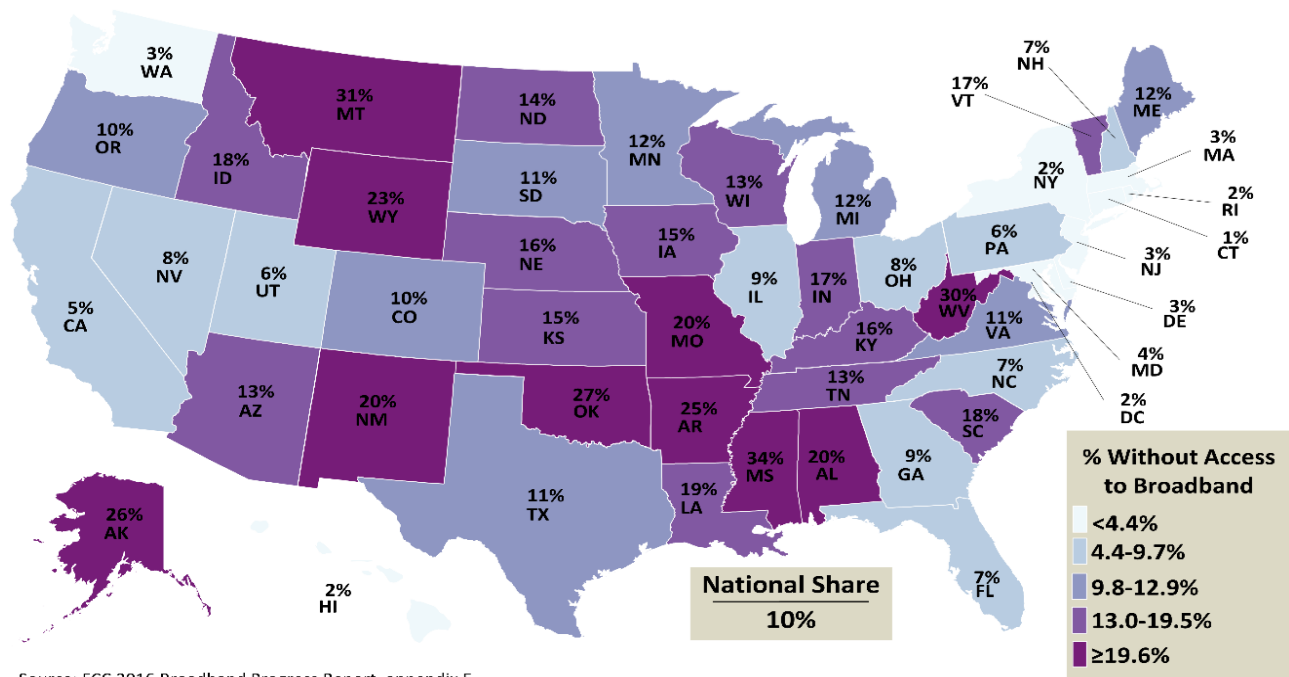


Internet Disparity Challenges Schooling for All

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In an age when access to the Internet is a fundamental part of work, learning, and communicating, schools have adopted the Internet as another vehicle for teaching using remote or online education. The importance of Internet access as a critical feature of schooling became clear as schools shifted from face-to-face instruction to digital instruction in response to school closures as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Districts across the nation closed their schools and turned to online learning, making the assumption that most students would be able to participate in online instruction. Yet, universal access to the Internet eludes many. The digital divide continues, fueled mainly by economic factors, leading to disparate impacts on communities of color, immigrants, and second-language learners. This CAL commentary explores the condition of Internet disparity as it affects English learners (ELs).

Residents Without Access to Broadband



Source: FCC 2016 Broadband Progress Report, appendix E

Note: Broadband is defined as fixed internet with download speeds of 25 Mbps or greater and upload speeds of 3 Mbps or greater; percent shown is the share of rural residents within the state that do not have access to at least one service provider that meets that definition; rural is defined based on 2010 census data.

Lack of Access

The digital divide affects marginalized communities most directly and promotes the reproduction of inequality (Prescott, 2020). Black and Hispanic Americans lag behind their white counterparts in broadband adoption; 44% of adults in households making under \$30,000 don't have home broadband; and more than 31% of rural Americans do not have access to broadband at home (*Washington Post* Editorial Board, 2020). A Pew Research report found that "some 15% of U.S. households with school-age children do not have a high-speed Internet connection at home" (Anderson & Perrin, 2018, para. 1). A survey from Pew Research Center also shows that some teens are more likely to face digital hurdles when trying to complete their homework (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). Students living in low-income households are about five times as likely to lack a high-speed Internet connection as their counterparts in middle-income homes (Anderson & Perrin, 2018). Living without an in-home broadband connection leads to challenges for students who may not be able to benefit from digital curricula or develop digital skills for the workplace. Similar challenges extend to schools and school districts that serve clusters of unconnected households.

Districts across the nation recognize that a substantial number of students lack Internet access. For example:

- The District of Columbia public school system estimated that about 30% of its 52,000 students lack Internet access or computers at home (Stein, 2020).
- In the Los Angeles Unified School District, as many as 100,000 students lack access to the Internet at home. The superintendent, Austin Beutner, said: "We must find a way for all students to continue to learn while schools are closed" (as quoted in Nagel, 2020).
- In Colorado, 54,000 students don't have Internet access at home, making the basic logistics of remote learning a nightmare. A study found that among those 54,000 children, more than 40,000 were Hispanic. Based on a study by Colorado State University's Futures Center, "Children in households without Internet are disproportionately Hispanic, younger and from lower income households" (Hernandez, 2020).
- Data from the National Digital Inclusion Alliance showed that in 462 U.S. cities, at least 20% of households are unconnected (Callahan, 2019).

It is clear from the data that access to the Internet is leaving a critical share of students underserved. Just as schooling is available to all students in this nation, access to schooling through the Internet must also be universal.

While many students can continue to learn content through participation in online courses, those students who lack connectivity will be left behind educationally. It is clear from the data reported above that access to the Internet is leaving a critical share of students underserved. Just as schooling is available to all students in this nation, access to schooling through the Internet must also be universal.

This lack of digital access has come to be known as the "homework gap"—which refers to school-aged children lacking the connectivity they need to complete schoolwork at home—and is more

pronounced for Black, Hispanic, and lower-income households (Auxier & Anderson, 2020). School-aged children in lower-income households are especially likely to lack broadband access. A 2015 report from the Joan Ganz Cooney Center (Lee & Baron, 2015) found that the primary reason some families do not have home computers or Internet access is because they cannot afford it. Unfortunately, the harms of past and current racial inequities are being replicated by the Internet disparity. As Thomas Gentzel, CEO of the National School Board, stated, “Millions of students don’t have adequate Internet access in their homes. The use of distance learning makes assumptions about students’ access to computers, reliable Internet connection, space to work, and home and parents’ ability to help students with work” (as quoted in Schaffhauser, 2020).

English Learners Are Particularly Affected

Assumptions have been made about EL access to online education, the quality and relevance of the online material available for ELs, and the additional support needed by some ELs to successfully complete online coursework. Digital resources have been critiqued for not integrating content with language instruction. Teachers of ELs state that much of the online content seems to be in isolated language skill-building and reading remediation. ELs also are more likely to attend under-resourced schools, which have limited online materials.

However, the most important issue related to ELs and online education is the fact that so many ELs don’t have broadband access. The concern is that as schools are relying on the Internet to deliver the curriculum, ELs will be left out. Online schooling during the pandemic exacerbates the disparity between those students who have access to the Internet and those who don’t.

The Joan Ganz Cooney Center report (Lee & Baron, 2015) noted that families who speak only Spanish at home are less likely to have Internet access, own a computer, or report that their child used educational content outside of television or DVDs. About 5 million American schoolchildren are classified as English-language learners, meaning they lack English fluency, and even more come from homes where their parents speak a language different from the school language. Many of these are immigrant families, who live in poverty and are less likely to have access to a computer or home Internet service.

Gabriela Uro, the director for English-language learner policy and a researcher for the Council of the Great City Schools, noted: “As [schools] pivoted to virtual or online education, it really [showed] in very concrete ways the impact of language barriers and what their consequences are” (as quoted in Mitchell, 2020, para. 10). Internet disparity limits ELs’ access to content instruction, both in the acquisition of English and in the learning of content areas, and exacerbates their academic progress.

A survey of parents in New York City found that in addition to an insufficient number of devices in the home, there is a lack of reliable Internet content covered by online learning, and the content that exists isn’t available in languages other than English. More than a third (38%) of non-English home speakers and a quarter of native Spanish speakers say their child’s school has not provided materials in other languages. Much of the educational software available is not specific to the needs of ELs. Some districts, especially small or rural ones, do not translate content into languages other than English, or have limited resources to do so.



Teachers are aware that their EL students may lack Internet access. The U.S. Department of Education (2019) found that teachers are less likely to assign Internet instruction for ELs. According to the report, teachers acknowledged that many ELs lack the necessary technology and Internet access at home. Teachers noted that they generally did not assign digital learning resources (DLR) for students outside of the classroom given their concern that some students might not have access to computers, DLRs, or Internet capacity at home. Most teachers (79%) reported ELs' lack of access to digital tools outside of the classroom as a major barrier to deploying DLRs in instructing ELs. A similar share of teachers (78%) said that ELs' lack of home access to the Internet, specifically, was a barrier to some extent or to a large extent (Muñiz, 2019).

Teachers of ELs receive very little professional development related to educational technology. A recent survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Education (2019) reported that EL teachers received fewer hours of professional development on online learning than mainstream teachers. In addition to professional development, EL teachers need access to resources for EL distance learning and access to the Internet so that they can connect with each other. Providing professional development for EL teachers using distance learning gives teachers an understanding of the unique needs of ELs and how distance learning can address those needs. In the long run, districts and schools will need to provide guidance to teachers on how best to teach ELs using digital formats.

At risk are EL students in dual-language programs, who have fewer opportunities to practice language skills during distance learning (Jacobson, 2020). In a normal school day, students in dual-language programs would be practicing two languages, developing their conversational and comprehension skills. Now, with reduced instructional online time, all students in dual-language programs will find their progress compromised.

It is important to highlight the special needs of ELs. The development of English proficiency is a primary educational goal and a focus of federal and civil rights mandates. Under Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Equal Educational Opportunities Act of 1974, public schools must ensure that EL students can participate meaningfully and equally in educational programs. EL students are entitled to an equal opportunity to participate in all programs, but lack of access to the Internet precludes that opportunity.

Recent guidelines from the U.S. Department of Education (2020) reiterated:

Although Federal law requires meaningful access to remote instruction, it does not mandate specific methodologies for providing that access. Where technology itself poses a barrier to access or where educational materials simply are not available in an accessible format, educators may still meet their legal obligations by providing ELs equally effective alternate access to the curriculum or services provided to other students. In some cases, this may be accomplished, for example, through hard copy packets, teacher check-ins, or tutorials. (pp. 4-5)

So, too, is the imperative for ELs to learn core content. ELs require instruction in both English language acquisition and content, whenever possible with native-language support. Despite innovations, it remains to be seen if the Internet is the optimal vehicle for language learning. Online education may offer ELs an opportunity for language and content learning, but what may be lost? Amaya Garcia, deputy director for EL education at New America, explained:

Language learning is a dynamic process that requires a range of inputs—including interactions with teachers who are modeling the language and with your peers, who can also serve as language models and practice partners. While schools are closed, language immersion simply will not be possible at the same level. (as quoted in Jacobson, 2020, para. 7)

Considerations for ELs and Technology

It is important to consider the assumptions made about the digital learning environment for ELs. This is a multifaceted issue which includes hardware and broadband access at home and at school, student experience with distance learning, support at home, and the availability of specially designed software for ELs. Resources for EL educators during school closures are provided by the National Clearinghouse for English Language Acquisition (<https://ncela.ed.gov/>). The U.S. Department of Education (2018) offered five guiding principles in the use of educational technology with ELs:

1. Understand what educational technology offers for instructing ELs
2. Discover the types of educational technology available
3. Maximize the supports that educational technology offers ELs
4. Seek out hands-on, instruction-focused professional development
5. Learn more about ELs and educational technology

Districts have addressed the connectivity aspect of Internet disparity by providing community “hot spots” where students can access the Internet. Recognizing the need for expanding access to wi-fi, several districts have retrofitted school buses to serve as wi-fi hot spots and located them around neighborhoods or have made school parking lots available for this purpose. Another approach has been to provide each student with a mobile hot spot. In South Portland, Maine, and University City, Missouri, students can check out mobile hot spots from their school libraries for use at home (Fay, 2018). Some districts partner with an Internet provider to provide free subscriptions for families in need. However, these subscriptions are valid for only 2 or 3 months.



Another approach to address Internet disparity is to broadcast lessons through public television services, as done in the District of Columbia and Los Angeles. The Cooney Center report found that most lower-income families rely on television for accessing information (Lee & Baron, 2015).

Finally, the most common solution across districts to reduce Internet disparity is to make the online curriculum accessible to ELs through printed instructional packets that can be available at schools weekly for students and families to pick up.

Engaging Parents

An awareness of EL families' experience using the Internet is essential. Some families have extensive understanding of Internet resources, and others may have had little or no experience using technology or navigating a website. Family support is critical to successful virtual learning, especially for young children. Families provide encouragement and monitor, advocate, and model activities around online learning. Many districts or schools currently reach out to parents to inform them of the district's distance learning plan and their expectations for allocating time for students to work online. A district EL distance learning plan provides for parental notification in the languages spoken by the families about the availability of broadband access or printed resources and grade-level materials, apps, and online programs that will be used. Many districts are also purchasing and providing electronic devices like laptops and tablets that they know families cannot afford. They also provide guidance in multiple languages on how to use the devices.



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Next Steps

The challenge posed by this Internet disparity can best be addressed by encouraging educators to understand the distribution of Internet familiarity and use by EL families. There is great heterogeneity of Internet exposure across the EL community. EL educators suggest getting started by conducting a needs assessment of ELs' use and access to the Internet. It is important to determine if EL students can receive online instruction, synchronous and asynchronous. Once this assessment is made, it is possible to determine which students will receive online instruction and which will receive prepared packages. The purpose of this information gathering is to determine the level of Internet knowledge in the home and the supports that may be needed to sustain this access. Some questions can be used to guide this information gathering:

- What languages are represented in the community, and how are parents accustomed to receiving school-related information?
- Which families do not have Internet service? How can Internet service be provided to EL families who lack it?
- Can the district provide hardware, computers, or readers to families as needed?
- What programs can be loaded onto the devices in advance for students to use on their own or with family support for young learners?

In Conclusion

Online distance learning has become a necessary instructional delivery system in the absence of face-to-face instruction. We know that ELs represent a vulnerable subset of our U.S. student population, a population that has all too often been left out in an otherwise tech-driven society. This Internet disparity denies ELs equal access to instruction, instruction that is critical to their progress.

Internet access has nearly become a right, just like schooling is a right. And just as we struggle every day to make schooling more equitable, we must address the inequity in the use of online learning with ELs.

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About CAL

The Center for Applied Linguistics (CAL) is a non-profit organization founded in 1959. Headquartered in Washington DC, CAL has earned an international reputation for its contributions to the fields of bilingual and dual language education, English as a second language, world languages education, language policy, assessment, immigrant and refugee integration, literacy, dialect studies, and the education of linguistically and culturally diverse adults and children. CAL's mission is to promote language learning and cultural understanding by serving as a trusted resource for research, services, and policy analysis. Through its work, CAL seeks solutions to issues involving language and culture as they relate to access and equity in education and society around the globe.

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