

By Jessica Rosenworcel

April 25, 2015 2:01AM

Jessica Rosenworcel: Falling through the homework gap

When I was growing up in New England, going to school meant a classroom and a teacher. Sharing in class involved dusty chalk and a blackboard. Texts were strictly paper and knowledge was bound in books. Homework required nothing more than your siblings leaving you alone, a clear workspace, and a Number 2 pencil.

No more. It's not just school that has changed as classrooms get connected and digital teaching tools make their way into school — it's homework itself.

Today, seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to the Internet. But data from where I work, the Federal Communications Commission, suggests that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service — because of lack of interest, affordability or availability.

Just imagine being a student in one of these households without broadband. Or better yet, consider Rhode Island's Shelley Pezza, a single mother living in Foster. Recently, she described to a reporter what her daily routine was like — just to help her two children complete their homework. Where she lives only dial-up is available. It's too slow for her kids to do their schoolwork. So after school is done and sports are over, she has her children head to their grandparents' home 20 minutes away. It's a taxing schedule that results in her kids not getting home until nine or ten at night, but it's the only place they can get reliable access to broadband.

Her problem is not unique to Foster — or New England. It's happening all across the country, as parents in households without broadband struggle to get their children the connectivity they need to do basic schoolwork. What we have is a Homework Gap — and it's the cruelest part of the new digital divide. That's because this divide is a loss to our collective human capital and shared economic future that we need to address.

There is no single, simple solution to fixing the Homework Gap. But there are steps we can take now to get started.

First, we need strong, coordinated federal and state policies to help bring broadband to places that lack it. The principle that everyone should have access -- universal service -- is enshrined in our laws and we must do our part to make sure that it remains meaningful as technology evolves and connectivity needs change.

Second, we need commonsense changes to a program called Lifeline. This program was set up in 1985, when most communications involved a cord and President Ronald Reagan was in the White House. Today, it supports telephone access in 14 million low-income households nationwide. But it needs an update for the broadband era. Instead of having this program support only voice service, we should apply the same support to either voice or broadband service.

Third, we need more Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is an essential onramp to the Internet for millions of Americans. Having Wi-Fi in more places — from the neighborhood park to the local library — will mean more opportunities for students to get schoolwork done. Plus, having more Wi-Fi is good for local business. Studies show that more than \$140 billion in economic activity is generated each year by unlicensed spectrum, or Wi-Fi.

A lot has changed since I grew up, though the constant refrain from parents to their kids to “do their homework” is definitely not new. But for every student to get homework done today, we need to get creative about bringing broadband to the home. If we do it right, we can prevent students from falling through the Homework Gap, expand access to the Internet, and grow the digital economy — in New England and across the country.

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