Expanding Access to Broadband

> *The importance of access to broadband in the post-COVID era was the subject of extensive work by the NewDEAL Forum Education Policy Group and was included in that group's 2020 report "Policy Proposals for Aligning the Future of Education with Workforce Opportunities". This section is largely borrowed from that report, and the Renewing America Task Force is grateful for their partnership.*

The pandemic brought with it a pivot to virtual work and school wherever possible, and access to quality broadband has never been more essential to American life than it is now. Before the pandemic, only 17 percent of workers were working a full week from home -- as of July 2020, 44 percent are working remotely 5 or more days per week. Accessing many social services, including telehealth services, requires broadband as well, meaning adults without connectivity will struggle to access work as well as the help they need to navigate the crisis.


For students, the closure of school buildings in the spring of 2020 disrupted education systems nationwide, and effectively ended instruction for the millions of students who lack broadband or devices, while also having deleterious impacts on their families' access to economic opportunity, health care, and more. These students are disproportionately people of color, older Americans, people with disabilities, the foreign-born, and people who live in rural areas. According to a study by the Alliance for Excellent Education, 50 million students nationwide lack computers, home internet service, or both. That includes 16.9 million children – including one of three Black, Latino, and American Indian/Alaska Native households – who do not have high-speed home internet access. In the spring of 2020, a majority of teachers surveyed said that fewer than half of their students were attending virtual classes regularly. Participation was worse in high-poverty communities, and the problem has persisted into the 2020-21 school year.

The impact on achievement gaps cannot be overstated: In April 2020, NWEA estimated that students would lose 30% of their learning gains in reading and 50% in math from the spring COVID-related school closures alone. States are starting to confirm, and worsen, those projections: Tennessee reported that early data from fall 2020 suggests a 50% decrease in reading proficiency and 65% decrease in math for third grade students. Achievement gaps will continue to widen.

Students and workers who do not have high-speed connections are at a significant disadvantage, with long-term consequences for economic opportunity and mobility. While the federal government plays a leading role in funding expanded access to broadband, state and local policymakers have opportunities to address this challenge.

Rebuilding a New Normal: Key Principles and Policy Goals

- Identify gaps in broadband availability more accurately, and ensure that families and individuals are connected, both by infrastructure and by affordability of access.

- "Crowdsource" data on broadband availability:
  - ▷ The FCC currently considers an entire census block to have broadband access even if only a single home or business actually has service. State and local leaders can create maps for their jurisdictions that have a much more accurate representation of where broadband is, and is not, available.

- Establish a student right to broadband access, devices, and technical support:
  - ▷ Create a student entitlement to internet access and devices necessary to participate in virtual instruction – for example, though a "digital student bill of rights" – and provide school districts with the support and funding necessary for implementation.
  - ▷ Consider requiring tracking of which students and families have internet access – and how they get online – so resources are targeted better.

- Ensure that state funding supports both "last-mile" and "middle-mile" deployment, prioritizing unserved areas.
  - ▷ Most states have some funding for broadband expansion. But "middle-mile" deployment installations (which brings broadband to the community) must be combined with "last-mile" deployment (bringing broadband to individual homes and businesses). State and local policymakers should oversee effective use of existing funds and allocate additional funds to the highest need areas.

- Provide students with the tools for distance learning:
  - ▷ Urge districts to ensure all students have access to a "digital backpack", which should include a device and broadband internet (through a wireless hotspot or fixed connection at home). Just as schools ensure that students have textbooks, they must also be sure students can learn virtually.
  - ▷ Look at creative deployment of Wi-Fi-equipped school buses (e.g. in parking lots of housing developments).

- Educate families on the benefits of internet access to increase adoption:
  - ▷ Training on the benefits of connectivity will encourage families who might never have had Internet access, or have only had access via a cellphone, to take advantage of low-cost programs that will get them online.
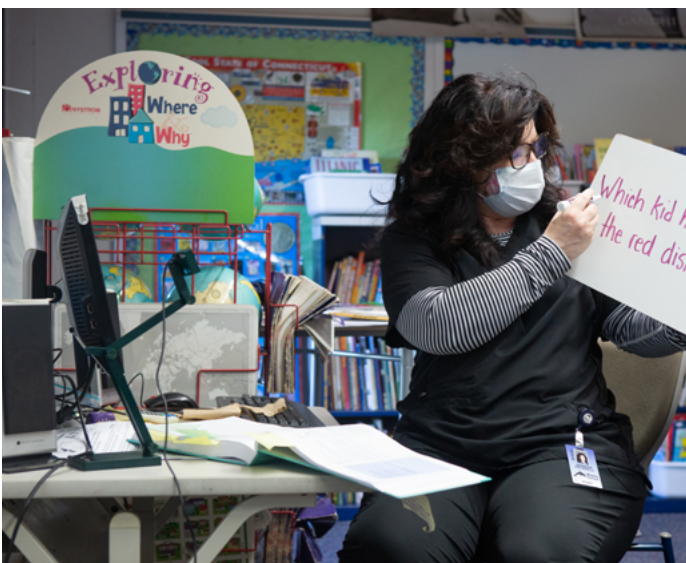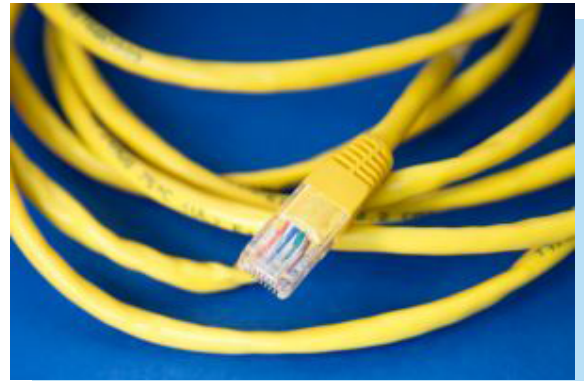
Selected Examples from America's State and City Governments

Improving data on availability:

- **West Virginia's** Broadband Enhancement Council, established in 2016, works to expand access to broadband throughout the state, with a special emphasis on underserved areas. This has required mapping at the sub-census-block level. A state-level mapping and data collection program has enabled the state to make more targeted investments of where to invest in broadband deployment.

Middle-mile and last-mile deployment:

- **Colorado's** Broadband Fund was created to extend broadband service to unserved areas of the state, with a focus on both middle-mile deployment (bringing broadband to rural communities) and last-mile development (access to individual homes and businesses). Since 2016, the Board has awarded $34.1 million in grants to 43 projects, serving more than 17,000 households. The fund repurposes money from an assessment placed on all telecommunications service providers operating in Colorado.

Training and digital literacy:

- **Tennessee's** Training Opportunities for the Public program, administered by the Tennessee State Library and Archives, provides up to $20,000 for local libraries to improve digital literacy through training and access to technology.

Connectivity and devices for students:

- **Philadelphia's** PHLConnectED is a public-private partnership that connects up to 35,000 students and their families with two years of high-speed internet access at no charge. The program includes three components: (1) providing the households of K-12 students with wired, high-speed internet from Comcast's Internet Essentials program (or a wireless hotspot for families who are housing insecure); (2) ensuring that K-12 public students have access to the devices they need to participate in virtual instruction (such as laptops and tablets); and (3) offering outreach, digital navigation, and digital skills training to students and families with the greatest need. Comcast, along with other business and civic leaders, have partnered with the Philadelphia School District to make this program possible.
- In **Chicago,** a program called Chicago Connected provides free high-speed internet to about 100,000 Chicago Public School students by leveraging philanthropic and federal COVID-19 relief funds.

Additional Resources

NewDEAL Forum Education Policy Group:
"Policy Proposals for Aligning the Future of Education with Workforce Opportunities"

*The NewDEAL Forum thanks the **many state and local elected officials** from the **NewDEAL Leader network.** for their contributions to these recommendations.*
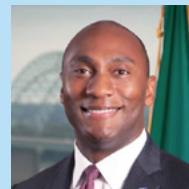
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