Digital Equity Education Roundtables (DEER)

The Digital Equity Education Roundtables (DEER) initiative seeks to close the digital divide and enable all learners in PK-12, higher education, and adult education to unlock technology-enabled opportunities for learning and fully participate in a digital society. The U.S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Technology (OET) will leverage its experience in setting the national vision for the effective use of technology for learning, strong relationships with educators and education ecosystems, and commitment to co-creating solutions with communities to drive the national dialogue on the adoption of reliable, high-speed internet and technology for learning and catalyze collective action to remove barriers for learners, families/caregivers, and communities. We envision a future in which every learner has the information, support, and skills to equitably access affordable, reliable, high-speed internet service, adequate internet-enabled devices, digital literacy training, quality technical support, and applications and online content designed to facilitate self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration.

The Context

Today, about 16 million K-12 students have neither an adequate internet connection nor access to devices at home.[1] Inadequate access to internet services and devices is particularly challenging for students of color, indigenous students, students from lower-income households, students who live in rural communities, students who live in urban communities, and students with disabilities. Availability and affordability solutions, such as distributing devices and subsidizing internet subscriptions, are essential components to the solution. However, these approaches on their own will not solve the human-level challenges around adoption that individuals and communities face. Dedicated efforts, at a minimum, must also address public trust, digital literacy, and program awareness and clarity.

Three Components of Digital Equity

Digital equity is the condition in which individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States. To ensure all learners have equitable access to reliable, high-speed internet service and technology tools for learning, we must consider:

Availability	Affordability	Adoption
Is there sufficient infrastructure and coverage to deliver high-speed, reliable wired or wireless internet service?	Can learners and families/caregivers pay for the total cost of maintaining a high-speed, reliable internet service?	Do learners and families/caregivers have the information, support, and skills to obtain regular, adequate access to reliable, high-speed internet service and technology tools for learning?

Unlocking Digital Equity: Adoption Strategies to Bridge the Digital Divide

Strategy	Example
Awareness Building: Expand public awareness and understanding of programs and resources.	**Targeted Communication:** Deliver information in a variety of accessible forms and languages to unconnected and under-connected learners and communities.
Program Clarity: Simplify processes for learners and families to access programs and resources.	**Streamlined Design:** Limit steps to apply and increase transparency about privacy and costs.
Public Trust: Leverage trusted relationships between different sectors and constituents.	**Community Assets:** Build a shared vision and partner with community organizations and anchor organizations.
Foundational Capacity: Develop skills necessary to fully take advantage of technology and access opportunities, such as digital literacy.	**Capacity Building:** Offer training and technical support for learners and families/caregivers and professional development for educators.

OET is well-positioned to address barriers to adoption, such as a lack of access to information, technical support, and digital literacy and skills training, that impede access to reliable, high-speed internet and technology-enabled learning for all students.

6 million
K-12 students face adoption barriers outside of availability and affordability.[2]

9 million
of 37 million households that are eligible for the Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB) program have applied.[3]

25%
of families with low- and medium-level incomes are aware of free or discount internet programs.[4]

A Historic Opportunity to Advance Digital Equity

The Bipartisan Infrastructure Law (BIL) addresses digital equity through a $65 billion investment, which aims to provide learners, families, and caregivers with the connectivity they need to engage in technology-enabled learning opportunities. As part of the BIL, the Digital Equity Act (P.L. 117-58 § 60301) calls on states to develop digital equity plans that identify barriers to digital inclusion and set measurable objectives to address them.

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OET is collaborating with Digital Promise, a non-profit organization focused on accelerating innovation in education to improve opportunities to learn and originated by the 2008 re-authorization of the Higher Education Opportunity Act, to host a series of national conversations to learn more about the barriers faced by learner communities and promising solutions for increasing access to technology for learning. Based on these conversations, OET will share strategic guidance on equitable broadband adoption to support states in building their digital equity plans. Finally, OET will drive and support community action and commitment aligned to the vision for digital equity emphasized in the guidance.

Through the DEER Initiative, OET will:

Host a series of national conversations with organizations championing educational and digital access to identify adoption barriers faced by learner communities furthest from digital opportunities and promising, impactful solutions.

Publish a resource for state leaders to inform states' digital equity plans regarding equitable broadband adoption strategies.

Spur community action and commitment aligned with the recommendations made in the published guidance resource.

For more information, visit tech.ed.gov/DEER

[1] Titilayo Tinubu Ali et al. *Looking Back, Looking Forward: What it will take to permanently close the K-12 digital divide.* Common Sense Media. (2021.) https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/research/report/final_-_what_it_will_take_to_permanently_close_the_k-12_digital_divide_vfeb3.pdf
[2] Id at 5.
[3] Universal Service Administrative Co., *Emergency Broadband Benefit Program Enrollments and Claims Tracker* (2021), https://www.usac.org/about/emergency-broadband-benefit-program/emergency-broadband-benefit-program-enrollments-and-claims-tracker/; EducationSuperHighway, *No Home Left Offline: Bridging the Broadband Affordability Gap,* at 13 (2021), https://www.educationsuperhighway.org/wp-content/uploads/No-Home-Left-Offline-Report_EducationSuperHighway2021.pdf.
[4] John B. Horrington, *Affordability and the Digital Divide,* EVERYONEON, at 6 (2021), https://static1.squarespace.com/static/5aa8af1fc3c16a54bcbb0415/t/61ad7722de56262d89e76c94/1638758180025/EveryoneOn+Report+on+Affordability+%26+the+Digital+Divide+2021.pdf