Reliable Connectivity - Legislative Brief   **October 2020**

The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the need for a comprehensive residential broadband strategy to enable virtual learning for all Hoosier students. Indiana schools continue to lag national broadband targets published prior to the pandemic and there is more the state could do to capture federal funds to support advances on this front. However, the biggest challenge before the state is ensuring students can remain connected and able to learn from home when the situation arises. The main barriers to home connectivity are student poverty and geography. Some students are not connected because they cannot afford available coverage. Some students live in locations where available coverage is too expensive, unreliable, or non-existent. As the 2020-2021 school year began, schools reported more than 350,000 students were virtual due to COVID-19. This means that approximately 30 percent of Indiana students were receiving more than 50 percent of their instruction through virtual channels. Many more students received virtual instruction but at thresholds below 50 percent. While grant funds are being used in many cases to fill the connectivity gaps that exist, Indiana needs to take a long view of this problem, and be in a position to ensure students can learn wherever and whenever they need to.

Left unchanged, Indiana's connectivity issue, as it relates to schools, presents the following challenges:

1. A recent survey found that two-thirds of district leaders and principals believe the government needs to provide financial support for purchasing hotspots or home Wi-Fi.
2. The same survey found only 11 percent of students have the level of home internet access needed to fully participate in virtual instruction.[1]
3. According to BroadbandNow Research, Indiana is behind other midwest states (Illinois, Tennessee, Michigan, and Minnesota) in terms of broadband speeds and access.[2]

Areas of improvement and proposed remedies to address connectivity hurdles:

- Support the collection of student addresses to reveal available connectivity options for school corporations and regions.

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[1] Education Week: *Many Students Still Lack Home Internet. Here's How Big the Problem Is.* Last accessed Oct. 19, 2020. https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/DigitalEducation/2020/10/internet_access_gaps_survey.html
[2] BroadbandNow Research: *Best and Worst States for Internet Coverage, Prices, and Speeds, 2020.* Last accessed Oct. 19, 2020. https://broadbandnow.com/research/best-states-with-internet-coverage-and-speed

- Support the expectation that schools collect student-level information regarding home Internet access so the true areas of need can be addressed.
  - What is the primary learning device the student most often uses to complete school work at home?
  - Is the primary learning device a personal device or school-provided?
  - Is the primary learning device shared with anyone else in the household?
  - Can the student access the Internet on their primary learning device at home?
  - What is the primary type of internet service used at the residence?
- Provide additional funding for connectivity to increase Indiana's participation in the federal broadband matching program which matches up to 10 percent of the qualified costs related to fiber installation costs.

The COVID-19 pandemic demanded schools quickly change course and move to remote learning. From the onset of the pandemic to now, districts met the challenge by providing students with academic support, social and emotional support, adequate remote learning opportunities, and food services. However, traction cannot stop here. Knowing the COVID-19 pandemic will likely persist leaves districts and their students with a degree of uncertainty. This uncertainty can be alleviated if schools are not burdened by barriers like broadband speed.

Additionally, without collecting data about home connectivity, Indiana will not be able to strategically invest to close connectivity gaps. Indiana has recognized the importance of investing in broadband for schools over and above federal investments. It is time for Indiana to extend that commitment to eradicate the home broadband gap to ensure Indiana students can learn no matter the educational setting.

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