

# Fulfilling the Promise of Distance Learning

by

Rep. Jerry Madden

To ensure that distance learning fulfills its untapped potential, I have filed the Virtual School Network Bill of 2005 to give every student access to the very best teachers and teaching tools the State of Texas has to offer. I believe that electronic teaching tools, including the Internet, will have a more decisive impact on achieving equity and excellence in education than any court-ordered response to the state's current educational challenges.

Rather than smashing geographic boundaries, most distance learning plans are, strangely, bound by geography. Distance learning is often seen as a tool best applied to students who attend small school districts in rural areas that have a hard time hiring teachers in certain subject areas or enrolling a sufficient number of students in specific classes.

But distance learning should have nothing to do with geography or district size. It should have everything to do with giving every student an opportunity, wherever they live, to learn from our best teachers. Consider a high school student in a small district in rural East Texas wishing to take physics and another high school student, attending a charter school in Houston, wanting to take a class in the same subject. In this scenario, neither student can take their desired class because neither the district nor the charter school can hire a teacher with the needed training and certification. The achievement of these students is constrained; not by their failure to learn, but by the places their families live.

New educational technology, already available in the marketplace, can be used to overcome the limits these students face. Both students could be enrolled in the same class, taught by the same highly qualified teacher, and working with the same sophisticated material in a class that is delivered over the Internet.

Shouldn't all students, no matter where they live or who their schools are able to hire and afford, be able to obtain superior instruction in challenging classes from the best teachers that our state has to offer? I am convinced that the answer to that question is a resounding yes. My legislative proposal creates a statewide virtual school network with two main functions for providing public education to students who take electronic courses or programs – allowing students who are not physically on the school's premises to be served by a public school teacher:

(1) The virtual school network provides quality control – it approves local districts' electronic courses and programs for which the district seeks to have the state count in average daily attendance (ADA), according to Texas Education Agency guidelines. These can be courses the district offers to local students or offers to other districts' students through an agreement with those districts, similar to the current pilot, which has been hugely successful in Plano ISD and Houston ISD.

(2) The virtual school network makes courses available to students statewide – if local districts want to offer their courses or programs statewide, the virtual school network offers them, with state funding and a designation of the statewide virtual district as a “responsible entity” for accountability, diplomas, special education, and other LEA functions for students who are enrolled in another district’s electronic course or program.

There are additional benefits of the program:

1. For advanced placement students, it’s a great way to enhance learning through after hours study.
2. For dropouts, it’s a means to complete courses after hours if they are working.
3. For home-schooled children, it’s a means to make available the best resources of the public education system while being able to maintain their independence

Based on the evidence, we are confident this approach will work. As the report *The Effects of Distance Education on K–12 Student Outcomes: A Meta-Analysis* states, “Evidence to date convincingly demonstrates that, when used appropriately, electronically delivered education—‘elearning’—can improve how students learn, can improve what students learn, and can deliver high-quality learning opportunities to all children.”

Other research also supports academic achievement including the report, *E-learning: Studying Canada’s Virtual Secondary Schools* which states, “Students in virtual schools showed greater improvement than their conventional school counterparts in critical thinking, researching, using computers, learning independently, problem-solving, creative thinking, decision-making, and time management.”

Changing our vision of distance learning would allow distance learning to have a meaningful impact on excellence and equity. All our students gain by having access to the very best teachers and teaching tools. That is why I urge my colleagues to support this legislation.

*Rep. Madden represents House District 67 in Plano, and he is a member of the Texas Conservative Coalition.*