

Advancing Digital Equity and Closing the Homework Gap: The Need to Connect Students at Home



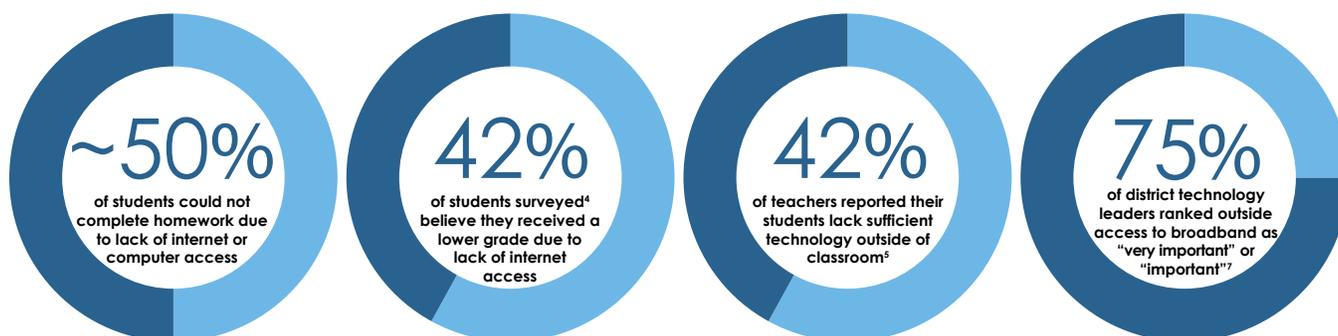
May 2017

Access to technology and connectivity are an essential part of a student's educational experience—both inside and outside of the classroom. Educators are becoming increasingly aware that students lacking broadband at home face a unique and harmful set of challenges that need to be addressed. States should play a more active role in increasing home broadband access for students from low-income families, thereby advancing digital equity and working to close the “homework gap.”

Students Without Broadband Access Are at a Disadvantage

Today, roughly seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But the FCC's data suggest that almost one in three households do not subscribe to broadband services at any speed—for reasons such as the lack of affordability and lack of interest.¹

- When students do not have broadband access at home, completing those assignments becomes exceedingly difficult.
- Pew research also indicates that 5 million households with school-age children across the United States do not have broadband access at home, and children in those homes are falling into what has been coined the “homework gap.”²
- Students are acutely aware of the disadvantages that come from a lack of broadband access at home. Nearly 50 percent of all students said they were unable to complete a homework assignment because they lacked access to the internet or a computer.³
- In fact, 42 percent of students surveyed by the Hispanic Heritage Foundation believe that they received a lower grade on an assignment because they did not have internet access to complete the assignment.⁴



Teachers and District Leaders See This Problem Too

- According to the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, 42 percent of teachers reported that their students lack sufficient access to technology outside of the classroom.⁵
- Barriers to home broadband access disproportionately impact low-income populations. The Alliance for Excellent Education and Stanford University find that teachers in high-poverty schools were more than twice as likely to say that students' lack of access at home is a challenge.⁶

- Results from the [Consortium of School Networking \(CoSN\)](#) 2016 Annual Infrastructure Survey show that three-fourths of district technology leaders ranked addressing lack of broadband access outside of the school as a “very important” or “important” issue for their district to address.⁷

Barriers to Broadband Adoption

While digital literacy and its perceived relevance are two barriers to broadband adoption, the biggest barrier is affordability. In CoSN’s 2016 Annual Infrastructure Survey, 68 percent of respondents reported that affordability is the greatest barrier to out-of-school broadband access. In the previous year, 88 percent of respondents cited affordability as the main barrier.⁸

Lifeline: A Tool to Combat and Close the Homework Gap

- In 2016, the Federal Communications Commission (the FCC) updated the Lifeline program to explicitly include subsidies for broadband access for low-income families to address the myriad of challenges they face.
- While parts of the FCC’s Lifeline modernization order are being challenged in federal court and new FCC leadership is signaling that it will revisit some of the 2016 reforms, states continue to have the ability to increase access to broadband for low-income families.

Lifeline: Shifting Action from the National Level to the State Level

- States can and should create a legal framework that includes a “broadband-only” option for providers. Currently, state laws and frameworks only support services tied to voice and text offerings. An updated framework should allow eligible households to also choose a provider that offers stand-alone broadband.
- States can and should consider offering state-level subsidies to Lifeline-eligible households. Existing state-level subsidies should be reassessed to determine if current levels are appropriate for all Lifeline services.
- States can and should collaborate with other states and the federal government to align Lifeline certification qualifications, thus easing the burden of entry for providers and increasing competition to better serve consumers.

This document was prepared by the Alliance for Excellent Education and the Consortium for School Networking in April 2017.

Endnotes

- 1 Jessica Rosenworcel, Modernizing the E-Rate Program for Schools and Libraries, WC Docket No. 13-184, Connect America Fund, WC Docket No. 10-90, 2016, https://apps.fcc.gov/edocs_public/attachmatch/FCC-14-189A4.pdf
- 2 John B. Horrigan, “The numbers behind the ‘homework gap’”, *FACTANK News in the Numbers*, Pew Research Center, April 20, 2015, <http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/>.
- 3 Alberto Avalos, HHF, MyCollegeOptions: Survey 3k Students, Hispanic Heritage Foundation, April 28, 2015, <http://hispanicheritage.org/hispanic-heritage-foundation-mycollegeoptions-family-online-safety-institute-and-other-partners-announce-findings-of-new-study-titled-taking-the-pulse-of-the-high-school-student-experience/>
- 4 Alberto Avalos, HHF, MyCollegeOptions: Survey 3k Students, Hispanic Heritage Foundation, April 28, 2015, <http://hispanicheritage.org/hispanic-heritage-foundation-mycollegeoptions-family-online-safety-institute-and-other-partners-announce-findings-of-new-study-titled-taking-the-pulse-of-the-high-school-student-experience/>
- 5 Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, Teachers Know Best, What Educators Want from Digital Instructional Tools, 2013, <https://s3.amazonaws.com/edtech-production/reports/Teachers-Know-Best-2.0.pdf>
- 6 Linda Darling-Hammond, Molly B. Zieleszinski, and Shelley Goldman. “Using Technology to Support At-Risk Students’ Learning.” (September 2014), Stanford Center for Opportunity Policy in Education (SCOPE) and the Alliance for Excellent Education: Pg. 2.
- 7 CoSN, MDR, AASA, CoSN’s 2016 Annual Infrastructure Survey, August, 2016, http://www.cosn.org/sites/default/files/CoSN_4th_Annual_Survey_Nov%202%20FINAL.pdf
- 8 CoSN, MDR, AASA, CoSN’s 2016 Annual Infrastructure Survey, August, 2016, http://www.cosn.org/sites/default/files/CoSN_4th_Annual_Survey_Nov%202%20FINAL.pdf