Insufficient Access to Digital Infrastructure Worsens Inequities for Illinois Students amidst COVID-19

1 in 4 Illinois Students Lack Access to Sufficient Digital Infrastructure for Remote and Blended Learning

The COVID-19 pandemic rushed schools to transition to remote and blended learning with little time to prepare. A major challenge to remote and blended learning is our students' lack of access to digital infrastructure. Absent full-time in-person instruction, students without devices and high-speed internet are largely unable to access online course content and instruction as well as virtual social-emotional and mental health supports.
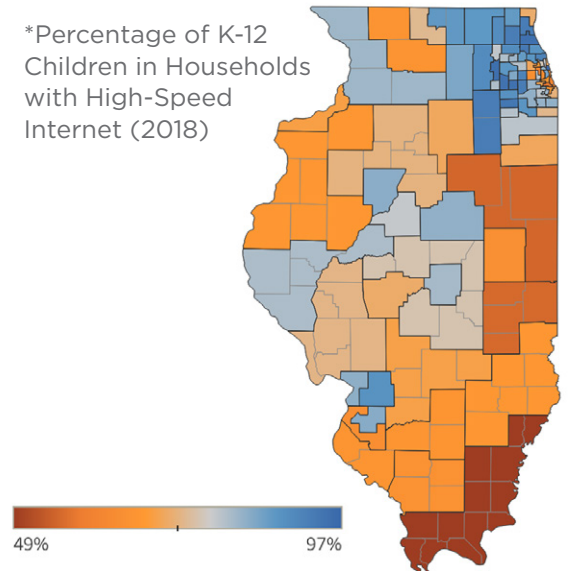
26% of Illinois students do not have the resources necessary to learn or receive support online. These students are unable to access either high-speed internet or a laptop or computer at home.[1] Across the state, 21% of students live in households without a subscription to high-speed internet, and 14% of students live in households without a laptop or computer. Of those who do live in a household with a laptop or computer, many must share the device with other family members. While these numbers reflect 2018 data – and in recent months, many districts and communities have provided internet and distributed devices for remote and blended learning – many students still face significant inequities in digital infrastructure access.

Existing Digital Infrastructure Varies Widely Across Illinois, Presenting Bigger Challenges to Some Districts and Families

Illinois counties vary immensely in access to digital infrastructure. While some Chicago suburbs boast 97% high-speed internet access, in the state's southeastern most counties, less than half of students live in households with high-speed internet. Across the state, rural and inner-city households suffer most. High-speed internet access in these households is over 10 percentage points lower than that of suburban homes. Districts and families in these underserved geographies experience an extra challenge to successful remote learning.

*IPUMS USA, American Community Survey 2018. Data are aggregated by Public Use Microdata Areas, regions designated by U.S. Census Bureau which contain at least 100,000 people.

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*Percentage of K-12 Children in Households with High-Speed Internet (2018)

49% ——————— 97%

Advance Illinois Analysis of 2018 American Community Survey. Steven Ruggles, Sarah Flood, Ronald Goeken, Josiah Grover, Erin Meyer, Jose Pacas and Matthew Sobek. IPUMS USA: Version 10.0[dataset]. Minneapolis, MN: IPUMS, 2020.

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Access to digital infrastructure varies widely by income. **Where 50% of children from households below the federal poverty line (FPL) have access to both high-speed internet and a laptop or computer, 90% of children from households around the median income in Illinois have access to these same tools.** This "digital divide" compounds existing educational inequities between students of different income levels.

% of K-12 children in Illinois without access to e-learning infrastructure in 2018, by income level

- % Without High-Speed Internet
- % Without a Laptop or Computer
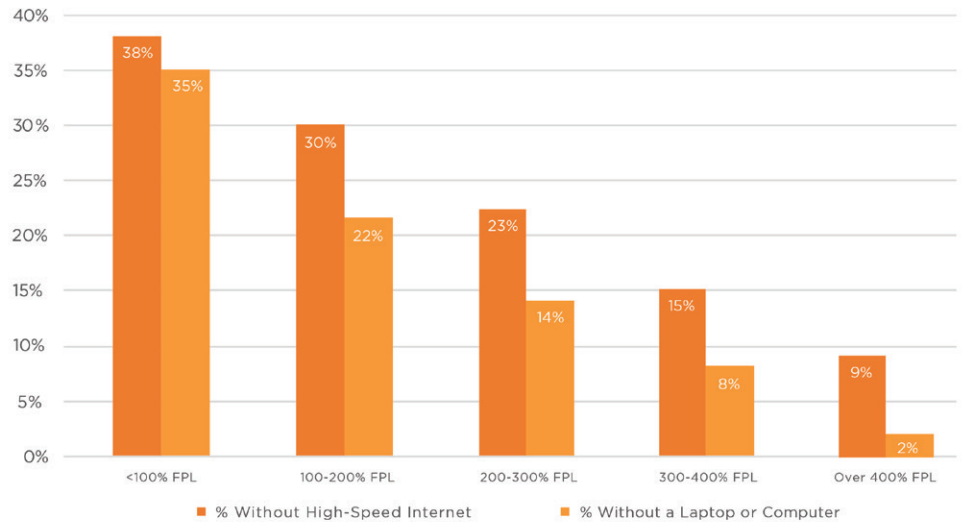
Black and Latinx Students are More Likely to Lack Access to Internet and Devices than Their White and Asian Peers

COVID-19 has disproportionately hurt Black and Latinx communities and students in many ways, including access to a high-quality education. Black and Latinx students in Illinois are 3-4 times more likely to lack access to a laptop or computer as White students and experience similarly disproportionate access to high-speed internet. If left unaddressed, this lack of access will only worsen racial inequities in Illinois' education system.

% of K-12 children in Illinois without access to key e-learning infrastructure in 2018, by race

- % Without High-Speed Internet
- % Without a Laptop or Computer
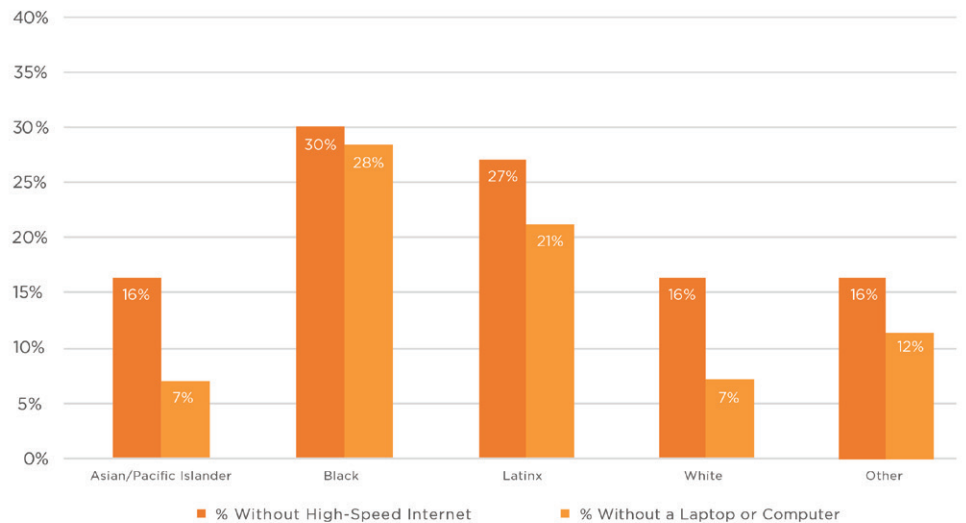
Access to Digital Infrastructure is Just One Step in Successful Remote and Blended Learning

Successful remote or blended learning requires digital infrastructure access but also includes technical support, well-trained educators, clear and consistent communication, and engaging digital instructional content. **While our students continue to rely – even in part – on digital learning, there is a clear federal and state role to help ensure our students have equity in opportunity to access a high-quality education.**