



Equity in Access: Leveling the Digital Playing Field

Defining the Challenge

Digital Equity is "... a condition in which all individuals and communities have the information technology capacity needed for full participation in our society, democracy and economy. Digital Equity is necessary for civic and cultural participation, employment, lifelong learning, and access to essential services."¹

With substantial teaching and learning taking place outside of school classrooms, COVID-19 has elevated the importance of digital equity.

Who are we leaving out?

As a result, many members are unable to participate in the teaching and learning experiences being offered by schools and their local Boys & Girls Clubs.

While there isn't a perfect solution to meet all needs, there are a number of solutions to explore that, together, can enable more of your young people to engage in what your Club and local schools might offer – thereby helping to level the digital playing field.

Solutions to Leveling the Playing Field

A first step in leveling the playing field is to understand who is getting left out, and why. By assessing why your members and families are unable to participate, you will then be able to identify solutions based upon need and priority. The following sections explore solutions including device access, internet access, technology support, digital skills and programmatic solutions.

Devices

Devices include desktop and laptop computers, tablets, smartphones, gaming consoles – in short, anything that can be used to "get online." However, school and Club experiences often are best when accessed through computers (whether desktop or laptop) or tablets equipped with keyboards; other form factors may inhibit full participation. Solutions to help families with decreased device access include:

- Your Club may have a number of devices that can be loaned directly to parents and caregivers.
- Your local schools may have devices they can loan to students who attend their classes. Speak with your local District or School representative to think through if and how local resources might be brought to bear to alleviate access challenges. Also be aware that your District may

¹ <https://www.ucpcog.org/Digital%20Equity%20&%20Why%20Is%20Broadband%20Important.pdf>



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have stipulations about when, where and how devices are used that may need to evolve based upon the evolving COVID situation. Now is a great time to have that conversation.

- Local corporations, including national chains like Best Buy, can be a source for hardware support. Corporations frequently “off-board” computers that are older than 3-4 years; they may be able to retrofit and donate a substantial number directly to your members. *Note: Proper investment must be made to protect the youth using the device. If you have the capacity, be sure the computers are outfitted with a modern operating system and secondary tools, like word processing software. Furthermore, the Club should install a reputable anti-virus and there should also be some validation that the drives have been cleaned.*
- Local government members, your board of directors, and/or other agencies can be sources for support.
- Community organizations, schools, and libraries may have computers that families can check out or rent.
- Tech Soup can you purchase hardware (like computers) and software for your Club. See <https://www.techsoup.org/>.

Internet Access

Internet access helps members get online and connected to virtual learning experiences. In order to fully participate in online programming, youth should have access to an internet connection that functions at a speed of at least 25 MBPS (megabits per second). Below 25 MBPS, web applications can take a long time to load. Solutions to help families access internet include:

- Many Internet providers are providing low-cost access. Details vary widely across providers, and the exact service provisions and discounts continually change. The best bet is to connect with local provider(s) directly to understand current offers available at service addresses.
 - To understand deals available in your area, use InMyArea.com to identify which providers might provide service. You will likely have to connect with providers separately to identify specific discount packages, as they are not likely listed on online aggregators like InMyArea.com. A good example is that Comcast has made its Internet Essentials service available to youth and families. However, specific options will vary with location and so starting by checking to see which providers will service your address, and then exploring specific providers’ options directly, will provide you the best up-to-date information.
- Schools can be part of the solution. Some districts are distributing wireless devices to families that lack basic access. One opportunity is to connect with your local District to learn about what they might be doing to ensure entire remote learning is available to all students.
- Libraries can be part of the solution. Some libraries are making access available in their parking lots and/or outside their walls; others provide/loan internet wireless devices.
- Your Club may have wireless devices (hotspots) you can loan to members. Wireless devices (hotspots) can allow members to access Internet services from off-site locations, such as their home.



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- Alternatively, you can check with your IT personnel or vendors to explore offering WiFi outside your walls (extending into the parking lot) to help others access your resources. If you do so, be sure to set up socially-distanced tables, power outlets and other materials to help families make comfortable use of the resource.

Support

It's important to understand that digital equity does not begin and end with device and internet access. Oftentimes, families and members do not have the support and/or digital skills they need to access digital learning and engagement. The following are some options and opportunities:

- Members can support one another through peer support. Facebook groups and/or other social media means can be a good way to connect members together or help members or their parents have their questions answered.
- Sometimes, members lose device access because of parental actions (e.g., punishment). Make sure parents understand that losing device access means losing access to educational opportunities and opportunities to connect with friends during a season of isolation.
- Some Clubs are creating a technical support e-mail address members and/or parents can utilize to ensure they have the right support. If you contract your IT to another agency, you might learn if they'd be willing to "volunteer" their support to assist any parents or caregivers in answering technical questions.

Virtual Programming

Virtual programming is what you deliver through your virtual club experience. While some virtual programs require computers and internet access, others engage youth who don't have reliable internet or access to a device. Here are some tips to ensure you can meet families, caregivers and members "where they are":

- Think about how you can best reach your members – if youth aren't able to all log on at the same time, you might consider sharing recorded videos or activities that youth can do on their own time.
- Households without internet access can benefit from activity kit distributions. You can either distribute physical copies of activities and the necessary materials directly through your Clubhouse or partner with your local District and schools to distribute more broadly.
- Offering members an opportunity to use Club resources to access their virtual schooling is a way to ensure youth have access to devices, internet, and support. If considering such a program, prioritize those who don't have access over those who do.
- Please review the Virtual Programming section of the Virtual Club Planning Tool, <https://virtualclubplanner.org>, for more information about virtual programming.