

## Boost the homework connection

By Jessica Rosenworcel, Commentary

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The digital world has made its way into every aspect of our lives, education included. Numbers from New York's [Broadband Program Office](#) make this change crystal clear: More than 98 percent of students statewide now use the Internet to learn in school. That is nearly every student in every school.

But what happens outside of school is just as striking. The office reports that 31 percent of students in the Empire State require Internet access for homework — on a daily basis.

Yet for too many students getting Internet access to do their homework can be the hardest assignment of all. According to data where I work, at the [Federal Communications Commission](#), one in three households in this country do not subscribe to broadband service. Students in these households — in New York and across the country — struggle. They linger in the school parking lot after hours, hang out in fast-food restaurants, or wait in line at the library — just to get a signal to get online. Even for the most dedicated kids, this is difficult. It means assignments go incomplete, learning stalls, and digital skills do not fully develop.

These students who lack broadband access at home to do basic schoolwork are falling into what is called the "homework gap." It's a problem that did not exist when I was in school. But as Internet access moves from luxury to necessity in education, the homework gap is becoming a new digital divide. It's one that needs to be addressed. Like every good homework assignment, this is a problem that is challenging. There is no single solution. But there are definitely creative things we can do to bridge this divide and close this gap.

Libraries in New York and Kansas are loaning out wireless hot spots so that students can get online access at home and get their homework done. In California and Kentucky, we have school buses that are being outfitted for Wi-Fi, turning ride time into connected time for schoolwork. Initiatives like these are making a real difference. But more can be done. For starters, on Thursday, the FCC is expected to vote on a proposal to modernize a program called Lifeline. Lifeline began more than three decades ago, when President Ronald Reagan was in the White House and rotary phones were still in style. Then and now, this program provides a discount for basic phone service. But broadband is the essential technology of our time. So it's time for the FCC to take steps to make this program broadband-capable and use it to help close the homework gap.

In addition, it is clear that we need more Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is an essential on-ramp to Internet connectivity. Making sure that more of our airwaves are devoted to it should be a priority at the FCC and in Washington. If you need a reason why, just take a look at New York City. It is repurposing phone booths and creating a citywide Wi-Fi network, expanding possibilities for connectivity across the city and providing more ways for students to get online.

Taking on the homework gap is not easy. But the reasons to do it are multiplying fast. The digital age is here to stay. Every student will need connectivity to succeed in school — and have a fair shot in our shared economic future.

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