

DIGITAL EQUITY IN EDUCATION

NEWDEAL LEADER INFORMATIONAL RESOURCE



WHAT ARE THE ISSUES?

Digital equity in schools — students' access to digital tools, resources, and curriculum — is now fundamental to their long-term success as schools become increasingly technological, something accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Access to broadband and devices is no longer an add-on, as digital literacy is now a critical component of classroom learning and an essential post-graduation workforce skill. Achieving digital equity involves not only providing hardware and internet access, but also addressing barriers to connectivity, digital skills, teacher training, technical assistance, and inclusive content.

To discuss this critical issue, NewDEAL Forum held a virtual convening that brought together NewDEAL Leaders from across the country, including Tennessee Senator Raumes Akbari and Washington Senator Marko Liias, along with experts from All4Ed. The discussion highlighted policies and best practices to ensure every student has the opportunity to access digital technology regardless of their background or socioeconomic status, setting the stage for their success.

RECOMMENDATIONS AND STRATEGIES FOR DIGITAL EDUCATION

Addressing the emerging digital equity gap in education will require a holistic approach that goes beyond what takes place in the classroom, particularly for historically underserved students. Addressing these issues is paramount, as the digital divide in schools will translate to a workforce equity gap down the line. In discussions with practitioners, [All4Ed](#) identified several key guidelines to make progress on the issue, including:

- 📖 Understanding that advancing digital equity involves more than just ensuring access to broadband connections and devices. It also entails empowering students and families to effectively utilize digital resources, by offering technical assistance in appropriate languages, both online and offline.
- 📖 Ensure reliable and sustainable funding with a plan to adapt as technology continues to advance and change, including funds for repair, renewal, and training.
- 📖 Do not ignore more narrow solutions needed, even when not moving large policies during the legislative session.
- 📖 Meet with families, teachers, superintendents, and other practitioners to understand how programs are rolling out on the ground. Based on feedback, be prepared to revisit legislation to refine and amend programs.
- 📖 Collect data proactively to understand whether programs are working and where changes are needed. These data points should include information that can be properly utilized in making decisions moving forward.

All4Ed is eager to connect with leaders on these policies and will be launching a State Policy Center with model policies and case studies on critical issues later this year. Please reach out to Jennifer Ellis, Director of State Government Relations, jellis@all4ed.org to learn more.

INSIGHT AND SOLUTIONS IN ACTION

The experiences of Senator Akbari and Senator Liias provide valuable examples that offer insights into effectively addressing the challenges of digital equity and education. Despite political divisions, these leaders successfully advance incremental and forward-looking policies to help students better access and utilize technology in the classroom.



TENNESSEE SENATE DEMOCRATIC LEADER RAUMESH AKBARI is tackling the digital divide for students, despite political division and her minority party status. Akbari has found success in framing the issue as one that cuts across income levels, political affiliation, and rural and urban communities. Akbari pursued pragmatic solutions and collaborated across party lines to shape the Tennessee Investment in Student Achievement (TISA), the state's new funding formula. She also secured funding in the special session to address COVID-related learning loss for summer camps and a tutoring

network to help students meet grade-level benchmarks. Her multi-year efforts, focused on incremental progress and data-driven decision-making, ultimately led to a [bipartisan bill that approved ongoing funding for computer science programs](#), emphasizing incremental progress and data-driven decision-making. Although she was not the author on the final bill, Akbari emphasized the year-to-year progress she made first passing a study bill, ensuring the collection of data, and forming relationships across the aisle.



WASHINGTON SENATOR MARKO LIAS has worked for years to equip students with digital navigation skills and tools to understand the online information landscape. Similarly, he started his effort in the minority party, first championing a [media literacy and digital citizenship bill](#). Liias passed subsequent legislation creating the Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship Grant, which supports teachers to develop a media literacy curriculum, and, most recently, secured funding for a [Media Literacy and Digital Citizenship Ambassador Program](#) for teachers and librarians to collaborate with their colleagues and share best

practices. When policymakers take a comprehensive approach to digital literacy education, students are able to capitalize on the opportunities provided by the advancement of technological resources in the classroom and the workplace. By integrating practitioners into the policy effort, Liias will effectively unlock new opportunities for students to capitalize on the advancement of technological resources in the classroom and the workplace.

CONCLUSION

The convergence of technology and learning has highlighted the urgent need to bridge the digital divide and ensure that all students have the necessary skills for their future success. Recommendations include reevaluating funding formulas for digital education programs, especially for underserved and rural students, and emphasizing a holistic approach that encompasses language diversity and sustainable funding. Insight and solutions from NewDEAL Leaders like Senator Raumes Akbari and Senator Marko Liias underscore the importance of bipartisan efforts, additive progress, and comprehensive media literacy education towards empowering students to navigate the digital landscape responsibly.