

# HOMework GAP ADVOCACY TOOLKIT

a.k.a. Digital Divide

## OVERALL MESSAGING

**MAIN MESSAGE:** The COVID-19 pandemic has blown wide-open one of the nation's worst kept secrets: the inequity with which students are not able to access the Internet at home. We call this the "homework gap."

MENTOR and mentoring advocates across the country know that during the pandemic and at all other times, connection is a key, vital resource to the healthy support and development of young people. Ensuring students and their families have reliable, affordable access to the Internet is a need that must be met to erase the digital divide and its most insidious aspect, the homework gap.

MENTOR supports robust federal resources and investment from a combination of state and local government, philanthropy and the telecommunications industry to eradicate these gaps. Read below to learn more about our federal advocacy focused on the homework gap.

**BACKGROUND:** The COVID-19 pandemic struck the K-12 public and private education systems especially hard and the national crisis shone a bright light on the "homework gap" which is experienced by approximately 15-16 million students who do not have reliable Internet access at home.

To address this emergency, MENTOR and a coalition of education advocates endorsed significant funding to be provided to schools and libraries to quickly and equitably address this gap via the [FCC's the E-rate program](#). ***As a result of our advocacy, more than \$7 billion were funded as part of the American Rescue Plan (signed into law in March 2021) for the E-rate program referred to as the Emergency Connectivity Fund.***

Schools and libraries can use these funds to support students, educators and library patrons with remote access to the Internet for schoolwork via logical and simple solutions at a reasonable cost. Since no one-size-fits-all solution exists to address all students, schools, libraries or communities, the E-rate program supports Wi-Fi hotspots, modems, routers, connected devices, and other advanced telecommunications and information services.



## WHY THE E-RATE PROGRAM?

- The FCC’s E-rate program is uniquely positioned, as the only federal program that supports K-12 schools and libraries with Internet connectivity, to quickly and efficiently address the homework gap.
- Since its founding in 1998, the E-rate program has committed over \$50 billion in support to schools and libraries, ensuring a swift and equitable distribution.
- The E-rate operates under strong guardrails that ensure program integrity and that funds are accurately and appropriately disbursed.
- It is both efficient and expedient to move federal dollars through an already existing proven program; and it is much easier to use an existing program than “start from scratch” during an emergency.
- Schools and libraries know and trust the E-rate and are familiar with the program’s operations.

**GOAL:** To provide robust, long-lasting federal funding for schools and libraries to close the Homework Gap permanently for all students, regardless of Zip Code, using the FCC’s the E-rate program.

**PRIORITY ASK:** Co-sponsor and support the passage of S. 2447, the Securing Universal Communications Connectivity to Ensure Students Succeed (SUCCESS) Act.

The bill, led by Senators Markey (MA) and Van Hollen (MD) and Representative Meng (NY), would provide \$40 billion over 5 years to expand and extend the emergency temporary funds provided for the E-rate program in the COVID-19 relief package, the American Rescue Plan.

## TOP MESSAGES:

- Even before the COVID-19 pandemic, students without reliable Internet connectivity were at an educational disadvantage because they could not complete homework assignments that required the Internet after school.
- The pandemic only made this situation worse as schools shifted to online and hybrid learning, leaving students without reliable access to the Internet unable to continue their education and necessary interaction with teachers.



## KEY QUOTES ABOUT THE SUCCESS ACT:

“The homework gap is an educational inequity that long predates the current emergency, and we need to put the funding in place to ensure no student is forced to sit in a strip mall parking lot, hoping to connect to a local store’s Internet in order to finish their homework.” - *Senator Markey (MA), author of S. 2447, the SUCCESS Act.*

“Too many students in Maryland and across our country still lack reliable Internet access and face significant barriers in completing their school work. To close this gap, we must get funding straight to where it’s needed most.” - *Senator Van Hollen (MD), co-sponsor of S. 2447, the SUCCESS Act.*

“During the COVID-19 crisis, we have seen how crucial Internet access has been for learning and completing assignments, and as our nation works to move past the pandemic, we must use this opportunity to help all students get online. Increasing Internet access is a vital issue.” - *Representative Meng (NY), sponsor of the SUCCESS Act.*

“The Homework Gap is the cruelest part of the digital divide. The pandemic has made it crystal clear that too many students are unable to complete their school assignments because they do not have Internet access at home. This means they fall behind in the classroom—and we all lose out when we have a generation ill-prepared to enter a 21st century economy.” - *Jessica Rosenworcel, Acting FCC Chairwoman.*

## USEFUL DATA

### HOMWORK GAP HAS BECOME THE LEARNING GAP UNDER COVID-19

- Common Sense Media’s recent study found that 15 to 16 million students do not have access to technology they need to learn from home during this coronavirus pandemic. And, up to 400,000 educators don’t have adequate Internet connectivity to teach from home<sup>1</sup>.
- The homework gap is a problem in every single state, but vulnerable student populations bear the greatest burden:
  - 37% of rural students and 21% of urban students lack home Internet access.
  - 35% of Native American students, 30% of Black students, and 26% of Latinx student have inadequate Internet access at home compared to only of 18% White students.
- According to Pew Research data, 35% of students from households with annual incomes below \$30,000 do not have access to high-speed Internet at home.



## AVAILABILITY OF COMPUTERS IMPROVED DURING THE PANDEMIC WHILE ACCESS TO THE INTERNET REMAINS THE SAME

- According to a survey by the [Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce](#)<sup>2</sup>, schools were more likely to provide students with laptops, but not the internet. The survey found that students' access to computers and the internet is connected with their household income.
  - In households with incomes over \$200,000 reported that computers (92 percent) and internet (90 percent) were always available to students.
  - In households with incomes below \$25,000, over half reported that computers (61 percent) and the internet (55 percent) were always available to students.
- Not only do students in lower-income households have less access to computers and the internet, they also have less *live* contact with their teachers — whether in person, by phone, or by video.
  - In the late fall, 21 percent of households with incomes under \$25,000 reported that their children had no live contact with teachers within the previous seven days, compared to 11 percent of households with incomes over \$200,000.
  - Comparatively, 66 percent of households with incomes over \$200,000 reported that their children had four or more days of live contact with teachers within the prior week, compared to 51 percent of households with incomes under \$25,000.

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<sup>1</sup> See Common Sense Media's report "[Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning.](#)"

<sup>2</sup> Georgetown University Center on Education and the Workforce analysis of data from US Census Bureau, Household Pulse Survey, November 25–December 7, 2020.

