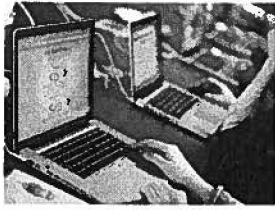


Limited Internet access a challenge for Detroit kids

Jessica Rosenworcel 12:42 p.m. EDT March 16, 2015



(Photo: Salwan Georges/Special to Detroit Free Press)

Last year, a report surfaced about a Detroit student who would forgo eating at school so that he could spend his lunch hour using his teacher's computer to finish his class assignments. Unfortunately, his story is not unique.

In communities in Michigan and across the country there are tales of students sitting after-hours in parking lots outside of libraries and inside the booths of fast-food restaurants just looking for a signal — the Internet connectivity they need to get their schoolwork done.

Today, roughly seven in 10 teachers assign homework that requires access to broadband. But data from where I work, at the Federal Communications Commission, suggests that as many as 1 in 3 households do not subscribe to broadband service at any speed — because of a lack of affordability and lack of interest. In Detroit, the numbers are even more troubling — seven in 10 students (<http://detroitk12.org/content/2013/12/12/kajeet-helping-students-receive-online-access-to-help-gain-competitive-edge-in-education/>) have no way to get online at home. It's basic arithmetic: For too many students, these numbers don't add up. Where they overlap is what I call the "homework gap."

Students who lack broadband access at home are unable to complete basic schoolwork. They have trouble keeping up in the classroom. More than that, they are holding our educational efforts back. According to the Pew Research Center, 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 classrooms.

Tackling this problem is not easy. It takes efforts on many fronts. Last year, the FCC modernized its E-Rate program, which is the nation's largest education technology program. It supports high-speed connectivity in schools and libraries in every state. Our modernization effort brought this program out of the age of dial-up. As a result, it will help put high-speed broadband and Wi-Fi connections in classrooms and library centers across the country.

This is a good start — but we need to do more to help with access to broadband after school hours. We need to take on the homework gap at home.

We can start by making commonsense changes to another FCC program. In 1985, when most communications involved a cord and President Ronald Reagan was in the White House, the FCC set up a program called Lifeline. 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 allow consumers to choose between applying the same support to either voice or broadband service.

Next, we can do more to increase the availability of Wi-Fi. Every day, millions of Americans access the Internet through Wi-Fi in coffee shops, shopping centers and even city parks. Expanding the availability of Wi-Fi will give more students more opportunity to get online and get their homework done. At the FCC, we can help by taking this into account as we manage the nation's airwaves. We need to make it a priority to ensure there is adequate spectrum for Wi-Fi and do it in a way that protects other services that make use of the airwaves. If we do this right, we can help our students and our economy — because more than \$140 billion in economic activity each year is generated by unlicensed spectrum, or Wi-Fi.

The homework gap is the cruelest part of the digital divide. But we can take steps now to tackle it — steps that will help students get their schoolwork done, help expand access to the Internet, and help grow our digital economy.

Jessica Rosenworcel is a member of the Federal Communications Commission.

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