Every student in California should have high-speed internet access. Here's how we can get there by fall 2021

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Of the many educational inequities highlighted by the pandemic, perhaps the most glaring has been the "digital divide" — the gap in technology access between students from low-income families and their more affluent peers.

Even after a year of remote learning, a Census Bureau study showed that 1 in 5 California households with K–12 students did not consistently have sufficient internet access for virtual school.

The situation has been particularly troubling for students of color: Black and Latino students are 30% to 40% more likely to have limited access to the internet, according to a UCLA report.

Just as redlining for decades prevented countless families of color from buying homes, today's unequal broadband distribution systems also prevent families of color from accessing essential high-quality Wi-Fi because of where they live.

The opportunity and achievement gaps between students of color and their white peers will likely grow unless California quickly closes the chasm between the digital haves and have-nots. Bringing low-cost, reliable

broadband into the homes of all California students is an urgent priority.

Assembly Bill 156, which Gov. Gavin Newsom signed earlier this month, and which could eventually ensure critical broadband infrastructure throughout the Golden State, is an important step in this direction. But California must move faster in order to help students already suffering the effects of the pandemic school shutdown.

School districts are uniquely positioned to help students of color and students experiencing poverty get reliable broadband at home. Districts have the data, relationships and resources to help close the digital divide for K-12 students and their families. And they can take immediate steps to connect all students to quality broadband by fall 2021.

The first step is to track which households have good internet access and which have poor access or none at all. Some of California's largest school districts are already doing this. Los Angeles Unified, for example, collected a dataset on home internet connectivity for over 333,000 students during the pandemic.

By analyzing the speed, reliability, type of device and internet service provider for each of these students, the district knows which of them need extra support, and it is currently working on an action plan to address students' home internet needs.

Other California districts should adopt L.A. Unified's approach. They can afford it. The Biden administration provided California schools with $15.3 billion in pandemic relief funds, a portion of which can be used to track internet usage in student households. Parents across the state should urge their local school board members to follow L.A. Unified's lead now, before

school resumes in late August and early September.

Once school districts pinpoint which households are struggling with internet connectivity, they also could sponsor broadband for families who need it. At the Partnership for Los Angeles Schools, which serves approximately 14,200 students at 19 district schools, we pay for broadband service for hundreds of students and their families who previously had no internet or low-quality internet, and more continue to enroll in our program, called "Students Connected."

In a recent survey, 68% of California households that didn't have an internet connection cited cost as a principal reason. School districts can help families overcome the cost barrier by connecting them with resources such as the federal Emergency Broadband Benefit program or helping them enroll in financial assistance programs offered by internet service providers.

State officials also must address prevailing inequities in the broadband business. Many ISPs still operate as lightly regulated monopolies, maximizing profits by offering lower-quality service at higher prices. The result is that the most financially strapped families often end up with the least reliable Wi-Fi.

Students can't wait years for new policies, regulations or incentives to take effect. The next school year is just around the corner. School districts already have the information needed to help narrow the digital divide. Unlike other intricate obstacles within the California public education system, in this case, the path is clear. There is a way. The only question: Is there a will?
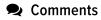
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