# Digital Equity in DC Education

## November 2020 Update

**To ensure digital equity for all DC students the city must commit to a funded, sustainable, comprehensive technology plan; robust supports for online learning; and a city-wide Internet access solution. During this time of economic uncertainty, it is critically important that we make wise use of our resources rather than opting for ad hoc purchases and band aid solutions. Online learning will be a part of the DC education landscape for the foreseeable future. Now is the time evaluate what we learned this year and plan for and procure technology to meet system needs for next year. Below we highlight the primary challenges and needs related to digital equity in DC education.**

## Top Challenges

1. **Lack of a comprehensive DCPS technology plan.** DCPS's Empowered Learners initiative focused on student computers for grades 3-12, had a target completion date of 2022, and did not constitute a comprehensive plan that outlined expected costs and funding sources as recommended by the DC Auditor in 2017. Without a sustainable plan to refresh technology and provide online learning-related supports for all students and teachers, technology will continue to be managed in an unpredictable, costly, and inefficient manner.

2. **Stop-gap fixes for Internet, insufficient attention to speed and bandwidth.** As the free trial period for low-cost Internet options expires and OCTO's free one-year Internet program comes to a close, the city will need to stand up a longer-term Internet solution. More than 30% of parents who completed the Digital Equity in DC Education tech survey said their student experiences Internet connectivity issues such as slow-downs and disconnections. Students require adequate Internet download/upload speeds for online learning, which requires videoconferencing and other bandwidth-heavy applications. Current low-cost Internet options provide speeds of up to 25/3 Mbps, which may not be sufficient for multiple Internet users in a household.

3. **DCPS technology implementation challenges hampered adoption of technology and Internet.**
    - Inconsistent DCPS communication delayed uptake of technology. The DCPS Tech Survey, which was created to determine student tech needs, was not comprehensive, did not reach all families, and did not include a timely response mechanism. Parents also reported mixed experiences with DCPS's tech support call center, suggesting quality control issues.
    - Inadequate and delayed outreach on OCTO's *Internet for All* program led to program undersubscription. Even today, many families and school staff are not aware of free and low-cost Internet options in their area. Meanwhile, DCPS is spending significant funding on monthly data plans for hotspots and LTE-enabled devices.
    - Lack of practical digital skills training resulted in some families struggling with online learning. Families and teachers have shared the need for practical, hands-on training on the basics of computer use and online platforms.

## Top Needs

1. **A funded multi-year comprehensive technology plan for DCPS that includes:**
    - A 1:1 student-device ratio for both students and teachers, and a robust replacement plan
    - Tech support and asset management – so that the burden is not on schools to fill service gaps
    - Practical digital literacy training and online learning programs for families and instructional staff
    - Improved technology infrastructure inside school facilities, including sufficient bandwidth and robust maintenance and refresh cycles for Smartboards and other instructional technologies.

2. **A sustainable, city-wide Internet solution.** Investing in a sustainable, city-wide solution for Internet access will ensure equitable access in the long term rather than relying on band aid approaches, which are costly and short term. The burden of providing Internet access should not be on the school system. Multiple government entities have a role in addressing the digital divide. We recommend an overarching vision and plan for Internet access behind which all government entities can align.