COVID-19 has shone a spotlight on a specific aspect of the digital divide known as the homework gap—the inability to do schoolwork at home due to lack of internet access. Nationwide, 15-16 million students are affected—roughly 1 in 3. A disproportionate share of those students are African-American or Hispanic, come from low-income households, or live in rural areas.

WHY ACTION IS NEEDED

- While educators are working toward safely reopening schools, it has become abundantly clear that most students will need to be online for at least part of the coming school year.
- Without specific, targeted funds to help students who do not have Internet access at home—whether it is Internet service, devices or both—students will be shut out of their virtual classrooms and denied access to public education.

WHO IS HIT HARDEST

- According to Common Sense Media’s recent report, based on 2018 data, the most vulnerable students are disproportionately affected by the homework gap:
  - 37 percent of rural students and 21 percent of urban students lack home Internet access
  - 35 percent of Native American students, 30 percent of African-American students and 26 percent of Hispanic students have inadequate Internet access at home
- According to the Alliance for Excellent Education’s recent analysis with similar findings, additionally:
  - One in three African-American, Hispanic and American Indian/Alaska Native families do not have high-speed home Internet
  - One in three families who earn between $25,000 and $50,000 do not have high-speed home Internet

WHAT EDUCATORS WANT

- Support the Emergency Educational Connections Act (S. 3690) in the next COVID-19 package to appropriate one-time emergency funds of at least $4 billion to the E-rate program, administered by the Federal Communications Commission, to support schools procuring and distributing Wi-Fi hotspots, connected devices, and other technology to support students without home internet access so they can participate in remote learning this school year.
- This approach is best because:
  - The E-Rate program is established, trusted, can distribute the emergency funds quickly and efficiently, and is the preference of schools.
  - E-Rate has guardrails to ensure equitable distribution of funds—based on the percentage of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch, with priority given to schools serving the students in greatest need.
  - Narrowly tailored adjustments could ensure funds are used as intended—to close the homework gap for this school year.

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1 Common Sense Media’s report “Closing the K-12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning.”

2 See the Alliance for Excellent Education’s analysis “Students of Color Caught in the Homework Gap.”