NASSP
National Association of Secondary School Principals

POSITION STATEMENT:
DIGITAL EQUITY

Issue at a Glance

A variety of new technologies help promote access, learning opportunities, and teaching styles for educators and students. According to the 2023 State of Technology in Education Report, 90% of teachers say that technology helps them to assess student learning more effectively and 76% of students say technology use makes learning more engaging. However, the increased use of technology has led to new challenges, most notably the inability of some student groups to access or most effectively use digital tools and resources to accelerate their learning. The digital divide leaves certain groups of students often at a disadvantage due to their lack of access through either digital equipment or reliable broadband access.

The National Education Association's "Digital Equity for Students and Educators" 2020 report estimated that 25% of all school-aged children live in households without broadband access or a web-enabled device such as a computer or tablet. This inequality is systematically related to the historical divisions of race, socioeconomic status, and geography. In addition, a Pew Research Center survey conducted in 2022 reported that nearly one third of U.S. teenagers report facing at least one academic challenge related to lack of access to technology at home, called the "homework gap" and 12% say they are often or sometimes unable to complete homework assignments because they do not have reliable access to a computer or internet connection leaving them at a disadvantage.

In 2022, Project Tomorrow found that when examining the use of Google Education Suite in classrooms, use of this product in was higher in majority-white schools compared to majority-minority schools. In daily usage, majority-white schools used this product 22% more daily and 20% more weekly than the majority-minority schools. Title I schools often use Google Education Suite 21% less daily and 22% less weekly than non-Title I schools. The same report found that 99% of K–12 principals strongly agree that the effective use of technology is important for students' future success while 97% of K–12 district administrators and 95% of parents of school-aged children strongly agree.

While physical technology—like laptops, tablets, and smartphones—play the essential role in accessing information, nonreliable or lack of broadband access at home remains a barrier to digital equity. Students from low-income families and those in rural areas are at a disadvantage which can cause them difficulties when participating in online instruction and completing assignments outside of school. The Federal Communications Commission (FCC) reports that 22% of rural Americans have no broadband internet service at home, compared to 1.5% of urban residents. This disparity is even more pronounced in Tribal communities, where nearly 30% lack coverage.

As new technologies like artificial intelligence expand learning environments, educators must continually adapt their teaching styles to what best serves their students including those with special needs who use assistive technology for engagement experiences.

NASSP Position

- State and federal lawmakers must invest in technology in schools, broadband access, training, and professional learning for educators, so that they are able to utilize new digital tools and provide the best possible learning opportunity for each student.
- 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, enhanced education can also greatly promote student agency and empowerment.
- Schools should provide a student-centered, equity-focused, personalized, and customized experience that includes technology for all students.
- School leaders should employ technology as a source of personalized learning for students and a tool to find interconnections between concepts.

Recommendations for Policymakers

- Provide a funding stream so broadband infrastructure and mobile learning devices are provided for each student. An example of this would be the federal E-Rate program, access in libraries and buses and ensuring the Universal Service Fund is adequately funded to provide broadband subsidies.
- Engage school leaders in the conversations that inform digital policies and ensure proper investments in cybersecurity measures for school districts.
- 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 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.
- 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.

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 data and to adhere to federal laws related to data privacy, including the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA), the Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) and the Children's Internet Privacy Act (CIPA).
- Empower educators to exercise professional agency, build teacher leadership skills, and pursue personalized professional learning.
- Inspire a culture of innovation where educators use technology and digital tools to advance learning that meets the diverse learning, cultural, and social-emotional needs of individual students.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Connect with the business and technology sector to build a network focused on the successful integration of technology use by students and staff members.
- Lead the conversation and creation of policies for equitable technology use in and outside of school; incorporate the student council for student voice and feedback.
- 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 with 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.
- Educate staff on proper student data privacy protections to ensure the safety of student data and to adhere to federal laws like FERPA, COPPA and CIPA.
- Share information with parents on what is expected of student use of digital tools, so they are informed of expectations; address lack of accessibility.
- 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.