



DIGITAL EQUITY IN DC EDUCATION

Equitable access to education technology is more than having computers and Internet connectivity. To fully participate in online learning, students and teachers must have reliable devices, Internet, and tech support to access a variety of online learning programs for several hours per day. Current demands of online learning, including long periods of live video instruction and interactive math and reading programs, are straining hardware, tech support, and home Internet bandwidth. Below we outline issues that require immediate attention and provide practical recommendations to address the identified issues.

STATUS OF DCPS TECHNOLOGY ISSUES

1. Computers

- **Distribution for Distance Learning.** DCPS has distributed more than 29,000 devices to students and is continuing to distribute devices to meet student needs. DCPS placed orders for devices on July 31. Therefore, not all schools had sufficient technology to distribute to families at the start of the school year. In some cases, schools were asked to share their computer inventory with other schools who were not able to meet their student body needs. As of this week, DCPS finally delivered iPads to schools for PreK students – four weeks into the school year.
- **User Feedback on DCPS-issue Microsoft Surface Gos.** Parents are reporting that 1) devices are overheating; 2) the small size of touchscreens make reading and classwork difficult, particularly for upper grades; and 3) some devices were distributed without a working camera (essential for live instruction).

2. DCPS Tech Support

- **Family-facing Call Center.** In partnership with DCPS, the Office of the Chief Technology Officer (OCTO) launched a family-facing call center to troubleshoot home tech issues. Despite providing additional staffing after the call center was overwhelmed on opening day, parents continue to report long call times and unresolved tech problems. While login issues have clearer resolution, issues related to hardware and apps have been more difficult to resolve, in some cases requiring parents to engage multiple times with OCTO and their local school. While some schools have offered their own tech support, not all schools have the capacity or expertise to provide this type of support.

3. Internet

- **Connectivity Issues.** To participate in live group video instruction over prolonged sessions and to use other high bandwidth online learning platforms that use video, voice, and manual interactions, students and teachers need reliable Internet with sufficient download and upload speeds. Approximately 30% of parents who completed the Digital Equity in DC Education tech survey said their student experiences Internet connectivity issues such as slow-downs and disconnections.
- **A Sustainable, City-wide Solution is Fiscally Responsible.** DCPS is spending significant funding on monthly data plans for hotspots and LTE-enabled devices. We estimate that the monthly DCPS internet connectivity bill for students is approximately \$600,000. Separately, DC government is spending \$3.3 million for OCTO's *Internet for All* program to cover one year of free Internet service for SNAP and TANF-

eligible households. Investing in a sustainable, city-wide solution for Internet access would ensure equitable access in the long term rather than relying on band-aid approaches, which are costly and short term.

4. **Teacher Technology and Instructional Supports.** Teacher computers and other instructional technology tools are not centrally funded or sourced and many schools lack funding to provide/refresh teacher technology. Many teachers are spending their own money for devices and Internet to teach from home. Additionally, teachers have expressed a need for practical, interactive training on technology platforms and apps.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the outlined issues, we recommend that Council do the following:

-  **Request answers to the key questions outlined below.**
-  **Request an immediate analysis and action plan to address DCPS Tech Support service gaps.**
-  **Direct DCPS to produce a comprehensive technology plan that includes a multi-year funding profile.**
A comprehensive, multi-year technology plan, which addresses all of the following components, coupled with a multi-year funding profile would solve many of the identified issues.
 - Student Devices – the original Empowered Learners initiative only covered grades 3-12 and ended in FY22, planning for a robust refresh/replacement plan must be costed and scheduled
 - Tech Support and Asset Management – so that the burden is not on schools to fill service gaps
 - Teacher Technology and Instructional Technology Tools
 - Technology Infrastructure for School Facilities – so that connectivity inside schools is sufficient to support the teacher/student population
 - Training and Curriculum for Student Digital Literacy
-  **Pursue a whole-of-government approach to expanding Internet access.** The burden of providing Internet access should not be on the school system. Multiple government entities have a role in addressing the digital divide. Council should push for an overarching vision and plan for Internet access behind which all government entities can align.

KEY QUESTIONS TO INFORM DECISION MAKING

Key Questions related to DCPS Computers:

- Given that new technology needs will arise due to damage/loss and as new students enroll, how will DCPS ensure there is adequate inventory to meet needs as the school year progresses?
- What is DCPS's plan to ensure technology is ready to use when students return to the school environment? If schools reopen with a hybrid approach, will there be enough devices for both school and home learning?
- Approximately 30,000 new devices have been added to school inventories this year. Once devices are delivered to schools, it is largely on school staff to manage these assets. What support will be provided at the school level to ensure quality asset management?

Key Questions related to IT Support:

- What are DCPS and OCTO doing to assess service gaps and shortfalls? How is OCTO/DCPS soliciting feedback from families to inform improvements for the call center?
- What metrics and analyses are being used to assess Tech Support and do they adequately capture the customer service issues being reported by parents and teachers?
- What is the right level of staffing and resources for the call center to be able to troubleshoot problems in an effective and timely manner?
- How should responsibility and work load for asset management be distributed between Central Office, OCTO, and school staff?

Key Questions related to Internet Connectivity:

- What is the bandwidth and upload/download speed required for distance learning, including in households in which multiple people need to be online at the same time?
- Do current programs (OCTO's *Internet for All* program, Comcast's *Internet Essentials* program, hotspots purchased by LEAs) provide sufficient Internet bandwidth/speed to support live instruction and other demands of distance learning?
- How can DC better spend limited resources on a city-wide Internet solution rather than temporary, piecemeal approaches by Local Education Agencies?

Key Questions related to Teacher Technology and Supports:

- Given that technology is required to perform their jobs, why isn't DCPS guaranteeing technology for teachers?
- How is DCPS soliciting feedback from teachers on supports needed for distance learning, including ways to improve current DCPS training related to online learning?