



The Digital Divide's Impact on Student Learning during Covid-19

OVERVIEW:

The impact of Covid-19 on daily life has revealed the depth of the existing inequities in every sector of society. This pandemic has changed how people work, interact, and educate—both from instructional and administrative positions. Due to these changes, the need for access to high-speed internet and devices has grown exponentially. Inequitable access to high-speed internet and devices, also known as the digital divide was already an issue prior to Covid-19 and led to learning loss for many students, particularly students of color and low-income students.

This learning loss and the homework gap “barriers students face when working on homework assignments without a reliable Internet source at home” – has only expanded due to the virtual schooling, thus calling for the expedited implementation of expanded broadband access.

THE PROBLEM:



In the United States, 1 in 3 Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households do not have access to high-speed internet.

This disparity is reflected in Delaware, where 18.4% of households are without reliable internet access. Of that 18.4%, 23.4% of Black households, 18.7% of Latino households, and 53.8% of American Indian/Alaska Native households lack high-speed internet access. While 18.4% seems to be a relatively small figure, it means that **about 34,353 children are denied a necessary service to which they are lawfully entitled.**

The disparity continues based on income status, for 31% of households with an income less than 25,000 also do not have access to high-speed internet. In an era of virtual learning, lack of access to high-speed internet, specifically, prevents students from attending classes and completing assignments. This further exacerbates learning loss, especially for marginalized students.

It is evident, then, that Delawarean families are greatly influenced by the digital divide, which has worsened due to COVID-19, and *it is imperative that access to reliable, high-speed internet is made available as part of the state's responsibility to provide all children with a free and appropriate education.*



POLICY SOLUTIONS:

While schools aim to return to in-person learning, current curricula still require students to complete homework assignments online, thus the need for access to reliable, high-speed internet will continue. In order to qualify for this program students must receive federal assistance in programs like Medicaid or Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). This requirement discounts the 20% of households with an income between \$50,000-\$75,000 who do not have high-speed internet and do not qualify for government assistance. *Thus, this program should be extended everyone who does not access to high-speed internet regardless of income.*

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Senator Nicole Poore has **called for Universal broadband services in Delaware**, and Connect Delaware and other similar programs could be modeled. In 2013, Del.Code. tit. 26, 709 created the Delaware Broadband fund which provided broadband support for Delaware schools, libraries, and rural areas. *However, despite rural Delaware communities' struggles with a lack of internet access throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, there have been no legislated expansions to broadband services since 2017.*

2

Another policy solution is to build partnerships within the business community or in collaboration with internet service providers. For example, in Delaware, a partnership with a telecom company, Bloosurf, was forged by Governor Carney and the Delaware Department of Technology and Information to address digital deserts in rural Delaware. In California, the state government worked with Google to get additional devices and mobile hotspots to students in need. *Both of these partnership showcase the need for Delaware to continually collaborate with the business community to meet the needs of the public. In Governor Carney's 2021 budget proposal, he requested 4.6 million dollars in school technology infrastructure.*

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In Governor Carney's 2021 budget proposal, **he requested 4.6 million dollars in school technology infrastructure.** *One final policy solution is supporting this necessary funding and having community members call on their legislators to act in support of this.*