

# NEW YORK STATE EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCE BOARD



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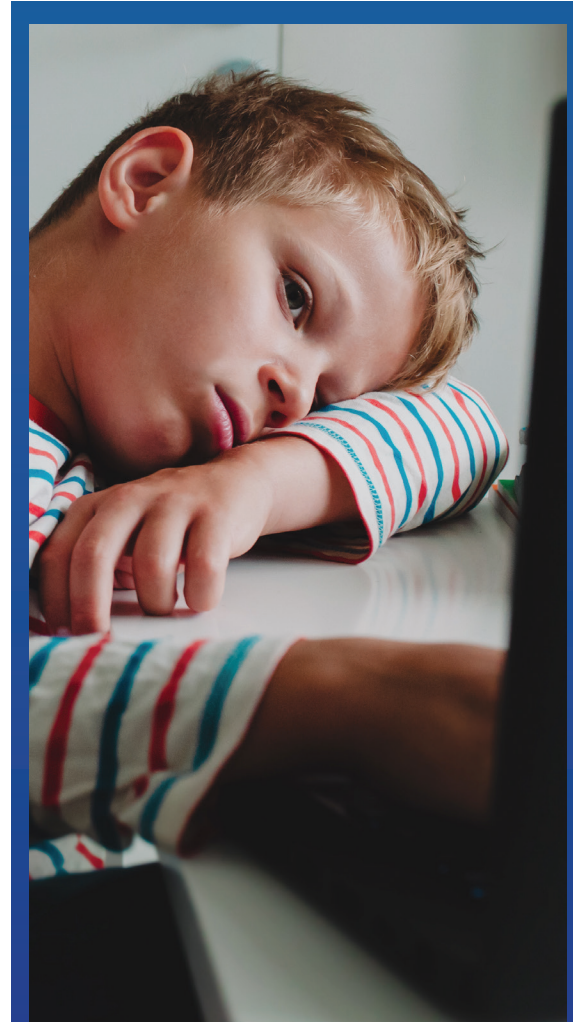
## Closing The Digital Divide

*The New York State Educational Conference Board (ECB)—made up of seven leading educational organizations representing parents, classroom teachers, school-related professionals, building administrators, superintendents, business officials and school boards—is urging federal and New York State policymakers to provide essential short- and long-term solutions to combat the digital divide our K-12 students continue to face. All students deserve a quality, equitable education, whether it is delivered in person or online.*

### BACKGROUND

The digital divide refers to the persistent lack of access to the internet and the devices needed to connect to it from home that plagues too many of the nation's K-12 students and their families. For these students, many of whom are among already underserved populations, availing themselves of the online learning tools their "connected" peers enjoy at home is not an option.

With the onset of the COVID-19 health crisis, how people live, learn and work has fundamentally changed. Access to quality broadband, technology and digital literacy skills to participate and stay connected has become more important than ever, further disadvantaging those without it. With schools' transition to fully remote or hybrid learning in 2020, a report by the nonprofit organization Common Sense found that nearly 30 percent of all public K-12 students nationwide—15 to 16 million—lacked either an internet connection or a device adequate for distance learning, while other research puts this number closer to 17 million. This gap is most pronounced in rural communities, low-income families and households with Black, Latinx, and Native American students. That means as many as 17 million students around the country are locked out of their classroom.



**27 percent of students in New York lack adequate high-speed broadband for online learning.**

*"Every household or shelter in which one or more students are learning from should have quality broadband. Without it, these students are locked out of the classroom and not given a fair opportunity for future success."*

John Yagielski,  
Chair of the Educational Conference Board



NEW YORK STATE EDUCATIONAL CONFERENCE BOARD

John Yagielski, Chair – [chair@nysecb.org](mailto:chair@nysecb.org)



**Without access to broadband, 15 to 17 million students around the country are locked out of their classrooms.**

## **BARRIERS EXIST FOR TOO MANY STUDENTS**

When COVID-19 forced school buildings across the country to close their doors, online learning was the best remaining option to engage students in their education. School leaders across New York scrambled to provide every student with a tablet or other device. They purchased wireless hotspots for individual students and teachers, and to equip their school buses. They collaborated with community partners and internet service providers (ISPs), searching every avenue to find short-term solutions for connecting children to their teachers because high-speed internet is not available where all students and teachers live. Federal and state programs such as the \$500 million New NY Broadband Program and the FCC's Connect America Fund offer service providers funding to expand and deploy broadband infrastructure to underserved areas. But even with such incentives, service providers struggle to extend necessary infrastructure, particularly to rural areas where geography and population sparsity drive up costs of connecting all households.

Further complicating these efforts are the inadequate data standards and collection methods that result in flawed service coverage maps. When reporting their coverage areas to the FCC, broadband providers can indicate that an entire census block has service even when only a single household within that block has broadband access. Although federal and state agencies are aware of these lapses in data, there has been no remedy.

Even where broadband is available, many families cannot afford a monthly internet subscription. According to the 2017 Current Population Survey, 34 percent of households with no internet and children aged 3-18 cited affordability as the primary reason they lacked an internet connection. Offers from ISPs, known as Low-Income Internet Programs, come with barriers to eligibility and service length.

Some families can pay for a broadband subscription but are then met with data caps, limiting their monthly usage. If a family reaches the monthly cap, they must curtail their usage or pay overage fees. With more family members working and learning at home, exceeding data caps can be all too common considering the data needed to stream video lessons, research and complete assignments and receive extra help for one or more learners, all online.

Furthermore, according to a recent survey conducted by the New York State Education Department, 8 percent of students in the state do not have a device at home that is adequate for virtual learning. For many years, school districts with available resources have been rolling out 1:1 device initiatives to provide every student with a district-issued device. Despite these burgeoning efforts, schools' rapid shift to remote learning at the pandemic's start laid bare just how much work remains. In too many households, students had to rely on sharing devices with siblings or remote-working parents/guardians or struggled to participate in lessons via a cell phone. School districts faced high costs and lacked immediate availability of affordable devices for students, placing large orders that in some cases took months or longer to be filled.



## Recommendations

**Prioritize the state's investment in infrastructure so that every household or shelter where one or more students live has access to high-speed broadband.** The state's New NY Broadband Program set the ambitious goal of connecting all New Yorkers to broadband internet by 2018. Despite significant progress, the work is incomplete. The state must commit to expediting the final phase of this initiative to bring broadband access to all New Yorkers.

**Improve the accuracy of broadband coverage maps.** Congress recently allocated \$65 million in long-sought funding for the Broadband DATA Act, which requires the FCC to adopt new data collection rules intended to ensure better accuracy. Revisions to these rules should:

- Require local and state officials involved in mapping efforts to consult school leaders who, due to the rapid switch to remote learning caused by the pandemic, conducted detailed needs assessments pertaining to their students' access to the internet. Yet, to date, they have been left out of mapping efforts at both the state and federal levels.
- Provide funding to support grassroots mapping efforts at the local level, so that school districts do not absorb yet another unfunded mandate. Consider avenues by which individuals can contribute their own access data to a "citizens' broadband map."

**Modernize the FCC's Lifeline Program to provide stand-alone broadband subsidies directly to low-income households.**

The HEROES Act, proposed by the U.S. House of Representatives in May 2020, included an emergency broadband benefit for Lifeline Program participants who lost jobs or income due to the pandemic and subsequent economic crisis. Had the Act passed, this provision would have provided up to \$50 per household per month toward any broadband connection chosen by the customer, for a total federal investment of about \$9 billion. Instead, as part of its recently enacted Consolidated Appropriations Act 2021, Congress allocated \$3.2 billion

for the Emergency Broadband Benefit Program, which reimburses broadband companies for providing discounted broadband service and connected devices to low-income households. This program invests only about one-third of what had been proposed in the HEROES Act, and because providers' participation is voluntary, the benefit may not be available to all eligible households. Further, the program is temporary, ending six months after the pandemic crisis ends. Including expanded, dedicated broadband subsidies within the Lifeline Program would help connect more low-income families to ongoing, affordable broadband service.

**Allocate state funds to provide additional subsidies, beyond what the Lifeline Program may offer, to low-income households to ensure free access to high-speed internet service.**

**Prohibit Internet Service Providers (ISPs) from setting data caps.**

The HEROES Act contained a continued-connectivity guarantee, making it unlawful for broadband providers to shut off service to individuals and small businesses during the national emergency or to impose data caps and overage fees while people are at home and relying so much on their internet connections. These guarantees remain unfulfilled, so the state should act now and make these guarantees permanent.

**Provide state and federal funding for school districts to invest in purchasing and replacing devices such as Chromebooks, laptops and WiFi hotspots.**

Additional funding must be provided at the state and federal level to reimburse school districts for the cost of devices purchased for all students. Although the latest federal stimulus included funds to reimburse service providers for providing affordable, connected devices to households, this temporary and limited (one device per household) measure is insufficient. Furthermore, the FCC's E-rate program must be expanded to include devices, WiFi hotspots and other means of securing at-home internet access for students as allowable purchases.

## STANDARD BROADBAND IS NOT SUFFICIENT FOR ONLINE LEARNING

Current FCC standards for broadband speeds are 25 Mbps for downloads and 3 Mbps for uploads. These speeds fall short of what is needed to support multiple members of a household who are learning and working remotely.

Interactive activities such as synchronous instruction and streaming video require much faster connection speeds, particularly for uploads, to avoid audio and video lag time, choppy or frozen connections or the inability to log on at all. Most experts consider speeds of 100/100 Mbps for downloads/uploads as the minimum necessary to support online learning—a far cry from the FCC's current requirement.

### Recommendation

**Advocate for higher broadband speed standards.** State policymakers should press the FCC to revisit broadband speed standards and adopt at least a minimum of 100/100 Mbps download and upload speeds. In the meantime, require the state to adopt its own speed standards of at least 100/100 Mbps download and upload speeds.



**When reporting their coverage areas to the FCC, broadband providers can indicate that an entire census block is served even when only a single household within that block has broadband access.**

## ONLINE LEARNING IS INCONSISTENT

Virtual classrooms are not a replacement for in-person school, but the crisis-driven shift to online instruction has fostered innovation and creativity, opening doors for many students to experience learning in new ways. However, even in times not clouded by COVID-19, there are obstacles to effectively delivering virtual instruction for educators, students and families, especially for students with disabilities, English language learners, and children in primary grades.

Our nation's teachers have not received enough high-quality professional development to improve remote instruction. Teachers and administrators had to pivot to online teaching with little notice and preparation in the spring of 2020. School administrators across the state juggle unique daily challenges in addition to device distribution and support, instructional program design and teacher support.

There has not been enough time for schools and educators to develop, learn and share strategies and digital literacy skills required to deliver quality online education that fits individual students' learning styles and needs. Digital learning platforms are flooding the market, making it more challenging for school officials to weed through the options to find cost-effective solutions that adhere to Education Law § 2-d and keep up with training faculty and students on how to use these digital tools.

Students are also feeling the pressure. Frustration mounts when they cannot log into lessons because they don't know how or because some other technical issue arises. Imagine spending time on schoolwork, only to find you can't or don't know how to submit it. Digital proficiency for students is necessary to help them feel empowered and confident with online learning. These skills are needed now, but they are valuable and essential for future opportunities in postsecondary education and many jobs.

Families struggle to support their children because they may not be able or available to help with the technology or issues that can arise when learning online. Additional support and services for students that are typically in-person at school are also at risk. Many families do not have the opportunity to seek or pay for extra help.

## Recommendations

**Authorize and direct the State Education Department (SED) to serve as a clearinghouse of vendors meeting requirements of Education Law § 2-d.** The burden of reviewing and negotiating contracts to ensure compliance, now occurring over and over in one school district after another, should rest with SED in order to leverage greater bargaining power to convince companies to comply.

**Support the growth of teachers' and students' digital proficiency. We call on state policymakers to:** Invest in professional development for current teachers and administrators that focuses on developing digital proficiency to better support K-12 students and engage families.



*"All children and families need meaningful and low- or no-cost access to devices and broadband to support their child's learning.*

*We are in the digital age, and we must advocate together to see that every child, no matter their ZIP code or income status, is fully supported."*

NYS PTA President, Dana Platin

## Conclusion

There have been positive developments resulting from the move to online learning that occurred so rapidly in the past year. Some schools have reported increased performance from some students in an online learning environment and increased engagement with families. Our educational system has evolved and, even when the pandemic is over and in-person instruction is available to everyone, some form of online interaction will be here to stay.

Just like heat and electricity, high-speed internet is the 21st-century utility that every household must have access to, especially those with school-age children. The COVID-19 pandemic did not create the digital divide, but it has exacerbated its impact, especially on underserved communities and households, now that students must "log on to learn." Without substantive, immediate action, these students will be left behind and disconnected from the futures they deserve.