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OPINION

A crucial effort to expand home internet access



BY **JENN GALINATO** POSTED 06.10.2022

Students all know the pains – dropped Zoom calls, spotty reception and failed downloads. COVID-19 has changed college campuses forever, expanding the classroom to wherever we can connect to the internet.

While the transition has opened more access for students, it also leaves behind

many, including the 3.5 million Californians who do not have internet access at home. As students, we deserve a voice in the fight to close the digital divide. I was proud to support AB 2753 and participate as a witness in a legislative committee hearing for the first time.

In 2021, 3.5 million Californians (<https://www.cetfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Statewide-Survey-on-Broadband-Adoption-CETF-Report.pdf>) did not have internet access from home and 5.9 million Californians did not have access to a computer, laptop, or tablet.

Sitting at a desk in the middle of a committee room next to Assembly Majority Leader Reyes was nerve wracking – it is not easy being surrounded by 10 Assemblymembers, many of whom I read about in the news or on Twitter every morning.

But my perspective and experience with the digital divide as a student is a story that has to be told.

In 2021, 3.5 million Californians (<https://www.cetfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Statewide-Survey-on-Broadband-Adoption-CETF-Report.pdf>) did not have internet access from home and 5.9 million Californians did not have access to a computer, laptop, or tablet. With the quick transition to online learning came a plethora of students who were forced to put their education on hold.

In fact, 82% of California college students (<https://west.edtrust.org/resource/the-digital-divide-in-higher-ed/>) who did not return for the Spring 2021 semester cited online classes as the main reason they would not be returning.

Another report by The Education Trust-West (<https://west.edtrust.org/resource/the-digital-divide-in-higher-ed/>) found that more than 100,000 low-income California college students lack access to the proper technology required to engage in online schooling. Over 100,000 low-income households and 145,000 students of color do not have internet access.

Additionally, 109,000 low-income students and nearly 134,000 students of color do not have access to a laptop or tablet.

Why is it that so many Californians cannot stay connected in a time of unprecedented technology?

In the 21st century, broadband is not a luxury but a human right.

Affordability is the main reason that households are not adopting broadband.

According to a statewide survey by the California Emerging Technology Fund (https://www.cetfund.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Annual_Survey_2021_CETF_USC_Final_Summary_Report_CETF_A.pdf), 68 percent of unconnected or underconnected Californians say that home internet connectivity is too expensive for them to access. While service providers are required to have low-cost options, 2 in 3 unconnected or smartphone-only households are unaware of discount Internet plans, and fewer than 1 in 4 of those aware reported having ever applied.

In the 21st century, broadband is not a luxury but a human right. More than 2,000 individuals and nearly 100 organizations have signed onto Internet for All Now's Digital Equity Bill of Rights (https://www.internetforallnow.org/digital-equity-bill-rights_supporters_2021). AB 2753 would have memorialized digital equity as a right for all Californians and linked eligibility for subsidized internet plans to

financial aid packages, guaranteeing broadband access for California’s most at-risk students.

The bill would have ensured huge Internet Service Providers like AT&T and Verizon do not derail the equitable rollout of Governor Newsom’s historic broadband investments but was unceremoniously held in the Assembly Judiciary Committee and is unlikely to see the light of day.

Just because AB 2753 stalled out does not absolve the Legislature from taking action to get students online. Finals may be wrapping up for the class of 2022, but the class of 2023 and beyond needs support. California’s students thank Asm. Majority Leader Reyes and co-author Asm. Chris Holden for their dedication to equity for all – the fight continues.

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Editor’s Note: Jenn Galinato is a student at Sacramento City College.

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