

# public citizens for children + youth

Testimony Presented Before the PA House Democratic Policy Committee and PA  
Legislative Black Caucus Hearing on March 11, 2021 on COVID-19 Disparities  
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Good morning Democratic Policy Committee and Black Legislative Caucus.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify before you today.

My name is Tomea Sippio-Smith. I am the Education Policy Director at the child advocacy organization, Public Citizens for Children and Youth (PCCY).

This pandemic has had an unimaginable impact on low income and Black and Hispanic kids. Some of the worst have been on our student's education.

As you all know, Covid has reshaped how America educates its students. Pew estimated that even before the pandemic, about five million or 15% school-age children lacked high-speed internet service at home.<sup>i</sup> And 1/3 of the poorest families, those with incomes below \$30,000 per did.<sup>ii</sup> Most of the hardest hit were students from poor Black and Hispanic families.<sup>iii</sup> This had dire consequences for Black and Hispanic students. Because many homework assignments required access, they were far less likely to be able to complete and turn in their homework leaving them struggling in school.

Even then, Pennsylvania ranked 38<sup>th</sup> in connectivity due to high-speed internet access problems for students.<sup>iv</sup> Of the state's approximately 302,000 unconnected students, 38%, or more than 114,000, were Black or Hispanic.<sup>v</sup> I'm from Southeastern Pennsylvania where more than half or 58,700 of Black and Hispanic students lack access.<sup>vi</sup>



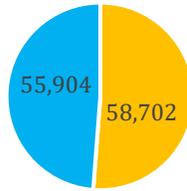
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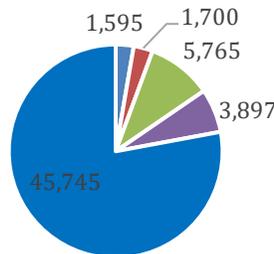
## Black and Hispanic Students Face the Biggest Digital Divide in the State



- SEPA's Unconnected Black and Hispanic Students
- Unconnected Black and Hispanic Students Outside of SEPA

This is not a just an urban problem. To be clear, although Philadelphia is home to the largest number of Black and Hispanic students without reliable internet connectivity, more than 13,000 students in the region's suburbs also lack adequate access.<sup>vii</sup>

## Black and Hispanic Students In Every SEPA County Lack Digital Access



- Bucks
- Chester
- Delaware
- Montgomery
- Philadelphia

Covid – 19 laid bare these inequities. Of course, students living in well-funded school districts had access to high-speed internet, readily available technology like Chromebooks and tablets, and the software necessary to help students transition to virtual learning when schools closed. Thousands of others, including many Black and Hispanic students in districts with a high share of students of color, went months without access to virtual learning or new lessons.<sup>viii</sup>

Many are still struggling with connectivity, have yet to re-enter classrooms and face the likelihood that temporary programs offering free or low-cost internet will expire leaving them without access again. Consistent access remains a hurdle for them as virtual learning in some form – in class and at home – will be the norm for the foreseeable future.

The same students battling connectivity issues were also the least likely to have returned to school. In Southeastern Pennsylvania, as of January 2021, the eight districts educating the majority of the region’s students of color - more than 114,000 students remained entirely virtual. It is no surprise that they struggled to reopen; six of them are among the poorest in the state.

Unsurprisingly, our children, especially children of color, are staggeringly behind. Students who were proficient a year ago, are now testing below average in school.<sup>ix</sup> Researchers estimate that White students are four to eight months behind.<sup>x</sup> And the effects are most pronounced for Black and Hispanic students, especially from low-income families. They may have fallen six months to a year behind.<sup>xi</sup>

As you all know, inequities do not occur in a vacuum. Students of color were much more likely than their peers to start behind. And in Pennsylvania, they attend some of the most racially and economically segregated schools in the country.<sup>xii</sup> This impact is compounded by the fact that the most powerful education funding policy in the state since 1991 - the hold harmless system - in fact harms 80% of the state’s students of color, by failing to adequately fund their schools.<sup>xiii</sup>

Remarkably, in Pennsylvania, students of color are 466% more likely to attend a high poverty school than White students.<sup>xiv</sup> And 20% of Pennsylvania’s poorest school districts serve: 65% of the state’s Black students, 58% of its’ Hispanic students and 48% of the state’s poorest students.<sup>xv</sup>

And we have heard from superintendents, educators, community members and parents, the impact on our most vulnerable students – those receiving special education services, English language learners and on children struggling to learn on their own without adult assistance have been disastrous.

Thousands of students across the state have yet to return to their classrooms. And schools remain in dire need of repair or do not have the space to accommodate the distancing protocols to keep students and safe.

If there was ever a time to address these inequities head on, the time is now. Students that were struggling will keep struggling unless we take active measures to catch them up. Students of color will keep falling behind unless we eliminate the biases and practices that impacted their learning before Covid.

I have gone over some of the problems, here is how we start to fix them.

First, federal government has appropriated \$2.2 billion more dollars to school districts.<sup>xvi</sup> Of this, 90% will be going out to school districts based on their share of poor students.<sup>xvii</sup> At least 20% of this must be used on supports to catch students up and limit the Covid learning loss slide. Additionally, the governor has an additional \$220 million that he can use to fund education at his discretion; these funds **cannot** be used to supplant state education funds.<sup>xix</sup> And, across the nation schools, including ours will receive a share of a \$7.2 billion dollar allocation to enhance broadband access through the Emergency Connectivity Fund.<sup>xx</sup> This money will allow our state's schools and other organizations to provide eligible connected devices, internet services and hotspots for students and teachers to access the internet at home.<sup>xxi</sup>

By any measure, these generous and unprecedented buckets of federal funds give us the opportunity to provide support that schools have always needed and if we invest adequately in our students, show us what they can do. Although districts have a few years to use federal dollars, this is a stop-gap measure, especially for districts that have been chronically underfunded for decades. When the federal funding dries up, without state action, these districts will continue to face millions of dollars in shortfalls annually.

Governor Wolf has presented a bold budgetary proposal that calls for the state to fund our schools adequately and equitably. And most of the state's students of color would benefit from this initiative. It is not the only way to resolve the funding inequities that plague the state, but it is a start. We must continue to do this going forward.

We must use the funds not only to close the digital divide but adopt a state funding strategy that builds the cost of technology into the costs of funding schools.

Moreover, school districts should make extra time in school and out of school for learning the norm. To offset learning losses, we must ensure that schools are open for summer school, students in all districts, especially those with Black, Hispanic, and low-income students have reduced class sizes, increased adult help in classrooms, and tutoring. Their teachers should receive ongoing comprehensive and robust professional development to ensure that they have the skills to continue to use online learning platforms, assist students and their parents in navigating synchronous and asynchronous lessons and assignments during the summer, and catch-up our most vulnerable students – those with disabilities and English Language learners. Taking these steps will enable us to watch the positive impact of having supports aligned with student need. We will see what our students can achieve when they have the tools to do so.

To be clear, we cannot keep saying we will reform education funding next year and expect students to perform better this year – without computers, without tutors and educational support. We cannot wait for another crisis to send our students, especially students of color into an educational whirlpool and see if they will sink or swim. The state must do better by them. We are calling on every legislator to do just that – adequately, consistently, and equitably invest in our schools, so that schools can better adapt and educate our students whether another crisis arises.

Covid-2019 was a violent and unprecedented wake-up call. Yet, it was one that was sorely needed. Children of color should not have had to bear the weight of this burden. We have the opportunity right now to ensure that it does not happened again. With adequate funding at the federal and state levels, we can invest our students, so this atrocity is a truly a once-in-century event.

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- <sup>i</sup> Anderson, Monica, and Andrew Perrin. “Nearly One-In-Five Teens Can’t Always Finish Their Homework because of the Digital Divide.” *Pew Research Center*, Pew Research Center, 26 Oct. 2018, [www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/](http://www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2018/10/26/nearly-one-in-five-teens-cant-always-finish-their-homework-because-of-the-digital-divide/).
- <sup>ii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>iv</sup> “State Ranking,” *Education Superhighway*, accessed September 17, 2019, [https://stateofthestates.educationsuperhighway.org/state\\_ranking.html](https://stateofthestates.educationsuperhighway.org/state_ranking.html).
- <sup>v</sup> “Interactive Map: America’s Unconnected Students.” *Digital Bridge K-12*, digitalbridgek12.org/toolkit/assess-need/connectivity-map/.
- <sup>vi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>vii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>viii</sup> Rybak, Sue Ann. *School District of Philadelphia Will Begin Formal Online Instruction in May*. 6 Apr. 2020.
- <sup>ix</sup> Sparks, Sarah D. “Pandemic Learning Loss Heavier in Math than Reading This Fall, but Questions Remain.” *Blogs Site (for Redirect Purposes Only)*, 1 Dec. 2020, [blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2020/12/pandemic\\_learning\\_loss\\_heavier\\_in\\_math.html?cmp=soc-edit-tw](https://blogs.edweek.org/edweek/inside-school-research/2020/12/pandemic_learning_loss_heavier_in_math.html?cmp=soc-edit-tw). Accessed 10 Mar. 2021.
- <sup>x</sup> “Mind the Gap: COVID-19 Is Widening Racial Disparities in Learning, so Students Need Help and a Chance to Catch up | McKinsey.” *Www.mckinsey.com*, [www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help](http://www.mckinsey.com/industries/public-and-social-sector/our-insights/covid-19-and-learning-loss-disparities-grow-and-students-need-help).
- <sup>xi</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xii</sup> *FAULT LINES AMERICA’S MOST SEGREGATING SCHOOL DISTRICT BORDERS.*, 2016. retrieved from: [EdBuild-Fault-Lines-2016.pdf](#)
- <sup>xiii</sup> Loeb, David, and Donna Cooper. *2 Hold “Harmless”: A Quarter Century of Inequity at the Heart of Pennsylvania’s School System a PCCY Education Report.*, Jan. 2021.
- <sup>xiv</sup> “School Poverty | National Equity Atlas.” *Nationalequityatlas.org*, [nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/School\\_poverty#/?geo=02000000000042000](http://nationalequityatlas.org/indicators/School_poverty#/?geo=02000000000042000). Accessed 19 Jan. 2021.
- <sup>xv</sup> Pennsylvania Department of Education. Statistics compiled using school district funding data -Average Instructional Expense per Weighted Average Daily Membership from 2018-2019. Retrieved from <https://www.education.pa.gov/Teachers%20-%20Administrators/School%20Finances/Finances/Historical%20Files/Pages/default.aspx>
- <sup>xvi</sup> *Elementary and Secondary School Emergency Relief Fund (ESSER II) Authorized by the Coronavirus Response and Relief Supplemental Appropriations Act, 2021.* 2021. Retrieved from [Final ESSERII Methodology Table 1.5.21.pdf \(ed.gov\)](#)
- <sup>xvii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xviii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xix</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xx</sup> *CHAPTER 2—DISTANCE LEARNING and 2 CONSUMER PROTECTION during the 3 COVID–19 PANDEMIC 4 SEC. 3311. FUNDING for CONSUMER PRODUCT SAFETY 5 FUND to PROTECT CONSUMERS from PO6 TENTIALLY DANGEROUS PRODUCTS RELATED to COVID–19.* 2021. Retrieved from [C:\Users\KLMERY~1\AppData\Roaming\SoftQuad\XMetaL\11.0\gen\c\OP\\_02.XML \(house.gov\)](#)
- <sup>xxi</sup> Ibid.