

## **Bridging the Digital Divide in Altoona, Wisconsin: A Collaborative and Data-Driven Approach**

---

### **Introduction**

The COVID-19 pandemic brought the issue of digital equity into sharp focus, highlighting the critical importance of internet access for education, employment, healthcare, and civic participation. In the School District of Altoona, Wisconsin, a community with diverse demographics and varying levels of digital access, the pandemic underscored the need to address the digital divide within the school system and throughout the broader community.

### **Challenges and Insights**

In 2021, while the School District of Altoona had achieved 1:1 device access for students, it became apparent that more than device availability was needed. Many families still needed reliable internet access, hindering their ability to participate fully in online learning and access essential resources.

To gain a deeper understanding of the digital divide in Altoona, the district used survey data from families to reach out to those with no internet access or inadequate access to online learning. Upon request, hotspots were provided to families during the pandemic, and that program continues.

However, more information was needed to help solve the digital divide because the district was unsure of the main reasons for not having internet at home. The School District of Altoona turned to the CoSN Digital Equity Dashboard, a comprehensive resource developed by the Consortium for School Networking (CoSN). It integrates various national datasets to provide a detailed picture of digital access and equity within a community. The dashboard offers insights into broadband availability, affordability, device ownership, and digital literacy, allowing stakeholders to identify gaps and effectively target interventions.



The dashboard's data, derived from census information and other publicly available sources, revealed significant disparities in internet access based on income level and health status. This data-driven insight sparked a realization that the digital divide extended beyond the school's purview and required a collaborative, community-wide approach.

### **Essential Partnerships**

The School District of Altoona made two key partnerships in response to a better understanding of the data: One with T-Mobile's 10 Million Project and one with the United Way of the Greater Chippewa Valley.

T-Mobile's 10 Million Project provides 100 gig hotspots free to districts for students from low-income families. Once acquired, communication was sent by mail to the homes of eligible families, and the hotspots were programmed and made available for pickup during registration.

Altoona initiated a community-wide team comprising diverse stakeholders from education, healthcare, government, and local businesses, along with the United Way and members of other local organizations whose mission and goals aligned with the challenges revealed by the dashboard. The committee, named the Chippewa Valley Digital Inclusion Partnership (Chip DIP) organized into four subcommittees focused on Education, Affordability, Accessibility, and Trust and Security, each with specific goals and objectives.

**"This data-driven insight sparked a realization that the digital divide extended beyond the school's purview and required a collaborative, community-wide approach."**

## Early Initiatives and Challenges

While early efforts were focused on understanding the community's specific needs and challenges, later work with the Chip DIP subcommittees sought to gather information and promote change in the digital equity landscape of the region. The Affordability subcommittee planned focus groups to gather feedback to define what 'affordable internet' means to residents and to understand the impact of the data.

Engaging the target demographic proved challenging, as many faced barriers to participation due to time constraints, transportation issues, or lack of trust. To address these challenges, the team will continue to partner with local organizations that serve low-income families, such as food pantries and social service agencies, to gather further insight and build trust.

## Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) dissolution

The federal Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) played a crucial role in expanding internet access for low-income households in Altoona and across the United States. By providing subsidies for broadband service and connected devices, the ACP helped bridge the digital divide for many families, enabling them to participate in online learning, access healthcare resources, and engage in the digital economy during the COVID-19 pandemic. The discontinuation of the ACP, caused by a lack of re-funding, is reigniting the urgency of finding alternative sustainable internet access solutions.

### District Quick Facts:

**Enrollment:** 1891 students

**District area:** 14.79 sq. miles

**Number of Buildings:** 5 (4K, elementary, intermediate, middle school, high school)

**Low socioeconomic status:** 36%

**Students with disabilities:** 17%

**Families without internet access at home:** 14% (Of the families with internet access at home, 8% do not have high-speed internet access.)

## Early Wins and Long-Term Strategies

Despite the challenges, the team identified several early wins. The focus groups are expected to provide crucial data on affordability, which would inform advocacy efforts with local internet service providers (ISPs) and guide decisions about future interventions. The School District of Altoona recognized the potential impact of ensuring that graduating seniors from low-income families receive a hotspot from T-Mobile, which renews with 100 gigs of data per year for five years, thus maintaining access to the internet during their transition to further education or the workforce.

To sustain its efforts, the School District of Altoona plans to continue partnering with Chip DIP and other local agencies to seek grant funding for hotspots and explore innovative solutions like mesh LTE networks or community wireless to expand access. The data collected will be leveraged to advocate for more affordable internet options from ISPs and continue its engagement in state and national digital equity initiatives.

With funding for ACP ending, continued access to this data from the CoSN Digital Equity Dashboard will also be important to see how the digital equity landscape changes in the coming years.

## Conclusion

The School District of Altoona's collaborative and data-driven approach to digital equity is a promising model for other communities. By leveraging the CoSN Digital Equity Dashboard, the district gained valuable insights that spurred a partnership with the United Way and formed a community-wide team. This collaborative effort, grounded in data and a shared commitment to equity, is poised to make a lasting impact on bridging the digital divide in Altoona and ensuring that all students and residents can thrive in the digital age.



**[COSN.ORG](https://www.cosn.org)**