California Budget & Policy Center

FACT SHEET

Distance Learning & the Digital Divide

Opportunity Gap Grows for California K-12 Students

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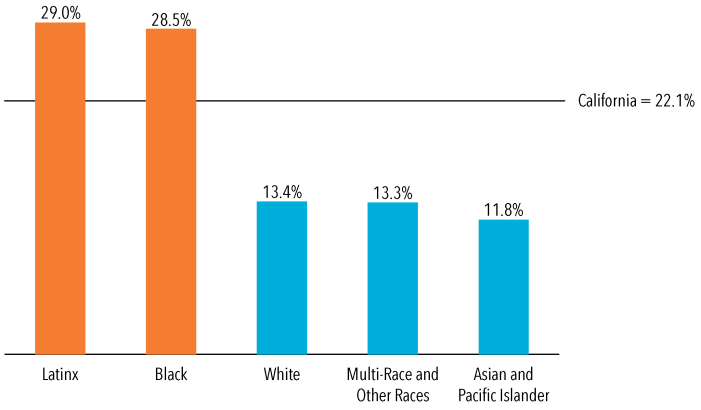
As California students of all ages cannot fully return to classrooms due to the COVID-19 pandemic, learning from home and the technology needed exposes the state's digital divide. Distance learning requires computers, tablets, or other devices as well as a reliable, high-speed internet connection, but inequitable access to this technology creates a persistent digital divide that disproportionately affects low-income, Black, and Latinx students. This digital divide was affecting students' academic achievement before the pandemic, and distance learning has likely exacerbated these existing disparities.

Prior to the pandemic more than 1 in 5 students in California — roughly 1.4 million — did not have access to either a computer or high-speed internet. Black and Latinx students were more likely to lack access, nearly 3 in 10 — more than double the share of white (13%) and Asian and Pacific Islander (12%) students. Of the students affected by the digital divide, 57% spoke a language other than English at home and 56% were eligible for free and reduced-price meals — indicators that point to even greater need for educational assistance.

Prior to the Pandemic, Black and Latinx Students Were Far More Likely to Be Negatively Affected by the Digital Divide

Percentage of California K-12 Students Without a Computer or High-Speed Internet, 2019

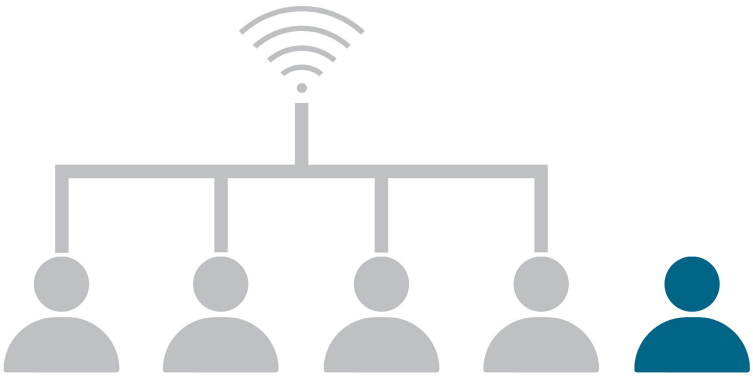


Note: "Computer" refers to a laptop, desktop, or tablet. Race and ethnicity categories are mutually exclusive.
Source: Budget Center analysis of US Census Bureau, American Community Survey data

State and local leaders have made efforts to help students connect with their teachers and engage in distance learning. The 2020-21 enacted budget provided $5.3 billion in state and federal dollars to local education agencies (LEAs) for learning and student supports, including computers and hotspots. Currently, it is unclear how much LEAs allocated specifically for computers and internet connectivity and whether those funds were distributed equitably.

The number of students with computing devices has improved, with fall 2020 estimates showing a 12 percentage point increase for households with school-age children as compared to the spring.[1] But the disparities in access to a reliable internet connection for most student groups, including Latinx and low-income households, remain mostly unchanged.[2] A Legislative Analyst's Office analysis highlights the same inequities in broadband adoption rates between low-income households (53%) and higher-income households (86%) even before the pandemic.[3]

The need for greater investment to address the inequities in distance learning is clear. California policymakers must consider options to invest in distance learning and carefully target resources for students most affected by the pandemic. This includes more data collection to better identify gaps in access and to ensure Black, Latinx, English language learners, and low-income students have the resources they need to learn. A device and high-speed internet access are necessary to engage in distance learning, and without both, the digital divide and academic opportunity gap will only grow wider for California students of all ages.



More than 1 in 5 students in California – roughly 1.4 million – did not have access to either a computer or high-speed internet in 2019.

[1] Niu Gao, Julien Lafortune and Laura Hill, *More Students Have Digital Devices, but Internet Gaps Persist* (Public Policy Institute of California, October 27, 2020), https://www.ppic.org/blog/more-students-have-digital-devices-but-internet-gaps-persist/.

[2] Gao, Lafortune, and Hill, *More Students Have Devices.*

[3] Legislative Analyst's Office, *Broadband Internet Access for Distance Learning* (October 14, 2020), 2, https://lao.ca.gov/handouts/education/2020/Broadband-Internet-Access-for-Distance-Learning-101420.pdf.