

# 'Homework gap' hurts poor, rural students

U.S. Senator Tom Udall and Jessica Rosenworcel 4:20 p.m. MDT October 22, 2016



Earlier this fall, kids in New Mexico and across the country headed back to school. This has meant a return to the routine of waking up early each morning, juggling extracurricular activities and sports after school and, of course, the nightly ritual of homework.

But for students in 5 million American households, homework represents an especially difficult challenge because they fall into the "Homework Gap" – they receive assignments that require the internet, but do not have broadband access at home.

This is a problem because just as access to broadband has become essential for finding a job or shopping online, it has also become necessary to complete basic school assignments. In fact, 1 in 5 students say they cannot do homework because they lack internet outside of school. Additionally, in another survey, 42 percent of students said that they received a lower grade on an assignment because they did not have access to the internet. The Homework Gap hurts low-income and highly rural students hardest.

These numbers are startling, but they aren't surprising. Kids have always required access to learning tools to have a fair shot at success. In today's digital age, that means access to the internet. Old, dusty chalkboards have been replaced by digital projectors and computing devices in the hands of every student. Without the internet, students are at a disadvantage. We must get creative as a nation and find a way to bridge this growing digital divide that is leaving behind students in low-income and rural America.

Our recent visit to rural Hatch confirmed this reality. Against a beautiful agricultural landscape known for producing hot green chile, we witnessed how technology and the internet play a central role in today's educational experience. At Hatch Valley High School, we saw teachers use technology to measure their students' performance and better target their lessons as the class unfolded in real-time. We observed the benefits of digital learning first-hand as students were literally connected to an entire world of information via Wi-Fi inside the confines of their classroom.

But we also learned that for many students, that interactive experience is one they only have at school. Once the final bell has rung and school is done for the day, kids and their parents face a nightly challenge of coordinating visits to the houses of friends and relatives with broadband, just so they can do their homework. Some rely on cellphone data, but parents on a budget can't afford expensive data plans, and these kids are out of luck when they reach the monthly limit. We listened to one student-athlete, Jonah Madrid, describe his odyssey of hourslong travel to play varsity football games only to return to the pitch-black school parking lot late at night so that he can catch an internet signal to do his homework.

These students deserve an A for their efforts. Their tenacity and willingness to help each other is what makes up the best in our country. But it should not be this hard to get homework done.

The good news is that there are local programs afoot across the country designed to narrow the Homework Gap. One great example is that some school districts are beginning to put Wi-Fi on school buses. This innovation can turn ride time into connected time, especially for students and student-athletes with long commutes on the school bus. For a student without the internet at home, access to Wi-Fi can be a game-changer. In fact, over half of us have used Wi-Fi to access the internet. And talk to any student and you will quickly learn it is their preferred way to get online. We should explore how federal efforts like those run by the Federal Communications Commission and the Department of Education can help pave the way for more Wi-Fi on wheels.

With the start of the school year, it's time to get to work and close the Homework Gap. After all, our collective future begins with the work that our students are doing each day in and out of school.

*Tom Udall, D-Santa Fe, represents New Mexico in the U.S. Senate. Jessica Rosenworcel is commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission.*

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