



Lessons from Pandemic Can Lead to Better Integration of Technology at School and Home

K-12 parents find positive aspects to distance learning to help close the Homework Gap and improve learning but success requires robust affordable Internet service and parent engagement

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Los Angeles and Bay Area – April 28, 2021 – A new Statewide Survey released today by the California Emerging Technology Fund (CETF) and the University of Southern California (USC) highlights important lessons gained from distance learning during the pandemic that have the potential to raise student achievement and parent engagement by effectively integrating technology in K-12 student learning at school and home.

The survey of parents with K-12 students underscored the need to get more families access to long-term discounted Internet at home, ensure that students have the appropriate devices geared for schoolwork and enable parents to become more engaged in their children’s educational achievement.

The highlights from the Statewide Survey on Broadband Adoption found California households with K-12 students had significantly greater access to technology tools during the pandemic shutdown and lower-income families are committed to staying connected to home Internet beyond short-term subsidized emergency programs. Still, distance learning disparities exist for households based on income, race and ethnicity: lower-income families reported improving but still have lower levels of technology adoption and difficulty helping their child with schoolwork and following their child’s academic progress.

“Distance learning changed education, and now is the time to seize the lessons learned during school shutdowns to effectively integrate technology tools in K-12 education at school and at home,” said Sunne Wright McPeak, CETF President and CEO. “We know from on-the-ground experience that it starts with a computing device and reliable, affordable Internet at home, and requires vital components to help parents who qualify access discount Internet offers in order

to close the Homework Gap and promote engagement in their children’s education. There is no time to wait.”

“There’s an opportunity here to leverage the lessons of the pandemic and extend solutions beyond the pandemic,” said Hernán Galperin, Associate Professor at the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, the survey’s principal investigator. “For students to succeed, families need access to computers, reliable broadband and the ability for parents to participate in the learning process. That participation involves close communication with teachers, supporting students with homework and monitoring their progress. These are key elements for student success in the digital age.”

News reports indicate that a higher-than-average number of students in heavily immigrant communities are not quickly returning to the classroom or may have dropped out. Los Angeles Unified School District reported in March that 42% of parents in several heavily immigrant and Latino communities planned to have their children return compared to 82% in West Los Angeles. Findings from the USC-CETF survey focusing on the demographics of the Digital Divide also found lower-income and Latino households were more likely to have no or limited broadband access at home. Cost was cited as the main reason for lack of Internet access.

“Technology can make things faster and more efficient, but only when it’s accessible,” said Stephen Aguilar, Assistant Professor at the USC Rossier School of Education, who contributed to the education findings analysis. Aguilar added, “Hispanic parents who speak Spanish at home, for example, reported more difficulty following their child or children’s school progress when compared to Hispanic parents who speak English at home. This suggests the obvious, we need to pay attention to people as much as we pay attention to the technology.”

An independent evaluation of the CETF School2Home statewide initiative found teachers and principals at participating schools were better prepared to transition to distance learning. School2Home helps build the capacity of schools in underserved communities to integrate technology into teaching, learning and parent engagement. In the 2020 evaluation, almost 90% of the teacher survey respondents agreed with the statement, “School2Home helped our school transition to online learning,” with 62% noting School2Home “definitely” helped with the transition. Additionally, 95% of teacher survey respondents said School2Home should be continued in their school during the upcoming school year.

Madison Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District would not be “where it is today without School2Home. Its leadership in establishing the digital connection between school and home has been invaluable. For students to be successful, the parents must be on board,” said Madison Principal Susan Parker.

Key Findings

The CETF-USC Statewide Survey of 575 parents with K-12 students was conducted between February 10 and March 22, 2021 in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese.

Key findings include:

Access to Devices Is Improving but Racial Disparities Exist

Overall, 95% of families with K-12 students attending school reported that each of their children had their own device to use for online classes, with 3% reporting that a device was available but shared among several children, and 2% reporting no device availability. When disaggregated by race and ethnicity, the results show that white families had the highest 1:1 child to device ratio (97%) and Latino families whose primary language is Spanish reported the lowest (92%). While small in magnitude, these differences reveal that gaps in device availability persist even after a year of distance education for California students, affecting an estimated 300,000 students.

Similarly, small but relevant differences are observed in device availability with respect to income. For 98% of families with annual incomes above 200% of the Federal Poverty Line (or above \$53,000 for a family of 4), each student in the household has access to a device for distance learning. The figure drops to 92% among families at or below 200% of the Federal Poverty Line. Among families with annual incomes below \$40,000, about 1 in 10 report either lacking a device or that children are sharing devices for distance learning.

The transition to distance learning forced schools and districts to make very large investments in devices and Internet service to ensure the continuation of learning for K-12 students. The survey results reflect these investments, with 72% of families reporting that at least one of the devices used by students was loaned to them by their school or school district, and the vast majority (76%) report that the device was received after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. When evaluated along demographic characteristics, there is evidence that these programs have reached those most in need. For example, while 82% of low-income families report having received a device from the school or district, the figure is 62% for higher-income families.

There Is Strong Demand but Low Awareness of Affordable Discount Internet Offers

The sudden shift to online learning after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic required that officials put emergency programs into place to guarantee the continuity of classes and learning activities for all. The impact of these programs is reflected in the findings, with 17% of families reporting to have connections provided and paid for by the school or district (rising to 22% among low-income families).

Interestingly, when probed about expectations to continue having Internet access once the school or district discontinues the subsidy program, more than two-thirds (70%) of parents report they will “definitely” or “most likely” subscribe to the service on their own. This reflects strong demand for low-cost connectivity options that cater in particular to the needs of K-12 families. However, only about a third (34%) of K-12 parents are aware of these options, which is lower than awareness of discounted plans among households without children (43%). This suggests an opportunity for partnerships between schools and service providers to promote these programs to reach those in need.

Reliable Broadband Connections Are Required for Closing the Homework Gap

Student households require reliable access to a robust broadband connection. While about 97% of families with school-age children in California have home Internet, the quality and reliability of a connection may fall short of the requirements for distance learning, particularly when other household members are using the same connection for school, work and other distance learning activities. In fact, nearly 16% of K-12 families with home Internet access report that their current connection is not adequate for their needs, compared to less than 11% among households without children.

When specifically asked about the availability of home Internet for distance learning, 78% of parents report that their child or children are “always” able to connect to distance classes, while 16% report that Internet access is available “sometimes but not always” and 6% report “rarely” or “never”. Low-income families are about 4 times more likely to report that students are unable to connect to distance class (“rarely” or “never”), thus indicating the extent to which disparities in access continue to impact online learning opportunities.

Parental Engagement Is Vital

Learning requires substantial efforts from the entire family, and prior studies suggest parental involvement and support is a key determinant of educational outcomes. About 60% of parents report having more difficulty than before the pandemic in helping their child or children with schoolwork, with noticeable differences along race and ethnicity. While about half of white parents reported that it was more difficult for them to help their children with schoolwork, the figure is higher (70%) for Latino parents, and reaches 75% for Latino parents who primarily speak Spanish at home. Asian parents also report more difficulties than white parents, thus suggesting that language barriers may be a factor that, compounded with lower broadband access, prevent non-white parents from adequately supporting their child or children with schoolwork completed at home; and Black parents reported no difference.

The 2020 School2Home evaluation found that schools play a vital role in engaging parents. “While it is difficult to entice parents into the training, by the end they have big smiles on their faces. A lot of them depend on their child for orientation to school technology and social media. The training empowered them and increased their self-esteem and confidence to guide their child and help their child to succeed in school,” reported the School Leadership Team at San Fernando Middle School in the Los Angeles Unified School District.

USC Research Panel

Researchers from across the University of Southern California will analyze and interpret results of the 2021 Statewide Survey, including: Stephen Aguilar of the USC Rossier School of Education; Francois Bar of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism; Donna Benton of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology; Geoffrey Cowan of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism and Center on Communication Leadership and Policy; Conyers Davis of the USC Sol Price School of Public Policy and Schwarzenegger Institute; Pedro Noguera, Dean of the USC Rossier School of Education; Manuel Pastor of the USC Dornsife College of Letters, Arts and Sciences, and Director of the Equity Research Institute; Adam Clayton Powell of the USC Annenberg School of Communication and Journalism; Dorian Traube of the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of

Social Work; and Kathleen Wilber of the USC Leonard Davis School of Gerontology. Former State Treasurer and Controller John Chiang, Past Fellow at the USC Dornsife Center for the Political Future, also is a contributing researcher, and Co-Chair of California Forward.

About the 2021 Statewide Survey on Broadband Adoption

The 2021 Statewide Survey of 1,650 California adults was conducted between February 10 and March 22, 2021 in English, Spanish, Mandarin and Vietnamese, to reflect population patterns. 94% of the interviews were completed by mobile phones and the remaining 6% by landline phones. The overall sample error is ± 2 percentage points with a 95% confidence level. The results are weighted for age, gender, race/ethnicity, education and region based on totals from the American Community Survey (ACS). Household connectivity results of more than 90% consist of the following findings: 84.8% connected; 5.6% underconnected (smartphone only); 9.6% unconnected.

About California Emerging Technology Fund

CETF is a statewide non-profit foundation with the mission to close the Digital Divide in California. CETF provides grants to non-profit community-based organizations (CBOs) to assist low-income households adopt broadband and become digitally proficient, leads and manages School2Home to successfully integrate technology into teaching and learning with deep parent engagement to close the Achievement Gap in middle schools in low-income neighborhoods, and promotes Digital Inclusion in public policy to achieve Digital Equity.

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