

# The Cleveland homework gap when there's no Internet at home: Jessica Rosenworcel (Opinion)



Dylan Powell, right, and Jerod Reyes use wireless Internet to do homework on their computers during a bus ride to school in Sonoita, Arizona, in this 2010 file photo. (*Joshua Lott, The New York Times, File, 2010*)



By [Guest Columnist/cleveland.com](#)

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April Willis is a 17-year-old student in Cleveland. She also is a student who did her homework not at home -- but all over town.

April had to get creative because she didn't have broadband where she lives. So to get her schoolwork done she often waited for computer time at the Woodland Branch of the Cleveland Public Library. Other times, she stayed after school well after the final bell had rung, just to get online and finish her assignments. Still other times, she headed to fast food restaurants with free Wi-Fi and did her research with fizzy drinks and fries.

Credit April for her tenacity. She was cobbling together the connectivity she needed to turn in her assignments and get her schoolwork done. But it wasn't easy. As she says, it was "very stressful."

This is a stress and strain too many students in Cleveland know.

That's because, today, homework requires so much more than a paper and pencil. In fact, seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires Internet access. But data from where I work — the Federal Communications Commission — demonstrate that one in three households do not subscribe to broadband service. Where these numbers overlap is a new digital divide. Call it the Homework Gap.

The Homework Gap is real. The Pew Research Center has done the math and found that, nationwide, there are five million households with school-aged children who **lack regular access** to the Internet.



## 2015: Inexpensive Internet service to be offered to thousands of low-income homes

### The National Digital Inclusion Alliance has ranked Cleveland among the 25 least-connected cities in the country.

But this problem is taking a special toll in Cleveland. Last year, the National Digital Inclusion Alliance ranked the North Coast among the 25 least-connected cities in the country. That means a real challenge for too many individual students — and a broader challenge for Cleveland's collective economic future.

The good news is that the city is becoming an incubator for programs to address this gap and close this divide.

Earlier this month, I saw this in action at the Centers for Families and Children, where they cut the ribbon on a new computer lab. **More efforts are coming** to the city through ClevelandConnects, a public-private initiative with the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority. This initiative, which is part of a national ConnectHome effort, will help provide devices, low-cost broadband, and digital skill programs for 350 students in assisted housing in the city. The impact here will be big, because the housing authority estimates that only eight percent of their units have high-speed Internet service today.

In addition, last month, the Federal Communications Commission updated a program called **Lifeline**. Lifeline got its start back in 1985 when President Ronald Reagan was in the White House and most communications involved a cord. Today it provides discounted phone service in millions of low-income households across the country — including Ohio. But times have changed. Voice service is no longer the only essential communications service. So going forward, this program will be modernized and help with broadband, too.

Still, more can be done. Cleveland can take cues from efforts to solve this problem in other areas of the country. For instance, there are rural school districts in California and Kentucky that have added Wi-Fi routers to their buses, turning ride time into connected time for homework. There are also libraries in Missouri and Maine that are loaning out wireless hotspots to students and their families to help ensure kids can keep up in class.

Cities are also taking a fresh look at their urban infrastructure and re-imagining it for the information age. New York City, for example, is converting the old payphones that line its streets into a new Wi-Fi network that will provide more ways for students to get online.

These initiatives can make a real difference. April's story makes this clear. Though she recently got Internet access at home — and it is helping her maintain a 4.0 grade-point average — her educational experience without it is all too common. Too many students just like her in Cleveland and around the country are struggling because they lack the connectivity they now need for basic schoolwork. That is why the Homework Gap is the cruelest part of the new digital divide. But if we work together we can bridge it and give more students a fair shot at 21st century success.

*Jessica Rosenworcel is a commissioner of the Federal Communications Commission in Washington, D.C. She was in Cleveland April 8 to attend the ribbon-cutting for a new computer lab at the Centers for Families and Children's El Barrio Workforce Development Center on Detroit Avenue near West 52nd Street.*

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