



Grace Hu
November 23, 2020
Digital Equity in DC Education
DigitalEquityDC@gmail.com
DCPS Budget Hearing

Good evening. My name is Grace Hu and I am a parent at Amidon-Bowen Elementary. Today I am here on behalf of Digital Equity in DC Education, a citywide coalition of parents working to close the digital divide and to provide a 21st century education for our children.

We've come a long way with DCPS technology since we first met with DCPS leadership two years ago. During this pandemic, we understand your team has been working around the clock to provide technology and other supports to our students, and we appreciate it. We also think there is still work to do (including finding the funding) to ensure all our schools have the tech infrastructure to support learning, whether that learning takes place at home or in school.

Over the past 3 months, we have collected feedback from our school communities, held interviews and focus groups, and conducted a parent survey. Based on these inputs, we believe the top needs for digital equity to be the following:

1) 1:1 student-device ratio + teacher technology

We still believe that DCPS should be at a 1:1 student-device ratio, which several other school districts in the region and some charter LEAs in DC are supporting this school year. The original Empowered Learners initiative had a target end date of 2022 and covered only grades 3-12. We are concerned that if tech planning and procurement does not occur in the next few months, we will not be prepared for next school year.

Additionally, DCPS has not done enough to ensure that teachers have sufficient instructional technology. During distance learning, we have heard that many teachers are relying on their personal computers, some of which are not optimal for online instructional demands, either because their school could not afford to buy them a computer or because the school-issued computer was not in good working condition. Before the pandemic, teachers struggled with inadequate or outdated technology in classrooms. We need a better technology infrastructure inside our schools.

2) Tech support/asset management

While DCPS started a family call center for tech support issues, we continue to hear that much of the burden for troubleshooting tech problems and managing technology equipment is still falling on school staff who already have full-time jobs and are not trained in tech support. In addition to general grade-level teachers providing tech support, we've heard of staff such as a school's math interventionist and assistant principal having to spend significant time helping families with technology issues. We urge you to provide more robust tech support at the school level. Now is the time to plan for improvements to tech support and asset management so that when we return to in-school learning next fall, staff will be able to focus on helping students recover from learning loss and trauma experienced during the pandemic.

3) Practical training for families and teachers – Families and teachers have noted the lack of practical, high-quality training on everything from basic computer use and e-mail to online platforms. Pre-

recorded webinars on Microsoft Teams isn't cutting it for many parents and teachers. Those who are not comfortable with technology often need hands-on, real-time help.

- 4) Sustainable citywide Internet solution – We do not think that continuing to spend significant funding for monthly data plans, hotspots, and LTE-enabled devices is sustainable. We urge you to work with OCTO and the Deputy Mayor for Education's office on a more long-term Internet solution for the city. We are also puzzled that DCPS is not working harder to transition SNAP and TANF households onto OCTO's Internet for All program targeting those households, which would perhaps reduce the need for some of the hotspots and monthly data plans being paid by DCPS.

Until DCPS has a funded, multi-year comprehensive plan that includes all these elements, technology will continue to be managed in an unpredictable, costly, and inefficient manner. We encourage you to prioritize creating a technology roadmap for DCPS and look forward to continuing to engage with you on digital equity. Thank you for the opportunity to testify.

Resources:

- Digital Equity in DC Education November 2020 Update (see below)
- Governor Strategies To Expand Affordable Broadband Access, National Governors Association, <https://www.nga.org/center/publications/expand-affordable-broadband/>
- Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning, Common Sense and Boston Consulting Group, https://www.common sense media.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_fi nal_7_1_3pm_web.pdf

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.