Today’s divide is much more subtle, centering on participation and teacher preparation.

By James Michael Brodie
he advent of the Internet in the mid-1990s led to numerous conversations about who would be able to tap into the new technology. Who would be in? Who would be left out? Critics foresaw only the rich having access, while the poor in urban and rural communities would end up on the outside looking in. Much has changed from that time, when the phrase “digital divide” was coined to describe the gap in equity between those who had access to computers and the Internet and those who did not.

Today, the digital divide is more subtle. Technology is more widespread, fueled by dramatic leaps in innovation in homes, workplaces, and schools. Today’s divide is also less about “if” a student has access than “when” and for “how long.” There is a difference, experts argue, between getting online at the local library—provided one still exists in the neighborhood—and developing a lifestyle that incorporates the technology. When a child only gets to surf, even at school—where there are time limits, filters blocking access to certain sites, and a paucity of space for storing data—many are starting well behind.

Responding to this reality, President Barack Obama has made expanding access to high-speed Internet a priority, outlining an $18 billion plan to blanket 98 percent of the nation with high-speed mobile broadband connections over five years. Obama has said that networks with at least 10 megabit-per-second download speeds are key to competing economically with countries that have cutting-edge Internet services, such as South Korea and Germany.

Rural Woes
Elementary principal David M. Hanson sees the challenges of the digital divide firsthand. “We definitely have families whose income dictates their ability to be an active player in the digital world,” said Hanson, who is principal of Wyndmere Public School in North Dakota. “We have students who have to complete their assignments in school [and] who have no electronic resources to do so at home. They feel the most pressure as our school moves toward becoming less paper and more electronic.”

Hanson, whose rural school serves about 220 K-6 students, is also the school’s technology coordinator, a post he has held for 20 years. Over that time, he has forged television classroom collaborations with schools in Arizona and Texas. He said a key challenge facing his school is access. “To be honest with you, I was surprised that I still have patrons with that low level of connectivity,” he said. Many of his students can’t complete electronic assignments at home because they only have dial-up connections.

At Blackwater Community School, a rural elementary school on the Gila River Indian Reservation near Coolidge, Arizona, the digital divide is a major concern due to sparse funding and limited home Web access. Over the years, the school has purchased Smart Boards and some classroom computers. But it still doesn’t have enough to serve the needs of its students. “The school is heavily impacted by sequestration because of its federal status and funding from Impact Aid,” said Blackwater Superintendent/Principal Jacqueline L. Power.

Power said that with assessments for the Common Core State Standards (CCSS) looming, she fears her school will not have sufficient computers or student experience to be ready. “Most of the families do not have computers or Internet in their homes,” she says. “This is a serious issue for Native American students.”

Access vs. Participation
“Some scholars argue that we’re moving from an ‘access gap’ of computers in schools to a ‘participation gap,’ that is, the ability to use tools to learn and participate in communities,” said
Digital Disparities
Who has access to broadband internet?

» 70% of urban households
» 57% of rural households
» 87% of Asian households
» 72% of Caucasian households
» 57% of Latino households
» 55% of African American households
» 93% of households with incomes over $100,000
» 43% of households with incomes below $25,000

1/2 of all households in the lowest income category do not have a computer.

Source: Exploring the Digital Nation: Computer and Internet Use At Home, 2011 report by the Economics and Statistics Administration and the National Telecommunications and Information Administration.

David Cooper Moore, an educator and documentary filmmaker with the Center for Media and Information Literacy at Temple University.

Moore said that given the external pressures of standardized testing and assessment, scholars say it is important to find a number of ways to engage teachers in a variety of media forms that will be measured to assess school performance.

There are several barriers to schools integrating technology: motivation, support issues and a lack of tools, and teachers who may not be prepared or knowledgeable about technology. As you work to increase access and participation in your school community—regardless of the student demographics—consider the following.

■ Often, students are more cyber savvy than the adults charged with teaching them. And the number of social sites aimed at children under 13 is growing, including Everloop, YourSphere, Togetherville.com, WhatsWhat.me, and National Geographic’s AnimalJam.com to name a few. Make sure that your school’s technology goals include professional development for teachers.

■ Research, research, research.
Avoid vendors looking to make a “quick buck” off of new technology. Do your homework on new purchases as well as online resources so that you acquire reputable sources that are teacher tested. Train yourself and your staff to critically filter the plethora of online resources.

■ Don’t be star struck by the next big thing. By avoiding technology that has a short shelf life, you can be ready to adapt and adjust as the technology changes. And realize that technology integration is not a one-time cost, but rather an investment over time—a paradigm shift.

Schools that are successfully bridging the gap are doing so by planning and training the adults to get them on board before an initiative can get off the floor. “My school is far from where we need to be,” said Hanson. “But I feel good that we are in the game and not just watching from the sidelines.”

James Michael Brodie is an author and freelance education writer in Baltimore, Maryland.