



DIGITAL EQUITY IN DC EDUCATION

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR REOPEN DC ADVISORY GROUP

For the past two years, our citywide coalition of parents has been working to close the digital divide for DC students. While much of the current discussion has focused on the immediate need of distributing technology to students, we urge city leaders to look at more sustainable, long-term solutions for providing digital equity. Specifically, we cannot close the digital divide unless we look beyond temporary fixes and create a technology infrastructure that enables both in-school and distance learning.

In our [January letter to Mayor Bowser](#), we highlighted the need for planned investment in a sustainable technology infrastructure for DC Public Schools. This pandemic has highlighted just how critical these supports are for both in-school and distance learning. Below are updated recommendations for providing digital equity to DC students.

Recommendations specific to DC Public Schools

1. **Provide funding to replace damaged/lost computers and continue DCPS's plan to provide a device to every student in grades 3-12 by 2022.** Prior to the pandemic, DCPS planned to reach a 1:1 student-device ratio over three years as part of the Empowered Learners initiative (ELi). At a minimum, the city should ensure that ELi funding is not negatively impacted so that DCPS can complete the initiative as planned to support in-school and distance learning.
2. **Provide additional IT support and asset management for in-school and distance learning.** Through an agreement with the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO), DCPS funds 47 OCTO technicians who support almost 60,000 DCPS technology users. During the pandemic, computer distribution was delayed due to limited staffing to support device preparation and distribution. Investment in computer hardware must be coupled with investment in technology support to ensure successful in-school and distance learning.
3. **Support teacher professional development and technology access.** The city must ensure that teachers are provided with working computers and professional development/resources to integrate technology into instruction. Better training to implement asynchronous, online instruction will be needed for the foreseeable future. Currently, professional development in these areas is modest and insufficient to support the entire teaching workforce in effectively using technology.
4. **Assess, tailor, and integrate a curriculum for teaching computer literacy skills to students.** While many students use smartphones and social media, they lack instruction on the range of common technology applications such as word processing, presentation creation, and computer programming. During the pandemic, the use of multiple content delivery platforms and applications was unfamiliar and overwhelming for many families. Given the increasing reliance on technology in education, DCPS must create and implement a comprehensive plan to ensure that students have the technology skills needed for education and career.

Broader recommendations for closing the digital divide

In 2010, DC government received \$17 million in federal funding to expand broadband access. DC government considered various options for broadening Internet access but ultimately focused on providing Internet connectivity

to government buildings and community anchor institutions. The pandemic has shown that DC government has not done enough to ensure all DC residents are connected. We recommend the following next steps for expanding Internet access:

1. **Pilot free Internet access at public housing.** Internet access for public housing facilities should be prioritized to increase student WiFi access for at-home learning. Some residents are either unable or unwilling to use Comcast’s Internet Essentials program, and hotspots currently being distributed may not work well in all parts of the city. If the city initiated a pilot project now to install WiFi at a select number of public housing facilities, the results of such a pilot could feed into the larger assessment described below.

2. **Conduct an immediate and comprehensive assessment for broadening municipal Internet that provides policymakers a menu of options, at various price points.** A thorough analysis that assesses options beyond relying on current Internet providers should be initiated now and completed in time to feed into next year’s budget process and into city planning should federal funding materialize over the summer. Figure 1 provides a possible framework for exploring various options. Possible inputs to this assessment include:
 - a. A review of prior OCTO ideas from when DC received \$17 million from the National Telecommunications and Information Administration in 2010
 - b. Responses from a Request for Information from Internet providers
 - c. A review of other cities’ broadband initiatives

Figure 1. Possible Framework for Broadband Assessment

Time to Implement	Coverage	Partnerships	Business Models	Cost (Capital & Operating)	Anticipated Outcomes
1 year	Public Housing	Vendor	City-owned	\$XXX	
1-3 years	Specific neighborhoods/wards	Foundation	Commercial	\$YYY	
>3 years	Citywide	Federal	Public-private partnership	\$ZZZ	

3. **Provide leadership on a whole-of-government approach to solving the digital divide.** Multiple government entities have a role in addressing the digital divide. However, it is not clear that there is robust coordination amongst all the entities involved and an overarching vision and goal behind which government entities can align. Groups working on the digital divide include:
 - Deputy Mayor for Education, Digital Divide Response Group
 - Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development, Innovation & Technology Inclusion Council
 - Office of the Chief Technology Officer
 - DC Public Schools and other LEAs
 - DC Public Charter School Board