



Empowering Parents Through Technology



To Improve the Odds for Children

Introduction

On the heels of a severe recession, more than ever our nation needs a generation of children who are well prepared to succeed in the fiercely competitive global marketplace. While our children need multiple resources and supports to succeed in life, a good education is critical. Each year, significant public investment is made to prepare students for college and career. As policy-makers, advocates, and voters determine where to target scarce public funding, they should consider an underutilized—and often overlooked—resource: families. The next educational resource our nation invests in should be our children's parents and other caregivers.

As President Obama and many education leaders have underscored, when parents and other caregivers are engaged in children's education, students do better. While there are many tools to connect schools and families, computers and Internet technology—combined with relevant digital literacy training and a school staff dedicated to parent engagement—hold particular promise as a way to overcome common barriers to parental involvement, such as time, distance, and access to educational resources as well as cultural and language barriers. As national attention on education and technology intensifies, there is an urgent need to invest not only in classroom technology, but also in technology that links the school and home learning environments to better enable parents to support their children's learning.

The return on investment comes from a better educated generation of students as well as a whole generation of parents who, themselves, have the 21st century skills demanded by today's jobs.

Computers and broadband can effectively enhance communication between the home and school, engage families in learning with their child, inform parents about student academic performance and attendance, promote beneficial educational practices, enable teachers to better engage parents in school activities, and connect families to resources that can improve their life prospects.

Equipping parents with the digital tools and training they need to help their children succeed is a wise investment. The return on investment comes from a better educated generation of students as well as a whole generation of parents who, themselves, have the 21st century skills demanded by today's jobs. Now it is time for policy-makers, state and community leaders, philanthropy, and other stakeholders to recognize the value technology and digital literacy hold and invest in empowering parents to benefit from these tools and skills. Especially in these tight fiscal times, this investment that brings multiple benefits makes good sense.



There Are Troubling Gaps in Children's Academic Achievement

Large numbers of America's children are not reaching their potential academically and are missing out on opportunities to go on to lead productive lives. In 2009, the national drop-out rate stood at nearly one in eleven children (9.1 percent).¹ According to the most recent national data available, only about one-third of eighth graders are at or above the *proficient* level in mathematics and reading (34 and 32 percent, respectively).²

A substantial need exists to ensure all students have the opportunity to graduate high school and be prepared to go on to higher education, specialized job training, or a productive career. However, the national standardized test scores and high school drop-out rates previously cited indicate that a significant number of students are not receiving the support and resources that could make a difference in their achievement. Research has identified specific ingredients for student academic success, including: ensuring children have their basic needs fulfilled—such as food, health care, and shelter; home-based parent educational support; high expectations set by parents and other adults; and learning opportunities.

Parents Are Essential to Their Children's Academic Success

Parents have high educational aspirations for their children.³ One of the most effective ways parents and other caregivers can help their children achieve ambitious educational goals is to become involved in their children's education.⁴ Research shows that children whose parents and other caregivers are knowledgeable about and engaged in their homework assignments, talk with them about school, and help plan their education achieve higher test scores, make better grades, have better school attendance, and demonstrate better behavior at school and at home. Parents setting high academic expectations for children has also consistently been shown to have a positive correlation with test scores.⁵

Schools can and should foster this type of parent and caregiver engagement because it does not happen automatically. When schools invite and encourage parent involvement, parents are more likely to become engaged.⁶ Policy-makers, communities, and advocates also have an important role in ensuring that parents have proper guidance and adequate resources to be effective partners in the education of their child.

Computers and Internet Technology Are Tools of Opportunity

Schools and communities can help students achieve by delivering needed resources to families and engaging parents and other caregivers in their child's education. However, many families—in particular, underserved

About This Issue Brief

For more than 15 years, The Children's Partnership has advocated for a comprehensive digital opportunity agenda for children, which it first articulated in its 1994 report, *America's Children & The Information Superhighway*. Recognizing the crucial role parents play in their children's online life, The Children's Partnership has worked since the 1996 publication of the *Parents' Guide to the Information Superhighway: Rules and Tools for Families Online* to support parents in this new aspect of parenting. More recently, The Children's Partnership has partnered with the California Emerging Technology Fund and leaders from the private, public, and philanthropic sectors to develop and implement a comprehensive school and home program that helps teachers and parents use technology to work together and support improved student outcomes.

This Issue Brief addresses ways to ensure more parents have access to technology tools and the skills to use them effectively to improve their children's education and lives. It discusses the connections between schools and families, how technology reinforces existing connections and constructs new ones, and how those connections can ultimately improve academic achievement and life prospects for youth, especially those who are underserved by the existing education system. Finally, this Issue Brief outlines an Empowering Parents Through Technology Action Plan that serves as a roadmap for achieving these goals.

This Issue Brief is part of The Children's Partnership's *Digital Opportunity for Youth* series. This collection of Issue Briefs provides a research-based advocacy platform to promote ways in which computers and broadband can be deployed so they benefit children, youth, and families, particularly those who are underserved.

The Overlap Between the Achievement Gap and the Technology Gap in the U.S.: Academic Achievement and Home Internet Use by Income and Ethnicity

High School Drop-Out Rates by Ethnicity in 2008⁷

Hispanics: 19%
American Indian/Alaska Native: 16.3 %
Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islanders: 9.5%
Blacks: 10.4%
Whites: 6.2%
Asians: 3.2%

High School Drop-Out Rates by Income Level in 2007⁸

Low-Income: 8.8%
High-Income: .9%

Household Internet Use by Race/Ethnicity 2009⁹

Asian: 80.5%
White: 70.5.5%
Black: 54.5%
Hispanic: 52.8%

Percentage of U.S. Households with Home Broadband by Annual Household Income in 2008¹⁰

<\$20k: 25%
\$20k to \$30k: 42%
\$30k to 40k: 49%
\$40k to \$50k: 60%
\$50k to \$75k: 67%
\$75k to \$100k: 82%
>\$100k: 85%

Very often, it is the same parents who do not have computers and broadband at home whose children struggle academically.

families whose students are more likely to need extra support—often face obstacles to engagement. Parents and other caregivers who are juggling many responsibilities—such as working multiple jobs, caring for other children, or attending school themselves—may have difficulty becoming more involved in their child’s education in traditional ways, such as attending Parent Teacher Association (PTA) meetings and parent-teacher conferences or volunteering in the classroom.

Computers and high-speed Internet are tools that hold great promise for overcoming distance, time, language, and access barriers to educational resources—especially those that tend to disproportionately affect underserved families.¹¹ But, today, many low-income families and families of color do not have a home computer and high-speed Internet access. Despite years of increased market demand that should drive down prices, the initial cost of computers and the ongoing cost of broadband service continue to be barriers for low-income families. And, very often, it is the same parents who do not have computers and broadband at home whose children struggle academically. The recommendations at the end of this Issue Brief offer suggestions for creating home-school technology connections for underserved families and ensuring low-income families have affordable access to broadband and computing devices.

Once families can access the Internet at home and have had digital literacy training, the opportunities for connecting parents and schools, delivering educational resources, and providing additional services are limitless. Using student information systems, e-mail, instant messaging, and blogs to cultivate regular communication between families and schools benefits students in multiple ways. Parents can monitor their child’s performance and help teachers identify areas for improvement. Web-based communications tools allow parents and teachers to work together to set shared expectations for students and develop a plan to provide them with the support they need to achieve. Following are examples of ways computer technology and the Internet can aid parent engagement to ultimately improve outcomes for students.

My 13-year-old and 11-year-old attend a school that uses e-mail and the Internet which help me keep them on track even though I work from 8 to 5, Monday through Friday. The school’s Web site lets me know their assignments, when work isn’t turned in, important events at school, and even the choices of food served each day. When there was a death in our family last year and my kids had to miss three days of school, I worked with their teachers to help them stay on top of their assignments. The technology helped us most after my son got an “F” in English class on a progress report because he didn’t turn in his assignments. I was able to communicate with his teacher by e-mail whenever I needed to. My son pulled his grade up to a “B” and is now in the AVID Program, which puts him on the college preparatory track.

—Mother of two students at a middle school in San Diego, California Unified School District



E-mail, Chat, and Teleconferencing

The majority of information schools share with families has traditionally been one-way: letters, flyers, automated phone messages, newsletters, and Web pages. If families have home high-speed Internet access, teachers and administrators can use Web-based tools—such as e-mail, instant messaging, and teleconferencing—to enable two-way communication. One Harvard Family Research Project study found that Internet-based family-school communication was correlated with higher student academic achievement and higher educational expectations, even when controlling for prior achievement and other forms of family-school communication.¹² It is clear that the Internet is a uniquely powerful communication tool.

With high-speed Internet access, parents and teachers can e-mail back and forth regarding a child's performance and progress. Furthermore, free, Web-based translation tools can be used to enable teachers and parents to communicate, even if they do not speak the same language.

Instant messaging, or online chatting, can allow parents and teachers to talk in real time without the need for a phone call. Teachers can remain in the classroom while their students are working and communicate with parents at the same time. A teacher can also create a chat room and invite several parents to chat together, augmenting PTA meetings or facilitating a new dialogue around a common interest.

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Student Information Systems

Schools with connected families can use student information systems (computer applications used to manage student data) to keep parents and other caregivers updated on their child's progress and to identify areas where students may need extra help. Student information systems allow teachers and other school personnel to enter student grades, test scores, standardized test performance, attendance, tardiness, and other important data and share it with students and parents via a secure Web-based portal. Some systems also enable teachers to share daily comments with families, such as feedback on students' homework assignments, and to inform families if homework assignments are not turned in. Some student information systems even have the added benefit of enabling schools to track student immunization and health records and to share up-to-date health information with parents and healthcare providers. However, it should be underscored that parents cannot do these things alone. School district leaders, along with principals and teachers who are skilled and committed to parent involvement, are needed.

In late April, Central Middle School in Riverside, California, which serves primarily low-income students, trained its 7th grade teachers and parents in the use of computers and the Internet. Following the training, a Netbook went home with each student whose parent participated in the training.

A teacher at Central reported: "I feel so empowered! I just sent my first e-mail in Spanish!!! I got an e-mail in Spanish, I translated it to English, wrote my response, translated that back into Spanish and e-mailed it back to the parent. It is so cool being able to communicate with my Spanish-speaking parents. I am so happy!"

Central is one of the first two schools in California to implement School2Home, a program of The Children's Partnership and the California Emerging Technology Fund to address the persistent educational challenges that disproportionately impact students of color from low-income neighborhoods.

See highlight box on page 6 to read about School2Home.

The Growing Evidence

The following examples demonstrate the growing evidence that computers and broadband Internet, coupled with parents using technology to engage in their children's education, can help increase children's success related to academic achievement, graduation rates, and school attendance.

State Evidence

Maine: The Maine Technology Learning Initiative provides laptop computers and technical assistance to all 7th and 8th grade students and their teachers statewide. Parents are required to participate in an onsite training session, and teachers use the computers to communicate with parents. An evaluation of the Initiative demonstrated that it increased class attendance; reduced the number of detentions; improved academic scores in writing, mathematics, and science; and resulted in greater depth of student research.¹³ Early evidence demonstrated that parents were engaged in their children's learning through laptops and were very supportive of the Initiative.¹⁴

Texas: The Texas Technology Immersion Pilot (which was completed in 2008) provided wireless mobile computing devices to each teacher and student in participating schools, software, online instruction, online assessments to evaluate students' achievement, professional development for teachers related to integrating technology in education, and technical support. Teachers participating in the program used computers and the Internet to communicate with parents, and there was a component of the program that involved parents being partners in assuming responsibility for appropriate use of computers outside of school. Evaluation of the program demonstrated that students who participated in the program were exposed to more intellectually demanding work, had fewer disciplinary actions, and had better academic achievement than students in nonparticipating schools.¹⁵

Local Evidence

Take IT Home, a program of Computers for Youth (CFY)—which has served more than 20,000 families overall—works with middle-school students, their families, and their schools in Atlanta, Los Angeles, New York City, Philadelphia, and the San Francisco Bay Area to improve children's academic performance by providing families who do not have a computer with a free

refurbished computer, educational software, parent training, and technical support. Some participants receive Internet access at a reduced rate, depending on their location. All participating families must attend a half-day hands-on workshop, which is held on a Saturday.¹⁶ Seventy percent of students in CFY programs reported feeling more curious and confident because they had a computer in the home. Furthermore, students who participated in CFY reported working harder because they had a home computer and, consequently, showed corresponding academic improvement. Additionally, over 90 percent of parents who participated in CFY's parent training program reported feeling more confident in helping their children learn as a result of the program.¹⁷

International Evidence

England: To ensure that all school-aged children in England have access to technology to support learning at home, former Prime Minister Gordon Brown initiated the Home Access program in 2009. While in its final stages, this government-sponsored program provided grants to more than 250,000 low-income families of school-aged children to purchase computers. The program also provided one year of broadband connectivity and one year of service and support. Community centers and a nonprofit organization provided support to parents, and parent resources were available through a government Web site. Assistive technology was available for children with special needs.

An evaluation of the pilot phase of the program found that children who received computers were spending more time doing homework and studying at home, and 97 percent of parents believed that Home Access would help their children do better at school. Eighty-one percent of parents believed that having a computer at home increased their involvement in their child's learning. Finally, a significant number of parents (up to 89 percent) used the computers and Internet technology for their own skills development, and many parents used the computers and a high-speed Internet connection to access public services.¹⁸

Another useful communication tool parents and teachers can use is videoconferencing capabilities. For a parent who is home caring for his or her other children, videoconferencing enables him or her to have a virtual parent-teacher conference from home. Videoconferencing can likewise be invaluable for a parent who is deaf and reads lips. These new forms of communication, of course, rely on schools having videoconferencing capabilities and staff who know how to use them, resources which are absent in many schools today.

Classroom Blogs and Vlogs

When students get home from school, parents generally ask, "What did you do in school today?" And students often answer, "Nothing." However, if teachers are provided training on how to use blogs and vlogs (video blogs) to keep daily records of what students accomplish each day, parents can remain up-to-date on classroom occurrences.

Joe McClung, an 8th grade teacher at Woodland Jr. High in Fayetteville, Arkansas, started Mr. McClung's World

A recent report found that approximately 5.4 percent of schools have ubiquitous technology programs, and, together, these programs reach about 4 percent of the nation's students.¹⁹

(<http://jkmclung.edublogs.org>), a blog for his science and social studies classes. On his blog, parents and colleagues can see homework assignments, read entries about current classroom activities, and often view accompanying photos and video. In one recent video post, two students hold up plastic cups of soil and grass seed and explain to viewers the purpose of this class project: to see what types of planting materials make grass grow best.

Families Need to Be Equipped with Technology

One way schools can ensure low-income families have the ability to access these systems and other powerful online tools is through 1-to-1 technology programs, which guarantee a 1-to-1 ratio of students to computers. Generally, these programs provide a laptop, a Netbook (small, lightweight, and inexpensive laptop), or other mobile technology device to each student to use in the classroom. However, there is a growing awareness that keeping computers at the school limits their potential for extending the learning day, facilitating collaborative project-based learning, and communicating with parents. Thus, some school districts are letting students take the computers home.

Although these 1-to-1 technology programs are becoming more widespread, they are a reality for only a fraction of today's students. A recent report found that approximately 5.4 percent of schools have ubiquitous technology programs, and, together, these programs reach about 4 percent of the nation's students.¹⁹ This already small percentage would be even smaller if it reflected only those schools in which parents are trained in the use of technology and in which students can take the computers home.

There Are Prerequisites to Closing the Technology Gap

While the potential for computers and broadband Internet to open doors of opportunity for underserved families is great, a number of elements that are not in place today must be put in place before these tools can be fully utilized:

- Schools need to fund and integrate technology into the classroom as a tool to communicate among teachers, students, parents, and school leaders;
- Teachers need training in ways to use the technology, both with students and parents;

- Families need to have a home computer and high-speed Internet access;
- Families need access to culturally relevant computer and Internet training; and
- Students and their families need engaging and developmentally appropriate online content that is relevant and "user-friendly."

School2Home: A Comprehensive Model Program

School2Home is an innovative statewide program targeting underperforming middle schools in California, designed by The Children's Partnership and the California Emerging Technology Fund to close both the Achievement Gap and the Digital Divide. Developed together with leaders from the public and private sector, School2Home uses technology-based strategies with teachers, parents, and students, based on best practices and rigorous research evaluations of school and home technology immersion and parent engagement programs. Broadband-enabled computing devices that link the home and school and technology-based instruction are the keystones of School2Home's comprehensive program model.

Each participating student is provided with a computing device to use in the classroom and at home with his or her family, and families receive free or discounted home broadband connections. The devices not only deliver educational resources to students, teachers, administrators, and families, but also reinforce connections between the school and home learning environments. To complement these devices, School2Home provides a rich, 24-hour professional development program for teachers, a six-hour technology training program for parents, and a leadership academy for school principals to deliver valuable technology skills and develop a community devoted to student success.

School2Home leverages broadband technology to develop a supportive educational atmosphere in which parents, teachers, and administrators are all valued partners striving to improve student achievement. By working together, schools and families develop a shared vision of student success and form a collaborative environment in which students receive comprehensive support. The beta phase of School2Home is currently being implemented at two middle schools in California. By the end of the first few months of program operations, the percentage of parents in one beta school who had accessed their child's school records increased from 5% to 47%.²⁰

To learn more about School2Home, visit www.cetfund.org/investments/School2Home.

Mobile Devices

Today, classrooms around the world are using cell phones, smartphones, MP3 players, and other mobile devices to provide students and families with access to language lessons, lectures, and educational videos.

These devices also enable students to play educational games, participate in classroom quizzes and polls, and share brief news stories with one another.²¹ Cell phones are a practical choice as an educational device for their portability, ease of use, and, perhaps most importantly, their prevalence. Currently, about 66 percent of children in the U.S. have cell phones before they turn 14, while almost 75 percent of high school students have a cell phone.²² Youth are particularly comfortable using cell phones to send text messages. About 72 percent of teens use text messages, and the average text-messaging teen sends and receives 50 texts each day.²³

A recent survey by Project Tomorrow, a national education nonprofit group, found that many parents recognize the potential benefits of cell phones and other mobile devices. More than 30 percent of parents reported that these devices could increase student engagement in school; 29 percent said mobile devices prepare students for the working world; and 27 percent said mobile devices could improve student, parent, and teacher communication.²⁴ In the same survey, more than three-fourths of principals and 46 percent of teachers who responded stated that using mobile devices for teaching and learning could increase student engagement.²⁵



In the Digital World, Parents Can Be Partners and Role Models

As we enter the second decade of the 21st century, technology is transforming the way education is conceptualized and delivered. With computers and high-speed Internet access, education never stops. Technology breaks down the school walls and enables students to learn whenever they'd like, wherever they are. During classroom time and out-of-school time, students can learn with teachers, parents, and peers across the world. Information is constantly shared and updated, and students have to keep up.

When parents are familiar with computers and the Internet, they can be partners in their child's online world and can set an example of smart Internet use. Parents can teach their child computer skills, online safety, and digital citizenship (preparing children for a technology-based society). And, parents have a crucial role to play in guiding their children's use of computers and the Internet so that these tools do not become a distraction from learning. If, as President Obama emphasizes, parents have a responsibility to be actively involved in their children's education, they will need the technology tools and skills to do so effectively.

Student Educational Technology Use Can Aid Academic Success, Especially for Students with Special Needs

Computer and Internet technologies are valuable educational tools for all students, but they hold particular value for students who have special needs. Parents and other caregivers have an important role in helping their child access these technologies as well as ensuring that they work well for their child. Computer-based technology can enable students with disabilities to fully participate in the classroom with their peers without disabilities. In Columbus, Ohio, the public schools used federal stimulus funding to purchase special keyboards and a printer for students who read Braille as well as educational computer software that is specially designed to teach students who are autistic.²⁶

English-language learners are another student group that can derive unique benefits from computers and educational technology. Language software can teach a student English, and some software even "listen" to a student's accent and correct any mistakes.

Please visit www.childrenspartnership.org/HelpingOurChildren to learn more about how children with special needs are using technology to succeed.

Keeping Children Safe on the Internet

While the Internet is a tool whose benefits are countless, like most things, it comes with risks. Concern about online safety is one of the main reasons underserved families give for not using technology.²⁷ Safety concerns include child predators, cyberbullying, and privacy violations. In an era where parents are eager to safeguard children against online risks, research suggests that parents educating children about safe Internet use is more effective than simply practicing “surveillance or co-viewing.”²⁸ In addition, as parents, students, teachers, and principals increase their use of technology, proper procedures must be established and adhered to in order to protect children’s privacy.²⁹

Online Safety Resources

Net Cetera: Chatting with Kids About Being Online [en Español]

<http://www.onguardonline.gov/topics/net-cetera.aspx>
This guide helps parents protect their kids and talk to them about living their lives online.

Common Sense Media

www.commonsensemedia.org
Common Sense Media is an independent nonprofit organization dedicated to helping families make the best media choices for their kids.

Center on Media and Child Health

www.cmch.tv
The Center for Media and Child Health educates families and the public on media’s effects on children’s health.

Net Family News

www.netfamilynews.org
Net Family News is a nonprofit public service providing weekly “kid-tech news” for parents and educators in more than 50 countries.

Family Online Safety Institute

www.fosi.org
The Family Online Safety Institute works toward online safety for kids and families by identifying and promoting best practices and methods through public policy, technology, education, and special events.

Home Computers and Broadband Deliver Additional Family Resources

In addition to involving parents directly in the education and online safety of their students, home technology has the added benefit of being able to link families in resource-poor areas to needed resources. Technology can help families, schools, and health and human service providers address systemic inequalities in access to services

that address, for example, hunger and poor nutrition; inadequate healthcare; inadequate housing, including access to heat, water, and electricity; and lack of community supports.

One critical way technology aids the provision of services is by connecting families to existing government and community resources. Throughout Arizona and Maryland and in a number of counties in California and Indiana, counties, clinics, hospitals, schools, other community-based organizations, and residents themselves use a Web-based system to apply for a number of health and social service programs. These include: Medicaid, the Children’s Health Insurance Program, and other health insurance assistance programs; Food Stamps; temporary cash assistance; utility support; and more. The system—called Health-e-Arizona in Arizona, Health-e-Link in Maryland, One-e-App in California, and Ind-e-App in Indiana—collects and stores enrollment information, verification documents, and signatures that a family must provide to apply for various programs, and makes a preliminary determination of programs for which each of the family members is eligible. In many cases, the system electronically sends the application information to the appropriate program for processing. Data and documents are stored in the system for re-use for renewals or when family circumstances change. The system also utilizes text and e-mail communication with consumers whose mailing addresses are less reliable in uncertain economic times.³⁰

The Internet can also empower family members to seek information to enhance their life prospects. Many student jobs require an online application. Similarly, parents can search and apply for jobs and job training programs online, and help their child research colleges and universities. Today, many universities do not accept paper applications, so students without home high-speed Internet access are at a severe disadvantage. Similarly, many private colleges and universities use CSS PROFILE, the financial aid application service of the College Board, to award nonfederal financial aid. CSS PROFILE is only available online.³¹





Empowering Parents Through Technology Action Plan

The Right Time to Act

This parent and technology connection, though once an expendable asset for families, has become indispensable for all parents. Many affluent families, today, are connected and using technology to strengthen their children's education and to link family members to needed information and resources. Fortunately, over the next few years, there are a number of significant opportunities to help all parents get empowered through technology, and to put public policies in place that ensure this outcome.

The upcoming reauthorization of the federal Elementary and Secondary Education Act, implementation of the National Broadband Plan and the National Educational Technology Plan, and new rules under consideration for use of Universal Service funds to ensure equitable deployment of telecommunications service can help make this parent, student, and technology connection a reality for all families. In addition to the reform opportunities at the federal level, significant pressure at the state and community levels to do more with fewer dollars provides a strong incentive to incorporate digital tools wisely into activities supported by states and localities. Finally, the parent and technology connection is an increasingly important component for philanthropy and corporate partners to incorporate if their efforts to improve education and career outcomes for underserved youth and families are to succeed.

Recommendations

1. Promote the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.

Now is the time to build upon the demonstrations and lessons of the past decade and develop a forward-looking agenda that can strengthen parents' involvement in their children's lives through the effective deployment of technology. Market forces that are driving down the cost of computers and creating a myriad of engaging educational digital content provide strong "tail winds" that propel this cause. Similarly, powerful new trends such as children's

The Children's Partnership's Empowering Parents Through Technology Action Plan

1. *Promote the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.*
2. *Create Policies and Fiscal Incentives that Support the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.*
3. *Hold Ourselves Accountable—as Civic and Elected Officials—for Achieving the Goal of Empowering All Parents Through Technology.*

Moreover, the Internet enables students to "visit" campuses for free. For families that cannot travel to make campus visits, many universities offer virtual tours or campus videos on their Web sites. In fact, some universities have virtual campuses in virtual worlds such as Second Life, where a student can visit a three-dimensional online version of the school. At its virtual campus in Second Life, the Harvard Extension School even holds lectures that can be attended free of charge by the public.³² Students can do their college interviews through Skype, and some colleges allow for a video essay to be submitted. Increasingly, students and parents can complete courses and even entire degree programs online. In 2006-07, 65 percent of degree-granting secondary education institutions (including two- and four-year colleges and universities) reported offering credit-granting distance education courses.³³ Of these courses, about three-quarters were wholly online courses, while the remainder were blended classroom/online courses or other types of distance learning.³⁴ In the same year, more than 11,200 college-level programs were designed to be completed through distance education, such as through online courses.³⁵

While a computer can connect families to resources around the globe, it can also enable families to be more engaged in their own communities. Community blogs and online newsletters inform residents about issues important to their neighborhoods, and social networking sites can connect neighbors with similar interests.

All Families Can Benefit from Digital Tools and Skills to Help Students Succeed

There is growing evidence that student achievement, technology access, and parent involvement are interrelated. By leveraging technology to connect schools and homes and to deliver opportunities, policy-makers, advocates and community leaders can work toward closing both the Technology Gap and the Achievement Gap for underserved families. Below are our recommendations for extending the benefits of technology to all parents, including those who are "offline" today.

The real potential for improving outcomes for children through technology that engages parents effectively relies on tying each of these essential components together as a handful of states have started to do.

growing use of technology, the increased use of handheld devices like smartphones, and wireless technologies can be harnessed to accomplish the goal of empowering all parents through technology. Following are the essential components of the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.

- *A Computing Device and Broadband:* An affordable computing device along with affordable broadband at home for every family.
- *Parent Training and Support:* Meaningful training and ongoing technical support for parents so they can use the technology to support their children's education and access opportunities.
- *Parent Online Safety Support:* Information and resources for parents on basic "do's and don'ts" as well as digital citizenship background, so parents can guide their children online and keep them safe.
- *Professional Development for Educators:* Sufficient professional development for teachers, principals, and superintendents, so they can use technology effectively for teaching, learning, and engaging parents.
- *Digital Curriculum:* Instructional materials that take full advantage of digital content's ability to engage students and parents, provide up-to-date information, be adapted to each student's needs, and potentially save taxpayer dollars.
- *Evaluation and Continuous Improvement:* Ongoing assessment of what parents need in order to be digitally prepared to help their children learn and succeed in life, along with an evaluation of our investments in such digital opportunities, so public and private efforts can be continuously strengthened.

None of these program components is, in and of itself, particularly innovative or bold. In fact, billions of public and private sector dollars have been invested in one or another of them over the past decade but with relatively little success. The real potential for improving outcomes for children through technology that engages parents effectively relies on tying each of these essential components together as a handful of states have started to do. Each component ought to be addressed in any policy or funding stream aimed at parent engagement, and improving educational and other outcomes for youth.

2. Create Policies and Financial Incentives that Support the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.

In addition to market forces, there are many existing institutions, policies, and financing sources that can be deployed to make this Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda a reality for all families. The Federal Communications Commission's National Broadband Plan and the U.S. Department of Education's National Educational Technology Plan for 2010, both issued in March 2010, provide Congress and the Obama Administration with a blueprint for action that would put in place most of the elements that comprise this agenda. The National Education Technology Plan, for example, calls for every student and educator to have "at least one Internet access device and software and resources...for use in and out of school."³⁶ Beyond infrastructure, both Plans emphasize the importance of teaching digital literacy skills to students and teachers.³⁷ There is also strong support for "exploit(ing) the flexibility and power of technology to reach all learners anytime and anywhere."³⁸ In addition, parents would logically be a strong focus in implementing the call in the National Broadband Plan for adult literacy, through measures like creating a national Digital Literacy Corps, to conduct training and outreach that builds on successful local models.³⁹

There are also high-impact, pioneering efforts underway that should be incentivized through public policy, federally and in states. For example, Texas, Indiana, California, Florida, Michigan, and Virginia are among the states leading the way in using electronic or digital textbooks in ways that help pay for computing devices and provide more current and engaging digital curriculum.⁴⁰ Texas law now gives the Commissioner of Education the authority to select electronic textbooks for districts and allows districts to use textbook funds to buy both devices like Netbook computers and electronic material.⁴¹ The Indiana State Board of Education interprets the state's definition of textbook for purposes of reimbursement to include computers and other instructional software along with Internet resources;⁴² California has identified free digital textbooks in math and science that are standards-aligned and can be used in California classrooms;⁴³ and Florida defines instructional materials to include digital courseware.⁴⁴ As states take actions like these, they ought to ensure that the learning enabled by digital curricula involves parents as well as students and teachers.

Similarly, states like Texas and Maine have pioneered the use of 1-to-1 laptop programs through which every student has a computer, and varying amounts of training are given to teachers and sometimes parents. Early results are encouraging in terms of impacts on student engagement, learning, and attendance, and show the potential for greater impact if all elements of the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda are incorporated.⁴⁵ And community-based organizations working with parents and schools are



demonstrating the benefits to parents and their families of training parents in technology and providing computers and broadband to families who have not had them.

Building on positive developments such as these, following are opportunities that should be tapped immediately to make the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda a reality. At the same time, these actions will help achieve many of the bold goals set out in the National Broadband Plan and the National Educational Technology Plan.

- **A combination of federal and state policy should authorize subsidizing the cost of a computing device and affordable broadband for any family with a child who qualifies for the National School Lunch Program.** This approach of allowing eligibility in School Lunch to automatically qualify a child for a related form of support has been used successfully to qualify children for health insurance.⁴⁶ Companies that produce computing devices and provide broadband should be encouraged to offer their products at a discounted rate for this untapped market whose demand would be conveniently aggregated through such an initiative. Over time, as teaching and learning become increasingly digital, education funding for textbooks should be deployed to purchase these learning tools for all students. Over the next five years, when targeting underserved youth is the only way to ensure that all families have these tools, financing could be authorized by state Public Utility Commissions and by the Federal Communications Commission when it updates the definition of permissible uses of Universal Service Funds.
- **Federal policy-makers should use the upcoming reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) to incentivize state Departments of Education and local school districts to provide to parents the technology training and tools they need to support their children's education.** As the Obama Administration and members of Congress give states and districts more flexibility to

spend their education funds as they see fit, policy-makers ought to prioritize and provide incentives for technology-enabled activities at school and at home that enable parents to be more involved in their children's education. Without a special "call out" for these technology investments, students attending schools in underserved communities will continue to be on the wrong side of the Digital Divide. For this same reason, Title I funds, which can now support parent involvement, should be increased specifically for technology initiatives that have proven successful at engaging parents.

- **Civic leaders should tap into related public and private sector initiatives to support the Empowering Parents Through Technology Agenda.** There is sufficient evidence now about the impact that linking parents and schools through technology can have on children's education to make investing in this technology link a priority. Federal Investing in Innovation (i3) funds, if reauthorized, ought to support parent engagement in children's education using technology. Funding sources outside of education should also be tapped because once parents have digital tools and training, these can be used for job-related skills training for parents, helping family members get health and human services they need, and the like. For example, funds directed at adult education are being used for technology skills training for parents and could be incorporated into this broader parent empowerment effort. Other initiatives that would be more successful if they supported parents' effective use of technology include federal funding for: low-income housing facilities; digital literacy training; health information technology; health prevention under the recently enacted health care reform law (Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act); and place-based initiatives such as Promise Neighborhoods (a federally-funded program that focuses on transforming communities to improve children's education).
- **Policy-makers and funders should ensure that investments from these varied sources fund comprehensive Empowering Parents Through Technology initiatives.** Only when each of the essential components of this parent agenda is addressed will the desired outcomes result.

3. Hold Ourselves Accountable, as Civic Leaders and Elected Officials, for Achieving the Goal of Empowering All Parents Through Technology.

This agenda has been badly neglected over the past decade because it does not yet have a powerful constituency. In addition, it has been difficult to assign accountability for accomplishing this agenda in any one place—whether in government or the private sector—because responsibility and funding for it are widely dispersed. Now is the time to

hold ourselves accountable for ensuring that by 2020 every student in school will have a parent or caregiver trained in the use of technology and will have appropriate digital tools at home.

We can achieve this goal, first, by capitalizing on the growing interest in this arena to build a strong constituency for it. In August 2010, a bipartisan effort involving former Governors Jeb Bush (Texas) and Bob Wise (West Virginia) along with 48 other leaders from government, industry, and education unveiled the Digital Learning Council, an effort to move best practices for digital education out into the states. This new group of key players—along with existing business, education, and parent organizations—all have a stake in making this agenda a reality.

We also need to monitor annual progress in reaching the 2020 goal. There are ongoing surveys through which this could be accomplished, including the Census' Current Population Survey and foundation-funded technology surveys such as those supported by Pew Charitable Trusts and the California Emerging Technology Fund. Data about the availability of technology tools in homes and technology skills training for parents should be reported on a regular basis to policy-makers and the public.

Now is the time to hold ourselves accountable for ensuring that by 2020 every student in school will have a parent or caregiver trained in the use of technology and will have appropriate digital tools at home.

Finally, serious investments need to be made in evaluation of current efforts and in research and development on the most effective ways to provide these essential parent components. With technology changing so quickly and young people who grew up with technology becoming parents themselves, we will need to continually adapt our strategies to achieve this goal.

Conclusion

There is growing consensus about the strong return on investments in technology tools and training for families. Although, too often, parents have been neglected in the digital revolution, their involvement is key to their children's successful future as well as their own. With a concerted effort, we can reach the goal that by 2020 every student in school will have a parent trained in the use of technology and will have appropriate digital tools at home. The Children's Partnership looks forward to working with all interested parties to achieve this important goal for children and their families.



The Children's Partnership would like to thank the following people for their review, feedback, and insights:

Doug Brown: STEP-A International Ltd.

Elaine Carpenter: The Children's Partnership, On Loan to School2Home

Maria Casillas and Kathleen Mooney: Families in Schools

Richard Chabran: Policy Advisor, California Broadband Policy Network

Todd Haiken: Consultant, Children, Media and Technology

Keith Krueger: Consortium for School Networking

Sunne Wright McPeak: California Emerging Technology Fund

Steve Midgley: U.S. Department of Education, Office of Educational Technology

Claudia Page: Social Interest Solutions

Catherine Reyes: Parent

Paul Richman: California State PTA

Pablo Sanchez: Central Middle School, Riverside CA

Alan Simpson: Common Sense Media

This Issue Brief was written by Jessica Rothsuh and Wendy Lazarus. Jenny Kattlove also contributed to this Brief. Laurie Lipper provided strategic input throughout this project, and Carrie Spencer provided editorial assistance. This Brief was designed by Higher Visuals Design, Inc. The Children's Partnership is grateful to the Conrad N. Hilton Foundation, Joseph Drown Foundation, The California Wellness Foundation, The Ralph Parsons Foundation, and individual donors for their generous support of this work. We also thank the Verizon Foundation for supporting online safety materials development and parent training programs. Finally, we are grateful to the California Emerging Technology Fund for supporting the closely related work of School2Home.

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Other Resources From The Children's Partnership

Available at www.childrenspartnership.org

Digital Opportunity Resources

- ☀ The School2Home Program: A Public-Private Initiative to Close the Technology Gap for California's Middle School Families (2009, in partnership with the California Emerging Technology Fund)
- ☀ Information Technology Making a Difference in Children's Lives: An Issue Brief for Leaders for Children (2008)
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E-Health Resources

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About The Children's Partnership

Since 1993, The Children's Partnership (TCP), a national, nonprofit organization, has worked to ensure that all children—especially those at risk of being left behind—have the resources and the opportunities they need to grow up healthy and lead productive lives. Consistent with that mission, we have educated the public and policy-makers about how technology can measurably improve children's lives. We have also worked at the state and national levels to enact policies and build programs that extend digital opportunity to all children.



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