

Illinois General Assembly
Senate Executive Committee
May 22, 2020
Testimony of Matthew Gross
On Submission

Thank you, members of the Executive Committee. I am Matthew Gross, CEO and Founder of Newsela, a digital education platform currently in use in two thirds of schools across America. I have spent my 25-year career working in education, from the time I was a classroom teacher in the South Bronx in New York City, and I strongly urge the Illinois State Senate to pass SB1569.

COVID-19 has forever changed how society will have to operate, perhaps nowhere more so than in our education system.

As schools face a future that will include prolonged closures and likely greater reliance on distance learning even after schools re-open, we must be honest about and address the gaps in our schools' preparedness for distance learning. SB1569 addresses three of the most important challenges we face.

First, the bill rightly requires that remote learning be accessible to all students in the district. We must acknowledge the digital divide that exists today. Access to devices and internet is an enormous barrier to online learning, and we as a society must work together to address the digital divide. But at the same time, we need to ensure that distance learning can still work for students who do not have access to unlimited internet. Districts should seek platforms with ample on and offline access that allow students to access their materials even when they are offline and that teachers can also print as PDFs to send to students without access to computers at home.

Second, the bill requires that remote learning be aligned with state standards. It is of the utmost importance that we not compromise on standards-based instruction while students are learning remotely. We must empower teachers with instructional materials that ensure students continue to progress on track, whether they are together or apart.

Finally, the bill strives for equity in seeking to address the needs of students with disabilities and homeless students in remote learning. Online materials should serve all students, including those most vulnerable. Using digital materials that meet WCAG AA (Web Content Accessibility Guidelines) standards ensures curricular content is accessible both for students with disabilities and those who only have access to limited devices, such as mobile phones. But equity does not

stop at getting materials in students' hands. We must also ensure that the instructional content itself is accessible to students of all reading and learning levels.

The elements of this bill I have outlined are entirely possible with solutions that exist today. We have no reason to deprive our students of accessible, standards-aligned instruction that serves ALL learners. I strongly urge the passage of this bill.

Thank you.