

BRINGING BROADBAND HOME:

HOW SCHOOL DISTRICTS CAN HELP CONNECT STUDENTS WITH HIGH-SPEED INTERNET NOW

JUNE 2021

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With unprecedented attention and resources to address the digital divide, we stand at a critical juncture. It will take years for necessary broadband infrastructure to be built and for increased provider competition to take hold. But school districts have an immediate opportunity to connect their students and families to incoming federal and state resources and ensure all students have broadband internet at home when they return to school in the fall. To ensure this, districts must:

1. identify household-level need;
2. use school lunch program data to pre-qualify families for subsidized broadband internet; and
3. create school-level systems to connect all families to broadband programs and partners.

High-speed internet is essential -- for homework, school assignments, healthcare, employment and more. We cannot tolerate continued digital inequity and must seize this opportunity to address it for students for the upcoming 2021-22 school year.

THE DIGITAL EQUITY IMPERATIVE

If we have learned anything in education over the past 15 months, it is that access to high-quality internet is as essential to schooling as textbooks, desks and other materials. However, even after more than a year of mostly remote learning, one in five California households with K-12 students told the [Census Bureau](#) in late March they don't consistently have the internet access needed for virtual school. The situation is particularly troubling for students of color: [UCLA researchers](#) estimated that Black and Latinx students are 30-40% less likely to have robust access to the internet. Some progress has been made, particularly with emergency measures led by such school districts as LA Unified to purchase devices and hotspots for students, but even in Los Angeles, [recent data](#) suggests that 24% of students participating in distance learning are using internet that is below the FCC's (relatively low) standard of 25 Megabits per second (Mbps). This means that robust live learning with teachers, counselors and other students is still not feasible for tens of thousands of students in Los Angeles. As such, students of color and students experiencing

poverty have been systematically disenfranchised yet again by a system of schooling that privileges those with greater access and resources.

Even after students return to campus, high-quality home internet is necessary to continue learning. Teaching and learning have adapted to the digital environment and unlocked new opportunities for students who are connected. It would not serve students well to try to revert back to approaches that do not leverage these tools. Moreover, families need high-quality internet access to participate in critical services and opportunities, including healthcare, employment, continuing education and civic life.

The good news is that the long-standing fight for digital equity has new resources and commitments from local, state and federal leaders, with billions of new dollars flowing into the system to address broadband access. Most immediately, school districts have an opportunity to connect their students and families to these resources in time for the fall semester. The time to act is now.

THE AFFORDABILITY CHALLENGE

The key barrier for students in Los Angeles is affordability. Broadband infrastructure is a fundamental issue, particularly in rural areas, but the biggest issue for most unconnected and under-connected households is cost. A [2021 survey](#) of California households by USC and California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) found that 68% of households that didn't have an internet connection cited cost as a principal reason (compared to 34% who said it wasn't available where they lived).

Internet service providers (ISPs) operate as lightly regulated monopolies in much of the state. According to an [analysis](#) of California Public Utilities Commission data by Dr. Hernan Galperin, Associate Professor of Communication at USC's Annenberg School of Communication, only about half of Californians had a choice of high-speed internet service providers. The problem is greatest in low-income communities of color, which often have only one provider. Without strong competition, regulation or incentive to serve low-income communities, internet providers maximize profits by offering lower-quality service at higher prices.

Discounted internet service offers remain inaccessible to most families. No public data exists for how many

families are currently served by subsidized internet plans, as ISPs fervently resist transparency on this. However, according to the USC-CETF survey, 62% of unconnected or smartphone-only households are not even aware of discount internet plans. Additionally, the Partnership's [earlier research](#) has documented the many barriers that families face in trying to access these plans. Far too many families are unable to afford high-quality internet service, so they remain unconnected, or struggle to pay for market-rate plans that are not sustainable for their finances, exacerbating the inequities already permeating our education system.

New resources are available

Billions of federal relief dollars are flowing into California from recent legislation. In addition to more general allocations that can be used to support broadband, Congress has established two specific programs — Emergency Broadband Benefit and E-rate — to support internet adoption.

The bottom line is that an influx of substantial resources are on the way to address internet access and affordability.

Billions of relief dollars are available:

**\$3.2
BILLION**

was allocated to the Emergency Broadband Benefit program to provide low-income households with \$50 monthly subsidies for broadband internet.

**\$7.2
BILLION**

was added to the E-rate program to reimburse school districts 100% of the cost of home connectivity purchases for K-12 households through one year after the formal end to the pandemic.

Additionally, billions more have been proposed:

**\$2
TRILLION**

President Joe Biden's \$2 trillion infrastructure plan includes \$100 billion for broadband.

**\$7
BILLION**

Governor Newsom's May 2021 budget proposal includes a \$7 billion investment in broadband.

Will the funds reach the families and students who need them?

These resources are welcome news, but the same barriers that have long stood in the way of families experiencing poverty still remain. For the [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#) for example, families will need to find the opportunity, apply for it by providing required documentation that they may not have, and then navigate

processes set up by ISPs through whom the benefit is being managed. For the majority of families who face long-standing barriers to accessing government services, these benefits will likely remain out of reach. Even the decades-old Lifeline telephone program only reaches [27% of eligible households](#), for example. However, concerted and targeted efforts could make an impact, which is where school districts like LA Unified come in.

THE OPPORTUNITY FOR SCHOOL DISTRICTS

School districts have three critical resources that are needed to reach underserved families with broadband internet access:

- data on which students need support to access broadband internet;
- data on which students qualify for resources to address affordability issues; and
- relationships and capacity to help students access the resources they are entitled to.

Data on which students need support to access broadband internet

Very little public data exists to pinpoint household-level internet access, speed and reliability. Internet providers, claiming the need to protect their business from competitors, have resisted transparency on which households are currently served and which need service. Census data and Public Utilities Commission data only show census-tract level data, which regularly counts as “connected” any neighborhood that has at least one household with access to broadband. This paucity of clear data makes it very difficult for targeted outreach, support and resources to reach the students and families who need it most.



THE PARTNERSHIP’S “STUDENTS CONNECTED” PROGRAM HAS ENABLED US TO SPONSOR QUALITY BROADBAND SERVICE (50 MBPS DOWNLOAD, 5 MBPS UPLOAD) FOR 450 FAMILIES AT NO COST TO THEM.

School districts, however, have data from the 2020-21 school year that can be used to identify specific households that need more support. LA Unified, in response to a [resolution](#) on the digital divide, has created a stellar [dataset](#) using student connectivity data for over 333,000 unique students during remote learning. This dataset will allow the district to analyze speed, reliability, type of device and ISP for students across the district. It provides an amazing opportunity to identify geographic areas where connection is lacking, and to identify student-level need so that support can be targeted. Districts can also sign data exchange agreements with ISPs to obtain data on which providers currently serve which student

households, and which additional households can be served by each provider. The Partnership’s [“Students Connected” program](#) has enabled us to sponsor quality broadband service (50 Mbps download, 5 Mbps upload) for 450 families at no cost to them. By negotiating a direct agreement with an internet provider, we received address-specific data on which students can and can’t be served, and removed the biggest barriers to access by paying for the service. More broadly, the [“K-12 Bridge to Broadband”](#) data exchange program facilitated by Education Superhighway has established data sharing agreements with ISPs across the nation that districts can leverage.

Data on which students qualify for resources to address affordability issues

One of the most challenging barriers families face in trying to access affordable internet is demonstrating their eligibility for service. To qualify for subsidized internet, families must submit paperwork to prove their low-income status or other eligibility qualifications. While not insurmountable, this barrier makes everything more complicated and can enable internet providers to [deny or obscure subsidized service](#). Furthermore, it is unnecessary. Government agencies already have this eligibility information and could pre-qualify families so that all they need to do is show identification. School districts can pre-qualify low-income families for benefits based on school lunch programs. Instead of putting the burden of proof on families, school districts could verify eligibility for all students who qualify for free and reduced-price lunch, which in Los Angeles is over 80% of students.

Relationships and capacity to help students access the resources they are entitled to

Lastly, schools can play a critical role in connecting students and families to programs and partners who can help them get connected to broadband internet. We envision as part of the return to school in the fall that all students and families will meet with school staff and community partners to check-in on needs (including internet needs) and connect families to resources that can help. Leveraging the existing relationships and trust with school staff and partners, schools can play a critical role in serving the holistic needs of communities. With respect to broadband access, this is a crucial opportunity to connect families to the [Emergency Broadband Benefit](#), to school-provided devices, to sponsored internet programs like our Students Connected program, to digital literacy programs, or to other partners who can support their needs. By playing the role of connecting and supporting families to access resources, schools can ensure that all students have high-speed internet at home.

What districts can do now

To make this a reality, school districts must act now so that systems are in place in time for the start of the fall 2021 semester. Specifically, we urge districts to:

- Conduct needs assessments using student-level engagement data from distance learning to identify under-connected students (as LA Unified has [done](#))
- Negotiate data exchange agreements with ISPs to obtain data on which students can be served by which providers
- Establish sponsored service agreements with ISPs using E-rate funds to procure internet for families most in need (like the Partnership's Students Connected program)
- Rollout information and outreach tools that schools and partners can use to raise awareness and streamline access to the Emergency Broadband Benefit and other resources
- Make eligibility for subsidized internet programs automatic for students by streamlining process and making verification information readily available to families and schools
- Share student-level data on under-connected students with schools so that schools can target outreach and support
- Establish school and community-level systems and teams that collaborate with district family engagement and technology teams in connecting students and families to available resources
- Collect and monitor data throughout the school year so that supports can be adjusted and intensified as needed to reach remaining under-connected students

CONCLUSION

The digital divide is a complicated problem that must be addressed with resources and reform at the federal, state and local levels. It will take years for necessary broadband infrastructure to be built and for increased competition to take hold. However, we see an immediate opportunity for school districts to leverage their existing assets to ensure all students have broadband internet at home when they return to school in the fall. By identifying household-level need, using school lunch program data to pre-qualify families for subsidized broadband internet, and by creating school-level systems to connect all families to broadband programs and partners, by fall 2021 school districts can realistically ensure that all students have the high-speed internet at home they need for learning.



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partnershipla.org | [f](#) [t](#) [@](#)PartnershipLA

1055 Wilshire Blvd, Suite 1850 | Los Angeles, CA 90017 | (213) 201-2000