What is Digital Equity in K-12 Schools?

Everyone deserves access to broadband technologies, yet these technologies often aren't affordable—or even physically accessible—to many. And even with a device and internet access, a computer and broadband connection are useless without the right digital skills.

According to **The National Digital Inclusion Alliance**, Digital Equity is "a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services." According to The National Digital Inclusion Alliance, Digital Equity is "a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services."

The current reality is that millions of students lack reliable high-speed internet service in their homes. And while many families rely on mobile phones and capped data plans to keep costs low, this is seldom enough.

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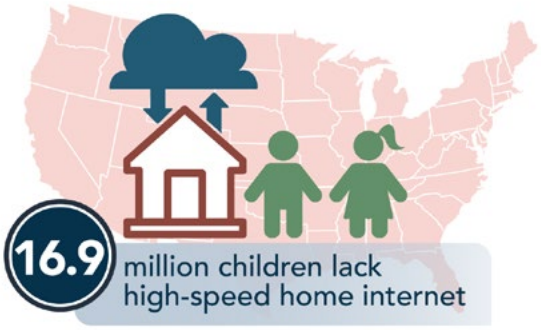
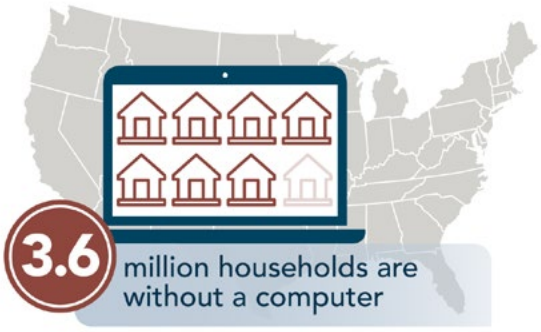
Inequity by Numbers

Recent data from **Future Ready Schools** shows that 16.9 million children lack high-speed home internet, and 3.6 million households are without a computer. And according to e-Stewards, 96.5% of all students are required to complete homework assignments online but 1 in 5 are disconnected and unable to participate in the digital environment due to cost.





The **Consortium for School Networking's Driving K–12 Innovation: 2021 Hurdles + Accelerators report** describes digital equity as three interrelated concepts:

- Digital foundations;
- Learning conditions; and,
- Meaningful learning opportunities.

When students lack devices, they lose valuable opportunities to hone the critical thinking inherent to technology use. Consequently, they are at a disadvantage when entering some of the fastest-growing job markets, such as data analytics and AI specialist fields.

Educator and IT Concerns

CoSN's **The State of Edtech Leadership 2021 Survey Report** asked education IT professionals if their concerns regarding students' home access to devices and the internet had increased since the pandemic, and the overwhelming majority (97%) of respondents said yes. Respondents highlighted digital equity as their third most pressing concern. Only 6% of respondents worked in districts where all students had broadband access at home.

Currently, 95% of respondents are providing off-campus services of some kind, as opposed to 51% in 2020. Nearly a third (30%) work with their communities to provide WiFi hotspots compared to 19% in 2020, and more than a quarter (27%) provide home access via free or subsidized programs to low-income families, more than doubling the prior year's rate of 10%.

Meanwhile, many districts that had 1:1 programs in place found the devices to be "woefully underpowered" to meet the demands of video streaming and collaboration tools.

The pandemic served to highlight to the broader public what school district leaders have known for years—the enormous disadvantages created by the lack of broadband access. This increased awareness will hopefully translate into actions that will bring connectivity into all homes, removing the disadvantages that the lack of internet access places on students and their families serve as a model for others.

Creating a Digital Equity Mindset

The pandemic has required schools to implement online learning initiatives, which has amplified existing digital inequities. To create strategies to overcome these and other inequities, CoSN suggests **implementing student surveys** to get a better understanding of at-home internet access, and nurturing teacher-student relationships to better support digital equity in and outside of the classroom. To prepare for **Dyknow's Remote Learning Summit in April 2021**, the organization asked K-12 educators their most pressing questions regarding online learning, including:

- How are you addressing equity with online learning?
- How do you provide meaningful online/remote instruction to families without technology or cellular service?
- How do you handle online learning when students within one classroom have varying levels of access to technology?

While digital equity has often focused on increasing access to computers and the internet, access to hardware and connectivity does not necessarily lead to deep engagement or learning. Inequity is a perfect storm of: inadequate access to computers inside schools due to a shortage of computers, outdated software, or computers earmarked for other purposes; a lack of teachers and staff who are willing and trained to incorporate digital tools into their everyday activities; and limited access to computers and robust reliable internet for student-use outside of school hours.

Digital Inclusion —which ensures that all individuals and communities can utilize Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs)—requires access to: affordable, robust broadband internet service; Internet-enabled devices that meet the needs of the user; digital literacy training; and applications and online content designed to enable self-sufficiency and participation.

Classroom Strategies

Digital equity supports social-emotional learning because there is no true SEL (Social and Emotional Learning) without equity. Districts providing resources should ensure that the tools and content represent their students and what they want students to learn. In short, K–12 leaders must aim to provide the best and most equitable experiences to their students. Digital equity is achieved when educational technology is used effectively to benefit the students and enhance the lessons. Only then can SEL be taught in a meaningful and beneficial way.

Common Sense Media released the research report, **The Common Sense Census: Inside the 21st-Century Classroom**. Nearly a third of teachers surveyed said that if their students didn't have access to a computer or the internet that it would limit student learning a "great deal" or "quite a bit".

These findings led to the following **four practical ways of bringing digital equity to the classroom**.

- Recognizing the current technology capabilities of students and their concerns. How many have computers at home? How many of those computers have access to a high-speed network? Where do students access the internet if they can't do it at home?
- Before giving assignments on a new platform or app, try it out beforehand. This will help circumvent possible frustrations while providing insight into what students will experience.

- Create a tech equity vision with your students. Begin with questions such as, "What do we use technology in the classroom for?"; "How do we want technology to help us learn?"; and "What are some challenges you face using technology in and out of school?".
- Reconsider homework policies. For example, if there is a "No Late Work" policy and a student can't submit online at home due to lack of access, they would fail that assignment, regardless of the work they did.

Taking Equity Home

Teachers are increasingly integrating technology into daily curricula. As a result, students have become more reliant on computers and the internet to complete homework. A disparity—referred to as the "homework gap"—occurs when students with home internet and device access have advantages over other students in completing school assignments.

As technology integration in student learning at home increases, we need to consider the diversity of students and their families. This includes identifying and addressing how to support student homes lacking adequate internet, with limited devices, or with less digital skill and experience.

Students with home internet have more time and flexibility compared with students without home internet access, who are often dependent on a smartphone data plan, or who rely on school technology labs, libraries, or local businesses. Students with slower internet speeds or limited mobile data plans have limitations on the online assignments and instruction they can do from home. Additionally, students without access to enough devices in their homes may need to share devices with other family members.

Equal to the Task

Teachers with a digital equity mindset can support learners in fully participating in educational opportunities, society, and economy. Universal access to technology alone is insufficient to achieve digital equity. However, by recognizing barriers to device and internet access for students and their parents; understanding digital equity strategies to improve learning and communication; and identifying resources to support technology integration in the classroom for all learners, educators can do much to bring equity to their physical and online classrooms.

Incorporating digital tools into a school-wide culture and recognizing that students from varying backgrounds bring diverse experiences, skills, and digital identities to their schooling. With heightened sensitivity to student needs and knowledge about digital tools and their commitment to incorporating digital tools into classroom activities, practitioners are in strategic positions to support students in meaningful ways.

View Additional Resources

Check out the rest of the Digital Equity tools and resources on the **K-12 Blueprint**.