BRIDGING THE
Digital Divide

Across Learning Environments

TALE *Academy*

Can You Hear Me Now?

Those of us who lived through the rise of cell phones and the competition for the "most coverage" will easily recognize the catchy slogans from the early 2000s. There was a commercial entitled "Test Man" that advertised the superiority of Verizon's network reliability by following a man on a never-ending phone call. In this comedic approach, the man traveled through cities, bogs, farms, and deserts, and in each location, Test Man would ask the invisible caller, "Can you hear me now?" The conclusion? With the right service, anyone can hear you, anywhere you go.

Fast forward to spring 2020. Parents and kids are sitting in school parking lots to get online for work and school; buses equipped with hotspots are camped out in neighborhoods. Despite every creative and heroic effort, many households miss out on days - even weeks - of remote learning due to a lack of internet, lack of devices, or both. *Everything* is online, but not *everyone* can access it. It turns out that Test Man was wrong; everyone cannot "hear me now."

Spotty Service in Too Many Spots

During the pandemic, the reality of New York's lack of access to digital tools vital to today's society was brought into sharp, glaring focus. Even more startling than the mere lack of internet and devices, however, were the undeniable socioeconomic and racial inequities that were highlighted by the **digital divide**.

Across the board, those living in rural and low-income communities face the challenge of accessing the internet and related devices needed for remote work and school. Communities of color face similar hurdles with the lack of access, leading to concerns around a profound lack of learning over not just the past two years, but also – if the problem is not seriously addressed – for the foreseeable future.

> **Access to technology at home [becomes] critically important to the quality of a student's education. It is alarming that one-third of all students in America, mostly from low-income households, lack that access in their home settings. Having a computer and internet service at home is no longer a luxury – it is a necessity.**
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> *Leander et al. (2017)*

By the Numbers

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27 Percent of New York households do not subscribe to broadband service at home.

33 Percent of African American and Latino households do not have wireline broadband at home, and similar numbers do not have a desktop or laptop computer.

50 Percent of New York's lowest income residents (those whose annual incomes are $25,000 or less) lack a computer.

31 Percent of households in rural areas do not have broadband service compared with 26% of households in metro areas that do not subscribe to broadband service.

Source: *New York's Digital Divide: Examining Adoption Of Internet And Computers For The State And Its Library Districts*

Building the Bridge...

...and Using it to Cross Learning Environments

While the issue of the digital divide across the nation is shocking, systemic, and overwhelming, there are steps that we as educators can take to bridge that gap for the families that we work with.

We might not be able to provide free internet or 1:1 devices out of our own salaries, but we can still make meaningful efforts to ensure that all families have access to what they need to participate in their child's education. Across all learning environments, we can support families as they navigate the difficulties presented by the digital divide.

We already know that families are the foundation of student success and that "when families and teachers join together to support children's learning and development, children are more likely to succeed in school, graduate, and stay on their path to college or a career" (pta.org). Ensuring that all families have access to our classrooms, regardless of their access to the internet, is the key to building that foundation.

3

Ways to leverage what we learned during the pandemic to help our families stay involved and become engaged:

Establish Your Understanding

First, to provide solutions, you must know the challenges. Do families have limited access to the internet? No internet at all? Do they have one cell phone to share among six family members, or do they have a slow-working desktop computer? Survey parents and families to find out what type of digital access they have, what they need, and what they want. Make sure the survey is made available as a hard copy and that the hard copy is translated into the languages of your classroom families. Surveys can also be done via phone call, Zoom, or in person. Remember, one size does not fit all. Helping to bridge the digital divide means assisting families in the ways that are meaningful for them.

Think It Through

Before communicating with parents or holding a family engagement event, ask yourself some questions. Will all parents be able to access this event? What is required for families to participate? Can I provide an alternative, equitable option for families who might not have the resources to engage in this way? Similarly, before you ask families to use any technology for communication or engagement, make sure that you test it. And then test it again. Nothing is more frustrating than finding out that your solution has problems after you've already spread the word.

Find Creative Solutions

Utilizing funds provided through the CARES Act, the New York State Education Department partnered with the New York State Association for Computers and Technology in Education (NYSCATE) in May 2021 to begin delivering a series of webinars aimed at "Parents as Partners". The webinars provide on-demand guidance for families on such topics as "Navigating the Online World," "Supporting Your Child with Remote Instruction," and "Google Classroom for Families." Though families need the internet to access the webinars, there are downloadable slide decks available for each topic that we can print and send home to families. Alternatively, we might hold a series of community screenings, focusing on one topic a month and viewing the related webinar together at a location that does have internet. Remember, this location doesn't have to be our school. It can be a local library, a community recreation center, or an available space in a church, temple, or mosque.

Resources to Share with Families

⊙ **EveryoneOn**

Helps connect low-income families with affordable internet plans and devices in their area.

⊙ **Devices for Students**

Provides children all the tools they need to learn remotely. The organization purchases laptops and data hotspots then configures them with the necessary software for online learning and distributes them to students in need.

⊙ **Notebooks for Students**

Helps students receive discounts on laptops from Apple, Lenovo, HP and Dell.

STARTING SMALL

Ultimately, bridging the digital divide is about engaging with families in a respectful, responsive, and equitable way. Although we'd like to, we can't drive WiFi-enabled buses into our students' neighborhoods or hand out iPads on the first day of school. What we can do, though smaller in scale, will create meaningful and lasting connections with our students and their families.

Your Turn!

Read on to explore resources that will help you bridge the digital divide in your own classroom.

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About Us

The TALE Academy

The TALE Academy is a series of virtual learning experiences available to all New York State educators and offers a rich array of resources on topics related to teaching across learning environments (TALE). The TALE Academy is built upon the work New York State educators carried out during emergency remote teaching (ERT) throughout the COVID-19 pandemic and extends it toward the future. TALE invites educators to think beyond online learning to consider a broader perspective on teaching and learning that encompasses teaching across multiple environments (in-person, remote, and hybrid).

The Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE) Project

The TALE Academy is part of a broader New York State Education Department (NYSED) initiative known as Teaching in Remote/Hybrid Learning Environments (TRLE). In July 2020, NYSED was awarded funding through the United States Department of Education's Education Stabilization Fund-Rethink K-12 Education Models Grant to implement TRLE – a three-year project to build the capacity of teachers and educational leaders to effectively implement remote/hybrid learning for all students. Launched in the depths of the pandemic, the first phase of the TRLE project focused on getting resources to the field through partnerships with Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and school districts across the state. The second phase, which began in February 2022, focused on aggregating lessons learned and emerging teaching and learning strategies to address a broader field of practice: teaching across learning environments.

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