DIGITAL EQUITY

INTRODUCTION

Across the country, districts, educators, students and families are reckoning with an educational environment that looks dramatically different due to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic. Schools undertake the task of adapting their educational approaches, an increased and on-going reliance on remote or hybrid learning highlights the need for targeted support to address the exacerbation of systemic racial inequities in education and digital access. In the face of unprecedented challenges, immediate efforts to support our schools must be complemented with long-term investments to establish equitable digital learning environments.

THE BREADTH OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

According to the most recent 2018 data from the U.S. Census Bureau and the National Center for Education Statistics, before the pandemic an estimated 17 million K-12 public school students lived in households without either an internet connection or a device adequate for distance learning at home, representing 30% of all public K-12 students. Of these students, approximately nine million lived in households with neither an adequate connection nor an adequate device for distance learning.

The lack of digital access that disproportionately impacts communities of color is magnified by the impact of a pandemic that is affecting Black, Indigenous, Latinx and other people of color the most[1]. When allocating funding to address gaps in digital access, it is imperative that policymakers apply an equity lens to ensure that investments serve the students and communities most affected.

This is not just a rural problem. Across the country, the makeup of students lacking adequate internet access is pervasive:

A SNAPSHOT OF WASHINGTON STATE

An estimated 735,000 people in Washington State do not have an internet connection in their homes. An additional 500,000 people rely solely on limited cell phone data plans, while 12,000 others still use slower dial-up services.

BUILDING A BRIDGE TO DIGITAL INCLUSION

Digital inclusion refers to the activities necessary to ensure that all individuals and communities have access to and use of Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs). This includes five elements: affordable, robust broadband internet service; internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; access to digital literacy training; quality technical support; and applications and online content designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation and collaboration.

Bridging the digital divide to achieve digital inclusion requires collective efforts between policymakers, districts, the private sector and education and nonprofit organizations.

IN WASHINGTON STATE

22% OF STUDENTS LACK ADEQUATE ACCESS TO HIGH-SPEED INTERNET CONNECTION

15% OF STUDENTS LACK DEVICES NECESSARY FOR REMOTE LEARNING

29% OF STUDENTS WHO LACK ADEQUATE ACCESS TO THE INTERNET ARE BLACK, LATINX, OR NATIVE AMERICAN

Congress must continue to invest in infrastructure to meet students and school needs. The goal is to help connect millions of students and families to the internet. Without this on-going support, the nation's skills, homework and educational digital divide will exacerbate existing inequity among students and learning gaps at an unacceptable rate.

[1] The COVID Racial Data Tracker. covidtracking.com/race.

[2] Gregerson, Mia, and Sabrina Roach. The Pandemic Shows Why Washington Needs Universal Internet Access. 11 May 2020, crosscut.com/2020/05/pandemic-shows-why-washington-needs-universal-internet-access..

[3] "Definitions: Digital Inclusion." April 16, 2019. https://www.digitalinclusion.org/definitions/.

Data provided by Common Sense Media https://www.commonsensemedia.org/digital-divide-stories#/state/WA

KEY MESSAGE — Students Lacking Adequate Internet Access

BY GEOGRAPHY

21% URBAN

25% SUBURBAN

37% RURAL

RACE/ETHNICITY

18% WHITE

35% NATIVE AMERICAN

30% BLACK

26% LATINX

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