

## Rich Child, Poor Child: Where the Gaps Lie in Online Education

How important is online access for students in today's tech-immersed society? Very—especially when it comes to studying for assessments, completing assigned tasks outside of the classroom, or simply using the vastness of the Internet to encourage curiosity and discovery. While nearly all students do have *some* form of online access at home, a recent study has shown that—for lower-income families—access isn't created equal.

### The Research

In many lower-income households, students simply don't have consistent, quality Internet connectivity—a statement especially true of households in which the primary Internet-capable device is a smartphone with (probable) data restrictions. This finding is among several released by the nonprofit Joan Ganz Cooney Center at Sesame Workshop, which examined children's relationships with digital media from a socioeconomic perspective in their study "[Opportunity for All? Technology and Learning in Lower-Income Families](#)."

Of note from the survey—which encompassed the responses from almost 1200 families living below the national median income for households with children aged 9 to 13—are the following thought-provoking truths:

- Families who cannot afford quality online access often face limitations like slow (or, in some cases, frequently cut-off) service. In addition, it could become difficult to use Internet-capable devices if they're heavily shared, or if the technology itself is outdated.
- Students from lower-income families have less exposure to new technologies outside the classroom, proving disadvantageous to them given the popularity of online, high-stakes testing.
- Only 29 percent of low-income parents reported using community resources (like libraries) for more secure and reliable online access. Those families that rely on mobile phones as their only source of Internet access—23 percent of respondents, to be exact—more commonly use free Wi-Fi at public establishments (like restaurants).
- Parents surveyed said they felt largely positive about their household's use of digital technology, many reporting that computers and mobile devices assist their children with learning skills (89 percent) and boosting self-expression (78 percent). Also of note is that a difference in online access capabilities does not change the parent/technology/child relationship when it comes to safety: Three out of four parents surveyed said they worry about their children being exposed to inappropriate online content.

### Is Change Coming?

While [the survey results point out the unfortunate gaps](#) between education and online access for children, there are indications positive change may be on the way.

For example, the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) recently breathed new life into the federal E-rate program, a collection of initiatives aimed at helping schools and libraries get affordable, high-functioning broadband access. Recent changes to the program focus on meeting the demand for internal wireless capabilities that can accommodate the relatively recent influx of devices into classrooms.

Another potentially positive piece of news is that last year, the [FCC voted to allow public comments on its Lifeline program](#)—an initiative that subsidizes phone service to low-income households. Established in 1985, the Lifeline program could see potential updates including the incorporation of broadband services and online access to students in their homes.

In addition to conversations about how to allow more online access to students, there has also been chatter about precisely *what* students should be doing with their Internet time. [The U.S. Department of Education's most recent assessment](#) of the use of technology in schools, for example, suggests improving teacher training and encouraging active (rather than passive) student use of online tools and content.

## Final Thoughts

If the impact of the socioeconomic divide wasn't already apparent to those tuned into education, the above survey results make it so. Students perform better and learn more when they have reliable and robust online access, a necessity in growing up in an especially tech-savvy generation. New and revised legislation could bring much-needed change to help solve the problem and give students the digital access they need to succeed.