

Digital Equity for All

The pandemic transformed the digital divide into a digital dystopia

ASBJ article, June 01, 2021

Digital inequity will lead to long-term consequences unless school board members place finding solutions to this issue at the top of their priority lists.

The digital divide—the gap between students with sufficient knowledge of and access to digital technology and those without—for decades has been among the greatest challenges facing our education system. Digital technology equity, or the lack thereof, has negatively impacted minority students, low-income families, and rural student populations in disproportionate numbers.

This historical digital technology inequity has been exacerbated with the onset of the pandemic. A recent Pew Research Center study found 59 percent of parents with lower incomes in the U.S. say their children face digital obstacles in schoolwork. In fact, with the shifting of K-12 schools from in-person learning to online, remote, and blended classes, many communities revealed that their students are struggling to complete their schoolwork because of little or no access to digital technologies.

The COVID-19 pandemic is exponentially widening the digital divide. Worse, research has revealed that among families with broadband access, many now fear they will not be able to pay recurring digital technology bills, such as cellphone and home broadband. This hardship is growing because of job and wage losses. Surveys show that 61 percent of Hispanic Americans and 44 percent of Black Americans reported that they or someone in their household had experienced a job or wage loss due to the coronavirus outbreak, compared with 38 percent of white Americans.

These facts point to a major disparity in technology equity that has led to a separate and very unequal digital education system. The statistics are so alarming that, effectively, the pandemic has transformed the digital divide into a digital dystopia. According to the Digital Divide Council, the growing digital inequity will lead to four potential long-term consequences:

- **Low performance:** Low-income families have less access to information that will advance their education.
- **Competitive edge:** Students with access to the internet will do better when they enter college due to universities embracing technology at an increasing rate.
- **Convenience in learning:** Privileged students have access to better devices and face fewer hurdles to complete their education.
- **Unequal learning experiences:** Students from low socioeconomic areas face more disadvantages and need to spend more hours to complete learning objectives.



Photo credit: [wavebreakmediamicro/stock.adobe.com](https://www.wavebreakmediamicro.com/stock.adobe.com)

COVID-19 presents immediate decision-making challenges for school board members a year (at this writing) into the pandemic. Not only has where and how students learn forever changed, but also where and how

educators teach, school staff operate, and superintendents manage. In 2020, we thought the transition from in-person education to various versions of the most appropriate forms of digital education—online, remote, reduced in-person, or blended—would be temporary.

However, as the pandemic took hold, we realized the need for digital education is a foundational pillar of our education system. For some school systems, the transition occurred seamlessly because many schools and households in wealthy districts already possessed critical digital technology and virtual lesson plans. However, in other districts, families who thought they were well-equipped with digital technology found their infrastructure and access to resources could not support entire households working and studying from home.

School systems in lower socioeconomic areas were especially ill-equipped for the transition. School leaders realized that they had to draft and execute their own pandemic response since no government, from the federal down to the county level, had been able to effectively implement a sustained digital education infrastructure program.

The future of education is digital, but digital education cannot occur without equitable and ubiquitous access to the internet and the digital tools that enable data connectivity. For our students to be successful, school boards must seek out solutions with urgency. In fact, the attention that the COVID-19 pandemic has brought to digital inequities offers school boards an opportunity to advocate for critical resources that will help students today and tomorrow. Specific actions that can be taken include:

- Evaluate and assess schools, communities, and districts that need digital support to direct needed resources. This includes outreach to families most impacted by the pandemic.
- Initiate conversations with federal and state leaders about allocating resources for districts with the greatest need for digital technology.
- Advocate for an increase in public-private partnerships, incentivizing technology providers to supply internet and digital tools to students, families, and schools in need.
- Establish communication with national and local businesses, foundations, nonprofits, and utilities to develop partnerships focused primarily on using shared resources for building or improving digital education programs and resources.

While there are many challenges facing our education system, school boards must place digital inequity at the top of their priority lists. Implementing unfettered and equitable access to digital technology is vital to helping ensure the success of students in an ever-growing digital society and economy. The pandemic has created a favorable environment across political, corporate, and charitable spectrums for school boards to advocate for digital equity for all students.

Shaun Wiggins (shaun.wiggins@soteryx.com) is the president and CEO of Soteryx Corp., Schenectady, NY.

Want to Have a Greater Impact on Equity in Your District?

NSBA's Equity Symposium, January 23, 2022, in Washington, D.C., provides a forum for school board members, public school advocates, and community leaders to examine and discuss the strategies, current trends, research, and best practices around equity in our nation's public K-12 schools. Come hear speakers such as Joanna Lohman, author of *Raising Tomorrow's Champions*, former professional soccer player, and member of the United States Women's National Team speak about her platform for social impact. [Learn more.](#)