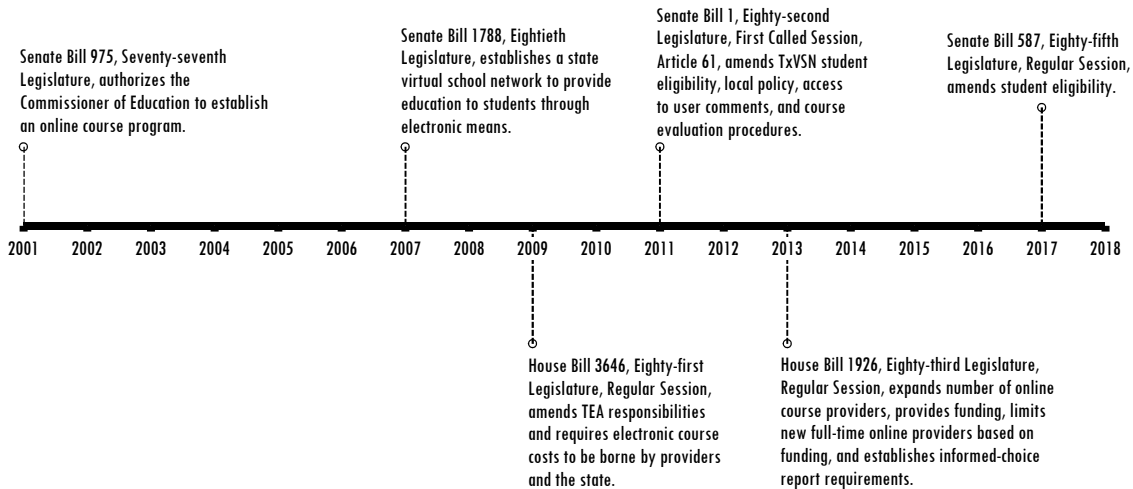
## OPTIONS

♦ **Option 1:** Amend statute to require the Texas Education Agency to ensure that accountability rating information for the Online School programs is posted directly on the Texas Virtual School Network website and on the website of each full-time online school.

♦ **Option 2:** Amend statute to require the publication of informed-choice reports for each course offered in a full-time online school on the Texas Virtual School Network website, each online school's website, and the school district's or open-enrollment charter school's website, for all grade levels eligible to enroll in a course or full-time online school.

## DISCUSSION

Online learning and distance learning are common educational tools used across the U.S. Florida, Hawaii, and Utah first established virtual schools during the late 1990s. By 2011, all 50 states and the District of Columbia offered full-time and supplemental online learning programs. Students in grades three to 12 in Texas have the option to attend online school full-time through the Online Schools (OLS) program operated by the Texas Virtual School Network (TxVSN). Students also may supplement the traditional classroom setting with online courses offered through the TxVSN's statewide Online Course Catalog system. However, users' access to accountability ratings and

**FIGURE 1**
**LEGISLATION GOVERNING THE TEXAS VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK**
**FISCAL YEARS 2001 TO 2017**



NOTE: TxVSN=Texas Virtual School Network; TEA=Texas Education Agency.
SOURCE: Legislative Budget Board.

other informative materials for the OLS program is lacking in consistency and accessibility.

### EVOLUTION OF THE VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK

By calendar year 2004, 91.0 percent of U.S. public schools had Internet access in one or more classrooms, and 22 states had established virtual schools. The Seventy-seventh Legislature, 2001, established online learning programs, and subsequent bills addressed the framework for full-time and supplemental online learning. Changes in statute have included distinguishing between individual online courses and OLS, reporting requirements relating to accountability and attendance, and fee authority and funding methodology. **Figure 1** shows significant legislation related to the development of the TxVSN.

### ORGANIZATION OF ONLINE PROGRAMS IN TEXAS

The TxVSN offers two programs, the Online Course Catalog and the OLS program. The course catalog offers supplemental courses for students enrolled at physical school campuses. Course catalog offerings include options for dual credit, advanced placement, and credit recovery. Courses are open to middle school and high school students with approval from their school district or charter school.

The Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 2, Section 70.1001, defines a "TxVSN receiver district" as any district that has students enrolled in one or more online courses

through the statewide course catalog. The OLS program offers full-time virtual learning for students in grades three to 12. Students enrolled in an OLS school receive instruction remotely through the Internet, in lieu of physical attendance at physical school campus.

**Figure 2** shows the seven OLS schools currently operating in Texas as of school year 2017–18. All online schools are operated through public school districts or charter schools and must meet the following eligibility requirements set in the Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 2, Section 70.1009:

- be currently accredited, have an acceptable academic accountability rating, and meet financial accountability standards;

- meet all reporting requirements with satisfactory performance;

- be in good standing with programs and projects administered through the Texas Education Agency (TEA); and

- have been approved to operate a TxVSN online school as of January 1, 2013.

Nonprofit entities, private entities, and corporations may not serve as course providers in OLS program. However, they may serve as course providers in the Online Course Catalog program with approval from the Commissioner of Education.

**FIGURE 2**
**TEXAS VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK ONLINE SCHOOLS, SCHOOL YEAR 2017–18**

| ONLINE SCHOOL | HOST DISTRICT OR CHARTER | GRADES |
|---|---|---|
| iUniversity Prep | Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District (ISD) | 4 to 12 |
| Texas Connections Academy | Houston ISD | 3 to 12 |
| Texas Online Preparatory Schools (1) | Huntsville ISD | 3 to 12 |
| Texas Virtual Academy at Hallsville | Hallsville ISD | 3 to 12 |
| Responsive Education Virtual Learning | Texas College Preparatory Academies (charter holder: Responsive Education Solutions) | 3 to 8 |
| Texas Virtual Academy | Premier High Schools (charter holder: Responsive Education Solutions) | 3 to 12 |

NOTE: (1) Texas Online Preparatory Schools have separate campus numbers for elementary, middle, and high schools.
SOURCE: Texas Education Agency.

The Texas Education Code, Section 30A.001(7), defines a course provider as any school district or charter school, nonprofit entity, private entity, or public or private institution of higher education that provides a course through TxVSN.

Much like traditional school campuses, each OLS school functions as a part of its respective school district or charter school. OLS student demographic information, accountability information, and other performance metrics are reflected in the overall performance report for the host district or charter school. For example, Grapevine-Colleyville Independent School District's annual performance report reflects data on students attending iUniversity Prep – including information such as standardized test results and dropout rates – regardless of where in Texas those students reside. All OLS schools are subject to the same accreditation and financial accountability standards as brick-and-mortar schools within a school district or charter school.

*STUDENT ELIGIBILITY*

A student is eligible to enroll full-time in an OLS school if the student:

- is age 20 or younger on September 1 of the school year or is age 25 or younger and entitled to the benefits of the Foundation School Program;

- has not graduated from high school;

- is otherwise eligible to enroll in a Texas public school; and

- was enrolled in a Texas public school during the previous school year, is a dependent of a member of the U.S. military who has been deployed or transferred to Texas and was enrolled in a publicly funded school outside of Texas during the previous

school year, or has been placed in substitute care within Texas regardless of enrollment during the previous school year.

**Figures 3** and **4** show changes in enrollment for each campus within the OLS program throughout its history. **Figure 3** shows online schools with enrollments of 1,000 or greater, and **Figure 4** shows smaller online schools. Enrollment has increased since the program was established. However, online schools have opened and closed during this period, and some schools have been reclassified for accountability purposes.

Recent legislation limits state funding for new online schools. House Bill 1926, Eighty-third Legislature, Regular Session, 2013, limits a district's or charter school's formula funding to no more than three year-long electronic courses, but that requirement does not affect students enrolled in full-time online schools that were operating as of January 1, 2013. A district or charter school that is not subject to this provision that opens a new, full-time, online school after January 1, 2013, is entitled to formula funding for up to three electronic courses during a school year.
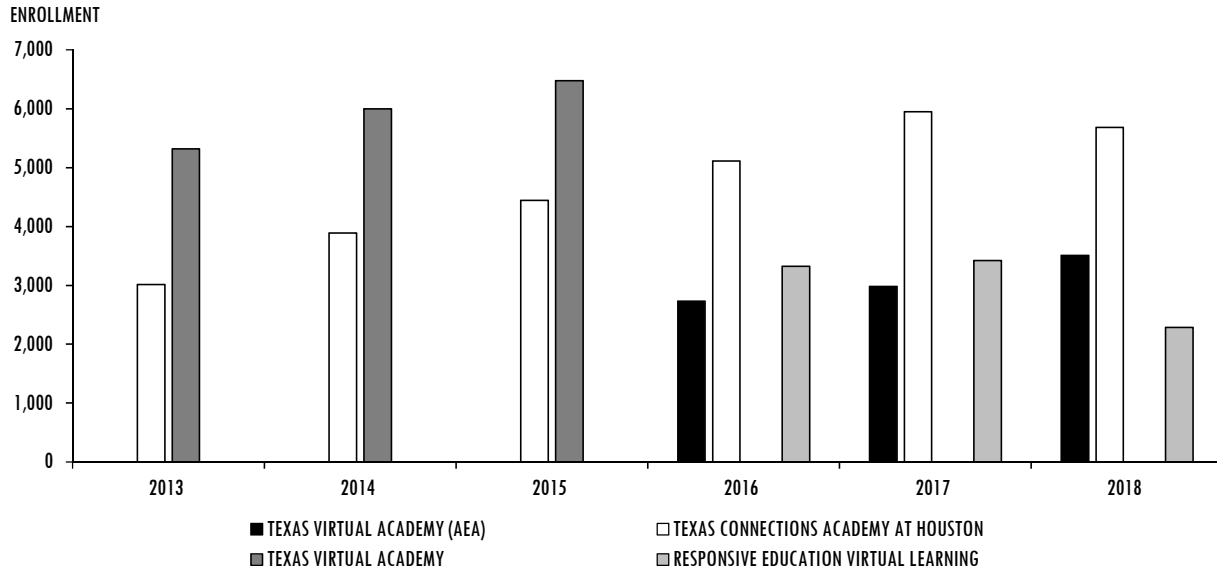
*GUIDANCE, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND INFORMED-CHOICE REPORTS*

To inform parents and students about school performance, TEA produces annual reports for all schools highlighting various metrics for performance and accountability standards. Informed-choice reports are another form of information sharing for all TxVSN courses and provide information specific to course requirements.
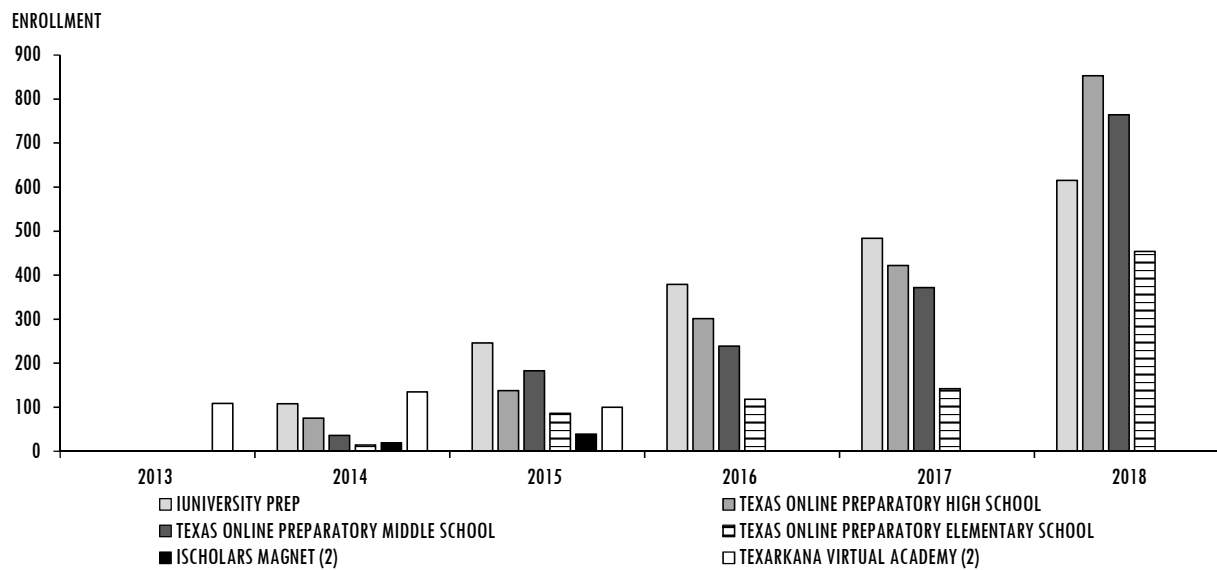
*GUIDANCE AND ACCOUNTABILITY*

The Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 2, Section 70.1035 requires that, when a school district or charter school informs students and parents about courses offered in the

**FIGURE 3**
**TEXAS VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK FULL-TIME ONLINE SCHOOLS WITH ANNUAL ENROLLMENT OF 1,000 OR GREATER**
**FISCAL YEARS 2013 TO 2018**



NOTE: Texas Virtual Academy was designated an alternative education campus for school year 2015–16 and has been rated in accordance with Alternative Education Accountability (AEA) standards.
SOURCE: Texas Education Agency.

**FIGURE 4**
**TEXAS VIRTUAL SCHOOL NETWORK FULL-TIME ONLINE SCHOOLS WITH ANNUAL ENROLLMENT LESS THAN 1,000**
**FISCAL YEARS 2013 TO 2018**



NOTES:
(1)    Schools approved to operate as of January 2013 might not have enrollment shown for school year 2012–13 (fiscal year 2013).
(2)    iScholars Magnet and Texarkana Virtual Academy closed after school year 2014–15.
SOURCE: Texas Education Agency.

traditional classroom setting, the district or charters also must provide information about online school offerings and the opportunity to enroll in electronic courses. TEA's website provides a video overview of the TxVSN OLS program and a free orientation course for online learning. Pursuant to the Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 2, Section 70.1008, each TxVSN host district must have qualified staff to serve as the TxVSN coordinator. This statute specifically affects the Online Course Catalog system, because a student enrolling in a catalog course also would attend a traditional physical school campus whose staff would assist the student in course selection. The TxVSN OLS website provides email and telephone contact information for representatives of each online school. It is the parent's or student's responsibility to contact either the virtual school provider or the host district to obtain information and guidance for enrolling in virtual schools.

According to TEA, schools are responsible for providing guidance to students enrolled in a full-time online program. Virtual schools are not authorized to provide equipment or items of value to students or parents as an inducement to enroll in a full-time online school. Virtual schools provide guidance and academic and emotional support services to students in various ways. Due to the nature of virtual schooling, some full-time online schools offer in-person events where students and parents can meet with staff and faculty. Current students may access guidance services through phone calls, email, and web conferencing or video services. Guidance and counseling services also are available to prospective students to facilitate placement and course selection and to identify general questions or concerns.

The Texas Annual Performance Report (TAPR) provides information on annual school performance. OLS student demographic information, performance metrics, and graduation information, if available, are included in the host district or charter school's performance report. TAPR contains different and more detailed information than the accountability ratings and reports.

The accountability rating system, introduced in 1993, is another measure of annual district and campus performance. Ratings are released every fall to document performance for the previous school year. Beginning in school year 2012–13, the majority of any school's or district's rating is based on student progress or overall scores on the State of Texas Assessments of Academic Readiness (STAAR) examinations. The performance of host districts and open-enrollment charter schools is affected by the performance of their OLS partner campuses and is reflected in districts' accountability

ratings. The accountability system was updated during fiscal year 2015 to include expanded measurements of post-secondary readiness. TEA is piloting a new accountability system for school year 2018–19. All full-time online schools operating within TxVSN are subject to the same accountability rating system as traditional physical school campuses. These state accountability ratings are determined using formulas described in the TEA's *2017 Accountability Manual*, which include the following four indices:

(1) student achievement across all subjects for all students;

(2) year-to-year student progress by student demographic categories;

(3) closing performance gaps by measuring academic achievement of economically disadvantaged students and the two lowest-performing racial or ethnic groups; and

(4) postsecondary readiness as measured by graduation or dropout rate, graduation diploma plan, college and career readiness, and STAAR performance at the Meets Grade Level category.

**Figure 5** shows the past five years of accountability ratings for each full-time online school.

### ACCESS TO FULL-TIME ONLINE SCHOOL ACCOUNTABILITY INFORMATION

The TxVSN website provides visitors with general information, such as contact information for schools and student eligibility information. However, OLS accountability information does not appear directly on the TxVSN website. Instead, a user is required to navigate to TEA's website to access detailed accountability measurement information. Instructions for how to access these accountability reports exist on the TxVSN website, but they are difficult to follow. The overall process for locating and viewing accountability reports and TAPRs is difficult and could hinder parents seeking to learn more about an online school's performance and making decisions regarding their child's learning needs. For example, to see how specific groups of students performed on STAAR examinations, or to see specific percent of students showing academic growth, one would have to access the TAPRs using specific campus numbers or district information through the TEA website.

Option 1 would improve transparency by amending the Texas Education Code, Chapter 30A, to require TEA to ensure that accountability rating information for the Online School programs is posted directly on the TxVSN website

**FIGURE 5**
**TEXAS ONLINE SCHOOL PROGRAM ACCOUNTABILITY RATINGS, SCHOOL YEARS 2012–13 TO 2016–17**

| SCHOOL | 2012–13 | 2013–14 | 2014–15 | 2015–16 | 2016–17 |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| Texas Connections Academy | Met Standard | Met Standard | Improvement Required | Improvement Required | Improvement Required (2) |
| Responsive Virtual Learning | Improvement Required | Improvement Required | Met Standard | Improvement Required | Improvement Required |
| Texarkana Virtual Academy | Improvement Required | Met Standard | Met Standard | (closed) | N/A |
| iUniversity Prep | (opened 2013) | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard |
| Texas Online Prep Elementary | (opened 2013) | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard |
| Texas Online Prep Middle School | (opened 2013) | Improvement Required | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard |
| Texas Online Prep High School | (opened 2013) | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard | Met Standard |
| iScholars Magnet Academy | Improvement Required | Met Standard | (closed) | N/A | N/A |
| Texas Virtual Academy | N/A | N/A | N/A | (opened 2015) | Acceptable (1) |

NOTES:
(1)   School is rated on the Alternative Education Accountability scale.
(2)   Texas independent school districts (ISD) with a campus that receives an Improvement Required rating for three consecutive years are required to submit a campus turnaround plan to the Texas Education Agency, pursuant to House Bill 1842, Eighty-fourth Legislature, 2015.
SOURCE: Texas Education Agency

and on the website of each full-time online school. Ensuring access to this information for all OLS schools would provide parents and students that are considering enrollment with more complete information about performance.

*INFORMED-CHOICE REPORTS*

Statute requires each course associated with the Online Course Catalog to include an informed-choice report. This report is intended to inform parents of the quality, rigor, and technological requirements associated with each course. The Texas Administrative Code, Title 19, Part 2, Section 70.1031, sets the following publication requirements for informed-choice reports:

- student course completion data, including withdrawal rate, completion rate, and successful completion rate;

- aggregate student performance on an assessment instrument administered pursuant to the Texas Education Code, Section 39.023, for students who completed the associated course;

- aggregate student performance on all assessment instruments administered to students who completed the course provider's courses;

- a description of the instructional program;

- the name, title, and contact information for the school district or charter school staff responsible for overseeing the daily operations of each TxVSN online school;

- all required materials provided by the receiver district or course provider outside the learning management system and all materials required to be obtained by the student;

- technical system requirements, minimum bandwidth, video player, and plug-in requirements; and

- software and browser compatibility needed to complete the course.

Informed-choice reports are different than accountability rating reports, which provide information regarding a school's ability to meet TEA's accountability standards. Informed-choice reports provide information about requirements and expectations for the course. They include the statutorily required information to help parents and students make an informed decision when enrolling in online courses or full-time online schools. TEA's administrative rules require school districts and charter schools that host TxVSN online schools to publish prominently on the online school's website a link to the informed-choice report that includes all of the components required in statute.

The Online Course Catalog section within the TxVSN website offers direct links to informed-choice reports for each course. However, the informed-choice reports provided for OLS schools lack the same information and organization. Course information for grades three to eight is not available on the TxVSN website. School survey information is available in one area of the TxVSN website, but it requires several website redirections for a user attempting to access the information. The information available for OLS schools differs from the course catalog in both type of information available and its location. For example, the TxVSN website includes direct links to parent and student survey responses but no direct link to course completion rates or student-to-teacher ratio per class. The information and data are available, but retrieval requires a significant amount of redirecting and searching on the website.

Option 2 would amend the Texas Education Code, Chapter 30A, to require the publication of informed-choice reports for each course offered in a full-time online school on the TxVSN website, each online school's website, and the school district's or open-enrollment charter school's website, for all grade levels eligible to enroll in a course or full-time online school. The Texas Education Code, Section 30A.108, requires TEA to maintain on the TxVSN website an informed-choice report for "each electronic course offered through the state virtual school network." However, the statute does not require specifically that each full-time online school must have an informed-choice report. This option would clarify the requirements for informed-choice report availability and information for the Online Course Catalog and OLS programs.

## FISCAL IMPACT OF THE OPTIONS

It is assumed that Option 1 and Option 2 would not have significant fiscal impacts and could be implemented within the administering authority's existing resources.

The introduced 2020–21 General Appropriations Bill does not include any adjustments as a result of these options.