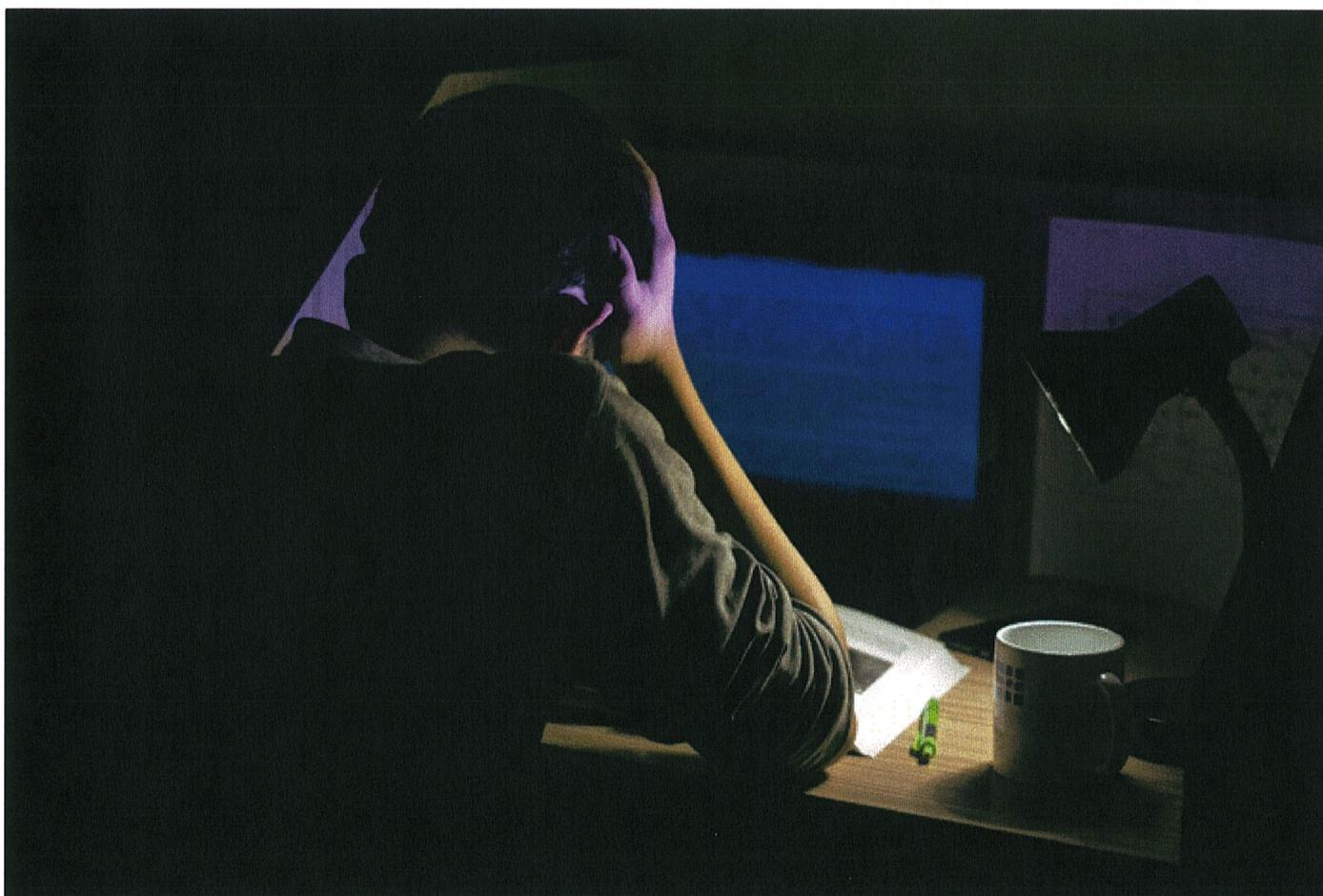

AIF BLOG

Millions of children can't do their homework because they don't have access to broadband internet

CATEGORY: [Technology](#), [U.S.A.](#)

Jun 29, 2016



Jessica Rosenworcel is a member of the US Federal Communications Commission. She will speak at the Festival on June 30th on a panel called "Closing the Digital Divide."

Below, Rosenworcel explains how the digital divide is preventing thousands of children from being able to do their homework and what's being done to address this issue.

This month the final bell rings in schools across the country. Exams end, lockers clang shut, and students bid farewell to teachers and friends as they head out for summer. But more than just the school year is coming to a close. Slowly but surely, we are also saying goodbye to the analog era of education.

The Homework Gap is the cruelest part of our new digital divide.

The evidence is all around us. Digital devices, coding classes, and online literacy are all now an essential part of learning. But the more fundamental shift is with homework. It used to be that nightly schoolwork required just pencil and paper. But those days are behind us. Internet access is now essential.

Today, as many as 7 in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data from where I work — the Federal Communications Commission — show that one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service. Where those numbers overlap is a new digital divide — call it the Homework Gap.

There is evidence all around us that the Homework Gap is real. According to the Pew Research Center, there are 5 million households in this country with school-aged children that lack broadband service at home. This is a problem. Without a way to get online access they will be unable to do basic homework or develop the skills necessary for the digital economy.

Moreover, students without broadband at home are holding our education system back. Surveys show that teachers are reluctant to assign digital homework when they fear that their students lack safe and consistent Internet access. On top of that, more than half of principals nationwide now cite digital equity as a major challenge in their schools.

But national statistics alone do not capture the magnitude of the problem. Without Internet access at home we have students in Alabama hunkering down in fast food restaurants with Wi-Fi, and sitting in parking lots in Michigan, where they can get a free signal and get their homework done. We have parents juggling their schedules around in New Mexico, to drive their kids to the homes of friends and relatives with broadband service. All of this makes nightly school assignments a serious challenge.

The good news is that by identifying the Homework Gap as a problem we can get started on developing solutions. But like any good homework problem, it's complex. There is no one single answer or quick fix. Still, there are things we can do right now to help bridge this gap and close this divide.

For starters, we need to make schools aware of recent reforms to a program at the Federal Communications Commission known as Lifeline. This program began in Washington back in 1985 — when most communications involved a cord and President Ronald Reagan was in the White House. Historically it helped low-income households get connected to basic telephone service. But voice telephony is not the primary way to connect and communicate in the digital age. So thanks to some adjustments made this year, going forward the Lifeline program will support broadband service. This is a meaningful change for students from low-income households whose parents might not otherwise be able to afford Internet access. Schools can pitch in by making this program known to both students and their parents.

In addition, we need more Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi democratizes Internet access and can help more students do their homework in more places. But the airwaves where Wi-Fi makes its home are getting crowded. So in Washington we need to seize opportunities to create more unlicensed spectrum, which are the kind of airwaves where Wi-Fi can easily expand.

Finally, we need to keep tabs on innovative broadband access programs all across the country. In New York, for instance, the city is creating a new wireless network with old payphone facilities, increasing the options its residents — students included — have to get online. In communities as diverse as Kansas City and Cherryfield, Maine, libraries are loaning out mobile hotspots that create a limited area of wireless coverage. For students, these small devices are a big deal. They can mean the difference between keeping up in school and falling behind.

In California, the Coachella school district got really innovative. More than half of the students in the district come from Spanish-speaking homes. Many have parents who are migrant farm workers. Few of their households have Internet access. But the school district came up with a creative way to help close the Homework Gap. They installed Wi-Fi routers on school buses and turned ride time into connected time for homework. Even better, the school system parks buses next to some of the most remote trailer parks in the district, leaving the routers on so students least likely to have broadband at home have yet another way to connect.

It will take creativity like this — at the federal and local level — to address the Homework Gap. Though school may be out for the summer, it's time to redouble our efforts to fix this problem. There is a lot to do to modernize education for the Information Age and even more to do to diversify the ranks of those in the new technology economy. A good place to start is with homework. Because the Homework Gap is the cruelest part of our new digital divide — but it is within our power to bridge it.