

A group of diverse students, including a boy in a blue shirt, a girl in a pink shirt, a boy in a plaid shirt, a girl in a pink shirt and blue overalls, a girl with glasses in a maroon shirt, and a boy in a yellow shirt, are gathered around a laptop, looking at the screen with interest.

Digital Equity and Schools

A 2022/2023 Study by Discovery Education

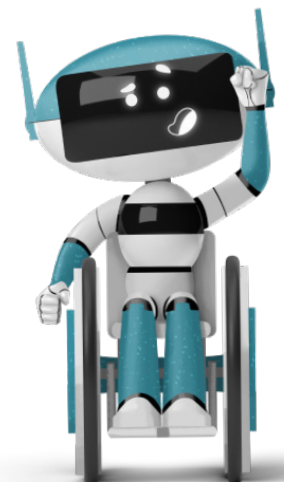
There is widespread agreement that the pandemic forcefully evolved and rapidly closed gaps in the digital divide given that schools needed to move swiftly to remote learning solutions. This cultural shift was met with success stories of connectivity and technological advancements. At the same time, this wave of pandemic solutions shined a light on students and families who did not experience equitable access to learning because of lack of connectivity or devices, or other barriers that made remote learning cumbersome.

Discovery Education, a leader in education technology content and curricular services, has examined digital equity through the lens of educators, school leaders, and parents. Using a multi-modal approach, Discovery Education sought to deepen understanding of remaining barriers to home internet adoption among students and their families.

Comcast was a partner for this study. Part of Comcast's commitment is prioritizing internet connectivity and its impact on education. Through providing low-cost broadband (Internet Essentials) to families and the Internet Essentials Partner Program (IEPP) for schools, Comcast continues to ensure there are no barriers to home connectivity that could impede learning. In fact, since 2011, Comcast has connected more than 10 million people to the Internet at home, most for the very first time. In addition, Comcast has created more than 1,250 "Lift Zones" in community centers nationwide to provide connectivity and digital skills resources.

Comcast participates in the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), a federal benefit program that helps ensure that households can afford the broadband they need for work, school, healthcare, and more.

The ACP provides a discount of up to \$30 per month toward internet service for eligible households and up to \$75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to \$100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers if the household contributes more than \$10 and less than \$50 toward the purchase price.



About the Study

Discovery Education is the worldwide EdTech leader whose state-of-the-art digital platform and related services support learning wherever it takes place. Through its award-winning multimedia content, instructional supports, and innovative classroom tools, Discovery Education helps educators deliver equitable learning experiences engaging all students and supports academic achievement on a global scale. Discovery Education serves approximately 4.5 million educators and 45 million students worldwide, and its resources are accessed in over 100 countries and territories.



Comcast partnered with Discovery Education to explore the role schools (educators and administrators) are playing, with a particular focus on family involvement in bridging students' abilities to connect to high-speed internet to support learning. The study surveyed 500 educators, administrators, and families to explore regional and national perceptions of the availability, quality, and affordability of high-speed internet through the role of the school. Lastly, it was reported that internet deployment – the availability of broadband infrastructure - existed within 98% of the participant's geographic quadrants (West, Midwest, South, Mid-Atlantic/ Northeast).

Results

1. Nearly all educators who participated in the study agree digital equity is more important today than ever before, due to the COVID-19 crisis forcing education to become (and likely stay) heavily reliant on digital solutions.

- The issue of digital equity impacts teachers as much as it does students. – *"I think [the digital divide] has more of an impact on our staff, to be honest, if we're trying to create equitable systems for all our students. What creative ways are available to create assignments or lesson plans so that every student has access regardless of the Internet that they have at home?"*
– Administrator

- 82% of families and 80% of educators surveyed feel strongly that high-speed internet (HSI) at home is extremely important to fulfilling learning outcomes.

2. Educators and families agree schools/districts could be doing more to help students bridge the digital divide. While two-thirds of families and educators acknowledge their school's interest in closing the digital divide, only one-third are aware of actionable measures being taken by schools.

- Educators and families understand the importance of support for home internet connectivity (including through government-sponsored programs), but widely acknowledge their schools/districts are not doing nearly enough to assist with getting students and their families connected.

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Results (Continued)

- 34% of families acknowledge receiving assistance from their local school district to identify ways to access affordable internet services.
- 26% of educators strongly agree that school administrators are taking an active role in trying to ensure all students have high-speed internet access at home.
- 22% of educators surveyed strongly agree that administrators in their home districts are equipped with the necessary information to communicate options for high-speed internet access at home.
 - » *“It would have been nice to get an outreach from the school, perhaps they could’ve considered doing outreach to every individual family to ask if they’re having problems. Our school didn’t do any type of outreach or offer any type of help.” – Parent*
 - » Educators say they simply are not receiving information from their school or district leadership on what can be done to help families better understand how to connect to high-speed internet, so they are not always certain what exactly to communicate to families in need.
 - » Parents expect more assistance from school leadership regarding ways in which they can connect to affordable high-speed internet.

Only 39% of parents are aware of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), and of those that were aware, only 13% of parents have signed up.



3. Findings suggest a need for a “train-the-trainer approach” to support educators, who are often also working as digital navigators, in order to become aware of the range of barriers that non-adopters face. This will enable digital navigators and educators to help close the digital divide for more students.

- More specifically, the data shows multiple disconnects between what parents pointed to as *actual* barriers to adoption versus what teachers *perceived* as parents’ barriers to adoption.
 - For instance: There was a 52-percentage-point difference between the share of teachers who thought that cost of service was the primary barrier to adoption for families versus the actual share of parents who pointed to cost as a barrier. In other words, teachers thought that families could not afford service when that was not the case for most non-adopting families.
 - Similarly, significantly larger shares of teachers thought that families did not live in buildings that were wired for broadband, did not know how to set up the Internet, and did not have devices than the share of parents who raised these barriers.

Results *(Continued)*



- Addressing these disconnects is critical to ensuring that school districts and digital navigator programs are effective in closing the digital divide for students.

The study design prevented confirmation of participating families' ACP eligibility. However, of the parents involved in the study, few said that they participated in programs that support home connectivity, but many more said they are interested in participating.

- Only 39% of parents are aware of the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP), and of those that were aware, only 13% of parents have signed up. However, nearly half (49%) of families surveyed said they would be interested in signing up with more information.

Information on connectivity was shared at the start of the pandemic; however, today, teachers aren't hearing from their administrators, and administrators aren't hearing from leadership.

- *"Early on in the pandemic, we got stuff from our social workers saying, 'Make sure families know about [affordable Internet programs],' but I wouldn't say that's been kept up." – Teacher*

Some educators note that schools request information from families, but that information seldom gets filtered through to teachers.

- *"I might get a one-pager on safety of technology, what you shouldn't do on your device and how to be safe on the Internet. But outside of that, it's something that I need to seek out." – Administrator*
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Results *(Continued)*

4. While digital equity is a priority in schools, 86% of educators surveyed elevated student well-being as the most important issue for schools to address, followed by school safety, and equity and inclusion more broadly. This places more emphasis on policymakers, school officials, institutions, and the private sector to show how digital equity and home broadband adoption facilitate broader equity issues and level the playing field for families seeking opportunities for their children.

While educators believe their school/district leaders are aware of the negative impacts the digital divide has on learning outcomes, there are numerous other factors school leaders are prioritizing.

- *“Other equity-related issues (racial, gender, food, housing, etc.) require fixing before digital inequity can even begin to be dealt with.” – Teacher*
 - *“In my school there’s a lot more discussion about getting food for families than Internet.” – Teacher*
 - *“As a teacher I don’t feel like I have any solid idea what our district is doing in this regard.” – Teacher*
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Our Recommendations

The pandemic changed how home internet connectivity impacts learning. To continue the catalyzation of digital equity for school leaders, educators, parents, and students, we recommend the following actionable steps:

1. ***Strengthen umbrella school-to-home communication at timely transitions.***

To support a drumbeat of communication, community organizations should leverage natural calendar transitions, such as summer and spring breaks, to disseminate information about internet programs and providers. This consistent and proactive communication channel will eliminate gaps in awareness and misgivings about getting and staying connected at home. This can be supported through “internet-at-home” toolkits, information packets, and trainings for both educators and parents.

2. ***Ensure alignment to, and inclusion of, school communities within Digital Navigator workstreams.***

Within each district, it is often unclear which department or individual within a school or district owns the strategy for connecting families with resources supporting internet adoption. This inconsistent ownership is in part due to a district’s

lack of subject matter expertise on digital equity. School district administrators should work with their **state-level broadband offices** to ensure that in-school Digital Navigators are part of the state’s Digital Equity Plan. District administrators should also ensure school leadership is aware of digital equity resources available to the students and families that they serve, and that leadership effectively communicates that information to their constituencies.

3. ***Leverage data to pinpoint directed supports.***

Assess which students are unlikely to have a home internet connection and direct them and their families to resources that can assist. This includes tailoring communications regarding the ACP and connecting with local resources, such as parent and community groups, and Digital Navigator programs to serve as trusted voices to overcome barriers to adoption.

4. ***Collaborate with other public institutions engaged in connecting households with public benefits.***

School districts are skilled and effective clearinghouses on a host of benefits programs. Therefore, ACP should be incorporated as well.



Conclusion

Internet service providers, schools, and families made significant progress to meet the digital demands of learning and shift to at-home education during the pandemic.

This study identified remaining gaps in educators' and families' understanding of the breadth of affordable and reliable high-speed internet options. Study participants expressed that the schools (educators and administrators) can help bridge this information gap, but educators need clearer guidance from district leaders. Further, digital equity is a lower priority behind school leaders' focus on critical issues such as mental health and well-being, food and housing insecurities, and overall student safety. However, digital equity is an important part of collective community approaches to address inherent disparities. As we continue to work toward digital equity, we need continued focus on how home internet adoption and associated support resources -such as digital skilling -ultimately help families obtain better jobs, access healthcare, and seek out better housing.

Findings from the study support a recommendation for school systems to partner with proven and trusted programs - like those that include support from Digital Navigators - to help close communication, advocacy, and adoption strategies that lead to equitable opportunities for all students. Ensuring all eligible families are signed up for the Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is equally important in supporting district connectivity goals. Further, coupling internet access and adoption with an ability to address other school concerns, such as providing supports for student well-being and growth, could keep digital equity in the top priorities for school leaders – helping them serve broader needs for their students.

