

Education Week

A Third of K-12 Students Aren't Adequately Connected for Remote Learning, Report Says

By [Mark Lieberman](#) on June 29, 2020 3:52 PM



Prior to the pandemic, between 15 and 16 million U.S. students out of **50 million total** lived in a household that lacked either Internet access, a digital device, or both, according to a new report from Common Sense Media.

The same was true for between 300,000 and 400,000 public school teachers, or slightly less than one out of every ten nationwide.

The majority of those 15 to 16 million students—between 55 and 60 percent—lacked both an internet connection *and* a digital device, the report says.

These significant gaps call for a massive investment from the federal government, the report argues: "The cost of closing the digital divide for K-12 public school students ranges from \$6 billion to \$11 billion in the first year, and up to an additional \$1 billion for teachers."

Those numbers exceed ed-tech groups' demands **this spring** for federal relief on digital divide issues.

The report adds statistical context to the challenges many educators witnessed during several months of school shutdowns for COVID-19 this spring. Some teachers were **forced to work in school parking lots** or empty buildings because they didn't have access at home, leading to some arguments that schools **ought to pay** for teachers' at-home internet usage. A **complex tangle of federal and state regulations** prevents some jurisdictions from expanding Internet access, and states have been working on **creative approaches** to addressing the issues.

Here's a bit more on what's in the full report, which is also available [here](#).

How did Common Sense Media get these numbers?

The organization synthesized existing federal, state, and school district data, as well as information from surveys and company press releases.

What are the caveats to keep in mind?

It's notoriously difficult to reliably gauge Internet access gaps in the United States, thanks to **incomplete data collection from the Federal Communications Commission**. The pandemic adds another wrinkle: With increased attention on Internet access gaps, some service providers have stepped in to offer temporary service to households, and many school districts have scrambled to meet students' **digital device needs**.

The precise scale of the "digital divide" is constantly in flux. It also doesn't account for nuances like three-child households where children have to share devices during the school day, or technical glitches that keep the internet service from running consistently at its maximum capacity. Access to a device and an Internet connection do not guarantee that learning can efficiently, reliably occur.

How do these numbers break down along geographic and demographic lines?

The states with the lowest proportion of adequately connected students are concentrated in the southern and western parts of the United States in Louisiana, Mississippi, New Mexico, and Oklahoma. Those states have a high concentration of rural areas or tribal lands, which generally struggle for broadband access. All 50 states, though, have a substantial percentage of residents who aren't adequately connected for remote learning.

Here's the breakdown of broadband access by race:

- White: 18 percent of households with at least one K-12 student lack connection
- Latinx: 26 percent
- Black: 30 percent
- Native American: 35 percent

What at-home setup qualifies as viable for remote learning?

The report breaks down the "adequately connected" distinction into four categories:

- High-speed broadband access
- Access to an internet-enabled device
- Instructional content
- Support from teachers and counselors

Households that have access to cellular networks but not broadband service count as adequately connected, but schools should keep in mind that those services often come with limits on the amount of data users can access monthly, according to the report.

What should schools be doing now?

The report urges policymakers to rapidly invest billions of dollars toward closing the digital divide and providing more access to technology for students, as the possibility of widespread remote learning this fall and beyond **continues to loom**.

In the meantime, the report urges districts to make a three- to five-year plan for how they'll expand technology access over time, whether switching from hotspots to lower-cost broadband options, or scaling up the supply of digital devices.

Education groups ought to team up to find ways for districts to share resources and help improve their communities' infrastructure using collective power. Part of that is acknowledging the ways non-white students, rural students, and low-income students bear the brunt of the gaps in technology access.

"This is an opportunity to rethink how to support students and families to weather the crisis, and level the playing field between those with full access and those without," the report says.