

IT INFRASTRUCTURE

A Change in Federal Funding May Make the 'Homework Gap' Worse



By [Lauraine Langreo](#) — January 10, 2023 ⌚ 3 min read



— Getty

Funding for a program created to provide students and teachers with internet access and digital devices they can use at home is not included in [the federal budget for fiscal 2023](#).

That decision will make it harder to close the so-called “homework gap,” the term used to describe the lack of internet access that still exists for many students at home, experts say.

Schools are increasingly relying on technology for teaching and learning in the classroom, from learning management systems to multimedia curriculum to internet research. And in some cases, schools are turning snow days into remote learning days. So it's even more imperative that students have sufficient internet connectivity and devices to access learning materials while at home, even though most schools are no longer closing their buildings to curb the spread of COVID-19.

The Federal Communications Commission's Emergency Connectivity Fund was established during the pandemic to help schools and libraries provide the tools their communities needed for remote learning. Congress, through the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021, appropriated \$7.2 billion for the program. So far, the FCC has doled out \$6.5 billion and the fund has helped millions of students and educators who didn't have access to broadband or digital devices at home.

"The program was incredibly successful," said Jon Bernstein, the president of the Bernstein Strategy Group, and co-chair of the Homework Gap Big Tent Coalition. "We believe it has made a significant dent in the existing homework gap."

But in the federal budget for fiscal 2023, there is not any additional funding to continue the program, even though there is still a lot of demand for it and even after dozens of education groups asked lawmakers to continue funding it.

"There's about \$1.3 billion in demand that is left, but there's only \$600 million left to satisfy that demand," Bernstein said. "So you're looking at hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars worth of demand from school districts and libraries for ECF funds that are going to go unfulfilled unless we find some more money for this program."

While the Emergency Connectivity Fund was not meant to be a permanent program, digital equity advocates say it's important to find a long-term, sustainable solution to the homework gap. The problem is that when these dollars run out, students will still have the devices but not the money to pay for home internet access, Bernstein added. That likely means students from the most disadvantaged communities will be the ones left without access.

"We're at a crossroads now where Congress has identified a need and provided a temporary fix but [has] not at all advanced on a substantive or sustainable platform for continuing to address a continuing need," said Noelle Ellerson Ng, the associate executive director of advocacy and governance for AASA, the School Superintendents Association.

“We are looking at a scenario where this initial investment of significant money could ultimately be for naught,” Ellerson Ng said.

Advocates are hoping that Congress will pass additional funding, whether through a stand-alone bill or as part of the next fiscal year’s budget. But with a divided government, it might be a steep hill to climb, Bernstein said.

States and school districts might also be able to step up to offer some patchwork funding to provide these services to their residents and students. But a recent survey from the [National Center for Education Statistics](#) found that schools are winding down their efforts to supply students with home internet access, most likely driven by federal COVID-relief aid drying up.

“There could also be a conversation among stakeholders to see what telecommunications companies can do to be more earnest, to ensure that they’re actually making good-faith efforts to provide connectivity to all of these areas,” Ellerson Ng said. Part of the problem is that companies decide whether to run fiber optic lines to certain areas at an affordable price point or they decide not to do that, she said.

At the end of the day, Bernstein said, there needs to be “a stable source of funding.”

“We don’t want to go back in terms of the progress we made in closing the homework gap,” he said.



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