

Maine Voices: It shouldn't take a pandemic to raise awareness of the 'homework gap'

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By Natalie Davidson
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WATERVILLE — Having spent the beginning of last semester at Colby College researching internet access across the country, with a focus on Maine, I had no idea how relevant this work would be in the shift to online learning that schools were forced to make as COVID-19 struck. While there were many efforts to make this transition successful, it quickly became clear how complicated remote learning can be and that there is a need for legislation that ensures a basic minimum of home internet access to everyone in the United States.



Predating the pandemic, internet access has long been a struggle for many Americans. A recent Associated Press analysis of census data shows that 18 percent of all U.S. students do not have access to broadband internet at home. Lack of internet access is often due to a family's inability to afford the cost, or because the region doesn't have the necessary technology infrastructure in place. Teachers at Waterville Junior High School estimated that perhaps half of their students lacked home internet access. To address this problem, some teachers encouraged the use of public libraries or let students do homework in school. However, in the pandemic era, solutions requiring public spaces no longer suffice and shouldn't be relied upon, as they don't solve the underlying issue.

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In an attempt to help transition our country into social distancing, the Federal Communications Commission created a Keep Americans Connected Pledge to facilitate internet access in all homes. In this initiative, large service providers, including AT&T, vowed to temporarily cut rates or provide more hot spots for those in need. In a similar spirit, many schools gave students without a home computer a laptop, and some provided

resources to help access inexpensive or free Wi-Fi. While these efforts were helpful, they were only partial solutions and did not ensure connectivity for students in areas that lack adequate broadband access.

When classes went remote, differences in how both teachers and students were able to handle – or chose to handle – the transition became evident. Some instructors canceled class altogether, reasoning that it was impossible to ensure that each student could still participate in an equal manner online. Other classes continued over Zoom sessions, with some students absent or with noticeably poor connections. One of my professors lives in a rural area of Maine, and her livestream would often freeze, making it difficult to comprehend discussions. Because there was no overall standard for internet access, it was impossible to create a standard of remote learning that benefited everyone.

To ensure that all Americans have equal internet access, the federal government must enact legislation that recognizes the internet as a necessity and then commit the required resources to make it a reality. Maine's state government has conducted several past efforts to remedy the so-called Digital Divide. For example, the Maine Learning Technology Initiative, implemented in 2002, was one of the first programs to provide laptops to middle school children across the state, while the ConnectME Authority has awarded almost \$13 million worth of grants to those needing broadband service. However, a federally funded program would have a much broader reach. Just as Medicaid helps ensure health care for lower-income Americans, a federal internet access program could ensure that any family below a certain income level would receive aid for home Wi-Fi.

A global pandemic should not have been the call to action needed to prompt initiatives to equalize internet access. Even disregarding the possibility that this pandemic could last for years, the internet has become so integrated into American lives that being without it disadvantages people educationally, financially and socially. In the future, it's likely that the online world will blend further into our lives, and that a resurgence of COVID-19 or another virus could force us back into our homes. To prepare for this and ensure equal internet participation at all levels of society, it's imperative that our country has a standard for a secure broadband connection for every American household.

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