



February 9, 2021

TO: Members of the House Energy and Commerce Committee
FR: James P. Steyer, CEO and Founder, Common Sense
RE: Support Committee Budget Reconciliation Funds to Close the Digital Divide

Dear Representative,

We write to urge your strong support for the Energy and Commerce Committee’s budget reconciliation package scheduled for markup on February 12th, including Sec. 3312 to provide more than \$7 billion to close the digital divide that is preventing millions of students and hundreds of thousands of teachers from fully participating in distance learning and teaching. We applaud the Committee for including this section and encourage you to vote for the package.

As you know, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic forced 55 million students to carry out their educations remotely, reliant on the internet and computers and laptops. But, as you might also be aware, before the pandemic struck, between [15 million and 16 million students](#) lacked adequate access to the internet, computing devices, or both, to conduct distance learning, and as many as 400,000 teachers lacked adequate connectivity and/or devices to conduct distance teaching.¹ While some progress was made during the pandemic, thanks to the CARES Act and other limited resources, **our research shows that 12 million students remain in the so-called Homework Gap.**²

[Common Sense](#) strongly supports getting students back into the classroom safely as quickly as possible. However, the need for all students and teachers to have access to high speed internet and modern devices at home continues to be a critical problem now, will continue to be a learning challenge despite school reopenings, and requires Congress’ immediate additional attention and support.

Distance learning tools for students and teachers at home will remain essential in the short-term while some children return to school and others remain in virtual learning settings, and this technology access will be needed to assist students with the difficult but critical effort to help recover from the steep learning loss that has taken place during the pandemic. Access to education technology, including high-speed internet and grade-appropriate devices at home, is inextricably linked to educational achievement opportunities for every child, in every state, whether they are learning in school or from home.

¹Chandra, S., Chang, A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., Weiss, D., (2020). Closing the K–12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media. Boston, Massachusetts, Boston Consulting Group.

² Ali, T., Chandra, S., Cherukumilli, S., Fazlullah, A., Galicia, E., Hill, H., McAlpine, N., McBride, L., Vaduganathan, N., Weiss, D., Wu, M. (2021). Looking back, looking forward: What it will take to permanently close the K–12 digital divide. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

The digital divide is a problem in every state, but it is particularly problematic for low-income students, students of color, rural students, and students on tribal lands.³ Consider these additional facts related to the digital divide:

- A 2019 Common Sense nationwide survey of teachers revealed troubling evidence of the continuing "homework gap," a divide between students who have home broadband internet access and students who do not. This survey showed that students in lower-income schools continue to miss out on opportunities for learning that will help set them up for success because their teachers are less likely to assign homework requiring digital tools.⁴
- According to recent research by McKinsey “cumulative learning loss could be substantial, especially in mathematics—with students on average likely to lose five to nine months of learning by the end of this school year.” This research also indicates school shutdowns are likely to compound racial disparities in learning and achievement, increasing dropout rates, which could take a toll on the economy.⁵ In fact, our analysis shows that the digital divide contributes to a \$22 billion loss to GDP.⁶
- Many school districts across the country are [planning for the possibility of continued distance learning](#) into the fall and some districts are planning for the [permanent inclusion of distance learning](#) from here on.

For more than 15 years, Common Sense has been a leading advocate for kids and families and a trusted independent resource for parents and teachers. We have long fought for equitable access to learning technology and we appreciate your attention to this issue and for your support for this budget reconciliation package.

Sincerely,

/s/ Jim Steyer

CEO & Founder
Common Sense

Cc: Chairman Pallone and Ranking Member McMorris Rogers

³Chandra, S., Chang, A., Day, L., Fazlullah, A., Liu, J., McBride, L., Mudalige, T., Weiss, D., (2020). Closing the K–12 Digital Divide in the Age of Distance Learning. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media. Boston, Massachusetts, Boston Consulting Group.

⁴Fazlullah, A., & Ong, S. (2019). The homework gap: Teacher perspectives on closing the digital divide. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.

⁵Dorn, E., Hancock B., Sarakatsannis, J., & Viruleg, E. (2020). COVID-19 and learning loss—disparities grow and students need help. McKinsey & Company.

⁶ Ali, T., Chandra, S., Cherukumilli, S., Fazlullah, A., Galicia, E., Hill, H., McAlpine, N., McBride, L., Vaduganathan, N., Weiss, D., Wu, M. (2021). Looking back, looking forward: What it will take to permanently close the K–12 digital divide. San Francisco, CA: Common Sense Media.