St. Louis Digital Divide

Summary of K-12 Education Analysis and Findings
Nearly half of households in St. Louis City and County are impacted by some aspect of the digital divide and will require investment to ensure adequate long-term connectivity. Infrastructure investment, increased competition, affordability of devices and services, and increased digital literacy are needed.

Addressing each of these components is central to permanently bridging the digital divide in St. Louis, but priority must be given to schools. The urgent needs of students and the broader need for long-term systemic solutions are inherently intertwined with sustainable solutions for the broader community.

How we approach the digital divide in the next five years will determine if technology will continue to benefit some or will grow to benefit all. Technology can serve as a transformative resource and bring thousands of students into a modern world of opportunity.

By capitalizing on existing opportunities, we can ensure that current and future students in St. Louis will have an equitable opportunity to thrive.
Defining the Digital Divide

Five Key Components

The digital divide is best understood by examining and addressing five key components, any of which can prevent an individual or family from adequate connectivity.

1 **Coverage**: Large portions of St. Louis City and County have only a single service provider which often negatively impacts quality as well as affordability.

2 **Quality**: 250-300,000 households in St Louis City and County currently live in areas without availability of fiber internet and will require upgrades to ensure long-term quality connectivity.

3 **Service Affordability**: An estimated 150,000 households in St Louis City and County with lower incomes struggle to afford internet access and will require subsidies to consistently afford high-speed broadband service.

4 **Device Affordability**: Inability to afford adequate devices affects an estimated 90,000 households.

5 **Digital Literacy and Mentoring**: Requires programs and initiatives within schools, libraries, and other anchor institutions to support students, their families, and an estimated 100,000 adults in St. Louis City and County.

Map of St. Louis City and County Likely Impacted by Digital Divide

The vast majority of St. Louis City and County are impacted by at least one of these five components, but low-income areas often face three or more barriers.

Almost 55 percent of the population live in areas meaningfully impacted by two or more digital divide pillars. Digital literacy needs permeate the region as older cohorts in all areas drive mentorship needs.

Service affordability impacts areas with 70–75 percent of the overall population, most prominent in the City and north County.

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1 Low-income households are defined as households with an average income of $35,000 and below
School districts in north St. Louis County including Normandy, Jennings, and Riverview Gardens, along with St. Louis Public Schools, face the largest impact from the digital divide.

- An estimated **40 percent** or more of households in these districts will require some form of internet service subsidy due to median household incomes below $35,000.
- Almost **15 percent** of households have no computer, and will in turn need support from device programs, likely complemented by digital literacy support to use them.
- **Nearly half** of these homes face long-term internet service quality concerns due to unavailability of fiber to the home.

### Key Digital Divide Indicators and Drivers

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Percent of Households without Fiber Internet Access</th>
<th>Percentage of Households with Income &lt; $35,000</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>&lt;2%</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;65%</td>
<td>30%</td>
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**Primarily low income areas in need of devices**

**Digital Divide Impact**

2Based on weighting of divide pillar using weighing of proxy variables
Vulnerable Student Populations

St. Louis Public Schools and north St. Louis County districts have vulnerable\(^3\) student populations, implying that helping these areas offers greater opportunity for positive impact on the community, and merits focus during planning and implementation.

- Students in these districts tend to face economic hardship, reliance on public support, and have adverse school performance
- These tend to be the same households that are in need of other critical support services (food, housing, employment, health care, etc.)
- Families of students will also require resources to enable them to support their students’ learning

**School Districts with Most Vulnerable Student Populations**

Ferguson-Florissant, Jennings, Normandy, Ritenour, Riverview Gardens, and St. Louis Public Schools have highly vulnerable student populations based on a combination of minority populations, lower graduation rates, lower student wealth\(^4\), public funding dependence, and homelessness.

Hancock Place, Hazelwood, and University City face slightly less (but still elevated) vulnerability based on these key metrics.

From this data, a clear picture comes into focus, which demonstrates a concentration of need within the school districts and communities that have been historically disadvantaged. Participation of trusted community members and organizations will be vital to connecting with vulnerable students and their families, and providing ongoing support.

\(^3\)Select indicators of vulnerability are graduation rate, percentage of non-white students, percentage of students eligible for free or reduced lunch, percentage of homeless students, percentage of households receiving public assistance, and assessed valuation per students.

\(^4\)Based on assessed home and property valuation.
Addressing the Challenge

In order to be effective, education-focused solutions to the digital divide must acknowledge the complex challenges that the region’s most vulnerable students and their families face. Therefore, solutions must be comprehensive and capable of addressing multiple obstacles in a variety of settings.

By examining national case studies, successful local programs, and local stakeholder feedback, we can understand the key role that school districts, library systems, and community anchors can play in addressing the challenge.

School Districts

School districts play a critical role in bringing high-speed broadband to student households through partnerships with internet service providers and by leveraging available government funding and charitable investment. Progress made at the school district level will have positive implications for the broader community.

Partnerships with trusted community organizations are vital to connecting with vulnerable families. These relationships provide the ongoing support necessary to ensure sustained internet access and use of devices for students and their households.

Additionally, partnerships between school districts and the business community can lead to innovative solutions for internet access and affordable devices. Therefore, school districts should:

• Develop cooperative, aligned strategies with other school districts to effectively maximize resources
• Consider a new full-time position directly responsible for coordinating efforts and stakeholders among partnering school districts
• Engage with students and members of their households to continuously identify barriers, provide resources, and promote external resources and programs such as Emergency Broadband Benefit (EBB)/Affordable Connectivity Program (ACP) subsidy programs
• Continue to leverage federal E-Rate program and apply CARES Act and American Rescue Plant Act funding to provide impactful programs such as specifically designed digital literacy curriculum for students and parents, one-on-one training, availability of free wi-fi, computers and technical assistance
• Advocate for funding from the State to obtain funds from the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act’s Digital Equity Initiative, which is designed to fund efforts around digital literacy and education around digital resources—an estimated $51 million is available within the state of Missouri
Libraries

Libraries in St. Louis City and County are uniquely positioned to provide a lasting impact by leveraging existing resources, sustainable revenue streams, and community partnerships.

Libraries are seen as established and trusted resources throughout the community. They offer 37 locations throughout the region that can provide evening and weekend access, support, and devices. Additionally, libraries can play an expanded role through capitalization of available federal funding and existing programs which can make an immediate impact for students.

Elevated computer usage in library branches within the most vulnerable school districts across St. Louis County underscores the need to capitalize and expand on existing resources.

Community Anchors

Community anchor institutions—beyond libraries—may also provide a role in advancing solutions through the provision of internet access, technical support, digital resources for students and their families, as well as access to devices. For example:

- **Boys and Girls Club of Hartford** provided devices and network access through Wifi Lift Zones in their locations that are accessible to students and their families
- **YWCA Seattle** partnered with Comcast to create WiFi Lift Zones at four area sites to provide high-speed internet to families living in YWCA housing, supportive housing, and emergency shelters
- **The YMCA of Metro Chicago** created three new Computer Support Labs in its facilities. These labs offer free computer training, IT assistance, and other digital support services
- **Mott Community College** in Flint, MI partnered with three community organizations to offer computer-based training, access to community resources, and mentoring across its facilities and partner institutions

St. Louis has a robust number of community anchor institutions such as the Delmar DivINe and Cortex Innovation Community that can and should be leveraged in our communities. With their support, the immediate needs of schools can begin to be addressed.

Solutions to the digital divide must acknowledge the complex challenges that our region's most vulnerable populations face.
Conclusion

The following actions are recommended as next steps in addressing the immediate digital divide-related needs of schools:

- Create a full-time position for a Director of Digital Initiatives focused on leading a task force with school districts and other key stakeholders to implement city and county-wide strategies to close the digital divide

- Develop an outreach campaign to identify vulnerable students lacking essential digital tools by leveraging inherent insight from and relationships between teachers, school counselors and the student population

- Focus not only on students but also the parents/guardians who support them by engaging in one-on-one outreach designed to understand affordability and literacy challenges across the entirety of the household

- Create a family support center (virtually and in-person if possible) as a one-stop-shop for students’ families to learn and access digital tools

- Identify resources to support families with help desks, automated information systems, initial training, instructional curriculum, and technology integration

- Leverage expansive resources made available through interfacing with the State to obtain funds through Federal programs (CARES Act, ARPA, IIJA, EBB/ACP, Lifeline, and E-Rate) which are available at unprecedented levels, and coordinating with the City and County libraries to capitalize and expand upon existing programs and recently renovated facilities which can provide safe and reliable options for connectivity, devices, and literacy

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