



POSITION STATEMENT: DIGITAL EQUITY

► PURPOSE

To highlight the importance of providing access to and understanding of how to properly use technology to open doors to each student locked out of learning and, in turn, make learning more inclusive.

► ISSUE

Education has seen an increase in the use of a variety of technologies to help promote access, new learning opportunities, and new teaching styles for educators and students. However, the increased use of technology has led to new challenges as well, most notably the inability of some student groups to access or most effectively use digital tools and resources to accelerate their learning. Commonly referred to as the digital divide, many groups of students are often at a disadvantage compared to their peers due to their lack of access through either digital equipment or reliable broadband access.

Digital equity has become a policy many are paying closer attention to, and recent data from Project Tomorrow found that digital equity concerns are at the forefront of educators' and parents' minds. When examining the use of Google Education Suite in classrooms, these organizations found significant levels of variance in the use of this product in majority-white schools compared to majority-minority schools. In daily usage, majority-white schools used this product 22 percent more daily and 20 percent more weekly than the majority-minority schools. This similar trend held true when examining lower-income and higher-income schools as well. Title I schools often used Google Education Suite 21 percent less daily and 22 percent less weekly than their non-Title I peers. The use of new education technologies is something that cannot be ignored, and differences like this must be rectified; this is a belief held by many of the stakeholders in a student's education. The same report found that 99 percent of K–12 principals strongly agree that the effective use of technology is important for students' future success. Ninety-

► ISSUE—CONTINUED

seven percent of K–12 district administrators and 95 percent of parents of school-aged children strongly agreed with this sentiment as well.

While physical technology—like laptops, tablets, and smartphones—play an essential role in equity and access of information, another key component of digital equity is reliable broadband access. Many low-income students and those in rural areas suffer from a lack of reliable internet access, which can cause them difficulties when participating in online instruction and completing assignments away from school. This lack of access was described as the “homework gap” by Federal Communications Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel. In 2019, a Pew Research Center report helped illuminate how much of the American public struggles with reliable broadband access. The report found that 37 percent of rural Americans have no broadband internet service at home, trailing urban residents by 12 points and suburban residents by 16 points. Overall, 17 percent of teens say they are often or sometimes unable to complete homework assignments because they do not have reliable access to a computer or internet connection. This is even more common among students of color and lower-income students who are already lacking many of the resources that other white and higher-income populations possess. Educators realize that this is a prevalent issue as well, with 87 percent in an EdWeek Research Center survey saying it is very important for students to have good internet access at home.

Though accessibility is one of the key factors in promoting digital equity, another key piece of the puzzle is educator preparedness to use technology—including software and platforms to enhance instruction and train students on how to properly use and engage them. This can often be referred to as the “digital use divide,” a term coined in the National Education Technology Plan. As new technologies continue working their way into student’s learning environments, educators must continually adapt their teaching styles to the new realities of their profession in a way that best serves their students. For many, this means learning new technologies and developing new strategies in a continuously changing environment and in new instructional models as well. This is especially true for educators who are using mobile technologies to help educate students with special needs, as they may require additional accessibility and learning components. Recent research from the National Center for Learning Disabilities highlighted just how impactful education technology is for students with learning disabilities in two main ways. First, students with disabilities often use assistive technology to help them connect with otherwise inaccessible general education curriculum as well as to maximize their learning strengths. Second, they use technology more generally to help in creating engaging educational experiences when compared to their peers. As the technological landscape continues to evolve, so will the possibility of more personalized learning opportunities that increase the chances for each student to learn successfully. Proper investments must be made so educators are able to utilize new digital tools so they can provide the best possible learning opportunity for each student.

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JANUARY 2021

► NASSP GUIDING PRINCIPLES

- Education should prepare each student to be active, constructive participants in a global society.
- The Professional Standards for Educational Leaders state that effective leaders strive for equity of educational opportunities to promote each student's academic success and well-being.
- Technology-enhanced instruction has the capacity to engage students deeply in their work, connect them with countless resources, and allow them to collaborate across time and space. Furthermore, technology-enhanced education can also greatly promote student agency and empowerment.
- Schools should provide a student-centered, equity-focused, personalized, and customized experience for all students—fundamental tenets of the Building Ranks™ school leader effectiveness framework.
- School leaders should employ technology as a source of connection to a broader world, a way to personalize learning for students and a tool to find interconnections between concepts—a fundamental tenet of the innovation dimension of Building Ranks.

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS

- Provide a funding stream to ensure broadband infrastructure and mobile learning devices for each student to help in closing the digital divide. An example of this would be the federal E-Rate program.
- When allocating funding, use a variety of factors in determining the areas of most need for funds to support digital equity.
- Engage school leaders in the conversations that inform digital policies and ensure proper investments in cybersecurity measures for school districts as more learning goes digital.
- Provide additional funding for the hiring and professional development of specialized staff to aid educators in adopting and implementing new learning technologies. Such staff can include but are not limited to education technology coaches and library media specialists.
- Provide additional funding for professional development on the effective use of technology to ensure educators are able to effectively use the latest technology for educating their students.
- Collect and analyze broadband connectivity data to paint a clearer picture of where additional support for broadband connectivity is necessary. This includes providing funding for federal mapping initiatives.
- Incentivize private broadband carriers to expand connectivity to areas that lack reliable internet access. Alternatively, provide additional supports for local governments to provide improved connectivity to low connectivity areas.
- Incentivize private broadband carriers to limit placing data caps or slowing the speed of broadband for school districts during extreme circumstances. For example, during a pandemic where students and educators are forced to learn virtually.

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JANUARY 2021

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR POLICYMAKERS—CONTINUED

- Update legislation related to student and educator data privacy so it is more applicable to the current education landscape. For example, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) and the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA).

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR DISTRICT LEADERS

- Support and advocate for policies that increase local broadband connectivity.
- Provide professional learning funding opportunities for school leaders and their staff to ensure successful implementation and sustainability of technology initiatives.
- Design and enact policies that leverage technology investments to support student achievement and career readiness and that also seek to actively close the homework gap and digital divide.
- Provide technical and financial support to schools that connect students and adopt 1:1 programs.
- Ensure proper cybersecurity measures are in place to protect student's data and to adhere to federal laws related to data privacy, including FERPA and COPPA.
- Empower educators to exercise professional agency, build teacher leadership skills, and pursue personalized professional learning.
- Inspire a culture of innovation and collaboration that allows the time and space to explore and experiment with digital tools for educators and students.
- Support educators in using technology to advance learning that meets the diverse learning, cultural, and social-emotional needs of individual students.

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS

- Lead the conversation around connectivity and involve students and staff in the creation of policies for equitable technology use in and outside of school.
- Incorporate the responsible use of mobile and social technologies into acceptable-use policies to ensure students are practicing digital citizenship as they increase their technology use.
- Promote 1:1 access to connectible devices, including students' own devices, to allow for "anytime, anywhere" learning.
- Participate in and provide teachers professional development on the effective use of digital devices and virtual instruction and how these can be used to enhance instruction and provide students with a more personalized learning experience.
- Support educators in using new technologies to advance learning that meets the diverse learning, cultural, and social-emotional needs of individual students.
- Educate students and faculty on proper digital citizenship and security measures as the use of technology increases.

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JANUARY 2021

► RECOMMENDATIONS FOR SCHOOL LEADERS—CONTINUED

- Educate staff on proper student data privacy protections to ensure the safety of student data and to adhere to federal laws like FERPA and COPPA.
- Share information with parents on what is expected for student's use of digital tools so they are fully aware of expectations and are able to provide feedback if they do not believe their child will be able to meet these expectations based on lack of accessibility or other factors.
- Encourage leadership teams and other staff members to research other schools that have successfully integrated technology and to speak with their peers at those schools.
- Develop a personal innovation professional network focused on the successful integration of technology use by students and staff members.

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