



The Digital Divide in Education

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This fact sheet focuses on the latest available data, from 2020, 2021, and 2022.

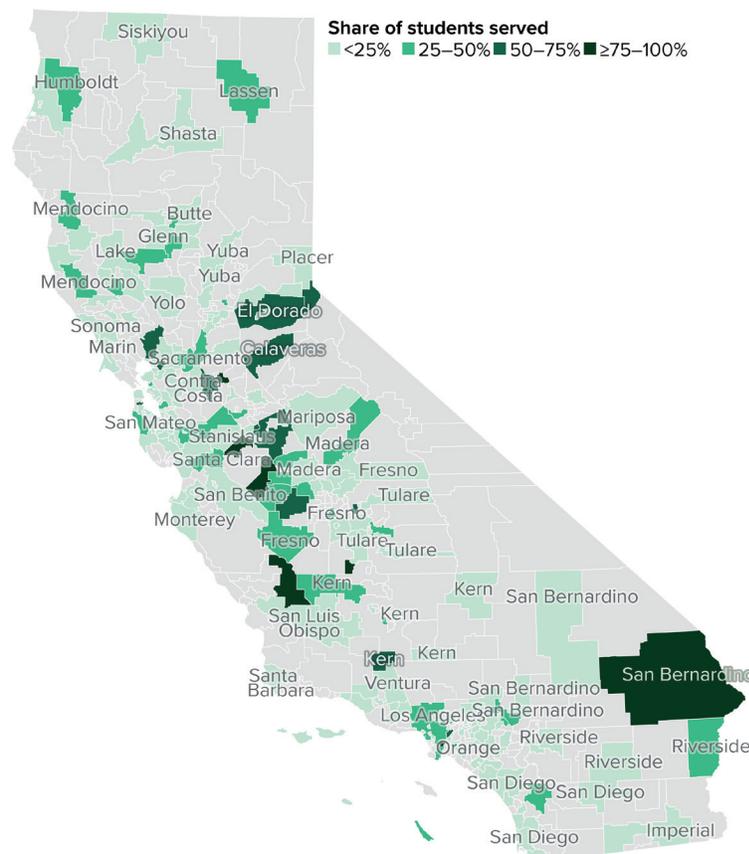
COVID-19 made digital access an educational necessity—and highlighted longstanding gaps.

- ▶ At the outset of the pandemic, as schools shifted abruptly to distance learning, about seven in ten (71%) California households with school-enrolled children (or K–12 households) reported always having internet access for educational purposes, according to the US Census Bureau’s Household Pulse Survey.
- ▶ Broadband access was lower among low-income (57%), Black (61%), Latino (67%) K–12 households and those headed by non–college graduates (67%).

Federal, state, and local efforts have helped bridge the digital divide.

- ▶ Three rounds of federal stimulus over the past two years have delivered more than \$15 billion to California schools. Schools used some of this money to provide more than [2 million devices and nearly 1 million connections](#) to students in need during the 2020–21 school year.

State and federal aid helped districts increase digital access after schools switched to distance learning



Sources: Emergency Connectivity Fund FCC Form 471, FCC, 2022. California Department of Education, 2022.

Notes: The shares shown on the map are calculated by dividing the number of students who were provided with devices and broadband access during the 2020-21 school year by the total number of students enrolled in the district. Districts may have used federal and state stimulus funding sources such as the Elementary and Secondary Schools Emergency Relief (ESSER) fund to pay for broadband and devices. Districts used different methods to assess student need and deliver devices/broadband. Many districts provided devices to every student. Areas in gray had not applied for the Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) as of March 2022. Charter schools and 19 schools that did not serve any students in the 2020-21 academic year are not included.

- ▶ The state established several public-private partnerships to secure devices for students, and districts across the state outfitted school buses with Wi-Fi, partnered with internet service providers, or built their own cellular towers.
- ▶ Several school districts and counties launched local initiatives before and during the pandemic to provide their students with internet access, including [Imperial County](#), [Fresno Unified](#), [Lindsay Unified](#), and [Ventura County](#).

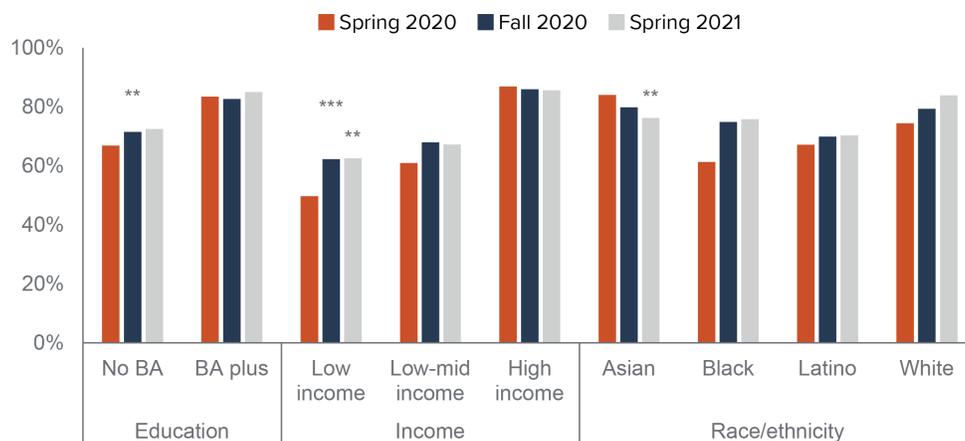
Many students have gained greater access . . .

- ▶ The share of K–12 households with reliable access to a computer device rose from 68% to 82%, from spring to fall 2020.
- ▶ Gains in reliable access to internet service moved at a slower pace, from 71% to 75%. This reflects the challenges of reaching households in remote areas that do not have internet infrastructure and low-income households in crowded urban areas that cannot afford reliable internet.
- ▶ Low-income K–12 households and K–12 households headed by someone without a bachelor’s degree experienced significant gains in reliable access to both devices and internet. Black and Latino K–12 households saw dramatic increases in device access but made no gains in internet access.

. . . but major digital equity gaps persist.

- ▶ The share of households with school children with full digital access—to both a computing device and an internet connection—for educational purposes increased from 60% in spring 2020 to 69% in fall 2020; but progress stalled at 71% in spring 2021.
- ▶ Full digital access remains lower among Latino (63%), Black (71%), and low-income households with school children (59%).
- ▶ The persistence of these gaps may reflect the longer-term, capital-intensive challenge of [providing broadband access](#), compared to the relative simplicity of distributing mobile devices.

Internet access gaps persisted in spring 2021



Source: Household Pulse Survey, US Census Bureau, 2020–21.

Notes: Low-income households have annual income (in 2019) less than \$50,000 and high-income households have annual income above \$100,000. We report significance of differences across time within each group, compared to spring 2020 values: **: p<0.05; ***: p<0.01.

Continued state and federal support can help California schools close remaining gaps.

- ▶ More than 400 California districts have applied for the federal Emergency Connectivity Fund (ECF) since summer 2021, providing devices to 1.2 million students and connecting about 900,000 students to broadband during the 2021–22 school year. The FCC recently extended the service delivery date to June 2023.
- ▶ California [Senate Bill 156](#)’s \$6 billion investment in middle-mile (\$3.25 billion) and last-mile (\$2 billion) broadband infrastructure is expected to significantly advance efforts to connect all Californians.

Sources: California Department of Education, 2022; [Emergency Connectivity Fund FCC Form 471](#), FCC, 22; [Household Pulse Survey](#), US Census Bureau, 2020–21.