

Broadband: A Necessity for Today's Students

Disconnected Students in a Connected World

It's been called the "homework gap," but at a time when homes have become classrooms and lessons stream into living rooms, the fact that many students lack access to reliable broadband means they are missing much more than homework assignments. While educators, advocates and experts have long warned that students who do not have adequate technology at home will be left behind, the COVID-19 public health crisis has brought the issue into sharper focus. The fact is that for many students, their ability to be successful depends upon broadband connectivity – and unless we find a way to ensure this for all students, we risk denying them their right to a sound basic education. Disconnected students are missing classes and are unable to participate in group projects, access research, contact teachers after hours for extra help, and more. In 21st Century America, we can do better.

It is true that many important initiatives have taken place at the state and federal level to increase rates of broadband access across society, and students have benefitted. However, across the communities of the Capital Region and beyond, there are still those who struggle for reliable broadband connectivity. The lack of affordability and infrastructure are among the barriers. The superintendents of the Capital Region BOCES have come together to create this document outlining the complexities and stakes of this issue.

"Last Mile of Fiber"

This refers to getting the broadband cable from the area where it runs, such as a public street or right-of-way, to a residence. The expense of this is typically borne by the homeowner and is cost prohibitive for many. As a result, although there may technically be broadband penetration in a given area, many people may be left out because they simply can't afford to bring it to their home. This is especially true in rural areas. Just as rural electrification initiatives transformed economies in sparsely populated areas generations ago, communities would benefit from efforts to make broadband access a reality for all. Otherwise, we risk leaving segments of the population out of education and the modern economy.

Students Need a Reliable Connection to Access Today's Learning

When people first started to use the Internet, much of the activity was email and websites that were very simple by today's standards. Fast forward to 2021: Today's students need a strong connection that enables them to view video lessons and meaningfully interact with peers online. This is challenging at best on cellular connections and can lead to overage charges and other fees for those with limits on data. Similarly, while hotspots – leveraging a cellular connection for Internet access on devices – can be helpful, they fall short of what is truly needed. In situations where



In a recent survey, the superintendents of the Capital Region BOCES area estimated that **15%** of students in the region— which equates to more than **11,000 students— have NO Internet access.**



"For our students and their learning, connectivity is no longer a luxury. It's a necessity. I also see this as an economic development issue. In an interconnected world where many people can

work from anywhere, I believe rural areas like ours can be even more attractive places to live and raise a family, but not without connectivity. No one wants to buy a house without electricity. The same is increasingly true for broadband. The health of our community and the opportunities we can offer our children are truly at stake."

— CARL J. MUMENTHEY,
Cobleskill-Richmondville
Superintendent



"A free and appropriate public education has become intertwined with broadband access at school and home. Throughout the pandemic, we have provided hundreds of mobile hotspots to families

across our city and to our homeless shelters. Yet, as we seek to offer a robust educational program and meaningful and interactive online learning, we have to recognize that basic access and true reliability are two different things. Multiple students drawing on a single hotspot or a cellular connection is a challenge that affects the ability of our children to connect with teachers and classmates. In the United States in the year 2021, we must be able to overcome this challenge."

— KAWEEDA G. ADAMS
City School District of Albany
Superintendent

multiple people (e.g., students and a caregiver working at home) are drawing from a single hotspot, the connection can be easily lost or weakened. Students need the stable, strong connection to broadband day in and day out.

“Dead Zones”

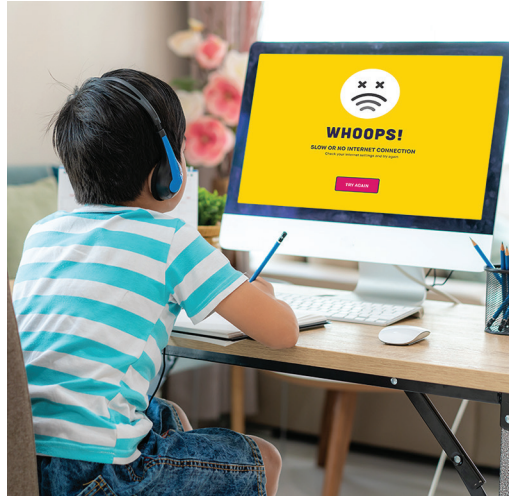
Although cellular connections, including hotspots, can be a solution in some instances, service remains nonexistent in some areas, especially rural areas. But, even in populated communities, there are spots where the coverage is weak or nonexistent. A cellular connection alone cannot be the only answer. Broadband cable is critical.

Affordability Challenges

For many families struggling to meet basic needs, broadband is simply not part of the household budget. This is especially the case during the current pandemic and economic downturn, while many families find themselves turning to food pantries and other assistance for the first time. However, broadband is far from a luxury when students are expected to be able to connect to class or do school work from home. In some cases, when a cellular plan is used to access data, such as streaming a class or working on a project, it can lead to extensive overage charges and fees that families are ill-equipped to pay. Some families have taken to going to a coffee shop or fast food parking lots for free Wi-Fi. This should not have to happen in order for one to get an education. While schools have provided hotspots to students, a basic broadband plan can cost far less. However, there are no mechanisms in place that would allow schools to provide this option.

Looking Into the Future

The COVID-19 crisis has led to significant changes in the ways people are living, learning and working. There is no doubt that some of these new practices will be with us even when the pandemic is over. We should embrace the power of teachers reaching their students no matter their physical location, of students working together through technology, and of fully connected learning communities. However, until we are able to ensure all students have adequate access to broadband, we will not truly be able to realize the promise of technology. We will have students who are left out of a time of progress and what was once called the homework gap will be an educational crisis of its own.



“As our economy continues to transform in a digital age, our schools are doing everything they can to keep up. The ability to stream lessons to students at home and have meaningful, remote

learning taking place is likely just one of many experiences that will be with us long after the pandemic is over. This has powerful implications for our students and their education. However, we also have to think in new ways about how to make sure all students have access to this, including modernizing funding structures, taking advantage of economies of scale and resources that already exist to make sure all of our kids are connected.

— DR. JAMES NIEDERMEIER
Duanesburg Central School District
Superintendent

Capital Region BOCES

- Albany City School District
- Berne-Knox-Westerlo CSD
- Bethlehem CSD
- Burnt Hills-Ballston Lake CSD
- Cobleskill-Richmondville CSD
- Cohoes City School District
- Duanesburg CSD
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- Menands CSD
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- Sharon Springs CSD
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- Voorheesville CSD
- Watervliet City School District



Anita M. Murphy
Capital Region BOCES District Superintendent

Joseph P. Dragone, Ph.D.
Capital Region BOCES Senior Executive Officer