



WE CAN DO BETTER THAN LEAVING KIDS TO DO HOMEWORK IN PARKING LOTS -INSIDE SOURCES

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There's a gap between American students who can easily access the internet for homework and those who can't. It's called the "[homework gap](#)," and this autumn, that gap is expanding rapidly because of the end of critical federal affordability programs.

A growing share of students are [doing homework](#) in McDonald's and library parking lots — just like they did before and early in the pandemic. The Federal Communications Commission recently tried to address the problem by [allowing](#) schools to use federal E-Rate funds to pay for loaner wireless hotspot devices so low-income students can use the internet outside of school, but the rule will need another year to take effect.

Why are Americans facing this problem again? Didn't we solve the homework gap through [emergency pandemic funding](#), an [internet affordability program](#), and [\\$42.45 billion for broadband infrastructure](#)? The truth is, we haven't. At least, not yet.

When the COVID-19 pandemic shuttered schools in March 2020, 50 million K-12 public school students nationally transitioned abruptly to learning from home. Thirty percent — [15 million to 16 million students](#) — lacked the internet access or devices to sustain learning from home (and 9 million lacked adequate internet access *and* devices.)

Congress responded, in part, by adopting a temporary Emergency Connectivity Fund that provided \$7.2 billion to help schools and libraries pay for internet access and devices for students in need. Congress also passed the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, which included an Affordable Connectivity Program to help low-income households pay for broadband service. Both programs expired recently and have not been renewed.

The [Cascade School District in Leavenworth, Wash.](#), is one of the places in the United States where students and families rely on federal [connectivity programs to get online](#). It's a small, rural district of about 1,200 students from families with a mix of ethnic diversity and incomes. Some families live in remote, mountainous areas.

"During the pandemic, we had to quickly figure out how to send devices home within only three weeks. But then we had so many students who did not have internet at home," said Tracey Edou, the superintendent of the Cascade School District. "By applying for the Emergency Connectivity Fund, we were able to use that to get hotspots and then to check them out to our students in need. It was very

valuable because it provided students and families access that they would not have otherwise had.”

The value of hotspots at home was clear for Edou from the stark differences in educational outcomes between Cascade School District and other Washington school districts. Says Edou, “The students who were able to access instruction, compared to the ones who weren’t, were light-years ahead. And because my district got that (Emergency Connectivity Fund) grant and was able to deploy hotspot devices to the homes of students in need, we had less learning loss compared to other school districts. ... I give a lot of credit to the (Emergency Connectivity Fund) for that.”

High-speed broadband at home is [critical](#) to [education](#), as many advocacy groups have argued for years. Without adequate internet access at home, students have trouble finishing homework, conducting research, or pursuing their [learning](#). However, access to the internet is only meaningful if people can [afford](#) it. In 2024 affordability [remains](#) one of the primary [barriers](#) to households getting broadband service, including disproportionate numbers of [low-income individuals and families](#) and residents of rural and Tribal areas.

Together, the Emergency Connectivity Fund and the Affordable Connectivity Program shrank the homework gap until they expired recently. The effect of Affordable Connectivity Program’s end in the Cascade School District bears out the concerns of educators and advocates. According to Edou, “Once we were fully back (from remote and hybrid learning) and ... once we removed the ability to provide internet access to our families, then we also removed a lot of the ability of our students to engage in our (online) learning management platforms, in assignments, and homework.”

The FCC’s recent vote to allow E-Rate funding to be used for Wi-Fi hotspots to connect low-income students at home will help to narrow the widening homework gap. The experiences of school districts like the [Pullman County School District \(Washington\)](#), [East Moline \(Illinois\)](#), [Boulder Valley \(Colorado\)](#) and [Fresno \(California\)](#), just like the Cascade School District, demonstrate that their wireless signal is often non-existent or not strong enough to support remote learning over a commercial mobile carrier broadband connection in many rural and low-income neighborhoods, especially inside a home or school building. This is why schools and libraries [want](#) and still need the [flexibility](#) to use alternative internet deployment methods if those best fit their needs and budgets.

While the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act of 2021 promises to build access to high-speed internet service to communities like those in central Washington, it remains a long-term solution when children need support to learn *now*. As Edou says: “We’re 15-20 years out from having internet access for all of our families. I have kids going to school today, so infrastructure might be helpful eventually, but it’s a drop in the bucket to me. I need children to have access today.”