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GETTING TO THE BOTTOM OF NEW JERSEY'S DIGITAL DIVIDE

Since COVID-19 caused schools to close in March 2020, state and local government and education leaders have been talking about the digital divide. However, despite New Jersey's strong standing nationally as an education leader, it has been hard to determine how many NJ students are being left behind by the requirements of remote work.

A recent report by the New Jersey School Boards Association details some of the difficulties, with a local news headline summarizing the challenge: "New Jersey education officials still don't know the depth of the state's digital divide."

Estimated needs around the digital divide have continued to evolve based on various surveys:

Mid-March: 89,000 needed internet, **136,000** needed devices (Commissioner Repollet).

April 8-9 Survey: 98,000 needed internet, **150,000** needed devices (Commissioner Repollet).

July (based on June survey): 230,000 needed internet or devices (Governor Murphy).

September (based on June survey): >350,000 student needed internet or devices, 230,000 previously mentioned by Governor Murphy were identified as ONLY low income students and not the TOTAL, **>40,000** staff members need devices (Interim Education Commissioner Kevin Dehmer).

September (based on July survey): About **one-third** of parents who responded to a WRNJ survey conducted by Learning Heroes indicated they were missing technology required for remote learning.
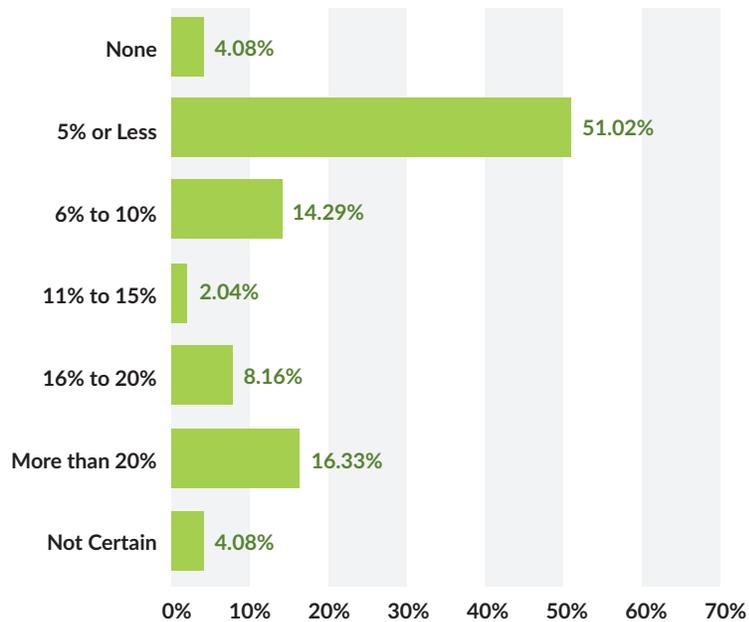

- 32% Already Had Own Tech
- 33% Using School Provided
- 35% Missing Device or Internet
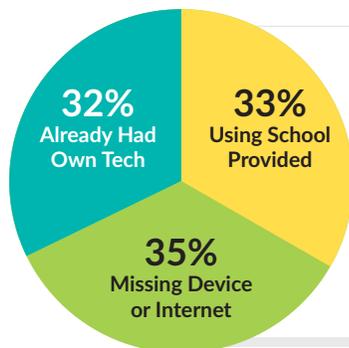
TECH AND/OR WIFI ACCESS SOURCE

	Own	School	Missing
African Americans	24%	37%	39%
Hispanics	31%	30%	39%
Whites	35%	35%	30%

10% Missing a Computer | 16% Missing Internet | 8% Missing Both

October (based on July survey): Nearly a quarter of the superintendents who responded said **16%** or more of their students lacked internet access (October 2020 NJSBA Report).

Category	Percentage
None	4.08%
5% or Less	51.02%
6% to 10%	14.29%
11% to 15%	2.04%
16% to 20%	8.16%
More than 20%	16.33%
Not Certain	4.08%

November 18 (Governor Murphy to NJ Spotlight**):** Currently **39,741** students in **245** school districts and public charter or special schools lack either a computer or internet access. More here[2] about what specific districts need.

December 16 (based on weekly updates to NJDOE**):**[1] As of mid-October, the state began requiring weekly reporting from all P-12 local education agencies on numbers of students needing devices and/or internet connectivity and the barriers preventing those needs from being met. Data shows:

» **97.5%** (810 of 831) of entities have shared information.
» Total need: **9,281**.

Discrepancies in these numbers can be attributed to the following:

- Until October, districts were encouraged but not required to respond to the surveys, with the exception of the one conducted in June.
- Districts self-reported estimated numbers and some did not respond at all.
- The state left it up to each district to define access.
- The newer state-required process acknowledges that, "While the Department continues to refine these submissions and work collaboratively with the entities to better understand their reported data and to ensure that it accurately reflects their needs now, or for this school year, district-reported data might reflect human error or misunderstanding of the requested information."[3]

Other relevant statistics point to opportunities and challenges:

- BroadbandNow ranks New Jersey first in the country for connectivity.
- The state's average Mbps (Megabits per second) speed is 102.9 (far above what the FCC recommends is needed for a moderately active household) and more than 78% of New Jerseyans have access to low-price plans.
- However, 147,000 residents[4] have access to only one provider, which can make it difficult to change service if it does not meet a household's digital needs.

1   https://www.nj.gov/education/grants/digitaldivide/techsurveys.shtml
2   https://www.njspotlight.com
3   https://www.nj.gov/education/grants/digitaldivide/techsurveys.shtml (below Student Device and Connectivity Needs)
4   https://broadbandnow.com/New-Jersey

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Aside from getting hardware into the hands of students and teachers, there are larger issues at play. The educational community is still in the beginning stages of understanding students', families', and educators' familiarity with digital tools, educational platforms, and online conduct. WRNJ is exploring ways to prioritize digital literacy and citizenship to better support equitable hybrid and remote learning for the 21st century.

We believe:

- *STUDENTS need and deserve reliable and consistent access to online learning and social/ emotional supports.*
- *EDUCATORS should be provided robust and relevant professional development and training to conduct engaging online learning.*
- *FAMILIES should have access to inclusive school/district-based support to build digital literacy and citizenship and to also help troubleshoot technology issues.*
- *BUSINESS LEADERS need strong partnerships and support from state and municipal agencies to make targeted donations of hardware and thoughtful investments around the expansion of needed infrastructure.*