The Patterson Foundation (TPF) created its Digital Access for All (DA4A) initiative to explore the efforts of multiple sectors working to enhance access to technology that connects people in ways that foster inclusion and well-being.

**DA4A Resource Library Spotlight: Common Sense**
*By Kiarra Louis*

**LOOKING BACK, LOOKING FORWARD:**
What will it take to permanently close the K–12 digital divide?

Common Sense is a nonprofit helping parents and their kids navigate media and technology to build a digital world where kids can thrive. Its focus on digital well-being is evident through Common Sense Media, Common Sense Education, and Common Sense Kids Action.

**Common Sense Media** rates and reviews popular entertainment choices to help parents determine appropriate options for their children. The ratings and reviews explore the content and the extent of language, violence, and consumerism. Providing helpful tips and lesson plans, **Common Sense Education** supports K–12 schools. Available resources include a free K–12 Digital Citizenship Curriculum that supports educators in teaching their students 21st-century skills and programs and guides to support remotely teaching and learning. Common Sense Education also has resources available in Spanish for the classroom and family engagement.

**Common Sense Kids Action** partners with leaders to advocate for all families to have access to quality technology. Supporting their advocacy is a digital divide map showing how students and educators in each state are affected by the digital divide.

Since the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic last spring, there has been a lot of discussion about virtual learning and how it impacts K–12 students. Many of those conversations have focused on student performance and the often heroic efforts of school districts across the country—and right here in our region—as they scrambled to adapt to digital classrooms and to provide devices for students to take home if they needed them.

But what if devices alone weren't the problem? What if students simply didn't have the ability to connect to high-speed internet at home, either because of a lack of infrastructure in their area or because their families couldn't afford a subscription plan?

Using research and data collected by the national organization, Digital Bridge K–12, our DA4A team examined the number of children in grades K–12 in our four-county area who lack even the most basic necessity of the virtual learning environment, having a reliable high-speed internet connection at home.
During the coronavirus pandemic, Common Sense and its partners published three reports:

1. Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning
2. Connect All Students: How States and School Districts Can Close the Digital Divide
3. Looking Back, Looking Forward What it will Take to Permanently Close the K-12 Digital Divide

All three reports explore the digital divide's impact on K-12 students, share efforts to help underserved and under-connected students, and provide policy recommendations at the federal, state, and local levels. Learn more about Common Sense [HERE](#).

Find more digital access resources on education and a dozen other areas [HERE](#).

Our Children Deserve Better
By Beth Duda, director of the
Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading

The Suncoast Campaign for Grade-Level Reading is a four-county effort in Charlotte, DeSoto, Manatee, and Sarasota counties in Southwest, Florida, to help children from birth through 3rd grade, especially those from asset-limited families, succeed in life by ensuring they read on grade level.

Families who were struggling with their children's academic success before the pandemic were hit with a tsunami when schools shut down. Limited or no access to internet and devices and a lack of knowledge on how to use devices made distance learning a daily nightmare for many families.

There is no doubt that the world has been on a steep learning curve since COVID-19 was declared a national emergency. Much of our acquired knowledge is medical-based: the proper techniques for hand-washing, the importance of social distancing, and how the virus can be transmitted through airborne particles. Some of what we have learned is how puzzling human behavior can be. Remember when there wasn't a roll of toilet paper to be found?

As illustrated in the graph above, the numbers are cause for concern. In DeSoto County, more than ⅓ of K-12 students (1,655 students out of a total school-age population of 4,812) lack reliable high-speed internet service at home. Charlotte County numbers are similar, with more than 4,500 students out of a total K-12 population of just less than 15,000 (31%) lacking a reliable high-speed internet connection. Even in Manatee and Sarasota counties, where the numbers are better, nearly one out of every five K-12 students (22% in Manatee and 17% in Sarasota) lack this basic need.

While based on estimates, because no comprehensive surveying has been done at either the local or national levels, these numbers indicate that more than 22,000 K-12 students in our four-county area lack the fundamental resource of high-speed internet that would allow them to compete and thrive in not only the virtual learning environment but in the modern classroom as well.

For more information on the source for our data, Digital Bridge K-12, visit [digitalbridgek12.org](http://digitalbridgek12.org/).

FCC Emergency Broadband Benefit: So, What's Next?
By Kiarra Louis

Late last year, Congress passed a new stimulus package, including $3.2 billion for broadband subsidies, and directed the Federal Communications Commission to establish a new Emergency Broadband Benefit Program.

On February 22, 2021, Acting Chairwoman Jessica Rosenworcel shared proposed rules for the Emergency Benefit Broadband Program. Some next steps include presenting the proposed rules and structure to commissioners for consideration, reviewing requests from interested providers wanting to participate, and developing a system to administer the program.

A start date for the program has not been announced.

To fully understand this federal broadband subsidy, visit the National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA)’s EBB webpage filled with resources such as definitions of commonly used terms, answers to frequently asked questions, and more. Learn more [HERE](#).

The Three Essential Elements of Digital Access
By Kiarra Louis
But the topic that has deservedly garnered a great deal of attention from educators, community leaders, and families over the past 13 months is the gap between those able to benefit from digital connection and those who are not—the digital divide.

When schools shut their doors in March, a rapid transition to remote learning exacerbated inequities among students, families, and educators.

Communities quickly became aware that

- Internet connections didn’t exist in many rural and asset-limited neighborhoods.
- Internet connections in many households were not strong enough for multiple users.
- There was a nationwide shortage of internet hot spots.
- Many families did not have digital devices.
- Many families owned one device but did not have enough for children to attend school while parents were working remotely.
- Although many internet providers offered reduced rates for families and students, outstanding balances disqualified some families from taking advantage of the offers.
- Many educators did not have experience with remote learning platforms.
- Many families did not have experience using laptops or tablets.
- Many parents struggled with their new role of IT manager for their children and family members.

School districts and communities across the country sprang into action, implementing quick fixes for some of these issues.

- School districts handed out laptops and tablets.
- Community partners purchased available hot spots and distributed them to families in underserved neighborhoods.
- School districts placed WiFi routers in school buses and parked the buses in neighborhood parking lots.
- Educators, parents, and students received "on-the-job" training for distance learning.

Most of these efforts are not sustainable.

Perhaps one of the silver linings in this pandemic’s dark cloud is the widespread realization that broadband access is critical to fully participating in society. Individuals and families need access to broadband, access to devices, and support in learning how to use the machines. Rather than band-aids or relying on quick fixes, people, nonprofits, governments, and businesses are now working together to better understand and address digital inequities with long-term solutions in mind.

Our children, indeed, all of our neighbors deserve better.

For several months, The Patterson Foundation’s Digital Access for All (DA4A) initiative has explored the state of digital access and efforts to get people connected at the national, state, and regional levels. Before the pandemic, people without internet access or connectivity relied on public places and local organizations to access the tools they need to apply for jobs, do class assignments, or schedule medical visits. When these places closed their doors, people were left disconnected.

After interviews and webversations with local and national thought leaders to explore why digital access is important and identify barriers, the DA4A team learned digital access has three essential elements: connectivity, devices, and skills and support. Having all three elements is critical to digitally connect, learn, and socialize in a meaningful way.

1. Connectivity

Connectivity is the ability to connect to affordable and reliable high-speed internet. Many people cannot afford broadband internet because it is too expensive. According to Hegle, "In 2019, the national average cost for internet was $72 a month, and more than $100 in some areas" (2020). Cost is a dealbreaker for many households, especially for ALICE (asset-limited, income-constrained, employed) families who struggle to afford basic necessities.

Another component of connectivity is reliability. People need reliable internet to do their daily online activities such as synchronous learning, working remotely, or telehealth visits. Learning, working, or socializing online is frustrating and challenging when your internet connection frequently lags, slowly loads a webpage, or repetitively kicks you out of a video conference (Zoom, Skype, Microsoft Teams, etc.).

The third aspect of connectivity is speed. Internet speed is crucial because it dictates how you use the internet in terms of what you can do. To illustrate, consider this example. To get to a particular destination, you can walk, bike, or drive a car. No matter what you choose, you will eventually get to your destination. However, that could mean the difference between getting there in two hours versus 15 minutes. BroadbandUSA’s speed demonstration tool visually shows how long typical internet activities take at different speeds.

To continue learning about the other two essential elements of digital access, click HERE.
Do you have a resource or idea to share with the community? Is there a national, regional, or local effort you'd like us to know about or feature in future publications? Contact DA4A at digitalaccess@thepattersonfoundation.org to be considered.

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