Homework Gap Talking Points & FAQ

The COVID-19 national emergency has struck the K-12 public and private education systems especially hard and this national crisis has shone a bright light on the "homework gap" – experienced by approximately 8.5 to 12 million students who do not have access to the internet at home. Some educators also lack Internet access in their homes, making it difficult if not impossible to deliver education online right now. Therefore, we support **HR 6563, the Emergency Educational Connections Act of 2020**, that Rep. Grace Meng (D-NY) introduced on April 21. This bill would appropriate $2 billion for: distance learning solutions including Wi-Fi hotspots; modems; routers; devices that combine modems and routers; connection devices including computers; any other advanced telecommunications and information services; and home Internet access service. The bill would direct the Federal Communications Commission to receive those monies and disburse them through the E-Rate program, prioritizing support to students, staff or library patrons that lack access to such equipment and/or Internet access.

TALKING POINTS

The Need

Prior to COVID-19, the homework gap was already a pernicious, existing inequity that prevented students from being able to complete schoolwork.

- **The numbers on the homework gap run well into the millions**:
    - Pew Research in 2018 indicated that 15% of K-12 students were victims of the homework gap. With the number of K-12 public and private students at 56.6 million, that means that roughly 8.5 million students lack home Internet access.
    - The Joint Economic Committee Democrats report (2017) suggests the number of unconnected students at home is even higher – 12 million students.
- **The homework gap afflicts minority households disproportionately**. According to Pew Research, 25% of all black households with school-age children and 23% of all Hispanic households with school-age children lacked high speed Internet access. Only 10% of white households with school-age children lacked high speed Internet access – a significant gap. Additionally, 11% of black teens and 18% of Hispanic teens do not have a computer at home. By contrast, 9% of white teens do not have a home computer.
- **The homework gap hits low-income families particularly hard.** According to Pew, more than one-third of households with school-age children that earn less than $30,000 lacked high-speed Internet access. Only 6% of families with school-age children earning $75,000 or more lacked high-speed Internet access. The differences are similar for teen home computers, with one-quarter of families earning less than $30,000 lacking computer access at home and only 4% of families earning more than $75,000 lacking home computers.
- **Rural students face significant homework gap challenges.** According to a 2019 Pew Research Center report, 37% of rural Americans have no home broadband Internet access. They trail urban residents by 12 points and suburban residents by 16 points. Rural Americans are also less likely to have a tablet or laptop/computer than urban and suburban residents. In Mississippi, which serves 235,000 rural students, the Census Bureau reports that one-fifth of Mississippi households do not have a computer and nearly one-third lack high-speed Internet access. According to the FCC, half of the residents of the Mississippi Delta have no access to the Internet.

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- With more than 70 percent of educators assigning homework that requires the internet, many low-income and rural students are at an educational and technological disadvantage.

With the advent of COVID-19, nearly all public and private school buildings have closed and the homework gap is rapidly becoming an education gap for millions of minority, low-income and rural students.

- With libraries closed and stay-at-home orders in place in many states and cities, students cannot avail themselves of free Wi-Fi opportunities and may have no ability to go online at all.
- Further, **only 1 out of 4 school districts currently offer loaner Wi-Fi hotspots**, meaning that the vast majority of the nation's students cannot rely on schools right now to provide home connectivity.

https://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2015/04/20/the-numbers-behind-the-broadband-homework-gap/

The Cost

We estimate that at least $2 billion will be required to connect to the Internet and pay 3 months of Internet access services for the vast majority of homework gap students. This figure would obviously increase if schools adopt more expensive solutions or if school buildings remain closed longer than 3 months. The $2 billion figure assumes:

- Approximately 10 million homework gap students.
- Average costs of hotspots: $150.
- Average costs of lower end computers containing hotspots: $160
- Average Internet access service costs for hotspots/computers for three months: $50
- Total average cost of hotspot/3 months Internet service or computer/3 months Internet service: $200-$210
- Homework gap bundle x number of homework gap students: $2 billion-$2.1 billion

Insufficient Potential Solutions

- **Existing Title IV-A, Student Support and Academic Enrichment Grants**: This formula-based program, which received $1.21 billion in FY19 appropriations, allows school districts to spend up to 15% of their allocations on technology, which can include hardware and software. The CARES Act allowed states to apply for waivers that would permit districts to use all of their Title IV-A dollars for distance learning and US Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos announced that she would provide states with expedited waivers if they desired to use FY19 funds for that purpose. While helpful, this is an inadequate response because:
  - Title IV-A covers a great deal of other important issues related to COVID-19 response, including physical and mental health programs, and districts will need to expend a portion of their Title IV-A dollars there.
  - Providing hotspots and computers to homework gap students will cost far more than is available through Title IV-A.
- **Education Stabilization Fund:** The CARES Act provided K-12 schools with more than $13 billion in COVID-19 relief that could be spent on virtually any education priority and

specifically allowed – but did not require – funding for distance learning devices. While this funding will prove helpful to schools, it's flexibility will have the effect of diffusing finding to support a number of different priorities rather than targeting funding to address one critical issue such as the homework gap. Additionally, with state and local revenues taking a significant hit because of widespread unemployment and closed businesses due to COVID-19, many of these funds will likely go to fill school district budgets, including paying educators.

- **Corporate Donations:** Google made news by announcing that it would donate 100,000 hotspots and 4,000 computers to rural students in California and other companies have also made donations. While that is incredibly generous, those donations only cover a fraction of the homework gap students who lack access nationwide. The homework gap is a national problem that cannot be solved by targeted corporate philanthropy.

The Best Solution to the Homework Gap – E-Rate

- HR 6563 would provide emergency funding and **appropriate $2 billion to the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC's) E-Rate Program** to help ensure all k-12 students and teachers have adequate home internet connectivity for the duration of this emergency.
- E-Rate is a longstanding, bipartisan universal service program that provides more than $4 billion in discounts annually on broadband and Wi-Fi annually to K-12 public and private schools and public libraries. E-Rate does not support home Internet access service and distance learning technology currently but a 2010 FCC pilot allowed home Internet access service. E-Rate's funding does not come from federal appropriations but through the universal service fund, which is funded via fees assessed on consumer interstate and international phone calls.
- E-Rate represents the best method of distributing homework gap funds in this case because:
    - E-Rate has been in existence 22 years and has developed singular expertise within the federal government in working with telecommunications carriers to connect schools and libraries to broadband and Wi-Fi.
    - E-Rate operates under strong guardrails that ensure program integrity and that funds are accurately and appropriately disbursed.
    - E-Rate rules can be quickly and easily changed by the FCC to accommodate homework gap needs. The Commission can waive rules and allow E-Rate funds to support home connection technologies and Internet access service to student and educator homes.

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FAQ

Why use the E-Rate?

The FCC, which oversees the E-Rate and all universal service programs, is uniquely positioned to take short-term, immediate action to allow E-rate beneficiaries to receive additional E-Rate support from appropriated funds to provide hotspots and wireless service to existing school devices for students who lack internet access at home.

Another benefit of using the established E-Rate program is that it has guardrails already in place to help disseminate the funds. By making narrowly tailored adjustments to the E-Rate program, we can ensure the funds are used specifically for the purpose intended – and not more than schools or students reasonably need during this national emergency – to ensure we're getting students Internet access so they can continue their education while school buildings are closed.

Finally, FCC's E-Rate program is already an existing program and it's much more efficient (not to mention quicker) to make narrowly tailored adjustments to a program whose purpose is helping schools and public libraries maintain their broadband connectivity. The alternative, creating a new program, would add significantly more time and delay to implementation, especially when permissions or review from other agencies would be required. In addition, the knowledge, expertise and experience required to efficiently manage such a program resides only within the FCC. Bottom line – why waste time and resources reinventing when an existing program, the E-Rate, can be adjusted to accommodate this critical, time-sensitive need?

Why $2 billion for the E-rate to address the homework gap?
Several factors were taken into account to estimate a cost of $2 billion to address the homework gap, including: an estimate of the number of students in the millions experiencing the homework gap, range in prices distance learning technology (influenced by geographic local, purchasing in bulk, etc.), and service cost plans. We estimate that a $2 billion figure seems about right.

Will a $2 billion Emergency Fund be enough to solve the homework gap?
Probably not, but it is a good start. The emergency fund will go a long way to helping a great number of students experiencing the homework gap while schools are closed. As with emergency funding for so many other challenges brought on by COVID-19, it will be a learning process that will require assessment to know exactly how many students will be helped with $2 billion. However, we cannot do nothing when we have students who are unable to essentially log-on to school when so many of their classmates can.

Does the FCC have the authority to make this specific, narrow change to the E-Rate program so that schools can procure and disseminate hotspots or connected devices to students who don't have internet access at home?
Yes. The FCC has the ability to make use of its emergency powers to temporarily waive relevant E-rate program rules to ensure all K-12 students have adequate home internet connectivity with schools across the country closed.

Did the CARES Act passed on March 27 address the homework gap?
Yes and no. While the U.S. Department of Education (ED) was appropriated $13.5 billion for the Education Stabilization Fund (ESF) for K-12, the funds may be used *but not required* to purchase

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education technology (hardware, software and connectivity). The ESF may also be used for 11 other broad categories of use ranging from paying educators to deep cleaning schools. There are no requirements or dedicated funds to ensure the homework gap is actually addressed. In addition, ED does not have the infrastructure or expertise to create a new program to address the homework gap.

BACKGROUND ON THE E-RATE PROGRAM

The E-Rate is part of the federal universal service program authorized under the Telecommunications Act of 1996. Originally, the E-Rate's authors focused the program on connecting all schools and libraries to the Internet. Since the FCC's 2014 E-Rate modernization orders, the E-Rate's goal has been to ensure that all schools and libraries have ample bandwidth to meet the educational needs of students and library patrons.

To accomplish this goal, E-Rate support, capped at $4.15 billion annually, provides public and private schools and public libraries with support for:

- **Broadband/Internet access** (Category 1) – Applicants receive service discounts ranging from 20% to 90%, with the lowest income applicants receiving the deepest discounts.
- **Wi-Fi/Internal Connections** (Category 2) – Applicants receive 5-year formula distributions, with schools getting $167 per student and libraries $4.50 per square foot of space, with the next five year cycle beginning in 2021. Small schools will receive no less than $25,000.

Over the last two decades, the E-Rate has increased public school classroom Internet connections from 14% in 1998 to nearly 100% today. The E-Rate has committed nearly $52 billion to applicants in the twenty-two years since its founding in 1998.

The E-Rate is a program that works. It has a positive impact on schools and the students they serve.

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