The growing ubiquity of Internet access and pervasive use of online information has changed the learning landscape forever. Students continue to benefit from enhanced connectivity throughout the formal school day, thanks to a $1.5 billion increase in E-rate funding in late 2014. However, demand and expectations for learning outside of the school day are on the rise, and there are still many students struggling to complete homework online, causing a challenging homework gap.

Students deserve equal access to digital resources—anywhere, anytime.

By Keith Krueger and Jayne James
Equity:
DMI. Central blog quotes Federal Communications Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel as saying, “Data suggests seven in 10 teachers now assign homework that requires Internet access. But, the FCC’s data about broadband says that one in three households doesn’t have access to the Internet. So, think about where those numbers overlap because that’s the homework gap.”

Successfully completed homework and flipped classroom learning is directly dependent on access within the home—at best—or throughout the community if a home connection isn’t currently available. Broadband access and adoption in cities, regional communities, and small towns continue to lag for certain population segments, including low-income and rural communities.

The Pew Research Center conducted an analysis of the U.S. Census Bureau’s 2013 American Community Survey and found that an estimated 5 million households with school-aged children do not have high-speed Internet service at home. Low-income households, especially black and Hispanic households, make up a disproportionate share of that 5 million. The under-connection of low-income families is a real issue.

Clearly, there is a great deal of work that needs to be done to narrow this inequitable gap. This issue constitutes a new civil right: the right to digital equity; the right to connect to needed resources—anywhere, anytime. This is a civil right that cannot be achieved by school leaders alone. A holistic approach will ensure that school-aged children aren’t reduced to little, or no access. It calls for community leadership that is connected and collaborative.

Despite these inequities, there is also good news: Pioneering educators are working in this space with others to lessen the gap. They are collaborating to provide three key components for digital equity within the community:

1. **Computing devices**—Many students and parents have a smartphone, yet it is tedious and, for some, impossible to read, write, and interact with several digital learning resources. Limits on family data plans can be an issue as well.

2. **Broadband access at school, home, and within the community**—It’s imperative to have access to learning resources provided on the Internet.

3. **Services to ensure community members have digital literacy skills**—Students and parents need basic skills on how to connect with pertinent content, interact with others, and how to search for and find needed resources.
Why It Matters

The rapid acceleration and adoption of digital content for learning is a pressing catalyst for digital equity. The Consortium for School Networking’s 2016 IT Leadership Survey found that at least 50 percent of learning resources and content are expected to be digital within the next three years. And results from ASCD and OverDrive’s Digital Content Goes to School survey reveals that 80 percent of administrators surveyed are using some type of digital content within their schools, with another 9 percent planning to implement digital content in the next year or so. Administrators responded that the top three benefits for using digital content are the ability to deliver individualized instruction; allow students to practice independently; and capture greater student attention/engagement, empowering students to take charge of their own learning.

Formal learning aside, children and adults throughout the world look to the Internet when they have questions; they “Google it.” Google now processes more than 40,000 search queries every second on average. That’s a lot, and that number is infinitely on the rise. With that growth comes the threat and reality of the widening gap for those who currently don’t have access, nor the ability to connect. Whether they need to know pertinent information for formal learning, how to fix a leaky faucet, or seek advice on where to eat dinner, the ever-present access to the Internet and digital literacy skills give students a distinct learning advantage.

Digital Equity Leadership in Action

Today we see innovative school leaders and students working in collaboration with community leaders and organizations to narrow the access gap and bring digital equity to their communities. Collectively they have a greater capacity to gather and leverage resources to provide creative and effective solutions to the gap. While every community differs in size, they all should be inclusive and expansive when considering potential partners and goal-setting for digital equity. Here are some snapshots of community leadership in action on behalf of digital equity.

1. District and Mayoral Partnership. When Paul Dakin was superintendent of Revere Public Schools in Massachusetts, he teamed up with then-Mayor Daniel Rizzo to accomplish together what individual agencies might not have been able to achieve alone. Strategies identified to address digital equity include allowing access to computer labs before and after school, working with the public library to provide community access and literacy programs, and working with community businesses to get its businesses online. Revere was recognized as one of three winning cities for its student-led effort in the Getting Your Business Online Competition.

2. Students, Parents, District, University, and Community Effort. In North Carolina’s Charlotte-Mecklenburg School District, students are playing a major role in igniting a communitywide effort to provide student access to both computers and broadband outside of the school day. Franny Millen is only 13 but she’s already created E2D (Eliminate the Digital Divide), her own nonprofit that is closing the digital divide in Davidson and Cornelius, North Carolina. She quickly and convincingly partnered with parents, her school district, the mayor, and corporations in addition to school leaders. Together, their collective impact is making strong headway.

3. Community-Based Organization. Connecting for Good, which has been bridging the digital divide since 2011, is the only Kansas City-area nonprofit that has digital inclusion as its core mission. It provides wireless mesh networks,
community technology centers, low-cost refurbished PCs, and free digital-life-skills classes. Local school districts can benefit from partnering with like local organizations that believe connectivity equals opportunity. Its website states, “Access to the Internet brings with it a chance to apply for jobs online, connections with family and friends, access to virtual library shelves, information about medical and health issues, online education—GED completion and college courses—and a whole lot more.”

Federal programs are tackling the issue of connectivity as well. For example, through Connect Home, the Department of Housing and Urban Development is collaborating with EveryoneOn and US Ignite to build local partnerships and gather commitments that will increase Internet access for low-income Americans. According to Connect Home’s website, these partnerships will bring broadband, technical assistance, and digital literacy training to students living in public and assisted housing across America.

And since 1985, the Federal Communication Commission’s Lifeline program has provided a discount on phone service for qualifying low-income Americans to ensure opportunities and security that phone service brings, such as being able to connect to jobs, family, and emergency services. In 2016, the FCC included broadband as a support service in the Lifeline program.

**What You Can Do**

Want to get started on digital equity today? Here are four, concrete actions steps you can take immediately to make an impact:

1. **Survey, survey, survey.** Assess what’s available within the community and take stock—school by school, in local libraries, and family by family—to find out what kinds of devices and connections, if any, people have at home.

2. **Engage your community.** Get together with other educators as well as community and business leaders and philanthropists to brainstorm and develop community solutions for closing the homework gap.

3. **Ensure sustainability through community assets.** Partners must work together to ensure that the energy to address digital equity now has long-term staying power.

4. **Consider out-of-the-box solutions and rethink how connectivity could be accessed.** For example, the Coachella Valley Unified School District in California, one of the poorest districts in the nation, provides Wi-Fi on its school buses. The buses, equipped with solar panels, are parked overnight in the most under-served communities so that students can have Internet access 24/7.

As educational leaders, you work hard within your buildings to support learning throughout the day. Providing access to key digital resources outside of the school day is quickly becoming a necessity. This is a tall order; don’t tackle the task in isolation. The power of collaboration and the leveraging of existing assets will take you far.

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