

Filling in the homework gap

By **Jessica Rosenworcel**

MAY 30, 2015, 1:58 PM

There was a time, not that long ago, when homework required a pencil, some paper and a textbook. Gone are the days. That's because connectivity is not only remaking the classroom, it's changing schoolwork outside of the classroom.

Today, seven in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data from where I work — the Federal Communications Commission — shows that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service. Where these numbers overlap is a new digital divide. It's a "homework gap."

There is mounting evidence that the Homework Gap is real. Last month, the Pew Research Center found that nationwide there are 5 million households with school-aged children that fall into this gap. In addition, Pew found that one-third of households with incomes below \$50,000 with school-aged children do not have a high-speed Internet connection at home.

The impact of this lack of connectivity on students is also real. According to a study from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation and Family Online Safety Institute, nearly 50 percent of high-school students say they have been unable to complete a homework assignment because they lacked access to the Internet or a computer. On top of that, 42 percent of students say they received a lower grade on an assignment because they did not have access to the Internet.

These numbers are striking. But they only begin to tell the story. To get a feel for what is happening, consider what the homework gap looks like in Virginia.

Sonya Scott sees the homework gap every day after school, as students head to the Pearl Bailey Library in Southeast Newport News, where she serves as senior youth information specialist. As she told the Daily Press (May 18), these are "digital kids" and "a lot of them come in to do their homework." Some students bring their own devices and use Wi-Fi, others wait to use library computers. As she noted, "times are a bit hard," and Internet service at home is "one of the first things parents cut."

David Doughty, a senior at Denbigh High School, knows it first-hand. He uses the computer lab at Grissom Library for schoolwork every Sunday, because he doesn't have Internet service at home. As he suggests, schoolwork is hard for students without broadband at home.

These stories are not unique to Virginia. The homework gap is showing up in communities all across the country. In Florida, there are stories of parents queuing up at libraries in order to get their school-aged children some time online. In Alabama and Michigan, there are tales of students piling into fast food restaurants, because they are the only places in town that are open late and have a reliable Wi-Fi signal. That means kids do their homework with fizzy drinks and fries.

We can do better.

We can begin by setting aside more spectrum for Wi-Fi. Wi-Fi is an essential onramp for Internet connectivity. In

fact, more than half of us have used public Wi-Fi to get online. In light of this, some school districts are getting creative and installing Wi-Fi kiosks in their community. Others are loaning out wireless hotspots from their school libraries. This is already happening in communities in New York and in school libraries in Wisconsin. We need more ideas like this — and more efforts to make sure we have more airwaves available for Wi-Fi all across the country.

We can also update a program at the Federal Communications Commission known as Lifeline. This program was started three decades ago when President Ronald Reagan was in the White House and calling anyone involved a cord. Today, it supports basic telephone service in 14 million low-income households. But it needs a digital age reboot. By making some small changes, we can allow Lifeline participants to choose support for broadband instead of traditional voice. This would modernize the program. Even better, it could help more students get the high-speed services they need to do their homework.

Homework has changed. We should give more students a fair shot at getting it done. Closing the homework gap may not be simple or easy — but the success of our students today and our economy tomorrow depends on it.

Rosenworcel is a commissioner at the Federal Communications Commission.

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