



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

"Internet access is a civil rights issue" - Mark Lieberman Education Week

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.¹ 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.²

Problem

In the United States, one out of three Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households do not have access to high-speed internet.³ This disparity is reflected in Delaware, where 18.4% of households are without reliable internet access. Of that 18.4%, 23.4% of Black

¹ McLaughlin, C. (2016, April 20). The homework gap: The 'cruellest part of the digital divide'. Retrieved February 12, 2021, from

<https://www.nea.org/advocating-for-change/new-from-nea/homework-gap-cruellest-part-digital-divide>

² *Ibid.*

³ Homework Gap: Future Ready. (2020, July 20). Retrieved December 12, 2020, from

<https://futureready.org/homework-gap/>

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

Governor Carney has taken initiative to address this issue and has established temporary solutions that can be expanded. The Connect Delaware initiative provides broadband services for low-income students until December 31, 2021.⁴ 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. Also, 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. Therefore, this program should be extended everyone who does not access to high-speed internet regardless of income. In fact, Senator Nicole Poore has called for Universal broadband services in Delaware, and Connect Delaware and other similar programs could be modeled.⁵

In 2013, Del.Code. tit. 26, 709 created the Delaware Broadband fund which provided broadband support for Delaware schools, libraries, and rural areas. The funds were to be used by July 1, 2018.⁶ The funds were primarily used to incentivize telecommunication service providers to serve rural communities in Delaware.⁷ However, in the wake of the pandemic, the lack of internet access was still a significant issue in rural Delaware. Since 2017, there have been no legislated expansions to broadband services. While Governor Carney has dedicated 20 million dollars of CARES Act funding to address this need, legislation must be updated and bolstered to increase access to high-speed internet for all Delawareans.

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

⁴ The State of Delaware - Delaware Broadband Initiative. (2020). Connect Delaware / CARES Act. Retrieved December 20, 2020, from <https://broadband.delaware.gov/pages/index.shtml?dc=caresAct>

⁵ Poore, N. (2020, June 06). In this crisis, Delaware families need universal broadband and an open Internet: Opinion. Retrieved December 17, 2020, from <https://www.delawareonline.com/story/opinion/contributors/2020/06/06/crisis-delaware-families-need-universal-broadband/3155872001/>

⁶ PEW. (2019, July 31). State Broadband Policy Explorer. Retrieved December 19, 2020, from <https://www.pewtrusts.org/en/research-and-analysis/data-visualizations/2019/state-broadband-policy-explorer>

⁷ Douglas, T. (2018, July 24). With new RFP, Delaware aims to Eradicate Broadband 'deserts'. Retrieved March 23, 2021, from <https://www.govtech.com/network/With-New-RFP-Delaware-Aims-to-Eradicate-Broadband-Deserts.html>

company, Bloosurf, was forged by Governor Carney and the Delaware Department of Technology and Information to address digital deserts in rural Delaware.⁸ 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.⁹ One final policy solution is supporting this necessary funding and having community members call on their legislators to act in support of this.

Resources for More Information

Additional resources

1. This source shows the impact of Covid-19 and learning loss. It reveals that more students experienced learning loss in math.
 - a. Kuhfeld, M., Tarasawa, B., Johnson, A., Ruzek, E., & Lewis, K. (2020, November). Learning During COVID-19: Initial findings on students' reading and math achievement and growth. Retrieved January 3, 2021, from <https://www.nwea.org/content/uploads/2020/11/Collaborative-brief-Learning-during-COVID-19.NOV2020.pdf>
2. This presentation provides the equity implications of the digital divide and virtual learning. It also highlights strategies schools can use to address these issues.
 - a. Bennett, H., Ph.D., Hurwitz, F., Ph.D., & Malik, S. (2020, April 14). Learning remotely in the age of COVID-19: Lessons from evidence and concerns for equity. Retrieved November 11, 2020, from https://ies.ed.gov/ncee/edlabs/regions/midatlantic/app/Docs/Events/Remote_Learning_Webinar_Slides_508.pdf
3. Education Week conducted a nationwide survey on the effects of the pandemic on schools. The results show the heightened equity issues for low-income students and the increased need for internet access to participate in online learning.
 - a. Kurtz, H. (2020, December 04). National Survey Tracks Impact of Coronavirus on Schools: 10 Key Findings. Retrieved December 27, 2020, from <https://www.edweek.org/teaching-learning/national-survey-tracks-impact-of-coronavirus-on-schools-10-key-findings/2020/04>

Model legislation

The need for expansion of broadband access, particularly for students, led many states to propose broadband legislation that addressed the inequities of the digital divide.

⁸ Herdman, P. (2020, June 12). What Delaware is Doing to Connect Kids. Retrieved December 19, 2020, from <https://rodelde.org/what-delaware-is-doing-to-connect-our-kids/>

⁹ OFFICE OF GOVERNOR CARNEY FINANCIAL OVERVIEW FOR FISCAL YEAR 2021. (2021, January 30). Retrieved January 31, 2021, from <https://governor.delaware.gov/wp-content/uploads/sites/24/2020/01/FY-21-Budget-Presentation-01302020.pdf>

Ex: **California: AB2626**, “Requires the California Research Bureau to conduct research on ways to close the digital divide through policies, including, but not limited to, tax policies, that reduce the upfront costs of devices and communications technology purchased by local educational agencies to provide students with equitable access to distance learning.”¹⁰

Ex: **California: AB570**, is a robust piece of legislation that involves diminishing digital divide for Education/Schools, Funding, Infrastructure and Rural and Underserved.

Ex: **New Jersey: AB4804**, “Establishes office in Board of Public Utilities to assist in provision and expansion of broadband internet service in state to address inequities in accessing broadband service”¹¹

¹⁰ Morton, H. (2021, January 11). Broadband 2020 Legislation. Retrieved January 25, 2021, from <https://www.ncsl.org/research/telecommunications-and-information-technology/broadband-2020-legislation.aspx>

¹¹ *Ibid.*