

COVID-19 and the Digital Divide

Students lack technology for academic success and social support



CSBA surveyed California school districts and county offices of education about their technology needs related to distance learning. More than one-quarter (270) of all local educational agencies in the state responded, indicating varying levels of need.

Uneven access to technology undermines the academic, career and life prospects of California students as well as the state's economic potential. Lack of access to technology that supports instruction and learning is especially prevalent in schools in rural areas and schools with high populations of low-income students, exacerbating existing inequities and contributing to generational poverty.



Broadband home internet access

One-third of respondents (33%) indicated that “less than half” or “a small minority/none” of students have broadband home internet access or similar. Two-thirds of participants (66%) reported that most or all of their students have broadband access in the home.

“We are in a rural agricultural area of central California where tech companies have not made an investment into infrastructure. A survey put out by the California Public Utilities Commission in 2018 showed less than 30% of our households have high speed internet.”

—Exeter USD, Tulare County



Access to multiple internet-capable devices

Half of all respondents (50%) indicated that “less than half” or “a small minority/none” of their students have access to multiple internet-capable devices at home. The need for multiple devices in homes is being exacerbated by California's stay-at-home order. Students who rely on their parents' devices may not have access if the parent is working from home and homes with multiple students engaging in online learning may not have enough computers for the entire household. Many rural districts pointed to the need for more devices in the survey.

Smartphone



A slight minority of respondents (45%) indicated that “less than half” or a “small minority/none” of their student body has smart phones, with 55% stating that most or all of their students have smart phones.

Cell phone service



Just under one-fifth (19%) of respondents described cell phone service in their community as “poor or nonexistent” although less than 1 percent selected the “nonexistent option.” Slightly less than half (44%) rated their cell phone service as “middling” and 37% believe they have “good” cell service.

“Those who live in the rural portions of our district have very slow and unreliable satellite internet service. Once plan allowances are used the speed is throttled back severely. If students have data plans on their phones they must use them to complete school assignments.”

—Esparto USD in Yolo County

Access to a laptop

More than one-third of school districts and county offices of education (39%) report that “less than half” or a “small minority/none” of their students have laptops courtesy of a school or a school partner. Nearly two-thirds, (61%) said that “most or all” of their students have laptops.

The great majority of respondents (86%) indicated that “all/vast majority” or “most” of their staff have access to broadband and laptops in the home with just 13% stating otherwise.

The need for additional funding, infrastructure, hardware and professional development to facilitate effective distance learning is enormous.

The survey responses informs CSBA's efforts to work with the State of California and various other public and private sector partners to increase access to the infrastructure, hardware and training that helps bridge the digital divide, close opportunity and achievement gaps, and facilitate distance learning.

However, local and state advocacy efforts can only take us so far. Much like the expansion of telephone services by the federal Communications Act of 1934, which worked to develop an infrastructure that provided telephone service to all consumers at a reasonable price, now is the time to ensure every household in the U.S. has access to high-speed internet.

Contact your legislator today and let them know what technology your district needs to educate students effectively and equitably!

You can also submit questions and recommendations on addressing the digital divide to CSBA at www.csba.org/coronavirus, where you can also find the latest education news and resources related to COVID-19.

