

Access Denied: Digital Inequity in Wisconsin Schools

A Report on Student Access to the Internet When Outside of School

In March 2017, DPI sent a survey to all Wisconsin school districts, asking for information about ways that students access the internet outside of school, availability of home access, and obstacles to access. 200 districts responded, which is 45% of all Wisconsin districts.

The questions fall into four categories:

- **Home Access** (does the student have internet access at home?)
- **Hotspots** (does the district provide portable internet access devices for its students to take home?)
- **WiFi on Buses** (does the district provide wireless internet access on its school buses?)
- **Other Types of Internet Access Outside of School.**"

I. Summary of results (and [underlying data](#))

Home Access:

1. Over a quarter of students statewide do not have access to the internet at home.
2. About one third of the students in the northernmost CESA regions -- 8, 9, 10, and 12 -- do not have internet access at home.
3. In one out of seven districts, fewer than half of the students have internet access at home.
4. Insufficient or unavailable service is the main reason cited for students not having access at home. Cost is also a significant barrier.

Hotspots:

1. About one out of seven districts surveyed provide hotspots for their students to take home.
2. More than half of districts surveyed expressed strong interest in providing hotspots for their students to take home.
3. The CESA regions where hotspots are least frequently provided are the same as the CESA regions where the fewest students have internet access at home.
4. Availability and cost of wireless services are the most common reasons why districts choose not to provide students with hotspots.

WiFi on Buses:

1. Only 5% of districts provide students with internet access while on their school bus.
2. Availability and cost of wireless services, as well as not owning buses, are the most common reasons why districts choose not to provide students with hotspots.
3. About two fifths of districts surveyed expressed strong interest in providing wifi on buses.

Other Types of Internet Access Outside of School

1. public library (26%)
2. after school access at school (15%)
3. local businesses (12%)

II. Impact on Student Learning

Every district that responded answered a narrative question asking how student learning is slowed when students do not have adequate internet access outside of school. The responses break into 6 categories:

1. Students without internet access are unable to access needed resources when at home.
2. They are also disadvantaged while at school, needing to make up work during school hours.
3. Teachers have to make curricular accommodations that hinder learning.
4. Schools are not able to take full advantage of their technology.
5. For families without internet access, communication with school is restricted.
6. Lack of home access makes the achievement gap even wider.

[Educator quotations](#) from the survey provide vivid illustrations from each category.

III. Conclusion

The statistics drawn from our survey, and the statements provided by Wisconsin educators, provide a stark view of digital inequity in Wisconsin schools and of the harm it does to students and learning. In schools across Wisconsin and around the country, the movement toward a digital curriculum and anytime learning is accelerating, and irreversible. To be without access at home is literally to be left behind in school. Yet, a quarter of Wisconsin K-12 students -- and up to a third in rural regions -- do not have internet access at home. As one educator noted, "We live in a connected, collaborative world and not having access is a tremendous disadvantage for learning."

The situation creates a dilemma for schools: do we build a curriculum that takes full advantage of the world's tools and resources but denies up to a third of our students the ability to participate when at home? Or do we restrict our curriculum to the detriment of all of our students, to ensure that all of our students are able to participate? No one surveyed thinks that either choice is acceptable.

Compounding the inequity is that districts with large numbers of students who don't have internet at home have no choice but to restrict their curriculum, effectively leaving *all* of their students behind the students in districts with better access. As an educator noted: "This hurts us in trying to close the achievement gap in our cohort that is economically disadvantaged."

There is no single solution to create student digital equity across Wisconsin. However, in areas with a cellular network, providing hotspots for students to take home, and installing WiFi on buses, has the potential to connect thousands of students to the internet at home who are currently unserved -- a major step in the direction of digital equity for students across Wisconsin. TEACH infrastructure grants will provide significant funding for rural districts to purchase hotspots, including service, to provide to their students without access and narrow the digital divide.