

HUFFPOST EDUCATION

Bridging the Homework Gap

Jessica Rosenworcel

Commissioner, FCC

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In June the same scene plays out in classrooms all across the country. The rituals are remarkably similar -- the frenzy of end of the year exams, the dash to file final papers and the goodbyes to teachers and friends as the school year comes to a close and summer begins.

Summer also brings an end to homework. But the truth is homework as we once knew it has already ended. In fact, the days when homework only required a paper, a pencil and a textbook are long gone.

That's because today roughly seven in ten teachers assign homework that requires access to the Internet. But data from where I work -- the Federal Communications Commission -- suggest that as many as one in three households do not subscribe to broadband, due to lack of affordability and lack of interest. Where these figures overlap is what I call the Homework Gap.

The Homework Gap is real. In fact, according to findings from the Pew Research Center, there are 29 million households with school-aged children nationwide. Five million of them lack regular access to broadband.

Try to imagine what it is like to be a student in one of these households. Just getting homework done is hard. Trying to research a paper is tough. Instructional videos and online educational programs are out of reach. It means the daily challenge of getting schoolwork done is compounded by a quest for connectivity. In too many communities, that means students sliding into the booth of a fast food restaurant with wireless service, doing their homework with a fizzy drink and fries. It means waiting in long lines at the library to get access to a computer and head online for homework. It means hanging around commercial parking lots late at night just to catch a signal for homework that is not password protected. This is a quest too many students struggle with every day and the consequences are mounting.

According to a recent study from the Hispanic Heritage Foundation, Family Online Safety Institute and My College Options, nearly 50 percent of students say they have been unable to complete a homework assignment because they didn't have 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 didn't have access to the Internet.

The Homework Gap is a problem for these students. But it's a problem for all of us, because this gap harms our shared economic future. When students lack access to online resources at home, teachers shy away from integrating technology into their teaching. But technology is making its way into every aspect of our economy and students require preparation for a world where computing skills are all but mandatory in the workplace.

The Homework Gap is a complicated problem, but the lesson is straightforward: We need to take steps now to make sure all students have access to the connectivity they need to do their homework. This will not only expand access to broadband, it will give more students a fair shot at digital age success.

So where to begin?

At the Federal Communications Commission this week, we will start a process to make changes to a program known as Lifeline. This program, which helps provide telephone access to low-income households, got its start in 1985 when most calls involved a cord and President Reagan was in the White House. We should modernize it and give it a digital age reboot. Instead of having the program only support voice service, we should allow participants to choose between applying the same support to either voice or broadband service. This simple change would both update the program and help bring more broadband to low-income households with school-aged children.

We also need more Wi-Fi. After all, Wi-Fi is an essential on-ramp for Internet connectivity. More than half of us online have relied on public Wi-Fi at some point. But for many low-income students it is their only means of getting online. So having more Wi-Fi in more places will mean more opportunities for students to get their homework done. Efforts from around the country make this clear -- there are cities with wireless hotspots for loan at libraries, schools identifying community or business Wi-Fi locations for students and even school buses equipped with routers to help with access for homework on the way to school and back. We need to multiply these creative efforts and make sure that they have the spectrum necessary for Wi-Fi that helps them flourish.

Closing the Homework Gap is not an easy problem with a simple solution. But the stakes are high because our shared economic future depends on it. So while students are away from the classroom this summer we should commit to finding ways to expand broadband access for schoolwork. The Homework Gap may be the cruelest part of the digital divide -- but it is within our power to bridge it and provide all students with the connectivity they need for a fair shot to succeed.