CLOSING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE IN EDUCATION

Policy Brief

ExcelinEd Policy Toolkit - 2023

INTRODUCTION

Technology plays an important role in education today, from homework assignments that require online research or peer collaboration to virtual tutoring or advanced courses that are not accessible at a student's assigned school. Online learning also provides flexibility. Schools can turn to online learning when inclement weather hits, school buildings need repair or in response to public health emergencies. Students may rely on it when personal situations, such as extended hospitalization, preclude school attendance.

But online learning requires reliable access to home broadband, which too many students still lack. A 2022 report estimates that 28.2 million households overall continue to lack home broadband, and federal data indicate that nearly a quarter of all students in rural areas lack access.[1,2]

While the digital divide persists for multiple reasons, the lack of broadband infrastructure and affordability are the two primary drivers.[3] Fortunately, state policymakers have the ability to allocate new and existing state and federal dollars to address the challenges families face, meet students' needs and open new educational opportunities.

RAISING AWARENESS OF BROADBAND AFFORDABILITY PROGRAMS

Several federal programs subsidize the cost of broadband for individuals and families who meet certain criteria. These include Lifeline, the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) and the temporary Emergency Connectivity Fund. Some states may also offer their own subsidy programs. Because the programs have different eligibility criteria and subsidy amounts, families may find it difficult to determine which subsidy program(s) could make home broadband affordable for them. They may also need assistance navigating online application processes.

To address this, state education agencies (SEAs) can take additional, proactive steps to provide resources that assist families in understanding their options. Currently, ACP is the most prominent and valuable subsidy. It is open to families of students who participate in free- or reduced-price meal programs; all students who attend Community Eligibility Provision schools; and families that participate in some federal programs, like WIC and SNAP.

Because of their direct relationships with families, local school leaders are in a strong position to know which students are eligible and to provide them with the required documentation to apply for ACP. The SEA can create templates that school districts can customize to certify student eligibility. The provision of this certification from a local, trusted source—school districts—can both raise awareness of the subsidy programs and help streamline the application process.

Resources

- Excel*in*Ed has developed an overview of ACP fact sheet and customizable flyers that states, districts and community groups can customize with their logos. These can be shared within their communities via email, social media or print to raise awareness of ACP opportunities. Several flyers are also available in Spanish.
- Common Sense Media and EducationSuperHighway both offer extensive tools, including live-chat options, to assist individuals in navigating the ACP sign-up process.

PRIORITIZING EDUCATION IN STATE AND FEDERAL BROADBAND GRANT PROGRAMS

For families to have the option of enrolling in broadband subsidy programs, they must have access to home broadband connectivity. Closing the digital divide takes coordinated efforts from state leaders to ensure broadband infrastructure reaches all communities.

[1] EducationSuperHighway. (2022). No Home Left Offline. https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/wp-content/uploads/No-Home-Left-Offline_Accelerating-ACP-Adoption_2022.pdf.
[2] National Center for Education Statistics. (2022). Rural Students' Access to the Internet. https://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/indicator/lfc/internet-access-students-rural?tid=1000.
[3] EducationSuperHighway. (2022). No Home Left Offline. https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/wp-content/uploads/No-Home-Left-Offline_Accelerating-ACP-Adoption_2022.pdf.

For nearly a decade, states have led the way in providing broadband expansion grants to internet service providers (ISPs) that deploy broadband to unserved or underserved communities. Now, the federal government is adding tens of billions of dollars to that effort via pandemic relief funds and grant programs through the Bipartisan Infrastructure Act. State broadband offices are tasked with awarding both federal and state grant funds to ISPs and monitoring progress toward grant deliverables.

State broadband offices can coordinate with state and local education officials to identify areas of need specific to the state and its communities. State policymakers can then incentivize broadband projects that support key state goals by establishing grant requirements aligned to those goals. For example, state policymakers might require the broadband office to prioritize grant applications that expand access to unserved communities with a high percentage of K-12 students among their populations.

Some states are already moving in this direction. Based on an Executive Order from Governor Bill Lee, Tennessee's Broadband Accessibility Grants to internet service providers prioritize applicants that serve distressed or at-risk counties. This Executive Order is an example of a governor ensuring broadband expansion grants serve broader state priorities. Tennessee's grant scoring process also considers whether applicants provide additional resources, such as digital literacy training, marketing campaigns to encourage broadband adoption or other services to community anchor institutions.

In Indiana, HB 1449 (2021) prioritizes grant funding for K-12 students at homes and at school. It also supplements federal funds with long-term state investments in broadband, without duplicating the use or the purpose of the funding. And in Arkansas, the Arkansas Connectivity Coalition brings together 15 organizations focused on broadband access and affordability, including government, nonprofit, advocacy and philanthropic leaders. The Coalition is informing Arkansas's plans for federal funds by identifying areas of greatest need and provides an example strategy of community engagement in broadband expansion plans.

Establishing K-12 Broadband Reports to Identify Needs and Monitor Progress

Every state has populations of students who lack access to broadband due to geographical barriers, affordability concerns or their families' lack of desire to adopt broadband. However, most states do not have specific data on the barriers affecting each student or group of students. These data are critical if states are to invest resources strategically.

The federal government recognizes that lack of data is a problem. Both the Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Act and the Digital Equity Act—which together account for about $45B of federal investment in broadband expansion efforts—call for states to survey unserved and underserved populations to identify barriers. They also ask states to establish measurable objectives and track progress, and they set an expectation that state broadband offices coordinate with state and local education officials to determine areas of need.[4]

By establishing annual reports focused on educational uses of broadband, state policymakers can identify needs and monitor progress on several metrics. State education agencies can establish a method, such as a survey or through the student information system, for collecting data on student access and provide a method for LEAs and charter schools to communicate that data to the state. SEAs and broadband offices can then use that data to produce a joint report that describes findings and identifies areas of greatest need as well as the most common barriers to broadband access for students. The agencies can then provide informed recommendations on how to remediate those barriers. The annual report can also be used to track return-on-investment of broadband grant dollars, ensuring public funds are used efficiently to benefit students and families.

A few states have implemented student broadband access surveys and seen positive early results. North Carolina's state Broadband Infrastructure Office collaborated with the Friday Institute at North Carolina State University to pilot a survey that would better pinpoint areas of need regarding the "homework gap," or lack of home access to broadband and devices students experience. Their report details the pilot, survey results and policy recommendations.

More recently, Nevada adopted legislation in 2021 requiring its Office of Science, Innovation and Technology to "develop a standardized, statewide system of gathering data from pupils and their families to assess the ability of

[4] Digital Equity Act Notice of Funding Opportunity and Broadband Equity, Access, and Deployment Act Notice of Funding Opportunity.

pupils to access the Internet at their homes." The legislation also details requirements for annual reporting on the data along with recommendations on how to improve access.

Lastly, Georgia provides an excellent example of the benefits of data-sharing among broadband and education agencies. The state developed the first state-specific broadband access maps in the country, which include more accurate and granular data than the previous FCC maps. During the early days of the pandemic, the state broadband office and SEA shared data to identify 135,756 unserved student households—households where students could not participate in remote learning due to lack of access. According to the broadband office's 2020 and 2021 reports, timely data sharing allowed the Governor's Office and SEA to direct federal relief funds directly to students in need.

Resources

- Common Sense Media provides additional policy guidance and resources on digital needs assessments.
- Education Commission of the States identifies states' best practices regarding data collection and secure data sharing among agencies.