

# Commentary: A vote for universal broadband in Maine is a vote for equitable education

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By Leigh Peake  
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Lack of equitable broadband service is widening the gap between children of privilege and children in Maine’s vulnerable and underserved communities – but we all have an opportunity to address this unjust trend.

On March 13, we closed the doors of the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic. That day, we hosted what turned out to be our final group of LabVenture students for the school year.



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

**Leigh Peake** is chief education officer for the Gulf of Maine Research Institute in Portland.

LabVenture is an on-site, hands-on science learning experience that has served about 70 percent of Maine’s fifth- and sixth-graders annually for the last 15 years. Founded on a commitment to equal access, we provide this experience in our lab completely free of charge for nearly 10,000 students each year — including transportation to Portland from schools across all 16 counties.

As I watched that last group of students, from Lewiston Middle School, I realized our service to Maine schools was about to change drastically. LabVenture and other education programs at the Gulf of Maine Research Institute were built as highly collaborative, hands-on programs. Whether examining plankton under a microscope, handling a live lobster, documenting invasive species in the field or using digital maps to trace changes in ocean temperature – our programs have always relied on getting students to do science in a way that reflects the methods of the professional research scientists in our lab.

Even as we scrambled to replicate our experiences online, we recognized the risk of exacerbating (rather than mitigating) gaps in equitable access to authentic science learning experiences. In underserved areas of Maine, most students do not have a reliable high-

speed internet connection at home. While we were excited to answer the challenge to continue to provide valuable learning experiences statewide, we recognized that students who participated online benefited from the interactive program while students lacking reliable internet access simply could not participate.

This kind of inequity isn't just an organizational challenge for us. It's a societal challenge requiring a systemwide solution. The good news is, the solution is in reach — and it starts with a “yes” vote July 14 on Maine Question 1 (the High-Speed Internet Infrastructure Bond Issue).

Voting “yes” on 1 is a vote for a more equitable future for schooling, both for the coming fall and over the long term. Voting “yes” on 1 is a vote to equip students with the scientific literacy needed to solve global challenges and pursue careers in a 21st-century economy. Voting “yes” on 1 is a response to climate change, enabling the Gulf of Maine Research Institute and other institutions to actively prepare the next generation of ecosystem stewards for the Gulf of Maine watershed. Voting “yes” on 1 is a vote for social justice and a response to our many intersecting contemporary challenges.

No matter where students wake up in the morning, they should have equal access to education. A “yes” vote on Maine Question 1 helps us deliver on that promise.

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