



Digital Equity in DC Education

DCPS Technology Update: Mayor's Statement on July 16

On July 16, the Mayor issued a statement saying: “Based on DCPS projections, 36,000 devices will allow us to meet the digital needs of families **if 40% of students in grades K-12 need a device.**”

The mayor's statement confirms that **DCPS leadership is planning to support the technology needs of less than half of the students in DC Public Schools during distance learning.** DCPS and the Mayor are making sweeping assumptions about families' ability to purchase and provide dedicated technology to help their students learn at home. In addition, students who use personal devices will be outside the IT support system and security protections that a DCPS-issue device provides.

Context

Last year Mayor Bowser and DCPS acknowledged the need to move to a 1:1 student-device ratio and began implementation of the Empowered Learners initiative (ELi) – a three-year plan to provide every DCPS student with a device. Now it is clear that all DCPS students will participate in distance learning as we head into the 2020-2021 school year. To meet the current challenge of the hybrid and distance learning models during the COVID-19 pandemic, DCPS must accelerate its three-year plan to provide devices to all students. Every student should receive a computer loaded with the learning apps, software, and protections to help them successfully connect with their teachers and classmates during distance learning.

Computer access for every student has become a standard of modern education. The surrounding school districts and even some charter networks in DC are already at a 1:1 student-device ratio. For example, KIPP DC is allocating two devices per student and is providing door-to-door tech support. **Educational equity is compromised when some students have access to two devices while a DCPS student is not even guaranteed reliable technology access.**

It would take an [additional \\$11 million to ensure every student in grades K-12 has a device.](#)

Breaking Down Assumptions

-  **The DCPS assertion—that they are equipped to meet all distance learning needs—is not grounded in current data.** Technology needs surveys conducted during the pandemic were not standardized across schools. Each school conducted its own survey. Some parents were not asked or were not reachable. **The lack of standardized, accurate data across the school system means that DCPS is**

likely underestimating the true technology needs of DCPS families. DCPS plans to conduct a family needs-based assessment this summer; it is unclear if they will be able to reach most or all families and evaluate these responses in time to deliver the correct number of devices to schools by August 31.

- 📖 While a **needs-based approach to device allocation sounds good in principle, in implementation it is complicated.** For example, what criteria will constitute need? Many middle-class families need computers for both parents and multiple children. Would they qualify for a computer under a needs-based approach? If there is a shortage of devices (i.e., more than 40% of students need computers), how would DCPS determine which family gets a computer? By insisting that DCPS provide a device to every student, NO student will be left behind. **Any plan that falls short of this objective leaves opportunity for students to fall through the cracks.**

- 📖 **The 36,000 computers referenced by Mayor Bowser includes older devices in school inventories that would require a functionality check and reimaging to bring them up to date** with the new content delivery platforms and apps that DCPS is supporting for distance learning. These older devices were purchased by individual school budgets (and in some cases augmented by funds raised by PTAs and community partners). If there is a student need and school supply mismatch, schools may be asked to redistribute their inventory to meet the needs of other schools. **This model would be labor-intensive and inefficient to implement.**

- 📖 **Of the 36,000 devices referenced by Mayor Bowser, DCPS assumes that 15,000 devices will remain in school for in-school learning and 21,000 devices will be available for at-home learning (21,000 is 40% of 52,000 total students).** Under a hybrid learning model, devices will continue to be used in the school environment. Our recommendation, which would require an additional \$11 million, would accelerate the Empowered Learners initiative and provide a device for every K-12 student to maintain educational continuity for at-home and in-school learning.

- 📖 DCPS has previously said that federal funding from the CARES Act would help meet distance learning needs. Our understanding is that even after accounting for CARES Act funding, DCPS would still purchase only 11,000 new computers for next school year, which gets them to the total of 36,000 devices. **Regardless of whether the funds are federal or local, the Mayor's statement from July 16 states that DCPS has devices for 40% of distance learners. This falls short of providing technology for every DCPS student.**