



June 16, 2021

WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW ABOUT Broadband Access for Students

PRO POINTS

- **A recent study has estimated that up to 12 million K-12 students remained “under-connected” at the beginning of the year as the Covid-19 pandemic exacerbated stubborn gaps in broadband access.**
- **Federal pandemic relief aid has put about \$10.4 billion into two new Federal Communications Commission programs meant to help purchase devices and connections for students and teachers, and help families cover their home internet bills.**
- **Expanding the nation’s broadband networks is a matter of bipartisan interest and a central pillar of infrastructure discussions between Congress and the Biden administration.**

HOW WE GOT HERE

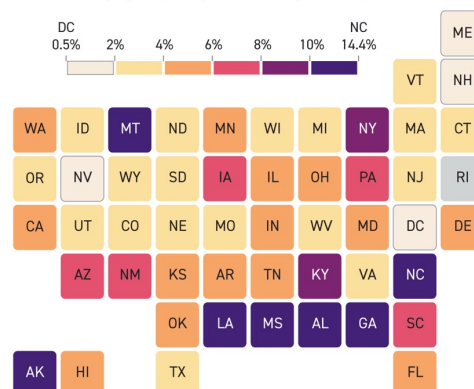
Well before Covid-19 sent the education system into a 15-month tailspin, millions of American students already struggled to access the internet connection and electronic devices they needed to complete their schoolwork. Children in minority communities and those from low-income households are the most likely to struggle with the “homework gap,” the disconnect students face as teachers assign more homework online. Consider this: An estimated 95 percent of children age 3-18 had some kind of home internet access in 2019. But not all connections are created equal. Some 30 percent of children living in households where parents held no more than a high school credential relied on smartphones as their internet lifeline in 2019.

Remote classes require more than just a device and an email address. When the pandemic pushed classrooms into a rocky world of online learning last year, as many as 17 million children couldn’t afford or access a suitable internet connection. A first-of-its-kind report from the Consortium for School Networking, funded by the Chan Zuckerberg Initiative, concluded that video consumed 85 percent of remote learning network traffic in thirteen school districts.

Three federal Covid relief laws sent billions of dollars to states aimed at closing the digital divide, and getting students connected to their remote classes. Yet, a report led by the Boston Consulting Group estimated up to 12 million K-12 students in the U.S. remained “under-connected” at the beginning of 2021. Among the main reasons for the lag, the firm found, were poor broadband mapping data, insufficient telecommunications infrastructure and inadequate funding.

Americans find challenges to getting online for school

Percent of households with children in public or private school who “sometimes,” “rarely” and “never” have internet for educational purposes, surveyed between May 12 and 24, 2021



Source: Household Pulse Survey — U.S. Census Bureau



WHAT'S NEXT

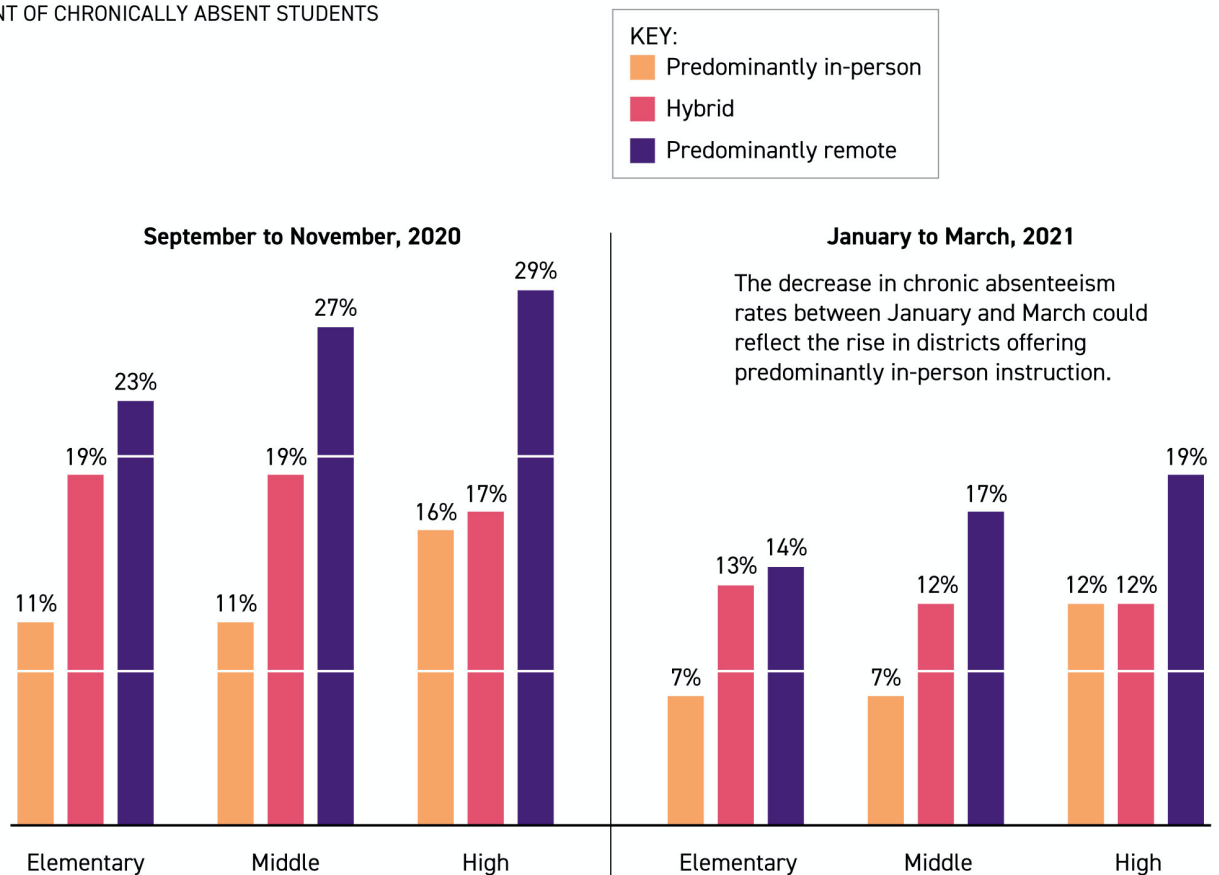
The White House declared broadband “the new electricity” when President Joe Biden first pitched a multibillion infrastructure spending package aimed in part at bringing high-speed internet to unconnected or under-served regions. The scope of the bill has been in flux as the Biden administration negotiates with Senate Republicans. But the FCC has already been authorized to deploy \$10.4 billion in federal stimulus dollars to assist schools and families with technology upgrades.

The FCC instituted a final rule for its \$7.2 billion Emergency Connectivity Fund, which is intended to help schools purchase devices and connections for students, school staff and library patrons. A separate \$3.2 billion Emergency Broadband Benefit Program that subsidizes family device purchases and internet bills is also being examined to see if there’s enough consumer demand to justify additional funding. Two prominent Republican senators, John Thune of South Dakota and Roger Wicker of Mississippi, have asked the Government Accountability Office to keep its eye on the program too.

In Connecticut, attendance rates are lower on remote learning days

A recent analysis of Connecticut public school attendance data concluded that chronic student absences were most prevalent among children in predominantly remote learning, and least prevalent among students learning in person. These early findings illustrate how other school systems could monitor which students need extra support and what kinds of learning work for students as the remote learning era moves into a new phase.

PERCENT OF CHRONICALLY ABSENT STUDENTS



Sources: Connecticut State Department of Education, Attendance Works, Kevin Gee



POWER PLAYERS

- **Acting FCC Chair Jessica Rosenworcel:** The Obama appointee has been a longtime advocate of closing the “homework gap” — a term she’s credited with coining. She’s also supported using government technology subsidy programs to help students get connected at home during the outbreak. Rosenworcel was confirmed to the FCC as a commissioner in 2012 and Biden appointed her acting chair shortly after taking office.
- **Senate Broadband Caucus:** Co-chaired by lawmakers from states with some of the weakest broadband penetration in the country, the caucus has kept pressure on the issue of internet access since it formed in 2016. West Virginia’s Sen. Shelley Moore Capito, one of the caucus co-chairs, has been a key Republican player in the infrastructure and broadband negotiations with the Biden administration.
- **Sens. Maria Cantwell and Roger Wicker:** Cantwell, the Commerce Committee chair, and Wicker, the panel’s ranking member, hold key positions to decide how legislation to expand broadband access is crafted. Cantwell has been particularly vocal about internet access for Tribal communities.
- **NCTA — The Internet & Television Association:** The chief U.S. lobbying group for the broadband and cable TV industry holds significant sway across the sector. Former FCC Chair Michael Powell, a longtime government operative who has criticized aspects of Biden’s broadband plans, works as NCTA’s president.