

## Learning any time, any place, at any pace

13 HOURS AGO • [BARBARA NEMKO AND SUNNE WRIGHT MCPEAK](#)

For California to remain a global leader of innovation, we must close the achievement gap among our state's

K-12 students. That goal will remain elusive, unless we first bridge the "digital divide."

Digital learning in the 21st century means far more than personal computers in the classroom. After much deliberation, education leaders and public officials are developing policy initiatives around broadband access, online textbooks, e-learning and standards for digital fluency.

Recent recommendations from the Superintendent of Public Instruction's Education Technology Task Force are a welcome addition to the work of others. We can make a real difference in several areas.

Let's start with the basics. Many students still lack a high-speed Internet connection at home. Four in 10 Latino households earning \$40,000 or less per year do not have broadband at home, according to the recently released Public Policy Institute of California Annual Statewide Survey, produced in collaboration with the nonprofit California Emerging Technology Fund and ZeroDivide.

In Napa County, 55 percent of K-12 students are Latino.

Having sufficient broadband and a one-to-one ratio of students to computers is at the heart of both our state plan and Napa County's local plan to increase student achievement.

Among positive developments, recently announced modernizations to the federal E-rate program should lead to affordable, super-fast fiber connections to schools and libraries.

While there has been significant progress, broadband access and digital literacy must become even higher public policy priorities.

We need Internet service providers to move faster to offer the discounted services and devices they've promised to low-income families with students, and the Federal Communications Commission must maintain its watchdog role.

We need to embrace teaching methods that creatively incorporate technology. In this era of iPads and ThinkPads, many schools still order expensive textbooks by the truckload.

We are making strides to change that in Napa schools, but the migration from traditional to online "techbooks" is too slow statewide. Some districts contend they are hampered by a court settlement known as the Williams Act.

While the Williams Act had good intentions — to ensure that all children, especially underachievers, had equal access to books in the four core subjects — the primary way a school can make it happen for children without computers or Internet access at home is to send home a traditional textbook.

The new "techbooks" have embedded videos and other more engaging technologies, but there is no equivalent "textbook" to send home, making the new materials ineligible for district adoption.

Thus, children from low-income households have no access to these materials, either in school or at home. We need to work with the American Civil Liberties Union, which represented the original plaintiffs, to provide new guidance to reflect these digital times.

By using blended learning, combining face-to-face teaching with digital instruction, students and teachers are showing the benefits of integrated and customized approaches, promoting student engagement with standards-based curricula.

More than 3,000 K-5 students in Napa schools are using an online math program that complements textbook and teacher instruction, and the nonverbal approach using animated images, instead of words, helps English learners master math skills more easily.

Three districts have preschool and kindergarten programs using iPads, which have increased student performance, confidence and collaboration. We've witnessed kindergarten students teach fourth-graders how to use an iPad.

But paying for software licenses and digital devices is a big drain on school budgets. Our five school districts and the Napa County Office of Education are partnering with NapaLearns, a group of key business and education leaders, organizations and foundations, to help ensure student access to digital opportunities.

The Community Education Task Force is working with partners around the state to promote broadband use in the classroom and at home by offering affordable computers to parents and students who attend training.

While we recognize the steep financial challenges facing our state's schools, we must move ahead now on these priorities.

For a state that is known worldwide for creating technology, our goal should be nothing less than providing our students with tools to learn at any time and any place, and at any pace.

**Nemko is the Napa County superintendent of schools, and McPeak is the CEO of the California Emerging Technology Fund.**