

They say everything's bigger in Texas and the spate of massive changes to education policy is no exception. There's federal policy, like the Every Student Succeeds Act, trickling down to the state level along with new regulations on accountability, testing, and special education. Funding models are shifting, too, as schools continue to work through a modernized E-Rate application process. Teachers and administrators need ever-increasing amounts of training on both policy and technology, and school broadband needs certainly aren't getting any lighter.

What schools will look like after all these upheavals is anyone's guess. It's an open question, but one that today's leading educators are actively working to answer. And, of course, along with the pain points there are some bright spots and big opportunities, too.

Recently, a group of education and technology experts gathered in Dallas to discuss these and other issues in front of a roomful of administrators and school IT leaders from across Texas.

Titled "Preparing the Next Generation of Personalized Learners in the Digital Age," the event was hosted by PCMG, a leading vendor of technology and IT products for schools, and featured policymakers like Tom Murray, who helps coordinate Future Ready Schools initiatives at the federal level, and Johnny Veselka, the executive director of TASA, the Texas Association of School Administrators. Attendees also heard from working administrators with valuable insights into how today's education paradigm is evolving to produce new opportunities for students and schools alike.

## ESSA and Funding

Naturally, the impending implementation of ESSA is a chief concern for many schools. At its core, the new bill returns decision-making power back to states in a number of areas, including standards, testing, accountability, and teacher evaluations.

While ESSA is not a funding bill itself, in terms of technology, there will be associated federal funds that districts will be able to take advantage of, said Murray, who helped write the bill in a non-partisan way (funding details are currently being ironed out). And while state and local education agencies can expect to regain more control in general, that also puts more pressure on educators on every level to show that there are plans in place to spend the money responsibly.

"The state is going to be the one to determine how to use that money," Murray said. "But there's categories for how it can be used, and one category is the innovative use of technology." On the district level, administrators should be prepared to show how they intend to use their slice of the pie appropriately, through taking self-assessments (such as the free, research-based one at [Dashboard.futurereadyschools.org](https://Dashboard.futurereadyschools.org)) and mapping out a vision for how teaching and learning are transforming with the help of technology. As states begin to make decisions on a more granular level, Murray suggested it's not too early for districts to advocate for their own interests with legislators, the state education agency, and other policy leaders. "Be advocates for your districts, get involved, speak with the state department, and take ownership," he advised. "It's better to get involved earlier than later."

The expansion of the Federal Communication Commission's E-Rate program offers districts yet another opportunity for funding as the spending cap has shot up thanks to a recent overhaul. Even though this is only the second year of the program's expansion, the modernization efforts are already impacting Texas districts. Stuart Burt, the chief technology officer for the Royse City Independent School District spoke of his elation at finally being able to ramp up broadband in his small, somewhat rural district thanks to new Category Two funding, which previously wasn't available.

"It was a learning curve," he admits of the change, which heavily disrupted the typical application process he was used to. "But I think we are starting now to take pretty good advantage of it. As a small district, it was great to get extra bandwidth and equipment." The downside? His phone bills are rising as funding for telecommunication starts to taper off.

"It's a different way of thinking for districts," Murray admitted of the overhaul. "It's really a question of whether E-Rate is supposed to maintain what we have now, or is the goal to get things we need?"

## Spotlight on Texas

It's not just federal policy that has Lone Star educators worried, though, as a number of issues close to home are posing challenges of their own. Changes to the state's accountability system—for both students and schools—are either on the horizon or already here thanks to new state legislation. High schools are now giving fewer end-of-course exams (five, down from a national high of 15), and schools and districts are gearing up for a new accountability system that will eventually grade schools and districts by letter grade, A through F—a change that some speakers found less than ideal.

"We're fortunate that the implementation of that system was delayed," said TASA's Johnny Veselka, whose organization is working with legislators and state education leaders to push for an accountability system that is more comprehensive and responsive. Legislative advocacy is one of TASA's main objectives, and the organization is also attempting to lead the state toward more portfolio-based student assessment and improved standards to further reduce the reliance on testing. To do that effectively, TASA is gathering together leading administrators and innovative districts to draft recommendations to policymakers and talk through big issues, such as digital learning outcomes and training the next generation of school leaders.

Another hotly-discussed item on the agenda concerned special education and Bill 507, passed in 2015 by the Texas Legislature, which requires that districts provide self-contained special education classrooms with cameras for video recording upon parental request. The bill itself was designed to provide an extra layer of accountability, but districts today are increasingly concerned about meeting their new obligations. Of particular concern is the fact that schools must respond with a plan of action within 10 days of the parental request. Also, the burden of responsibility for procuring and setting up the equipment and figuring out data storage is now on the districts themselves, according to speaker Angela Pittman, the executive director of special education for the Dallas Independent School District. "In Dallas alone the startup costs were \$2.4 million," she said of her district's efforts to meet the bill's requirements. "If you don't have a dedicated funding source, it's going to come from somewhere."

## Culture of Change

Working through these challenges one at a time will only realize superficial improvements unless true change is made to the way learning occurs—both for students and educators. In his usual role helping districts prepare their Future Ready initiatives, Murray said he's seen districts in every stage along the continuum. "It's the complete gamut," he said. "Some districts are really pushing the envelope in terms of innovation, looking at course credits differently or redesigning high school. Others are still very traditional and haven't changed for dozens of years."

What sets trendsetting districts apart, more often than not, is solid leadership and a culture that inspires change, both at the district and school level. "It's not about the tech and the stuff—so much of it is mindset," he said. "There are principals and superintendents out there that are really leading the way. If I'm a principal and I'm not creating a culture of risk-taking and a culture of try-something-new, innovative things are not going to happen."



Take teacher training for example. When Garland ISD first began its 1-to-1 device program a few years back, one of its biggest challenges was getting teachers ready for the change. “Teachers were all over the map in terms of what they were able to do,” said speaker Doug Brubaker, an assistant superintendent at the district. “In the first year, there were a lot of course corrections.” Often, he said, devices sat around gathering dust or being used inconsistently.

The next year, though, they decided to be more systematic about it, setting up a 12-module training program for teachers and offering it both online and in person. “At the end, teachers could submit a product to show they knew how to do different things” with the technology. A full 100 percent of Garland’s teachers gave the module a try—a three hour commitment—and Brubaker said it has made all the difference. “Now, it’s a big success,” he said of the program. “Once the teachers got more comfortable with the tech, the kids started using it. There was more content there for them.”

That brought to mind Murray’s time as a school principal and the often paradoxical way professional development was meted out. “Not often do teachers get that vertical alignment to see and observe other teachers at other levels,” he said, adding that the most effective training uses the same 21st-century skills that students are learning. “How do you run your in-service dates? Your faculty meetings? If they’re one-directional and then the next day you’re talking about collaboration, those are at odds. Are you modeling in your leadership the practices you’re looking for?”

In terms of training, TASA is working on similar initiatives, but at the administrative level. The organization has created a Future Ready-inspired network for superintendents and (more recently) emerging administrators who are preparing to replace a core group of rapidly-retiring leaders. “A lot of those people will graduate to being superintendents in time,” Veselka said. “If we don’t do it now, when? If not us, who?”

Ultimately, Murray said, leading the charge for the next generation of learners will come down to strong leadership and a culture that encourages new lines of thinking. “The best districts have a high octane superintendent that is leading the way and building principals creating a new culture and modeling change,” he said. “It doesn’t necessarily take the most tech savvy person in the world to make it happen.”

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