

Written Testimony & Sign-On Letter: Digital Connectivity Act
Senate Bill 66
Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE)
www.beequity.org

To Chairperson Paul G. Pinsky, Vice Chair Cheryl C. Kagan and Members of the Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee,

We are the leadership team of Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE). Baltimoreans for Educational Equity is an alliance of current and former teachers, families, students, and allies who work collectively to achieve educational equity at the district, city, and state level.

Today, we are asking you to vote to pass SB66, the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021.

Our past work includes coalition work towards securing:

- A \$30 million re-allocation of funds from Baltimore city government to city schools over three years.
- \$3 million for devices and internet for our young people to learn during the pandemic.
- A 50% increase in upload/download speeds on the Comcast Internet Essential plan.

This work occurred parallel to BEE's organizing efforts to advance the Blueprint for Maryland's Future.

I'm here on behalf of over 50 organizations serving the entire state of Maryland who support the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021.

BEE and these 60+ allied organizations spanning across the state believe that educational equity starts with resources that result from strong social infrastructure. The pandemic has exposed a number of shortcomings in that infrastructure, one of which is access to the internet.

The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 would protect and enhance funding in public education upon implementation. It expands the duties of the Maryland Office of Rural Broadband towards increasing broadband access to people in urban and suburban areas of Maryland.

At the 2019 Digital Equity Summit, FCC Commissioner Jessica Rosenworcel acknowledged¹ that digital inequity had been contributing to the learning gap, particularly as it inhibits students' ability to complete any paper-free homework assignments.

¹2019 digital equity summit in Richmond, VA
https://www.doe.virginia.gov/support/technology/edtech_plan/infrastructure_program/digital-equity/rosenworcel-remarks.pdf&sa=D&ust=1611240041988000&usg=AOvVaw1W4SbaOsmrCFxSsCJELIDK

A recently published report² by The Abell Foundation found that nearly one in four (23%) Maryland homes did not have broadband and two-thirds of those disconnected households live in metro communities or Baltimore City. These disconnected households are disproportionately (40%) Black. Furthermore, 20% of Maryland households with school age children do not have internet service at home. These households are disproportionately poor, African American and Latino.

In MD, we have particularly high chronic absence rates. According to Attendance Works, one of five students were absent prior to the closure of school buildings, an absenteeism rate slightly above the national average. Many educators are now seeing even lower rates of attendance due to the pandemic. Key barriers include lack of access to devices, broadband, technological literacy, and user ability, including but not limited to language barriers.

Many Baltimoreans for Educational Equity's (BEE) members are educators. We have firsthand experience with the reality of the homework gap, the phenomenon of children being unable to complete homework assignments online due to lack of connectivity, and other challenges of online learning for public school students. Here's a story from a constituent whose family has experienced this inequity firsthand:

My nephew was at risk of failing, missing many assignments, due to lack of consistent, strong internet access. Luckily, I am working remotely due to COVID-19 and took in my nephew Monday - Friday so that he could access my internet and computer in order to complete his past-assignments and attend digital instruction. His success shouldn't depend on an uncle who happens to work from home with the space to keep him overnight. Children should have steady, reliable internet access.

Teachers across Maryland log onto Zoom each day to show up for our students, and while Baltimore's students work diligently to access their learning, it is all too common for students to be kicked off multiple times during a class period or struggle to stay connected because their broadband speeds and bandwidth are inadequate, or because modern broadband infrastructure does not extend to their homes.

This is not just a problem in large cities. We know firsthand that the digital divide is disproportionately affecting rural communities as well. A report by Common Sense Media³ found that nationally, the households which are the disconnected span from rural (37%) to urban (21%) to suburban (25%). We can only assume something similar is true for Maryland.

² Disconnected in Maryland <https://abell.org/publications/disconnected-maryland>

³ Common Sense Media

https://www.commonsensemedia.org/sites/default/files/uploads/pdfs/common_sense_media_report_infographicfinal.pdf

The digital divide follows racial and economic lines across the state, and BEE and its aligned organizations believe that the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 will be a foundational step towards addressing these pre-existing inequities in an effort to leave no Maryland child offline.

These digital equity issues ought to have been resolved years ago, or as soon as teachers began using online assignments of any kind to assess student achievement. However, it is now apparent that brick and mortar methods, paper methods, and any expected fulfillment of essential activities in person cannot be considered reliable means of providing adequate educational access to the people of Maryland.

The pandemic, in many instances, only made the existing barrier of limited broadband access more impactful for many people. The homework gap existed prior to the need for social distancing, and this country did not appropriately address this issue. The homework gap has now expanded to a learning gap and a retention gap as there has been no sufficient attempt to universally increase broadband accessibility.

Legislation designed to address universal broadband access is a necessary step towards addressing student achievement gaps while we are maintaining social distance measures and thereafter.

Sincerely,



Kelsey Ko, High School English Educator, Baltimore City Public Schools
Baltimoreans for Educational Equity Leadership Team
And on behalf of the undersigned organizations (organizational sign-on letter begins on page 6)

Undersigned Organizations & Agencies:

Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE)
Advocates for Children and Youth (ACY)
AFSCME Maryland Council 3
American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) of Maryland
American Federation of Teachers (AFT) Maryland
Anne Arundel County Literacy Council, Inc.
Arts Education in Maryland Schools
Arts Every Day
Attendance Works

Undersigned Organizations & Agencies (cont'd):

Baltimore Digital Equity Coalition (BDEC)
Baltimore City Health Department
Baltimore Community Foundation (BCF)
Baltimore Family Alliance
Baltimore Teachers Union (BTU)
Betsy Dinkins Simon (BDS) Healthy Aging Networks
CASA
Catalyte
Disability Rights Maryland
The Education Trust
Greater Baltimore Urban League
Greatest Possible Good
Hinkey-Benson Family Fund
Impact Hub Baltimore
League of Women Voters-Maryland
Libraries Without Borders
Living Classrooms
Maryland Alliance for Racial Equity in Education (MAREE)
Maryland Association of Boards of Education (MABE)
Maryland Association of Counties (MACO)
Maryland Alliance Of Public Charter Schools
Maryland Center on Economic Policy
Maryland Coalition for Homeless Children and Families
Maryland Education Coalition (MEC)
Maryland State Education Association (MSEA)
Maryland State Family Child Care Association
Maryland Out of School Time Network
Office of Kristerfer Burnett, Baltimore City Council District 8
Office of Zeke Cohen, Baltimore City Council District 1
Open Works
Parent and Community Advisory Board (PCAB) for Baltimore City Public Schools
PCs for People Maryland
Public Schools Superintendents' Association of Maryland (PSSAM)
Project Waves
SEIU 500
SEIU 1199
SmartLogic
Urban Teachers
Teachers' Democracy Project
The Mount Royal School
The Parents' Place of MD
Strong Schools Maryland

Writers in Baltimore Schools
Waller Gallery
Warnock Foundation

To the members of the General Assembly:

The COVID-19 pandemic has exposed and exacerbated pre-existing racial and socioeconomic inequities in Maryland. In an increasingly digital world, access to technology is vitally important for connection to educational curricula, job opportunities, health care, and relationships with loved ones.

The 2013 American Community Survey by the U.S. Census shows that lower-income and Black and Brown households are disproportionately disconnected from the internet. Furthermore, we know that Black and Latinx students are more likely to not have access to the prerequisites of learning—devices, internet access, and live contact with teachers. If we don't take action now, further learning loss and economic exclusion will translate into a wider opportunity gap and a decrease in Maryland's future economic growth potential.

The Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 (HB0097/SB0066) establishes the Office of Digital Inclusion and devotes capacity and funding for broadband access to all 24 Maryland jurisdictions. Increased broadband access creates new jobs, expands markets for new and existing businesses, enables access to educational opportunities and resources and facilitates delivery of health care services. As a result, It will improve long-term quality of life for all Marylanders and ensure that the State remains economically competitive both locally and globally.

This act also collects critical data around the root causes of digital inequity. We believe that this knowledge is necessary towards creating further policy solutions which will eradicate digital inequity.

The undersigned organizations composed of parents, educators, students and community leaders and groups urgently **call on the State Legislature to pass the Digital Connectivity Act of 2021 to address this immediate and pressing need.**

The crises in education and economic immobility began long before COVID-19. We must keep the gap from widening. We must act to equip all communities with the requisite digital tools, resources, and support for immediate and long term success.

With Urgency -

Natasha Escobar, Executive Chair
Baltimoreans for Educational Equity (BEE)

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Baltimore Clayworks
Baltimore Community Foundation (BCF)
Baltimore Family Alliance
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