



Focus: Bridging the Digital Divide

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Texas High School Attrition Rate Worsens For the First Time in Seven Years – Highlights of IDRA’s 37th Annual Attrition Study

by Charles A. Cavazos

IDRA’s latest annual attrition study found that 20% of the freshman class of 2018-19 in Texas public schools left school prior to graduating in 2021-22. This is an increase over last year’s 19% finding. Texas has not experienced an increase since 2015-16.

Double-digit disparities among racial and ethnic student groups remain. This year’s study is the 37th in a series of annual reports on trends in dropout and attrition rates in Texas public schools.

IDRA conducted the first-ever comprehensive study of school dropouts in Texas for the 1985-86 school year. Since statewide data on school dropouts did not exist then, IDRA developed an attrition methodology that has since become a standard method used by education researchers.

IDRA continues to conduct attrition analyses each year to assess Texas schools’ abilities to hold on to their students until they graduate. Attrition rates are an indicator of a school’s holding power, or ability to keep students enrolled in school and learning until they graduate. In simplest terms, attrition is defined as the decrease in size or number. Therefore, an attrition rate is the percent change in grade level enrollment between a base year and an end year.

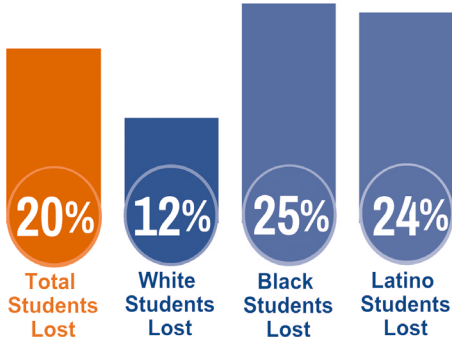
Since the shift to remote learning during the pandemic, schools continue to struggle to reconnect with hundreds of thousands of students. An IDRA study found that the problem is bigger than any single school strategy. IDRA’s report, *Plugged in, Tuned Out – A First Examination of Student Engagement Patterns in Texas Public Schools During COVID-19*, found that, in many parts of Texas, student disengagement during the pandemic was a direct result of limited broadband access (Quintanilla-Muñoz, 2021). Schools lost touch with Black students and Latino students at over twice the rate of white students.

The 2021-22 statewide attrition rate of 20% is 13 percentage points lower than the initial rate of 33% found in IDRA’s landmark 1985-86 study and 1 percentage point higher than last year. The overall high school attrition rate in Texas has ranged from 19% to 25% over the past nine years.

Across racial and ethnic groups, attrition rates are lower than they were almost four decades ago when IDRA conducted the first attrition study. In this year’s study, the attrition rate of each racial-ethnic group increased by 1 or 2 percentage points, except for Asian American students, whose rates remain unchanged. Key findings of the latest study follow.

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Texas High Schools Are Losing One in Five Students



(Texas High School Attrition Rate Worsens for the First Time in Seven Years, continued from Page 1)

- Texas public schools fail to graduate one out of every five students.
- Nearly 89,000 students from the 2018-19 freshman class were lost from public high school enrollment in 2021-22.
- For the class of 2022, Latino students and Black students were two times more likely to leave school without graduating than white students.
- In four decades, the overall attrition rate declined from 33% in 1985-86 to 20% in 2021-22, which is a 39% improvement.
- The attrition rate gap between white students and Latino students decreased by 33% from 18 percentage points in 1985-86 to 12 percentage points in 2021-22.
- The attrition rate gap between white students and Black students increased by 86% from 7 percentage points in 1985-86 to 13 percentage points in 2021-22.

IDRA conducts a forecast analysis of the expected year that the attrition rate will equal zero. Last year's analysis predicted that, barring significant improvements in policy and practice, Texas will continue to have attrition rates ranging from 19% to 25% and will not reach an attrition rate of zero until the year 2038-39.

School closures and disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic may have serious implications for student learning, student engagement and school dropout rates. The Office for Civil Rights observed a negative impact by the pandemic on academic growth and deepened disparities in access and opportunity for students of color in public schools (2021).

Pottiger studied comprehensive graduation rates and, since 2007, there was a rapid, steady increase in graduation rates across the country

Change in Texas High School Attrition Rates by Race-Ethnicity

Group	First Study	Pre-COVID-19		Full-Year COVID-19			
	1985-86 Rate	2018-19 Rate	2019-20 Rate	2020-21 Rate	2021-22 Rate	Change Since 3 Decades Ago	Change Since Last Year
All Students	33	21	20	19	20	↓	↑
Native American	45	20	22	19	20	↓	↑
Asian/Pacific Islander*	33	12	11	7	7	↓	↔
Black	34	24	23	23	25	↓	↑
White	27	12	12	10	12	↓	↑
Latino	45	25	25	23	24	↓	↑

*Asian/Pacific Islander includes Native Hawaiian and Other Pacific Islander
Data source: Texas Education Agency, Standard Reports, Enrollment Reports

2022, IDRA

until 2019 – from around 73% to 86%, driven by Black and Latino students and students in families with low incomes. Black student graduation increased around 2% from 2019-20 but dropped in 2020-21 by 2.5%. The sharp fall in graduation rates only a year later speaks to schools being unable to fully support Black students (2022).

Similarly, preliminary data from 25 states that covered around 57% of the student population showed that graduation rates for Latino students declined slightly in 2020-21 (Unidos US, 2022).

Some education experts believe that remote learning during COVID-19 placed students at higher risk of dropping out of school. Factors include the loss of connection with peers and school support, reduction in educational services and extracurricular activities, and loss of other activities and events that help to engage students (De La Rosa, 2020).

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Keeping Young Digital Citizens Safe

by Michelle Martínez Vega

\$15,000 stolen from a teacher, or some may say just given away?

In April of this year, Angie Olson, a 40-year veteran educator fell victim to a pop-up computer scam that resulted in her losing over \$15,000 of her hard-earned money (Hurley, 2022). She thought she was doing the right thing.

In a digital landscape where even teachers are finding it challenging to discern fact from fiction, how do we ensure students have the skills to keep themselves safe? Do we assume that because they are digital natives (people raised in the presence of digital technology) that they will be able to easily sift through the constant bombardment of digital media being thrown at them?

In matters of education and safety, it is best not to take chances.

Considering the average person receives over 100 e-mails daily, it is alarming that typically one out of every 99 emails is an attempted scam (Radicati Group, 2018). The average person in this country consumes over 7.5 hours of media per day (SRD, 2021). And as new terms like “fake news” and “alternative facts” are being baked into the public lexicon, the necessity to enable our students to be digitally literate has become paramount.

At the rate that we are consuming and digesting media, teaching digital literacy and how to be media savvy is now tantamount to teaching nutrition and exercise.

Students, in particular, need strategies to help them distinguish between credible news stories and opinion pieces. They need the skills to determine which email in their inbox is a potential scam and which is a legitimate request for information.

Strategies and Skills for Teaching Students to Help them Become Good Digital Citizens

First, we need to recognize that students – even digital natives – need to learn the soft and hard skills of good digital citizenship. They are being raised in the ever-evolving tech landscape drenched in media, and it is our responsibility to provide tools and teach strategies to succeed in that environment.

Next, digital citizenship must be embedded in everyday learning. When a research project is assigned, students need to understand that completing their assignment also means employing good research methodologies and acquiring knowledge from credible sources.

We need to teach students about such things as “creative commons” and “copyright licenses.” When students are unaware of how to navigate these concepts, they do not know how to avoid pitfalls or, better yet, how to leverage them to their advantage.

In 2019 one such major pitfall befell Houston ISD when it was hit with a \$9 million verdict over its reproduction of copyright-protected education materials (Cox, 2019). After some negotiation, the district had to pay \$7.8 million (Bailey, 2019).

One strategy is to partner with your campus librarian(s). They can teach students how to be media savvy in both searching online, cross-referencing with print media, and verifying cited sources.

Resources for Teaching Digital Citizenship

Here are some free resources that you can use in your classroom.

- **Learning for Justice, Digital Literacy**
<https://www.learningforjustice.org/frame->

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Never before have we had so much amazing knowledge glowing in the palm of our hands. We must help students become productive, media-savvy digital citizens so that they are safe and can take full advantage of all the world has to offer.

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works/digital-literacy

- **Media Smarts Digital Literacy** <https://mediasmarts.ca>
- **ISTE Digital Literacy** <https://www.iste.org/explore/category/digital-and-media-literacy>
- **Media Wise Digital Literacy for All** <https://www.poynter.org/mediawise/>
- **Common Sense Media – Curriculum** <https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship/curriculum>
- **Common Sense Media – Digital Citizenship** <https://www.commonsense.org/education/digital-citizenship>
- **Digital Skills Library** <https://digitalskillslibrary.org>

Today, students and teachers alike live in a technology-driven world. It is critical that we help students learn to engage online in ways that are safe and responsible and with an understanding of the complexities of the Internet and social media.

Never before have we had so much amazing knowledge glowing in the palm of our hands, we must practice digital citizenship daily and help students become productive media-savvy digital citizens so that they may take full advantage of all the world has to offer.

Resources

- Bailey, J. (October 29, 2019). How a School District Wasted \$7.8 Million. *Plagiarism Today*.
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Digital Divide Stories in South Texas Colonias



The team at ARISE Adelante Muñiz. (FRONT ROW L-R) Andrea Landeros, Lourdes Flores, Delia Nepomuceno, Michelle Vega, Ludivina Escalante, Aurelio Montemayor, Knowledge Build Hudson, Thomas Marshall III; (BACK ROW L-R) Carmen Garza, Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz.

For Digital Inclusion Week 2022, IDRA and our long-standing partner, ARISE Adelante, led a site visit with a representative from the U.S. Department of Commerce's National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) to hear from families in south Texas colonias. Colonias are unincorporated communities with scarce public services. ARISE Adelante is a community-based organization that supports family leadership and promotes community empowerment through education. We heard compelling stories of digital inequity faced by students and families.

“We would have three in the home, three kids in one area would work. In worst cases, they would just have one computer.”

– Lourdes Flores, ARISE President

“Sometimes, my cousins would come too and connect to the Wi-Fi too. We were all just scattered around the house, connecting. And then at one point, we had to call the company to get faster Wi-Fi.”

– Gabriela, former student

“The community needs digital skills to help our students succeed with online learning.”

– Eva Carranza, ARISE staff member

IDRA and ARISE Adelante also commemorated this year's Digital Inclusion Week theme “Turning Our Moment into Movement” by co-facilitating a panel discussion on the **Realities of the Digital Divide within the Colonias of Texas**. During this hybrid in-person/webinar event, attendees heard from expert panelists about Internet issues community members faced during the COVID-19 pandemic and the daily challenges they continue to experience related to access, connectivity and affordability.



As states develop their digital equity plans in response to the federal *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* (IIJA), community voices are vital in producing plans that are informed and sustainable. IDRA partnered with ARISE Adelante to center the lived experiences of impacted Texans. The event highlighted the necessity of grassroots digital inclusion partnerships in solving challenges to achieve digital equity. Video of the session is available for viewing at <https://idra.news/DigDivWbr>. IDRA will release a full report on the findings from the tour with ARISE Adelante soon.

The Parallel Roads to Digital and Racial Justice

by Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed.

Like other injustices, the digital divide is perpetuated through the intricate intersections of racism and poverty, particularly endemic in urban centers. The COVID-19 pandemic spotlighted with unabated honesty the systemic inequities impacting our most vulnerable communities, including families with low incomes, older adults, individuals with disabilities and students.

Access to digital technologies and the Internet was among the most pervasive equity issues as the trend toward online school, work, health appointments and other business heightened at the peak of the pandemic.

The pandemic roused coordinated efforts from public and private sectors through large investments, such as development of local and state digital equity plans and digital inclusion programs to increase patrons' immediate access to devices and Internet. But it demanded swift responses that were often temporary or short-term.

Passage of the federal *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* (IIJA) in November 2021 marked a momentous victory for digital inclusion champions as the "largest single investment in broadband and digital equity in the nation's history" (Huffman, 2021).

This bipartisan law signaled a pivot to sustaining long-term solutions for bridging the digital divide. The law appropriates over \$65 billion to state and local governments, community organizations and other entities for expanding access to reliable high-speed Internet and affordable Internet services, and other digital inclusion activities and programs.

Community Expertise Inspires Innovative and Sustainable Change

Grassroots digital inclusion advocates recognize the road to digital equity demands aggressive

action led by impacted individuals – lived experts – in restructuring harmful institutions rooted in capitalism and racism. Such institutions consistently miss the mark in providing equitable solutions to bridge the divide and are often what created the issues in the first place.

Hence, sustainable efforts to close the divide can only be achieved when community members help design impactful solutions that address root problems, like digital discrimination, digital redlining and neighborhood disinvestment.

Many digital inclusion coalitions know well that the digital divide is "more nuanced than connectivity and adoption alone" (Hearn & Gates, 2020). The divide encapsulates the chilling legacy of discriminatory housing policies and neighborhood disinvestment practices, further marginalizing vulnerable populations and disproportionately impacting communities of color and low income households.

Thus, investments in programs to increase broadband adoption that would otherwise be funneled to corporations or institutions that have not previously served such communities
(cont. on Page 6)

Approaching digital equity through a racial justice lens is necessary for closing the gaping disparity in digital access among racially marginalized communities.

IDRA Classnotes Podcast #228

Even Digital Natives Need to Learn Digital Literacy

Featuring
Munirih Santiago Jester

Programs Manager
National Digital Inclusion Alliance

with
Christina Quintanilla-Muñoz, M.Ed.
IDRA Research Analyst



<https://idra.news/Pod228>

Hidden Files
IDRA
Transforming Education

(The Parallel Roads to Digital and Racial Justice, continued from Page 5)

with integrity would create a stronger impact if invested in grassroots initiatives that directly serve their community.

With the new federal law, states and territories will receive *Digital Equity Act* grant awards to support state digital equity planning with required input from various community members, including county and municipal governments, school districts, and nonprofit and community-based organizations (Schill, 2022; King et al., 2022). Collaboration across these entities is vital to producing digital equity plans that are inclusive, informed and impactful.

Digital Justice is Racial Justice

Community stewardship over digital inclusion can help ensure the roads to digital and racial justice run parallel. The digital divide at its core is a racial equity issue.

In the United States, Black and Latino adults are less likely than their white counterparts to own a desktop or laptop computer (69% and 67%, respectively compared to 80%) and to have a home broadband subscription (71% and 65% compared to 80%) (Atske & Perrin, 2021).

Moreover, Black and Latino Americans are more likely to experience insecurity about their ability to afford home Internet services (McClain et al, 2021).

When we reconceptualize digital equity work as a function of advancing racial equity, we challenge how a locally embedded ecosystem of partners allocates resources for “boosting digital inclusion, unifies parallel efforts” and focuses on the most vulnerable community members (Benton, 2022).

Applying a racial justice lens to digital inclusion emboldens an ecosystem to collectively rectify past acts of oppression and center re-

construction of oppressive structures in critical transformation (Williams, 2022).

This approach maintains that communities are not simply invited to the conversation space held by decision-makers but are actively creating avenues for increased understanding of oppressive mechanisms and deploying community solutions that benefit all residents despite their race, education level, socioeconomic status, age and ability.

The Benton Institute for Broadband and Society summarizes well: “Community members are valuable experts with the potential to become true change makers as they are closer to the issues and solutions than anyone else. Education is the most impactful tool in empowering historically disenfranchised communities to confront systemic inequities and develop innovative solutions for these challenges” (2022).

Digital Inclusion Must Be Liberatory

We must ensure a racial justice lens is applied to initiatives championed to close the digital divide. This means ensuring the path toward digital justice is liberatory in nature. Digital justice seeks to bridge the divide for all individuals regardless of their identity through three main strategies:

- Democratizing the knowledge of digital inclusion within our community by increasing access to educative materials and tools,
- Leveraging community assets to advance innovative solutions, and
- Activating the community through digital inclusion initiatives designed to promote greater autonomy within the shared digital ecosystem.

Robust education resources are an important (cont. on Page 7)

National Telecommunications and Information Administration Resources for Communities

The National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) will administer \$48 billion of the investment allocated to digital equity and broadband through four programs and as part the “Internet for All” initiative.

- The **Broadband Equity Access and Deployment (BEAD) Program** provides \$42.45 billion for expanding access to high-speed infrastructure in high need areas through the support of funding planning, infrastructure deployment and adoption programs.
- The **Digital Equity Act Programs** provide \$2.75 billion to establish three main grant programs aimed at promoting digital equity and inclusion through skills, technology and capacity building and supporting the development and implementation of state, territorial and tribal digital equity plans.
- The **Enabling Middle Mile (MM) Broadband Infrastructure Program** provides \$1 billion in funding for reducing the costs associated with servicing unserved and under served communities with high-speed Internet through local networks.
- The **Tribal Broadband Connectivity Program** provides \$1 billion to tribal governments for adopting high-speed Internet across tribal lands. (The application window for this program closed in September 2021.)

The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) has published numerous articles and hosted various webinars that examine the latest detail and updates concerning the *Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act* and its digital inclusion grant programs.

Digital Inclusion Community Power Tools

The Digital Inclusion Resource Library by the Institute of Museum and Library Services & NDIA <https://www.digitalinclusion.org/digital-inclusion-resource-library>

IDRA Online Technical Assistance Package on Digital Equity
<https://idra.news/DigitalEquityTA>

Digital Skills Library managed by EdTech Center @ World Education
<https://digitalskillslibrary.org>

State Digital Equity Scorecard by NDIA and the National Skills Coalition
<https://state-scorecard.digitalinclusion.org>

(Texas High School Attrition Rate Worsens for the First Time in Seven Years, continued from Page 2)

IDRA developed a resource, *Ready-Renew-Reconnect! Proven Strategies for Re-engaging Students Who Need You the Most*, that outlines key factors that keep students coming back and how schools can help them feel a sense of success day after day (Bojorquez, 2021). It shows strategies that have been proven successful, such as in the IDRA Valued Youth Partnership program. IDRA's attrition full study for 2021-22 will be published soon.

Resources

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gateway for inviting non-expert community members into their digital equity ecosystem. Strong community power tools can increase the knowledge of digital inclusion within a community and can build capacity across an ecosystem through shared storytelling, materials and best practices.

For example, just as federal entities, including the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration (NTIA) work to bridge the divide by promoting federal data that inform where under served populations are (King, 2022), community entities – like community-based and non-profit organizations and digital inclusion coalitions – can assess, evaluate, use and share local data to better identify specific community needs. Having a local data repository can encourage knowledge-building, alignment and coordination across the ecosystem.

A community-produced asset map is another example of an equity-based, community power tool that accentuates the strengths within an ecosystem. Asset maps have a two-fold pur-

Change in Texas High School Enrollment Rates by Grade							
Grade Level	Pre-COVID-19	Full-Year COVID-19		Number & Percent Change Pre-COVID-19 to One and Two Years Later			
	October 2019 Enrollment	October 2020 Enrollment	October 2021 Enrollment	Number Change 2020 to 2019	Percent Change 2020 to 2019	Number Change 2021 to 2019	Percent Change 2021 to 2019
Early Ed	25,883	20,991	21,375	-4,892	-19%	-4,508	-17%
Pre-K	249,226	197,093	223,733	-52,133	-21%	-25,493	-10%
Kinder	384,114	361,349	371,502	-22,765	-6%	-12,612	-3%
1 st Grade	391,449	381,403	386,232	-10,046	-3%	-5,217	-1%
2 nd Grade	388,675	380,122	383,838	-8,553	-2%	-4,837	-1%
3 rd Grade	391,795	381,135	384,872	-10,660	-3%	-6,923	-2%
4 th Grade	400,111	385,364	386,011	-14,747	-4%	-14,100	-4%
5 th Grade	417,444	395,649	389,971	-21,795	-5%	-27,473	-7%
6 th Grade	422,740	414,357	400,447	-8,383	-2%	-22,293	-5%
7 th Grade	423,545	421,347	418,788	-2,198	-1%	-4,757	-1%
8 th Grade	411,272	422,505	424,544	11,233	3%	13,272	3%
9 th Grade	449,122	436,523	475,746	-12,599	-3%	26,624	6%
10 th Grade	407,044	420,705	408,700	13,661	3%	1,656	0%
11 th Grade	377,208	388,443	389,454	11,235	3%	12,246	3%
12 th Grade	354,312	364,600	362,157	10,288	3%	7,845	2%
Total	5,493,940	5,371,586	5,427,370	-122,354	-2%	-66,570	-1%

Data source: Texas Education Agency, Standard Reports, Enrollment Reports 2022, IDRA

pose: to identify service gaps within a community; and to aid community members with locating digital inclusion programs and services related to access to affordable devices or Internet services, and digital skills training or technical support.

Approaching digital equity through a racial justice lens is necessary for closing the gaping disparity in digital access among racially marginalized communities. In order to target communities in the leading role of local, regional and national equity work, we must catalyze liberatory systemic transformation necessary for achieving digital justice for all individuals.

Resources

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Focus: Bridging the Digital Divide

Digital Equity Online Technical Assistance

Available free!

Solutions for bridging the digital divide are more nuanced than simply providing students with devices and troubleshooting connectivity issues. Students, their families and their teachers must also feel confident in navigating the digital landscape safely. To fully support students' digital learning, schools must make informed decisions about what resources can meet their communities' needs – from connectivity and devices to digital skills support.

IDRA's **Digital Equity – Online Technical Assistance Package** is designed to introduce community stakeholders to the conversation around digital equity and invite school leaders to consider how schools can make informed decisions about increasing students' access to broadband Internet, computer technologies, and the digital skills training necessary for supporting their educational success.

This multimedia package is comprised of four chapters that showcase videos, webinars, articles, podcasts and other engaging resources that aim to increase awareness of the digital divide, connect understanding of key concepts with research and data, and elevate the vital digital inclusion work led by advocates and lived experts in striving for digital equity within their communities.



<https://idra.news/DigitalEquityTA>

*achieving equal educational opportunity for every child
through strong public schools that prepare all students to access and succeed in college*