BROADBAND INTERNET:
A Foundation For a Sound Basic Education

PUBLIC SCHOOL FORUM *of north carolina*

NCFORUM.ORG

THE PROBLEM

Broadband internet, defined as a download speed of 25mbps or higher, is a foundational resource for work, school, and life in North Carolina – and even more so today, as families and educators engage in remote learning efforts in order to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

Physical broadband infrastructure problems are a challenge for rural parts of the state. However, the barriers to securing broadband internet for households are not limited to certain geographic areas – in fact, this is also a problem for those who live in urban areas. In addition to the challenges of accessing broadband internet infrastructure, North Carolinians grapple with additional barriers that include affordability, the perception of high-speed internet's relevance to the lives of some, and digital literacy gaps. Together, these barriers all contribute to North Carolina's relatively low broadband adoption rate of just 59.4 percent.
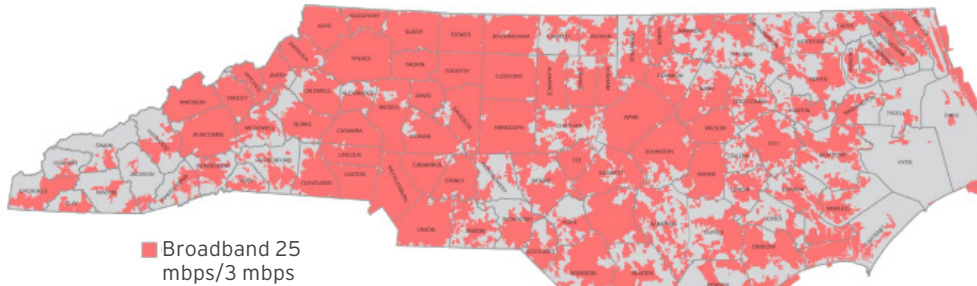
THE BARRIERS

Access

While North Carolina ranks 9th in the United States in broadband deployment, or availability of infrastructure, 89 percent of households that are without broadband access live in sparsely populated areas. Rural areas "generally lack a traditional business case for private sector providers to serve them, and as the last unserved areas in the state, they are likely the hardest and most expensive areas to serve," according to the NC Department of Information Technology.[1]

Broadband Availability: Advertised of at Least 25 MBPs Download/3 MBPs Upload

■ Broadband 25 mbps/3 mbps

Data derived from U.S. Federal Communications Form 477 Data Release, December 2016

A provider that reports deployment of a particular technology and bandwidth in a census block may not necessarily offer that service everywhere in the block.

Affordability

For many households, even if the infrastructure for broadband internet is in place in their communities, the cost for an internet service plan – as well as affording a device to access the data – is a formidable barrier.

Just shy of 40 percent of households across our state have access to a wired broadband internet connection that costs less than or equal to $60 per month.[2] In North Carolina, nearly half of all children live in households that are classified as poor or low-income[3], making it nearly impossible for a household to choose internet and devices over putting food on the table.

~40% of households across North Carolina have access to a wired broadband internet connection that costs ≤ $60 per month

Adoption

For many households, the internet doesn't appear to hold the necessary keys to everyday living. **Relevancy** is the concept that if the internet doesn't serve as a gatekeeper to a person's ability to work, or doesn't appear to serve as a means toward accessing jobs, healthcare or education, then that person is less likely to pursue the adoption of a high-speed internet connection, as they don't see it being relevant to their lives.

The internet's lack of relevancy can also translate to a **dearth of digital literacy skills,** which comes at a critical time when these skills are needed in homes across the state, nation, and world as students stay home to mitigate the spread of COVID-19 and access their education through virtual platforms.

Today, having a high-speed internet connection at home has suddenly become much more relevant to the lives of families, who must access education for their children from home as North Carolinians work to mitigate the impacts of COVID-19. This reality places even greater pressure on finding solutions to these barriers.

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THE SOLUTIONS

Provide short-term solutions for students and families. At the beginning of this pandemic, the North Carolina Business Committee for Education has served as a convener of many stakeholders across North Carolina to develop critical short-term solutions for schools, educators and families engaged in remote learning.

Borne out of these efforts is NC Student Connect, a new partnership created to address internet connectivity gaps that are a barrier to remote learning for many North Carolina students. This partnership leverages federal CARES Act funding to provide WiFi hotspots, "park and learn" internet connection sites, and digital literacy training. These efforts are geared toward helping students without broadband access get the support they need now to access their education as the state works toward long-term solutions.

🔗 **Learn more about NC Student Connect.**

Gather Better Data. To eliminate the digital divide, it's critical to understand where the disconnect lies in order to implement long-term, structural solutions that cover the entire state. The federal data that is relied upon for grant-making and investing in areas that are unserved is not very accurate.

NC DIT has launched a statewide survey to gather better data that will guide further investments to the state's GREAT Grant Program, inform research and policy recommendations, and support strategic targeting of additional funding streams.

SLOW internet?
NO internet?
We need to know.

The N.C. Broadband Survey is designed to gather information on locations without adequate internet access and speeds in our community.

✅ For Homes & Businesses **WITH** Internet Service

Visit **NCBroadband.gov/Survey** to take the survey now.

❌ For Homes & Businesses **WITHOUT** Internet Service

Text "**internet**" to **919-750-0553**. Standard text messaging rates will apply.

Your feedback directly impacts grant and infrastructure funding in your community.

NCDIT | NORTH CAROLINA DEPARTMENT OF INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Broadband Infrastructure Office

🔗 **Take the survey here**.

THE SOLUTIONS (continued)

Support the GREAT Grant Program. For largely rural communities that are classified as economically distressed and lack the necessary broadband infrastructure to access high-speed internet, North Carolina's Growing Rural Economies with Access to Technology (GREAT) Grant Program has doled out tens of millions of dollars directly to Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to connect those households to the internet. In September 2020, the NC General Assembly appropriated a new infusion of $30 million in COVID relief funds for the GREAT Grant Program to distribute.

Advocates say the GREAT Grant Program needs quick and significant investments in order to ensure everyone has access to high-speed internet. The program should also contain new provisions that incentivize Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to offer more affordable, robust data plans to those in need.

🔗 Learn more about the GREAT Grant Program here.

Modernize the federal Lifeline Program. Since 1985, the federal Lifeline Program for Low-Income Consumers[4] "has provided a discount on phone service for qualifying low-income consumers to ensure that all Americans have the opportunities and security that phone service brings, including being able to connect to jobs, family and emergency services," according to the program's website.

In 2016, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) modernized the Lifeline program to include access to broadband internet, recognizing that in order to participate in today's modern economy, internet access is critical.

Modernizing the federal grant program even further could provide another avenue through which broadband internet access could become more affordable for those who need help. Establishing a tax credit program for broadband providers to accept Lifeline subscribers is necessary.

🔗 Learn more about the federal Lifeline program here.

Promote broadband access as an economic development and recruitment effort. According to our partners at the NC Rural Center, there are ample, long-standing funding streams and grant programs on the table that if used collectively, can significantly leverage private companies to invest in rural, last-mile broadband. Local governments can partner with and encourage Internet Service Providers (ISPs) to consider how they can serve their citizens and communities. Many local entities are not familiar with the many resources available to them, and it's important to build local capacity to take advantage of these funding opportunities. Together, we must look at last-mile broadband as any other opportunity to attract businesses that will create jobs and investment in local communities that need broadband internet access.

RESOURCES

[Broadband Mapping Data](): Discover and access geographic data related to broadband availability, adoption, and related topics. (NC Broadband Infrastructure Office)

[North Carolina Broadband Survey](): this survey is designed to gather information on locations in the state without adequate internet access and speeds. (NC Broadband Infrastructure Office)

["Across North Carolina, the Barriers – and Solutions – to Broadband Internet Access for Students and Families are Multi-Layered"]() (Public School Forum of NC)

Endnotes
1 [https://www.ncbroadband.gov/reports/connecting-north-carolina-state-broadband-plan/download]().
2 [https://www.ednc.org/perspective-the-reality-of-broadband-in-north-carolina/]()
3 [https://ncchild.org/child-poverty-scope/]()
4 [https://www.fcc.gov/general/lifeline-program-low-income-consumers]()