The Lone Star State is a frontrunner in closing the K-12 digital divide; it prioritized the issue during the pandemic and built actionable solutions. In the Spring of 2020, Governor Abbott’s Operation Connectivity Task Force began work toward a mighty goal: ensuring every Texas student could engage in virtual learning with at-home connectivity and access to digital devices.

To tackle the digital divide and uniformly support its most disadvantaged rural, urban and low-income students, Texas focused on an important first step: the state -- as opposed to individual districts -- coordinated the process to procure digital devices and connectivity. The Governor’s office and the Operation Connectivity Task Force included and worked closely with telecom providers as it built the new statewide procurement process. In the end, the state was able to free up districts to concentrate on the demands of teaching during a pandemic by taking a traditionally a cumbersome, expensive, and time-consuming task off their plates.

By negotiating competitive pricing on behalf of districts, the statewide procurement effort resulted in a 40-50% cost savings in devices and connectivity for districts and students. Between May and December 2020, Operation Connectivity supported the acquisition of more than 4.5 million devices for students, resulting in a 1:1 ratio of device access per student. Texas leveraged $900 million in CARES Act funding to fund this initiative, combining it with federal state and local sources.

“Bridging the digital divide for the Students of Texas became Mission Critical with the onset of COVID-19, enabling us to develop successful solutions with speed and at scale like never before.”

Gaby Rowe, Principal, GROW Associates, LLC and Project Lead for Operation Connectivity

**INTRODUCTION**

In the early days of the pandemic, students in Texas faced a multitude of broadband-related challenges, including lack of adequate high-speed connectivity in many areas and inability to afford internet plans.

Nearly 37% of all Texas schools statewide are in rural areas, which are less likely to have reliable, high-quality internet service offerings. Internet service providers are not motivated to cover rural areas where there are few residents because the price of building new infrastructure is high, which makes providing affordable pricing even more difficult. And in many areas, affordable pricing is necessary. Nearly half of all students who live in the state’s rural communities are also likely to qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Lunch (FRPL).

Students living in densely populated urban areas face a similar but slightly different challenge: service is available, but many families cannot afford it. For example, cities like Laredo and Brownsville, TX have regularly ranked in the top two of a list of the nation’s worst-connected cities.

In the past, districts individually procured their own services and devices in Texas, resulting in an uneven mix of students who were connected to the Internet and had access to digital devices. As the pandemic took hold in Texas, it shone a spotlight on these inequities.
Through the Operation Connectivity Task Force, the state wanted to take an efficient and fiscally conservative approach to procurement and create a replicable process that it could use over the long term. The Task Force first convened a number of reliable service providers that were willing to cover rural and urban areas. After gleaning insights from reputable service providers and public-private partners, the state identified telecom services and devices that districts could choose. The state then offered this menu of service offerings to LEAs to provide for their students.

In this process, the state prioritized funding and support for the most economically disadvantaged LEAs, ensuring that no LEA was left out because of financial or administrative capacity. The state’s procurement model has resulted in a 40-50% cost-savings on devices and connectivity and has ensured that every student in the state has access to at least one device.

Texas provides an example for other states to consider when devising an equitable solution to ensure 1:1 devices, connectivity solutions, and digital skills training for students. By emulating Texas, states and their respective student populations may benefit in a number of ways - finding more cost-effective internet solutions and devices for students and their households, supporting communities that do not have capacity or infrastructure, and leveraging numerous federal, state and local funding streams effectively to support students for the long haul.

Lessons Learned From Texas

Texas’s procurement process comprised two critical phases. States can consider Texas’s process when implementing a statewide procurement process and adapt these phases to their individual needs and student populations.

Phases of Implementation

Phase 1: Adopt and support a pre-approval process to streamline the purchase of broadband and telecom service offerings for school districts. This would follow a formal request for information (RFI) or other process in place to identify or aggregate a list of internet service and digital device providers and services for the school districts.

Optional: Depending on the size of the state, organize districts by region or subgroup, allowing for purchasing agreements to be made by a larger entity on behalf of all LEAs falling into that group.
Phase 2: Create a co-op or separate entity that allows the state to collect data from the LEAs on the gaps in student connectivity and devices. Build a master service agreement to support purchases.

**Why Should States Emulate Texas?**

A state’s role in the preapproval process can optimize and simplify negotiations with telecom providers to facilitate the decision-making and device purchasing process for school districts. By doing so, each individual district does not have to make time-consuming and sometimes challenging decisions regarding choosing from a multitude of different broadband service offerings.

A statewide procurement process can have many advantages:

- **Gain efficiencies for LEAs:** State procurement can relieve school districts of the burden of having to sort through a multitude of existing services and alleviate any confusion surrounding the most affordable, high-quality and optimal services and technology/device options for their students.

- **Alleviate challenges with market supply and demand, while negotiating volume discounts:** By playing a central role, the state creates checks and balances by understanding considerations regarding the affordable and accessible broadband policies, programs and offerings that can support communities. The state can work to track the rates offered by internet service providers for services and devices across each school’s service area, and identify gaps and price anomalies in underserved areas, where there is reduced volume. Without the state’s presence, schools in rural areas may be charged many times higher prices for services, because of the reduced supply and lack of providers in the service area, coupled with a high demand.

- **Help households get connected:** The state can play a critical role working with LEAs and community-based organizations in spreading awareness about new and existing telecom service offerings, a message which can be directly relayed to households from the LEAs. Ensuring effective communication will weaken existing participation and adoption barriers faced by low-income communities and communities speaking English as a Second Language, who do not fully trust that the discounts will benefit them or their children. The role of the state provides direction to the LEAs and can work in alignment with telecom providers to reach as many individual households as possible and ensure they are opting into the internet and/or device plan that most optimally meets their needs.

- **Build consistent, high-quality data that is replicable and future-proof:** The statewide procurement and master service agreement codifies a data collection process that allows states to assess their LEAs needs and regularly update these needs, as necessary, when the useful life of the device comes to an end.

- **Leverage all digital device and connectivity funding sources:** In particular, for rural and urban communities, involving the state or its designated entity to participate in this process ensures states are being thoughtful about how to effectively leverage and maximize the use of federal and state funds (e.g. FCC e-rate funding and flexibility) to support improved broadband infrastructure, through 5G, satellite, or fixed wired broadband architecture, for schools and their respective students, educators and families.

**A Look Forward**

In addition to the work happening as part of the Operation Connectivity Task Force, Texas is in the process of exploring numerous policies and initiatives that would further advance digital equity and close the digital divide. For example, one policy under consideration would establish a state Broadband Development Office and a Broadband Development
Program. These are important measures that are necessary to build a state plan to close the digital divide over the long term. By crafting a broadband and digital equity plan, the state can prioritize areas without access to internet, inclusive of student communities that face the double-edged sword of access and affordability challenges with virtual learning.

**Texas News and Resources on Bulk Procurement & Purchasing**

- Expanding internet access, closing ‘digital divide’ on the table for lawmakers this session
- Texas’ Digital Divide. The State of Broadband in Texas’ Rural Communities
- Texas Bulk Order Process Webinar
- Texas Education Agency. Operation Connectivity Bulk Order FAQs