

COMMENTARIES

Bridging the digital divide for families can improve student outcomes

By [Delaine Eastin](#) | May 23, 2016 | [No Comments](#)

California, once revered as a top school system, now ranks among the bottom in the nation. Despite being one of the most expensive states to live in, California is near the bottom in per-pupil spending. Inadequate funding has led to teacher training and retention problems, overly large classes and the fewest number of counselors, nurses and librarians per student of any state. Most disturbing, we are experiencing low achievement for too many students.

This comes at a time of historically high rates of poverty and income inequality. Amidst all this bad news, however, there is an overlooked bright spot: parent engagement through educational technology. Not only are online teaching and learning aids transforming the learning potential for students, they are providing a revolutionary way for parents of all backgrounds to engage in their children's education.

We've always known that parent engagement matters. And over the past decade, a ream of academic studies has confirmed that parent engagement – across income, ethnicity, race and geography – is a key to student learning and academic success. Yet parent engagement tends to be higher at higher income schools – and that's because wealthier parents generally have three things poorer parents don't have: time, money and access.

Educators can't solve parents' time and money problems. But there is plenty we can do about access. One promising approach is an innovative program called [School2Home](#) that's been adopted in 11 low-performing middle schools in five California districts. The program, where I've served as a coach for educators, is showing that Internet access and digital literacy training can provide significant benefits for students, teachers and parents.

School2Home is based on the simple recognition that around 30 to 40 percent of low-income California households do not have high-speed Internet and that this “digital divide” is widening the academic achievement divide. For that reason, School2Home has set out to: get students connected to the Internet at home through affordable broadband programs and low-cost computers; provide parents the digital literacy skills they need to engage with teachers, schools and their children's learning; and train teachers to use the increasing abundance of hardware and software to the benefit of their students'

education.

There are plenty of other nonprofit programs providing digital literacy skills to students and teachers – but School2Home is the only initiative in California with a major focus on parent engagement coupled with educational technology training.

Since it was first implemented five years ago, the program has witnessed positive results, according to a 2015 evaluation [report](#) by Education Support Systems. School2Home schools, such as Robert Louis Stevenson Middle School in Los Angeles and University Heights Middle School in Riverside, have seen improved student performance. Stevenson, for example, which has long struggled with low math and English test scores, has outperformed similar low-income schools that don't use the School2Home intervention. In 2015, University Heights' baseline CAASPP scores exceeded the county and statewide average for clear, purposeful writing and effective communication skills. Three years earlier, it was underperforming by district, county and state standards. Moreover, School2Home schools have seen a 50 percent increase in home broadband subscriptions among Spanish-speaking parents and a 10 percent increase for English-speaking parents, according to the 2015 evaluation.

Through funding from the California Emerging Technology Fund,

School2Home underwrites the purchase of computers for teachers as well as for students to use at home. It offers teacher training on integrating technology and project-based learning into the classroom and homework, and on using technology to engage parents in their child's education. Parents are also offered training on basic digital literacy and on communicating online with the school.

Micah Studer, assistant principal of Winters Joint Unified School District, believes that School2Home works because it recognizes access and equity issues facing under-resourced public schools. "The digital divide – this divide between the haves and have-nots of technology – is the new literacy divide," says Studer. "By making knowledge digitally accessible, School2Home represents a transformative philosophy that school is not an event that happens from 7 am to 3 pm every day. It's something that our kids experience out of school and in collaboration with their parents and teachers."

I know the power of these forces. Having grown up with engaged but working-class parents and some teachers who really cared, I become the first person in my family to go to college and the first woman to be elected California State Superintendent of Public Education. I am a living embodiment of equity through education, and I am adamant it continues.

In the 21st century, equity will require digital access and digital

literacy. School2Home is delivering both. It is sending a powerful message to low-income kids and their families – through their schools – that the world of information and knowledge is not only within their grasp, it's theirs to shape their minds and hearts.

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Delaine Eastin served as California State Superintendent of Public Instruction from 1995 to 2003. She serves as a teacher coach at School2Home's annual Leadership Academy.

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