



May 17, 2023

Subcommittee on Rural Development and Energy
Committee on Agriculture, Nutrition, and Forestry
U.S. Senate
Washington, DC 20510

Dear Senator:

On behalf of the 3 million members of the National Education Association and the 50 million students they teach and support, thank you for holding today’s hearing, “Rural Broadband: Connecting Our Communities to the Digital Economy.” We submit these comments for the record.

The NEA believes that the fallout from the COVID-19 pandemic has made it impossible to ignore the nation’s digital divide and its repercussions on the rural communities, communities of color, and under-resourced communities it affects, and the association strongly supports efforts to ensure that every community in America has access to affordable, reliable, high-speed internet service.

In partnership with Public Policy Associations Incorporated, the NEA’s September 2020 report—“[Digital Equity for Students and Educators](#)”—estimates that nearly one quarter of all school-aged children live in households without broadband access or a web-enabled device such as a computer or tablet; the inequities track across historic divisions of race, socioeconomic status, and geography. The divide is worse for students living in rural areas, Native students, and students of color.

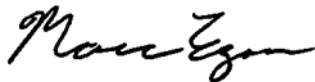
Additionally, only 53 percent of school-aged children in households that are below the federal poverty threshold have access to both broadband and a device, while 79 percent of children in households above the federal poverty line have access to broadband and a device. The expanded use of technology for schooling affects educators, students, and their families both inside and outside the classroom. Students—and educators—without sufficient access to digital technologies and resources are essentially left in the dark. Many questions remain regarding how to best close the digital divide in the United States, but one thing is clear: intentional investment and planning by stakeholders are necessary. To move toward digital equity for our members and their students, the following policies and practices should be considered:

1. Affordable high-speed broadband should be available to all in the United States—akin to a public utility like electricity or water—regardless of Zip Code, race, disability, sexual orientation, gender identity and expression, family status, employment status, economic background, or geographic location.
2. Every student should have access to their own device (1:1) that is internet-capable, contains the software necessary for schoolwork, has a keyboard, and has a web camera for use during remote learning and beyond, provided at no cost to students.
3. Schools should evaluate what was learned during the time when schools were closed in spring 2020 to support all students and minimize future learning disruptions, including the collection and sharing of data on students who needed technology and households that need additional assistance.
4. The federal government should provide the funding and coordination necessary for schools, with states and other stakeholders collaborating, to close the access gaps made worse by the COVID-19 pandemic, including ensuring that all students have equitable, affordable access to broadband and devices.

5. Students should have access to digital assistance and technical support after school hours and when school buildings are closed—this includes secure adaptive technologies to meet individual student needs, such as the needs of English learners and differently abled students.
6. Educators around the country should develop innovative strategies (beyond the internet) to connect with students in authentic and supportive ways that do not leave some students out (e.g., requiring students to print materials). Educators and schools should be equipped with the tools needed to equitably meet students where they are, regardless of whether instruction happens at home or in school.
7. Content and instructional practices should be developed with direct input from educators to maximize student participation in remote learning, increase engagement, and provide meaningful ways to foster student collaboration and innovation.
8. Educators should be supported by ongoing professional development that includes racial bias training to create an inclusive learning environment either at home or at school.
9. Training in digital-literacy instruction is necessary, especially as schools shift from in-person to remote learning during future disruptive events.
10. School districts, with the assistance of the federal government and states, should ensure full access to digital technologies—both broadband and computer devices—for those living in rural areas, Native students and students of color, students living in under-resourced households, students with disabilities, and educators. Additionally, as demonstrated by the COVID-19 pandemic, technology is no longer a luxury and serves as a necessity for equity in educational opportunity for all students. Less than 10 percent of Indian Country has access to broadband internet technology. Sixty percent of Bureau of Indian Education (BIE) schools do not have adequate digital broadband access, or computer access, to be aligned with college and career readiness standards.

As this subcommittee begins to assess the U.S. Department of Agriculture’s various broadband programs, we hope the focus is on ensuring that the hardest-to-reach rural and Tribal communities are not overlooked. In addition, it is important to ensure that access to high-speed connectivity is affordable for families and schools. Bringing such access to communities, including to the schools, libraries, and families in them, will allow all students to explore their passions and thrive.

Sincerely,



Director of Government Relations
National Education Association