



## Digital Equity: Supporting Students & Families in Out-of-School Learning

*“Access to high-speed broadband is no longer a luxury; it is a necessity for American families, businesses, and consumers. Affordable, reliable access to high-speed broadband is critical to U.S. economic growth and competitiveness. High-speed broadband enables Americans to use the Internet in new ways, expands access to health services and education, increases the productivity of businesses, and drives innovation throughout the digital ecosystem.”*

*—President Barack Obama*

# Executive Summary

There's a fast-developing problem with learning today. While nearly two decades of improved Internet access for schools (including billions of federal E-rate dollars) is largely closing what remains of the so-called digital divide, the ubiquity of more recent mobile technologies has now opened wide a new 'homework gap' into which lower-income students too often fall. As a large part of education still happens after school lets out, students with reliable, robust Internet access and task-appropriate devices seamlessly stay connected to classwork, assignments, teachers and all manner of necessary online resources for work and learning they accomplish at home. Meanwhile, those without a meaningful home-to-school or student-to-resources connection in their home environments face challenges that make for a very uneven playing field. And the gap extends beyond homework; parents, too, stand to lose out; being connected is tantamount to being fully informed of their child's academic performance. Such access and opportunity can't in fairness be seen as a luxury afforded only for affluent or better-connected communities when, in today's reality, Internet access on appropriate devices with a sufficient amount of bandwidth are basic and essential tools for learning and participation in our system.

This toolkit offers historic contextual background, describes the 'homework gap', addresses broader implications of household connectivity, and details four **first steps** school districts can take right now:

1. **Survey**
2. **Engage your community**
3. **Ensure sustainability through community assets**
4. **Consider outside-of-the-box solutions**

We also present six **approaches** that are enabling some school districts to strengthen their leadership and spark innovation in pursuing digital equity in their communities:

1. ***Partnering with local businesses on Wi-Fi access for learning***
2. ***Making the most of existing school district assets***
3. ***Seeking mobile hotspot programs and/or affordable LTE***
4. ***Taking advantage of special broadband offerings***
5. ***Repurposing educational spectrum***
6. ***Creating a mesh network***

Innovative leaders in school districts nationwide, with help from business and community groups, are rising above fiscal constraints to ensure digital equity for their students. This toolkit provides thoughtful strategies, inspiring case studies and workable survey templates to implement such digital equity in any locale. Indeed, it doesn't require much contemplation to see the moral imperative and societal benefit in making such digital equity a reality. The good news is, with help from this toolkit, it isn't impossible, but it does require an intentional approach. Welcome to the civil rights issue of today's digital era.

