What is Digital Equity?

Digital equity is achieved when all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity that is needed for full participation in the society and economy of the United States. [1.] Despite significant growth in technology use across various sectors, much work remains to ensure all learners, families/caregivers, and communities have access to reliable, high-speed broadband and technology tools for learning.

The 3 A's of Access

Overall, an estimated 15 to 16 million K-12 learners do not have sufficient access to reliable, high-speed broadband and/or technology tools for learning. [2.] To remedy this gap, we must address the availability, affordability, and adoption of broadband and technology tools.

● **Availability** refers to the level and sufficiency of coverage in delivering high-speed, reliable wired or wireless broadband services and sufficiency of technology tools for learning. Barriers and strategies related to availability align with typical understandings of "access," focused on whether learners and their families/caregivers can connect to reliable, high-speed broadband through a device and the necessary physical infrastructure from home and in their communities.

Availability

Driven by and centered around communities

Affordability

Adoption

[3.]

1. Text – H.R.3684 – 117th Congress (2021–2022): Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act. (2021, November 15). http://www.congress.gov/
2. 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
3. Office of Educational Technology. (2022, September.) Advancing Digital Equity for All: Community-Based Strategies for Developing Effective Digital Equity plans to Close the Digital Divide and Enable Technology-Empowered Learning. U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. https://tech.ed.gov/files/2022/09/DEER-Resource-Guide_FINAL.pdf. (p. 18.)

WHAT IS DIGITAL EQUITY?

● **Affordability** refers to the ability to pay for the cost of installing and maintaining a high-speed and reliable broadband connection and technology tools for learning. Barriers and strategies related to affordability impact not only the ability for learners and families to get connected, but also to have a reliable, high-speed broadband connection and to maintain that connection—including as their circumstances change over time.

● **Adoption** refers to the process by which an individual obtains daily access to broadband at a speed, quality, and capacity that is necessary, with the digital skills that are necessary to participate online, on a personal device, and on a secure and convenient network. Barriers and strategies related to adoption tend to focus on human-level challenges and strategies. They go beyond whether reliable, high-speed broadband is available and affordable to focus on whether the necessary information, support, and skill-building opportunities are provided.

> 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 and access to information, technical support, and digital skill-building opportunities. The education sector, given its experiences navigating the pandemic, identifying barriers and strategies, developing trusted relationships in communities, and building digital skills, is well-positioned to address adoption barriers and drive adoption solutions.

How Can the National Partnership for Student Success (NPSS) Impact Digital Equity?

NPSS's network of champions are experts in providing "people-powered" supports for learners and their families, which are critical to advancing digital equity for communities furthest from opportunities.

For example, wraparound/integrated student support coordinator and student success coach roles supported by the NPSS can serve as trusted ambassadors for digital equity by implementing strategies that digital navigators perform nationally to promote adoption, including increasing awareness of existing digital inclusion resources, providing technical support, and offering digital skill building opportunities.

What is Digital Inclusion?

If digital equity is the "what" or goal, then digital inclusion is the "how" or strategies employed to meet that goal. Digital inclusion refers to the "activities that are necessary to ensure that all individuals in the United States have access to, and the use of, affordable information and communication technologies, **such as reliable fixed and wireless broadband internet service**; **internet-enabled devices** that meet the needs of the user; and **applications and online content** designed to enable and encourage self-sufficiency, participation, and collaboration; and includes obtaining access to **digital literacy training**; the provision of **quality technical support**; and obtaining basic awareness of measures to ensure **online privacy and cybersecurity**." [4.]

The Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) is an example of a digital inclusion strategy. This program from the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) aims to help ensure that households can afford the broadband they need for work, school, healthcare and more. The benefit provides a discount of up to $30 per month toward internet service for eligible households and up to $75 per month for households on qualifying Tribal lands. Eligible households can also receive a one-time discount of up to $100 to purchase a laptop, desktop computer, or tablet from participating providers, if they contribute more than $10 and less than $50 toward the purchase price. Some households need additional support to take advantage of this benefit, as many eligible households are unaware of the program or have yet to enroll.

---

4. H.R.3684 – 117th Congress (2021–2022): Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act, 2021

Example Barrier	Example Strategy
Communications about programs and services are not in the community's home languages or accessible formats.	Communications are in multiple formats and accessible for multilingual individuals and individuals with disabilities.
Learners/families need assistance to understand affordable internet programs and to complete applications for programs/services.	Inclusive technical support, such as community-based hotlines and digital navigators, help families/caregivers to sign up for programs/services.
Communities do not trust federal and state governments and private companies due to historical and ongoing exclusionary practices.	Partnerships with community-based organizations and trusted advocates rooted in communities facilitate information exchange and resource distribution.
Learners, families/caregivers, and community members need opportunities to learn how to leverage technology to meet their goals.	Digital navigators provide 1:1 technical support, and community assets offer digital skill-building opportunities.
Solutions are misaligned with community needs and lack impact.	Communities engage in co-creating solutions, and regular learning and feedback cycles help identify areas for scaling and improvement.
The time, expense, and cognitive load of enrolling in affordable internet and digital inclusion programs competes with other basic needs.	Partnerships help meet individuals where they are and integrate affordable internet and digital inclusion programs with other supports.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

- **Advancing Digital Equity for All** – This U.S. Department of Education Office of Educational Technology publication provides insights from a series of national, learner-centered listening sessions to highlight pressing barriers faced by learner communities and promising solutions for increasing access to broadband and technology tools for learning.

- **Digital Equity Guide** – The Learning Accelerator developed this guide to help school and system leaders engage in meaningful, actionable, and iterative conversations around digital equity to develop concrete plans of action.

- **Internet for All** – Internet for All is a federal initiative to invest $45 billion, under the Bipartisan Infrastructure Law, to provide affordable, reliable, high-speed internet for everyone in America by the end of the decade. This website includes information on funding programs and federal and state contacts.

- **The Words Behind Our Work: The Source for Definitions of Digital Inclusion Terms** – The National Digital Inclusion Alliance (NDIA) created a glossary of common terms to cultivate a shared language for digital inclusion discussions, initiatives, and policies.