The Great Divide: It's Not Just Digital

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Despite efforts to get all kids hooked up and on-line, in school or out, a substantial computer gap remains.

Reports from the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) and the National Telecommunications Information Administration (NTIA) have said the same thing: There is a "digital divide" that leads some children to fall through the Net at home and at school. Thus, while access to computers and the Internet grows for society as a whole, it can vary widely from one child, school, or school district to another – largely along lines of race, class and gender.

In February 2000, NCES reported that while schools were equally likely to have Internet access regardless of grade level, the concentration of poverty among their students, and metropolitan status, wealthier schools still enjoyed much richer access. Schools with low concentrations of poverty reported that 62% to 74% of their instructional rooms had Internet connections by 1999, and the number was growing. In high-poverty schools, meanwhile, just 39% of rooms were wired for the Net, with no increase from 1998 to '99.

It's not new news that low-income, inner-city and rural kids don't have equal access to computers. They also typically don't have equal access to the educational, social, or economic resources necessary for success in U.S. society.

The last eight years have seen a number of federal and state attempts to provide subsidies and tax incentives for schools to acquire computers and to expand Internet access. Despite the best intentions of education policymakers, corporations, local district and school leaders, however, the digital divide of computer haves and have-nots remains a fact and reflects a deeper, longstanding divide of structural and social inequality. Helping schools obtain computers and network access is honorable. Failing to address the deep disparities in resources that schools confront as they attempt to use these education tools is a travesty, and will do nothing to improve educational opportunity or student achievement.

Therein lies the good news in the digital divide, however. If we're serious about closing the gap, we will be forced to address the underlying inequities in schools and the communities they serve.

Children using computers need a nourishing and sustaining physical environment in which to use them. They need schools that understand and provide for their educational needs and interests. And to help them use computers in educationally meaningful ways,

they need well-trained teachers.

To meet those needs, and therefore to truly bridge the digital divide, requires much more than new hardware or Internet hook-ups.

First, it will require attention to the physical surroundings where students and teachers work. This space needs to be clean and secure, with access to adequate electrical power. For many schools, particularly poor urban and rural schools, such environments simply don't exist. Placing computers in deteriorating classrooms and school buildings seems a poor arrangement of priorities.

Second, it will be necessary to properly support students, teachers, computers, and communications networks. While technical support is certainly crucial to answering students' and teachers' questions about how to use computers and the Internet and what to do when hardware or software fail, it's not enough. More fundamental support is needed if we are to fulfill students' educational needs and interests. Simply placing a computer in the classroom does not mean that education will spontaneously take place. Students and teachers need to be able to use these new tools in ways that contribute to, not detract from, teaching and the curriculum.

This requires technical, human and financial resources … and time. Students and teachers need computers that work. To work, computers need software, maintenance, people who can fix them when they aren't working properly, and people who can show how they can be used to learn and achieve when they are working. At the very least, this requires money. Poorer schools typically don't have this money. The funds schools get through grants and subsidies do provide computers, phone lines, Internet service, and software. Funds are usually missing, however, for their fundamental supports -- sound, functioning buildings, well-trained teachers, and healthy, engaged kids. Without these supports, computers offer limited educational benefit.

Third, computers will serve our classrooms best when we provide students with meaningful educational activities. Teachers and students do need to know how to use computers and the software that makes them run. But they can offer a much richer educational experience when teachers and students learn to use computers in ways that benefit their schools and communities. In Madison, Wis., for instance, the Instructional Technology Academy provides computers, software and training to 9th grade students. They meet every other Saturday with experienced teachers and professional designers to work on web pages for local non-profit organizations like the YMCA and the Wisconsin Intergenerational Project. Computers can help teachers and students make an impact outside of their classrooms and connect with their communities in ways that deepen the learning experience.

Bridging the digital divide is not merely a matter of computers and conduits for all -- as much of the policy and media rhetoric would have one believe. Access to computers

does not mean they will be used responsibly or in an educationally meaningful way. Only by linking technological access, maintenance and training to more fundamental problems facing our communities will we reap the real benefits these new tools can offer.