

SUBJECT: Free home computers for elementary and secondary school students

COMMITTEE: Public Education — favorable, without amendment

VOTE: 8 ayes — Sadler, Dutton, Dunnam, Hardcastle, Hochberg, Oliveira, Olivo, Smith
0 nays
1 absent — Grusendorf

SENATE VOTE: On final passage, May 9 — 29-0

WITNESSES: No public hearing

BACKGROUND: Education Code, chapter 32 sets forth the state’s policy on computers in education, including the need for computer literacy and the use of technology in the classroom.

DIGEST: SB 927 would authorize school districts and open-enrollment charter schools to transfer data processing equipment to enrolled students. Only students without home access to data processing equipment, as determined by the districts or schools, would be eligible. Educationally disadvantaged students would have priority.

Districts and schools could transfer equipment donated by private donors, state agencies, or state charitable institutions; purchased by the districts or schools for transfer to students; or surplus or salvage equipment. Districts and schools could accept gifts, grants, or monetary donations to buy, refurbish or repair equipment for transfer. They also could spend public funds to buy, refurbish, repair, store, transport, or transfer equipment.

Before transferring any data processing equipment, districts and schools would have to adopt transfer rules and provide technical assistance to recipient students; determine that transfers would serve a public purpose and would benefit the districts or schools; and remove from the equipment any information they deemed offensive, confidential, or proprietary.

A student would have to return equipment five years after receiving it, upon graduating or transferring to another district or school, or upon withdrawing from school, whichever occurred first. A student would not have to return equipment with no marketable value.

The bill would authorize districts and schools, for purposes of the transfer program, to receive some of the state agency surplus or salvage equipment that now goes to the Texas Department of Criminal Justice (TDCJ). Along with TDCJ, districts and schools would be eligible to receive surplus and salvage equipment from state charitable and higher education institutions and agencies not otherwise disposed of.

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, 2001.

**SUPPORTERS
SAY:**

SB 927 would help bridge the “digital divide” that separates students from low-income families who cannot afford computers from more affluent students whose families can provide them computer access.

Computers help children learn and have become essential for successful participation in today’s global economy. Providing computers at home would help at-risk students progress and graduate, lowering drop-out rates and encouraging independent study. At-home computers also would benefit disabled or chronically ill students who have difficulty getting to school or other students who do not function well in a school environment. Having computers at home especially would benefit students with personal initiative or who could be part of a distance learning program.

This bill would respect local control by leaving most decisions up to the school districts or charter schools. It would not create a cost to the state.

**OPPONENTS
SAY:**

SB 927 means well, but is mostly unnecessary and even could be counter-productive. Students need computers at school, not at home where their use often is not supervised. The likelihood of at-risk students using home computers for educational purposes, rather than for playing games or “surfing the Net,” is slim unless these children are being mentored.

The bill's guidelines for determining eligibility for and receipt of computers are too vague, allowing for arbitrariness and for allocation based on inappropriate factors or false information.

The notion that computers enhance learning is popular but unproven. Some schools have upgraded to the most modern digital classrooms with no parallel rise in scholastic achievement. Computers may make students more efficient, but the assumption that they make students smarter is dubious.

The bill would create the potential for districts or schools to be held liable for objectionable content on computers they placed in children's homes, or for making content decisions in any way contrary to parents' beliefs.