CoSN
LEADING EDUCATION INNOVATION

MEMBER EXCLUSIVE BRIEF

HOMEWORK GAP 2.0
BRIDGING THE GAP

ISSUE RECAP

"The Homework Gap is the cruelest part of the digital divide. We need to bridge this gap and fix this problem. Our kids deserve nothing less and our shared economic future depends on it."

- FCC Commissioner, Jessica Rosenworcel [1]

A 2017 report published by the U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee[2] stated that while access to high-speed internet has improved, the quality of that access varies by state, geography, and community. Of particular concern, approximately 12 million school-aged children lacked access to a broadband connection outside of school creating the Homework Gap. Since the release of this report, new evidence has documented the persistence of this challenge.
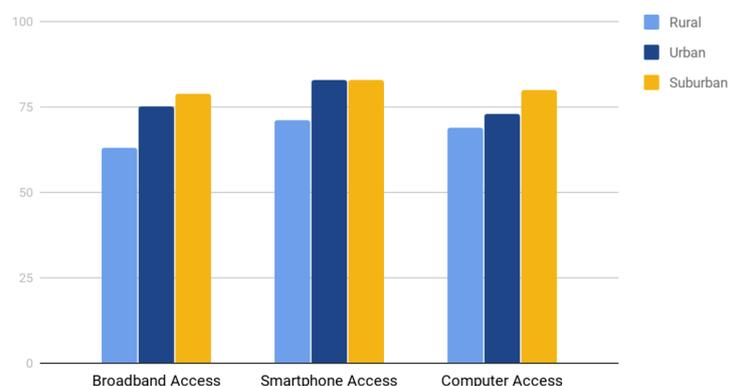
DEMOGRAPHICS OF THE HOMEWORK GAP

In 2019, the Pew Research Center issued two reports documenting digital access gaps across communities and geography. First, in households where families earn less than $30,000 per year, 26% report having only a smartphone; and yet, another 29% do NOT have a smartphone. Additionally, 44% do NOT have broadband access, and 46% do NOT have a laptop or traditional computer[3]. In contrast, 64% of high-income households possess both broadband and access to multiple devices

The inequity of broadband access also spans geography. Individuals in rural communities[4] consistently report lower adoption rates of high-speed Internet, smartphones, and computers as illustrated by the figure to the right.

The ACT Center for Equity in Learning found similar disparities.[5] Based on their survey of students who took the 2017 ACT test, 19% of underserved students - meaning those from either a low-income, low-education attainment, first-generation college, and/or rural household - reported having access to only a single device (most often a smartphone) and insufficient internet at home.

Percentage of Community with Access

Legend: Rural, Urban, Suburban

*Data via the Pew Research Center (2019)
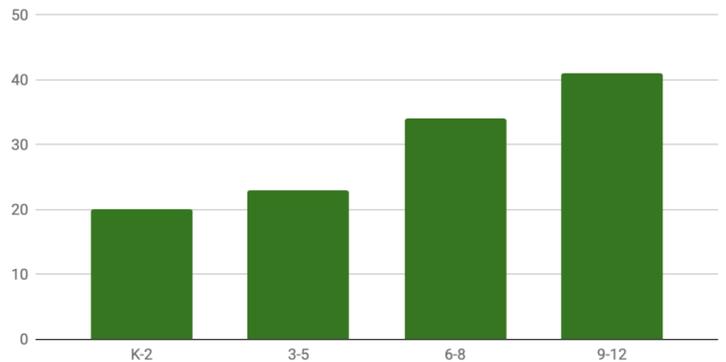
THE INEQUITY OF THE HOMEWORK GAP

Although great strides have been made to provide access to devices and broadband in schools, much work remains once students leave campus. The 2018-19 CoSN Infrastructure Survey[6] found that while 92% of districts reported meeting the FCC's short-term bandwidth goal of 100Mbps per student, less than 10% indicated that their students had access to a non-shared device and sufficient Internet outside of school. At the same time, a 2019 report from Common Sense Media[7] found that a significant percentage of teachers assign homework at least one time per week that requires access.

Percentage of Teachers Who Assign Homework that Requires Internet by Grade Level

*Data via Common Sense Media (2019)

Despite these numbers, 12% of the surveyed teachers reported that at least 60% of their students had NO access to devices and/or the Internet at home. Further, these teachers predominantly represented Title I schools which have high proportions of students of color as well as those living below poverty. Within the Title I population of teachers, however, 42% indicated that they NEVER assign homework requiring technology as compared to 31% of teachers in non-Title I schools. Over 26% of the teachers across all schools believe that limited access to technology limits student learning.

To create equitable learning opportunities for ALL students therefore requires equitable access to technology and high-speed Internet. Beyond just the potential to complete homework assignments, lack of access also thwarts schools from considering new education models such as flipped or blended learning. Echoing the findings from Common Sense Media, the 2018 SETDA[8] report listed off-campus broadband access as a critical condition for creating equitable access to innovative learning opportunities. Finally, the 2019-2020 Driving K-12 Innovation initiative has identified Digital Equity as a major hurdle for the second year in a row. CoSN intends to launch a revised Digital Equity Toolkit[9] in 2020 to continue providing resources that address this challenge.

MEMBER EXCLUSIVE BRIEF

NOTES

1. STATEMENT OF COMMISSIONER JESSICA ROSENWORCEL ON NEW HOMEWORK GAP DATA FROM THE PEW RESEARCH CENTER. Retrieved from https://docs.fcc.gov/public/attachments/DOC-354809A1.pdf
2. U.S. Congress Joint Economic Committee. (2017). America's Digital Divide. Retrieved from https://www.jec.senate.gov/public/_cache/files/ff7b3d0b-bc00-4498-9f9d-3e56ef95088f/the-digital-divide-.pdf
3. Pew Research Center. (2019). Digital divide persists even as lower-income Americans make gains in tech adoption. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/07/digital-divide-persists-even-as-lower-income-americans-make-gains-in-tech-adoption/
4. Pew Research Center. (2019). Digital gap between rural and nonrural America persists. Retrieved from https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/05/31/digital-gap-between-rural-and-nonrural-america-persists/
5. ACT Center for Equity in Learning. (2018). The Digital Divide and Educational Equity: A Look at Students with Very Limited Access to Electronic Devices at Home. Retrieved from https://equityinlearning.act.org/wp-content/themes/voltron/img/tech-briefs/the-digital-divide.pdf
6. CoSN. (2019). 2018-2019 Infrastructure Survey. Retrieved from https://www.cosn.org/Infrastructure
7. Common Sense Media. (2019). The Homework Gap: Teacher Perspectives on Closing the Digital Divide. Retrieved from https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/kids_action/homework-gap-report-2019.pdf
8. Jones, R., Fox, C. (2018). Navigating the Digital Shift 2018: Equitable Opportunities for All Learners. Washington, DC: State Educational Technology Directors Association (SETDA). Retrieved from https://www.setda.org/master/wp-content/uploads/2019/06/SETDA_Navigating_the_Shift-2019_6.4.19.pdf
9. CoSN. (2018). Digital Equity Toolkit: Supporting Students & Families in Out-of-School Learning. Retrieved from https://cosn.org/DEtoolkit

For more on CoSN's Digital Equity resources, visit CoSN.org/DigitalEquity.

This Member Exclusive Brief was written for CoSN's Digital Equity Initiative by Beth Holland, CoSN Project Director.