



Bridging the Digital Divide Initiative 2020-21

The global COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted an issue of educational equity that has increasingly affected children's ability to prepare for success in our technology-driven world. Many of Georgia's children do not have access to an electronic device or the Internet at home. During school closures in the spring of 2020, many students could not access instruction or critical learning tools. Schools rushed to loan classroom devices to their students and provide Internet access, but funding and equipment shortages meant that too many children were left unserved or could only use paper packets. The State Charter Schools Foundation of Georgia has launched the Bridging the Digital Divide Initiative to ensure that students have the resources they need at home to be successful in school and prepare for bright futures.

The Problem

According to USAFacts*, 17% of children between the ages of 3-18 live in households without a computer, meaning that at least 11 million do not have an electronic device for learning. Many more must share a single device with multiple siblings. In addition, 14-18% of households with school-aged children do not have Internet access at home, with a greater percent of students in rural areas unable to connect. In addition, a study by the Pew Research Center** revealed that 43% of low-income families expect that their children will have to complete any remote assignments on a cell phone due to lack of access to an electronic device and/or the Internet. The study also shows that Hispanic and



A student from Atlanta Heights Charter School accessed remote tutoring services from home through a SCSF grant.

Black respondents are more worried about paying their Internet bill, and many rural families do not have access to broadband Internet at all. Although parents and schools recognize the need, public charter schools do not have adequate funds for this purpose.

In Georgia, we know that the percentages are similar to national statistics. Among state charter school students, based on school surveys and income data, we estimate that at least 20% of the 33,000 students do not have their own electronic device, and another 15% lack Internet access. This means that at least 6,600 students enrolled in state charter schools do not have what they need to be successful in school and life. Children of color and children living in rural communities are disproportionately affected, creating a serious issue of education equity.

Even though the pandemic has shown a light on the divide, this is not a new problem. The U.S. Department of Commerce, National Telecommunications & Information Administration (NTIA) began sounding the alarm about lack of access to digital resources in the 1990s, asserting that lack of access constituted an economic and civil rights issue. Educators have noted the disparities as curriculum and homework are increasingly being delivered electronically. However, with austerity cuts to education funding in Georgia lasting nearly 10 years after the recession in 2009,

public schools had just recently begun to address the digital divide in more meaningful ways. The pandemic has made it clear, though, that devices and Internet access at home for children cannot be optional and efforts cannot wait. We must act and “bridge” the divide so that children gain the core computer skills they need to be successful in their future careers and their lives.

*Source: <https://usafacts.org/articles/internet-access-students-at-home/#:~:text=Among%20children%20ages%203%2D18,a%20single%20device%20with%20siblings.>

**Source: <https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/2020/04/30/53-of-americans-say-the-internet-has-been-essential-during-the-covid-19-outbreak/>

Unique Challenge & Opportunity

State charter schools are single-school public school districts that have a charter to provide innovative and unique educational opportunities to students. They receive the majority of their funding from the state, with the rest coming from federal grants and donations. They do not have the ability to collect local tax revenue or other local government funds, constraining their ability to provide students with technology resources at home. Many state charter schools have more than 50% low-income students, and most serve a high percentage of students of color, immigrants, and/or vulnerable children.

Since state charter schools are “schools of choice,” they usually have close-knit communities and substantial family outreach initiatives. During school closures due to the pandemic, they pivoted quickly to distance learning, able to be more responsive and flexible than their traditional public school counterparts. State charter schools have developed comprehensive pandemic plans, considering how to serve students during “rolling closures,” hybrid learning, and/or extended virtual learning. They are also using this time to evaluate their use of technology and determine best practices so that students can benefit from increased access to electronic devices and the Internet in order to further their skills and knowledge.



A mother brings her daughter to International Academy of Smyrna to pick up her very own laptop through the SCSF's partnership with Inspiredu.

The Initiative

The State Charter Schools Foundation of Georgia (SCSF) believes strongly that every student must have their own device at home and access to the Internet to increase equity in education. “Bridging the digital divide” is one of our top priorities because no child should be worried that they will not be able to learn – whether during distance learning, completing homework, studying, completing projects, or learning for the sake of learning. We cannot let a device be a barrier for children’s achievement, academic growth, and overall wellbeing. The initiative has three components.

1. The SCSF has partnered with Inspiredu – Atlanta to provide refurbished electronic devices (tablets for grades K-2 and laptops for grades 3-12), as well as training for the family, technical support, and a one-year warranty to students. We have set a joint goal of serving 1,500 low-income state charter school students in Georgia by the end of

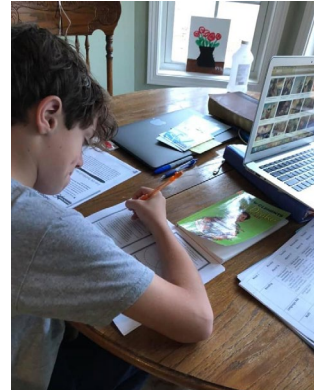
2021. To date, 160 children have received devices through this partnership, formed in June 2020, fulfilling the needs of four schools.

Through this model, children keep these devices, giving them a sense of permanence and ownership. This approach also relieves the burden on schools to loan devices, provide afterhours technical assistance, repair devices, and maintain inventory. Schools are able to focus on acquiring and maintaining an adequate number of electronic devices for classroom use, and teachers know that students already have what they need at home to complete assignments.

2. The SCSF will award grants to state charter schools to provide home Internet access for low-income and/or vulnerable students, with a priority given to students without Internet hotspots within 2 miles of their home.

Schools have been providing students in need with hot spots or Internet-enabled devices. Long-term Internet access is very costly, and schools have not been able to meet the need. Students in urban and suburban areas usually have access to Internet hot spot zones; however, they may require students to study in vehicles or parking lots. With adequate funding, schools can assist families with paying for broadband service. This is not an option for students living in rural areas of Georgia, though, since much of our state does not yet have broadband connectivity available. Grants would allow schools to provide 10 months of access to students.

3. The SCSF will also consider requests for grants to purchase classroom devices to support digital learning, up to the point that schools have a 1:1 device to student ratio.



Students in rural parts of Georgia not only cannot always afford Internet access, but often broadband service is not available. Schools like Pataula Charter Academy contracted with cell service providers to offer Internet through wireless devices with the help of a SCSF grant.