

## How to close the 'Homework Gap'

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The Miami Herald's Oct. 12 story *With no Internet at home, Miami-Dade kids crowd libraries for online homework*, described students crowding local libraries to complete their online homework because they have no Internet access at home.

The story made waves far beyond Florida. The problem it described is a familiar one in communities across the country. There is nothing new about students struggling to get their school work done — “The dog ate my homework,” after all, is an excuse as old as time. What is

different now is the need to be online in order to complete so many school assignments.

Today, roughly seven in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data from the Federal Communications Commission suggest that almost one in three households do not subscribe to broadband services at any speed – for reasons such as the lack of affordability and lack of interest.

Think about these numbers. Where they overlap is the “Homework Gap.” If you are a student in a household without broadband, just getting homework done is hard, and applying for a scholarship is challenging. While low-income families are adopting smartphones with Internet access at high rates, a phone is not how you want to research and type a paper, apply for jobs or further your education.

A recent study by the Pew Research Center found that more than half of teachers in low-income communities said that their students’ lack of access to online resources at home presented a major challenge to integrating technology into their teaching. So not only are students who lack access at home struggling to keep up, their lack of access is holding our education system back. It means too many young people will go through school without fully developing the skills that give them a fair shot in the digital age.

The good news is that we can do something about it.

First, the Federal Communications Commission, where I work, is poised to update its E-Rate program. The E-Rate program supports modern communications and Internet access in schools and libraries across the country. But it needs an upgrade. That means we need to provide more support for wi-fi and broadband service to libraries like those in South Florida, which are crowded with kids waiting hours to get online just to do their homework. We should make these changes without delay.

Second, we have to take on the Homework Gap at home. In 1985, when most communications involved a cord and President Ronald Regan was in the White House, the FCC set up a program called Lifeline.

Today, it supports telephone access in 14 million low-income households across the country.

But it needs an update for the broadband era. Instead of having this program support only voice service, we should allow consumers to choose between applying the same support to either voice service or broadband service.

Doing so would modernize the Lifeline program — and also help address the Homework Gap.

The Homework Gap is the cruelest part of the digital divide. But it is within our power to bridge it, help kids get their schoolwork done and expand Internet access. We should go for it.

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